



Spice *island*

Chico Kidd tastes the art of Serendipity— the cooking of Sri Lanka

A *yubowan* – Welcome to Sri Lanka! The greeting means “May you have a long life” and is accompanied by pressing the palms together in prayer mode. It is used for welcome, goodbye, respect, devotion or loyalty to suit the occasion. It also serves, when you go to eat, for “Bon appetit”!

Historically, Sri Lanka was not only the navigational hub of the Orient but also the source of many of the best spices, with the result that many peoples left their mark there – culinary as well as cultural. The island went under many names: Tambapanni to Emperor Asoka of India, Taprobane to the Greeks and Romans, Serendib to the Arab seafarers, Hsi-lan-ch’ih to the Chinese, Ceilão to the Portuguese, Ceylan to the Dutch, Ceylan to the French and Ceylon to the British. Of these the most influential food-wise are said to be the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Malays, the Arabs, and the South Indians, though I have to say I never detected much that was Dutch about Sri Lankan food. It was the Portuguese who were responsible for introducing the chilli to the east, quite a fair exchange for all the other spices the explorers voyaged in search of!

Despite this, Sri Lankan food tends to get bracketed with Indian – but as most of us know by now, Indian regional cuisine has a huge variety of different styles, so why should its island neighbour not be as different? Granted, you could still call most of it “curry” if you wanted, and indeed you are offered “curry and rice” everywhere you go, but that would be to miss the point. Which is that it’s such fun to discover new cuisines, new combinations of food and spices. To take just one example, I have never come across the marriage of aubergine and apple anywhere else, and it is a most serendipitous one. Very apt for a country known as the Isle of Serendipity!

Reethi Rah Pumpkin Curry

Reethi Rah is in the Maldives, but most of the chefs are Sri Lankan. I ate the pumpkin curry four nights running. Even my carnivorous partner enjoyed it.

Sri Lanka curry powder

coriander seeds – 3 tbsp

cumin seeds – 1 tbsp

fennel seed – 1 tbsp

dried red chillies – 1 tbsp

cinnamon stick – 1, broken up

cardamom pods – 1 tsp

whole cloves – 1 tsp

ground turmeric – 1 tsp

For the curry

pumpkin – 1kg, cubed

onion – 50g, sliced

chillies – 2 fresh, chopped

garlic – 4 cloves, squashed

vegetable oil

black pepper – 1/2 tsp

turmeric – 1/4 tsp

thin coconut milk – 350 ml *

thick coconut milk – 100 ml *

curry powder (see above) – 1 tbsp

lime juice – 1 tbsp

Make the curry powder first. Heat a frying pan without oil and toast the coriander, cumin and fennel seeds until fragrant. Remove from heat, add the chillies, cinnamon, cardamom and cloves, and grind till fine. Finally mix in the turmeric and store in an airtight jar.

Heat the oil and fry the onion, garlic and chilli together. Make sure you don't let the garlic go brown. When the onion is soft add the curry powder and stir briefly, then add the pumpkin, pepper, turmeric and thin coconut milk. Simmer until the pumpkin is done – this may take as little as ten minutes, so keep checking. Add the thick coconut milk and bring back to the boil. Remove from the heat and sprinkle with lime juice.



Mahaweli Apple and Aubergine

This was served at a little roadhouse on the way to Kandy. When we got there the Mahaweli River had burst its banks, so I always think of that great brown expanse of water when I taste this combination of flavours.

aubergines (eggplants) – 500g

apples – 200 g. Use nice hard eating apples, the tarter the better.

Sri Lanka curry powder (see previous recipe) – 2 tsp

vegetable oil

asafoetida – a pinch

Don't peel either the apple or the aubergine. Core the apples and cut them into six wedges. Cut the aubergines into chunky slices – about a centimetre thick should do it. Make the curry powder into a paste with a teaspoon of water. Heat the oil in a big frying pan until smoking and add the apple pieces. Brown lightly, take them out and put in a warm place. Do the same with the aubergine slices, adding a drizzle more oil as they soak it up from the pan. Sprinkle the asafoetida into the empty pan, turn down the heat, then add the curry paste and stir for a few seconds. Finally return the apple and aubergine to the pan and cook gently for 10 minutes, stirring carefully to make sure they are coated with the spice mixture.



* Note: Make coconut milk from a creamed coconut block. For thin, use equal quantities of creamed coconut and water. For thick, the proportions are one-quarter water and three-quarters creamed coconut.

Colombo Cashew Curry

I was going to call this Mount Lavinia Cashews after the hotel where I ate it, but I'm a sucker for alliteration.

Spice mix

coriander – 1 tsp

fennel – 1/2 tsp

cumin – 1 tsp

fenugreek – 1/2 tsp

curry leaves – a sprig

cinnamon stick – 1 cm

chilli powder – 1/4 teaspoon

fenugreek – 1/2 teaspoon

turmeric – 1/2 teaspoon



For the curry

cashew nuts – 300 g, soaked in water for a couple of hours

onion – one medium-sized, sliced

chilli – 1 fresh, chopped

coconut milk – 250 ml

vegetable oil

coriander leaves for garnish

Make the spice mix first by dry roasting everything except the turmeric powder. Remove from the heat, mix in the turmeric, and grind till fine.

Drain the cashew nuts and put in a saucepan with the chilli, spice powder and coconut milk. Bring to the boil and simmer for 5 minutes. While it is cooking, heat the oil in a frying pan and chuck in the onion for a couple of minutes till just starting to go crispy. Pour in the cashew nut mixture and cook for a further 3-4 minutes. Garnish with coriander, if you like.

All of these can be served with rice, of course, or your favourite Indian bread. Sometimes you will get hoppers – crispy-edged rice pancakes, soft in the centre – although these make an appearance more often at breakfast time. And don't forget the poppadums and pickles!

Sambols

Sambols are the Sri Lankan equivalent of salsas or relishes and, like them, come in all kinds of combinations. These two are among the tastiest.



Coconut sambol

coconut – 75 g, grated

onion – 25 g, finely chopped

chilli powder – 1/4 tsp

lime juice – 2 tsp

paprika – 1 tsp

Tomato and Onion Sambol

tomatoes – 3, thinly sliced

onion – 25 g, finely chopped

lime juice – 250 ml

black pepper – 1/4 teaspoon

red chilli (optional) – de-seeded if you like and finely chopped

In both cases, throw everything into a bowl and mix until thoroughly amalgamated.