**‘Doing’ Curry and Rice**

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For the first years of my life in Australia, I felt that the food I had grown up on was very much out of place. It was the 1960s and I was a ten-year old Sri Lankan living in Sydney and then in Singleton in the Upper Hunter Valley of New South Wales.

It wasn’t only that the spices that my palate craved were virtually impossible to get unless smuggled in by some third cousin twice removed in a packet that had invariably leaked staining forever the carefully packed white shirts ready for the first job interview. It wasn’t that the vegetables that formed what is still my strongest childhood taste memory – mung beans, manioc, fresh grated coconut at a Sunday breakfast more spiritually nourishing than my First Communion – were not available in the nascent supermarkets of lower north shore Sydney or rural New South Wales.

It wasn’t that we were now cast on the wracked shores of my mother’s cooking, a mother who for all my life till then had depended on our Singhalese cook Rosalind, to not only prepare complexly flavoured mojus, and badungs, and mallungs, but also the heavy meat stews and pan fried cuts (no grills on our two burner kerosene stove kitchen; no oven unless we went across the street to my uncle’s house and that really was only for baking the Christmas cake) that were the invariable dinner of our Sri Lankan Burgher household, and who faced with the impossibility of it all retreated to tuna and macaroni pies, crumbed rissoles and fish fingers and endless increasingly sweet and increasingly luridly coloured desserts from the pages of the *Women’s Weekly*.

No, it was that my schoolmates and their families apparently new better than I what the cuisine of my birth county should be and were disappointed when I was less than grateful when they went to the trouble of ‘doing curry and rice’ when I visited for dinner. Mostly what was put before me was a plate of pale brown lumps of an unplaceable meat or greyer mince in a thick pallid yellow gravy whose only discernible flavours were white flour, turmeric and salt. Occasionally there would be diced carrots and/or diced pineapple and/or Granny Smith apple, and sometimes sultanas. This would be accompanied by boiled potatoes and peas and, occupying perhaps a sixth of the plate, a spoonful or two of boiled white rice. Of chili there was none: these were resolutely pre-Colombian exchange curries.

Several things about these meals were out of place. Most glaringly the proportion of rice to curry was entirely the reverse of what I was used to. Rice was the major starch in my diet and a mound of it ought to have occupied the plate from the centre nearly to the edge. The curries – yes, plural, a meat or fish plus dhal plus at least three vegetable curries – should have been presented in separate bowls and I should have spooned enough round the edges of the rice to get me started and then returned to the separate bowls to top them up as the meal progressed. The pineapple, potato and peas ought to have been separately served, too, each with a different combination of spices suited to their particular flavour profile. I could forgive the absence of chili, but not, finally, the disastrous gravy: not thickened with coconut milk but white flour, and clearly not made on spices roasted to bring out the robustness of coriander, cumin, fennel seed that best serve the flavour needs of meat. Unroasted spices, on the other hand, as a rule go best with fish and vegetables.

Of course I ate it, desperate not to be out of place while all the while feeling very much out of place.

The road back to my place was slow. It began when my father took over cooking dinner and sought out the Indian and Sri Lankan spice shops that began to appear in the late 1960s. This man whose only interaction with food preparation in Sri Lanka that I could recall was selecting the mud crabs from the Colombo fish market for Sunday lunch suddenly began to produce meals that became legendary among our Burgher circle and his workmates. It was to him I turned when I took my first steps down that road to satisfy share housemates insistence that as I was Sri Lankan I must be genetically programmed to make curries.

The place to which the road led was the kitchen where I would sit watching or Rosalind roast and grind spices on the flat slab of stone, expertly crushing and mixing them as she flung drops of water or lime juice onto them, till they formed a paste she would roll up into a dark, aromatic marble that would sit agonisingly out of my reach till the moment she tossed it into the hot oil and it would hiss and spit and suffuse the close air of the windowless kitchen. It’s where I am when I ‘do’ curry and rice these days.