The Yam That Won The World

Posted on
Wash, dry and cut the manioc crosswise into chunks

The humble manioc from South America has found a place in every home in Sri Lanka.

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There’s a popular notion that no one can ever go hungry in Sri Lanka because there will always be some *maniocca* and *pol* (coconut) around. That’s true, because coconut palms are everywhere on this tropical island, while manioc, a hardy woody perennial shrub, can be spotted in clumps of roadside vegetation and in home gardens. Manioc (tapioca, *Manihot esculenta Crantz*) propagates easily, taking root quickly if a mature stem is pressed into the ground, and thriving even in very dry conditions. It is all around wherever you go, most often hidden in plain sight.

Prolific though it may be, manioc is not indigenous to Sri Lanka. The yam was introduced to Sri Lanka, most likely by the Portuguese in the 16th Century. It originated in South America and spread worldwide, becoming a global food, a rich source of carbohydrates and a staple to many in countries in Africa. In Sri Lanka, manioc, called *manniocca*, is often regarded as the poor man’s food, though loved by all. A plate of soft white melt-in-the-mouth boiled manioc and small heap of plain spicy coconut is a welcome sight anywhere, a dish that is loved and relished.

Manioc is so commonplace that it is regarded as an indigenous plant. Few realise that its localised moniker echoes tragic roots in the Amazon jungles, where according to legend, lived a beautiful princess named Mani who fell in love with a prince who did not return her love. Stricken with grief, she ordered her people to kill and bury her. Out of her grave grew the beautiful white manioc that provided sustenance for her people. Manioc literally means the “House of Mani”. Manioc belongs to the family Euphoribiaceae, of which there are over 100 species. Only two spread worldwide.

There are two varieties of manioc: the bitter and the sweet. The latter is the tastiest, while the former is more common and bitter, because it is pest resistant. Since it is an imported plant, it is not part of the ayurvedic pharmacopoeia,

although it is used in the native medicines of South America, Africa and China. Despite it's allure, however, the manioc root and leaves can be as tragic as the story of its genesis. Its roots and leaves contain quantities of linamarin, a cyanogenic glucoside that transforms into cyanide when the tuber is damaged. Records from early times show evidence that native Americans used drops of its poisonous extract to kill off colonisers. But don't let the bad news put you off this delicious food. Like many of nature's miracles, this plant "born of death" is also life giving, and there have been reports that self-treating cancer patients have beaten cancer by consuming manioc every day, with a first person accounts of cancer cures attributed to manioc being circulated on the Internet. However, scientific studies have still to establish a correlation between use of manioc and such cancer cures. It is said to be an ingredient in about 5,500 homeopathic remedies. Records show that it was domesticated over 10,000 years ago.

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Due to the cyanogenic content of this delicious tuber, manioc should be consumed in moderation and only after careful preparation. Sri Lankan cooks deal with this aspect by exercising wisdom handed down over generations. The tubers are usually purchased fresh, and only perfect tubers, without any trace of damage, are chosen. When making a purchase, it is common to ask the vendor to cut the tuber open. A fresh and good tuber will be pure white with slightly pinkish skin. Fine lines and other markings are indications that it is turning toxic. Once purchased, it is cooked quickly over high heat in an open pot (without a lid), which neutralises its toxicity, and it is consumed within the day. Manioc tubers are never stored over periods as one would do other yams or potatoes. The manioc is peeled and washed thoroughly and boiled over strong heat, often with antioxidising ingredients such as fenugreek, tumeric and/or *murunga* (drumstick) leaves. There is a folk belief that combining ginger with manioc is potentially poisonous, and so ginger is avoided in any dish when manioc is on the day's menu. In South America and the West Indies, manioc is processed and pounded into a flour which is then made into a delicious bread or cakes. It is also fermented and made into a liquor to tenderise meat.

So, how do Sri Lankans transform this incredible tuber into delicious repast? We love to have it boiled with tumeric, accompanied with fresh grated coconut and *lunu*

miris (onion/chillie sambal), curried to be eaten with rice, or sliced finely and made into delicious crisps. Adding a more fancy touch, at Kaema Sutra, the manioc is turned to manioc floss, all fluffy and light.

Boiled Fluffy Manioc(Makes a Delicious Breakfast)

- Large Pot
- Fresh Manioc tubers peeled and cut cross wise in to large chunks
- Murunga leaves
- A tea spoon of turmeric
- Salt to season

Method

Place manioc in a pot of water with a heavy base. Place over a high flame and boil for about 25 minutes or until it is done. Once it is boiled, drain the water and cover pot with the lid and leave awhile for the chunks to fluff out.

Serve with fresh ground coconut, and, for contrasting flavour, a dollop of flaming lunu miris.

Lunu Miris

- One cup onion sliced
- Half cup dried red chillies (reduce quantity if the chilles are very hot and if you preffer a milder sensation)
- One tablespoon of Maldive fish
- Lime juice
- Salt to taste

Method

Coursely grind the red chillies in a blender. Add the onions to the ground chillies and grind again. Then mix in maldive fish and blend a little longer. Empty contents into a little bowl. Season with lime juice and salt to taste.

It’s a simple preparation for a perfect start of the day. Dig in, it’s delicious.

