**My hybrid Sri Lankan Christmas cake**

**2021**

It’s a tradition. Every December I go to my grandmother Ada’s recipe book. Page 95: Christmas Cake. I’ve made it for my family for over 30 years.

As I make it, the book and the recipe always catapult me back to Sri Lanka, back to the kitchen of my childhood.

I was 7 in 1959 when I first helped Ada, and our cook, Rosalind, make this Christmas cake.

*First prepare the fruit: stone and cut the raisins in three or four pieces: wash and stem the sultanas. Wash, pick and dry the currants.*

The cast iron mincer was attached to the kitchen table. Rosalind would feed the mincer with handfuls of each fruit. And as she cranked, I watched, fascinated as the fruits mixed together into rich, brown worms extruded onto a plate. From time to time, she’d press the fruit down into the funnel of the mincer. I was terrified her fingers would get caught!

*Cut the pumpkin preserve, ginger preserve, and chow chow into small pieces.*

I remember back in Sri Lanka these would come in a thick, tangy, sugary syrup in brown ceramic pots with bright coloured labels covered in Chinese writing. I never stopped to wonder what on earth chow chow was … or what Chinese preserves were doing in a British fruitcake. I knew nothing back then of the more than 500 years of Chinese silk traders living cheek-by-jowl with Sri Lankans.

It was decades later that I recognized how cultures and cuisines cross-fertilise through simple daily actions between people, more deeply than through government policy – a plate of food passed over the wall, a piece of calico exchanged for two or three mangoes. Everyday multiculturalism.

*Shred the candied peel finely and chop the cajunuts. Mix the fruit together with the flour. Put the butter and sugar into a large basin and beat well (1 hour) with a wooden spoon till very light and smooth.*

A*dd the egg yolks one at a time, beating well after each is added. Mix in the semolina, gradually.*

Semolina. Another curious element for a fruit cake. And so, this Christmas cake tells more of Sri Lanka’s history. This time it’s about Moghul empires in northern India. These Asian conquerors ate sweet cakes made from semolina. From kitchen to kitchen the sweet cakes travelled south, crossing the sea into the Tamil dominated north of the island. I like to see the semolina in the Sri Lankan Christmas cake as a subtle culinary act of enduring anti-colonialism.

But all I knew back then was that the semolina made it much harder to stir the batter.

*Add the fruit, cadjunuts, and spices.*

Spices. That’s what the Europeans came for. Cinnamon in particular, from Sri Lanka. For centuries, the spice trade into Europe was controlled by Arab and Venetian merchants. They carried the spices up through the middle east and into Europe. To break the monopoly and bring down prices first the Portuguese then the Dutch came to Sri Lanka. Neither of these two nations sought to rule Sri Lanka. They set up trading posts and entered into marketing contracts with the rajahs. When the British arrived, they were in the full flush of empire and Sri Lanka became a British colony.

My grandmother Ada and I are Sri Lankan Burghers, a hybrid race: a mixture of Portuguese, Dutch, Sinhala, and Tamil. We were the westernised middle class that worked for the British colonial administration in Sri Lanka. You can read the Christmas cake as a metaphor for Burghers like my family.

*Lastly, the brandy, rosewater, bees honey and syrup (vanilla and essence of almonds).*

Arabian influences now…. the scents and foods of paradise.

*The whites of 8 – 10 eggs beaten up to a stiff froth. Pour the mixture into the prepared tin and bake in a moderate and steady oven for four to five hours.*

When Sri Lanka became independent, we Burghers were not welcome anymore. I can understand that. The Burgher diaspora settled in Britain or its former colonies – Canada and Australia mainly.

It was when I arrived in Australia in 1962 that I finally discovered what chow chow was…. It’s choko!!! The exotic ingredient from my childhood grew wild like a weed over our outside dunny. I think it’s fitting that from the outset this hybrid cake contained an ingredient from my future.

It’s fitting too, that the hybrid Christmas cake should be the centrepiece of the annual gathering of my proudly hybrid family.