

Uncle Chips

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Crispy manioc chips, coated in chili and salt, are an all-time favorite snack.

With a sizzle, the thinly sliced manioc chips were placed in the hot oil. The delicious smell of fried manioc filled the air as the chips were removed from the pan minutes later. We could hardly wait as the manioc cooled to try the crispy goodness, coated in chili and salt, prepared by Uncle Chips.

Words Gayathri Kothalawala.

Photographs Menaka Aravinda.

In Sri Lanka, manioc has a special place in the hearts of everyone; we love it in a curry, boiled with scraped coconut, or fried. The fried manioc chips are a quick snack to keep you going through the day. Therefore, when we passed a little roadside stall under a kottamba tree (*terminalia catappa*) while driving along Union Place, we had to stop. Our first impression of the stall was that it was compact – constructed with aluminum with glass-paned windows giving a peek at the mouthwatering manioc preparations on offer. But what we found at this stall is far from the ordinary.

The peeled manioc skins in a neat little pile on the ground was the first sign that we had that things are different here. While we waited for our chips, which are given in little brown paper bags, we started a conversation with Mohamed Zihard Ali, the stall owner. The regular customers fondly call him 'Uncle Chips', as he smilingly told us. He provides a novel experience for fans of manioc chips. Rather than simply offering them pre-prepared chips, he makes the chips to order, in his stall.

Early in the morning, Mohamed visits several manioc farms to purchase the manioc for about two days. He visits the Colombo market only on the days when the farmers cannot supply manioc. By 8.30 in the morning, he is at the stall. From then until six in the evening he prepares fresh manioc chips for his customers.

After peeling the skin off the manioc, he uses a chips cutter to slice the yam into thin slices. The next step is to put the sliced manioc into hot oil and fry for about 15 minutes. As he explained, the oil has to be at the right temperature. If not, the chips would sink in and absorb excess oil. He also makes sure not to put too much chips in at once; this, he told us, is to avoid the chips sticking together and losing their round shape. A generous sprinkling of chili and salt powder, and the chips are good to go. Mohamed also accepts bulk orders and visits special events such as cocktail parties at hotels to prepare fresh manioc chips on site.

While munching on the crispy chips, we watched as he let the oil heat for ten minutes, before beginning the process all over again. The brown paper bags we held in our hands absorbed the oil from the chips. As Mohamed explained, oily paper is a sign that the chips are fresh. As we took our leave, Mohamed was already busy serving his delicious manioc chips to another customer – a yummy treat with a great show.

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