

The making of my multicultural palate and the multicultural Australian table.

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Kellogs cornflakes were my first exposure to non-Sri Lankan food. (I don't count the food on board the Oriana, the ship in which we travelled to Australia, as it was something of an intermediate time for me, neither in Sri Lanka nor Australia, and so intermediate food also.) It was the morning after we arrived in Sydney, 11 November 1962. We were given some groceries to tide us over till my dad began work a week after we landed, and the family had an income. There were probably other things but it's the cornflakes that stand out for me. My family are Burghers, descendants of the Dutch and Portuguese who had settlements in Sri Lanka pre Britain's colonisation. So, our meals were a mix of Sri Lankan, Portuguese, Dutch and colonial English food. Breakfast during the week was usually porridge with warm milk, scrambled eggs on toast on the weekend or hoppers (bowl shaped pancakes) with fish curry and sometimes manioc with green gram, grated coconut and onion sambol. There was something exciting about this novel Australian breakfast food; crisp orange flakes, reminiscent of broken pappadam, going soggy in a bowl of cold milk sweetened with sugar. Maybe it was the decisiveness of the break from Sri Lanka that the cornflakes embodied.

This disjuncture was emphasised by my primary school lunch. Gone were rice and curries eaten out of tiffin tins pedalled to us by our houseboy (yes, yes, derogatory term) eaten in the grandstand facing the school cricket field. Now lunch boxes disgorged to us tomato-sauce-soggy white bread and devon or Vegemite and chopped boiled egg sandwiches.

Dinner was re-stabilizing. In Sri Lanka this was usually an Anglo affair of fresh-made soup (mulligatawny was and still is a favourite), stew, roast beef or sausages (imported by Elephant House the largest emporium for foreign goods in Sri Lanka at the time) with accompanying Anglo vegetables - potatoes, peas, carrots, onion – and gravy. It was the same here in Australia, though the soups now came out of packets and tins.

The fruits, too, were new to me: apples and oranges from trees in the orchard in which we lived for the first three months or blackberries we collected from the bushes rampant seemingly everywhere. I had read about apples and oranges in the British children's weekly magazines and in American sited children's novels like the Bobbsey Twins series, but I don't recall ever eating them. It was again a significant break in my diet not to have mangoes, pawpaws, rambutans, and mangosteens. Pineapples were an exception though the circular slices came in a tin in a sweet syrup without the slight sharpness of fresh pineapple pieces and they were not candidates for my favourite way of eating pineapple, dredging the slices through a mix of salt and chilli. I compensated for this by dredging apple slices through the mix instead. I don't recall for several years in Australia ever seeing a fresh pineapple.

Within a couple of weeks though for lack of alternative input and the newness of it all my palate was broadened to embrace the Australian table in its 60s guise.

I think sweet and sour pork was my next palate-broadening food, diced pork drowned in a cloying, sweetish tan sauce featuring pineapple chunks and thick sliced onion from the Chinese restaurant in Singleton, rural Australia in the mid 60's. There were Chinese restaurants in Colombo. Mum and dad

told me that for a special dinner when they were courting they had fried rice at one, as did other middle-class Sri Lankans out for a special night. I have a grey memory that I may have gone once also at New Year. But it was in Singleton that I first consciously ate Chinese food. Many country towns throughout Australia had a Chinese restaurant, still do, sometimes as the restaurant in the local R.S.L. (Returned Services League) premises, the irony of which considering Australia's history of Chinese targeted racism, is undoubtedly lost to the service folk but lost on me. Friends recall as kids being sent to the local Chinese with empty tin containers to take away Friday's dinner, often the obligatory sweet and sour pork or beef. In my university days having braised tripe and chicken feet at yum cha thrilled the offal lover in me. They remain favourites, though I am usually solo for the tripe. Steamed dumplings with their pale yellow jackets and pink flesh and fluffy white steamed buns with sweet, shredded pork inside ran a close second. Barbecued pork and duck became in-home dining choices. It was not till many years later I found regional Chinese dishes - Szechuan, Hainanese. (I was going to add Uighur but I suspect Uighurs would not like to be labelled as Chinese) I missed the whole deep-fried ice cream thing till well into my adult years accompanying my kids to birthday dinners.

It was during the early days in Australia I was introduced to pastas via spaghetti Bolognese (sometimes tinned) and macaroni cheese. I don't say 'Italian dishes' as I think both those dishes by the time I had them were well and truly divorced from Italian cuisine. I don't count 'Neapolitan' ice cream either. I didn't have a certifiably Italian meal until my university days- fettuccine marinara, veal scallopini, gnocchi with a simple parmesan sauce, frito misto, espresso coffee and gelato. Somewhere in there came fresh garlic, pizza, parmesan cheese, vongole, olives, arancini and risotto, the latter leading me to Spanish paella which led me to bacalao and remembering salty dry fish in Sri Lanka. And of course that life-saver for summer salads - olive oil, straight or in a dressing with vinegar and garlic.

Cabanossi became a standard nibble at parties accompanied by Jatz crackers, block cheese and olives. 'Continental' meats generally were making inroads on my palate – that delicious fattiness, saltiness and spicing ... The Middle European delicatessens, some established by World War Two refugees, became one of the regular shopping stops for hams off the bone, salamis, wursts, brawns, cheeses, pickled herrings and thin slices of dense black breads. I gorged myself on rich creamy cakes in cafes where you could get Viennese coffee.

University days also introduced me to Lebanese food via falafel rolls - humus, felafels, tabbouli (mint, parsley and burghul salad) and pickled turnip wrapped in thin round Lebanese bread; baba ghanoush (an exciting new way smoke tinged way to eat brinjal/eggplant that was a staple vegetable crusted with turmeric and salt and deep fried in Sri Lanka); and Fattoush (a salad with croutons). Kebab rolls became a regular hand-held meal. Greek came to me through sweet pastries thick with honey syrup – baklava and galaktoboureko, stifado, dolmades fat with rice, chargrilled calamari and the bite of a good tzatziki. And it was to the Greek run fish and chip shop opposite the railway station in Liverpool that I and my school mates would go to for potato scallops and chips doused in vinegar wrapped up in butcher's paper.

Malaysian laksa lemak brought back chillies, coconut milk and lemon grass into my out of home dining and introduced me to Asian noodles. Indonesian satay sauces and gado gado used peanuts more creatively than peanut butter and were deliciously olfactorily redolent with fish paste.

Later as a young adult French gave me buttery croissants – plain and almond, tart tatin, camembert, and bread sticks spread with pate for picnics. I draw a veil thankfully over the brief flirtation with fondue.

Through all this there were curries – Indian, Pakistani and Afghan approximating the flavours I recalled from childhood with varying degrees of success and a lack of discrimination between the three, but thankfully vastly different to the raisin and apple concoctions I endured in share houses. I think avoiding this was a strong influence in me becoming a cook. Also, no-one in the shared houses other than me knew how to cook. I had as a teenager made my own after school snacks – cheese and bacon jaffles or tinned corned beef and cabbage fry. Now I called on my father's knowledge of curries developed out of necessity, we not having a cook as we did in Sri Lanka, and my mother's retreat to making desserts from the pages of the *Australian Women's Weekly*. I ate a lot of bread puddings and jellied concoctions featuring condensed milk in my early teens as a result. She bravely tried to make the Sri Lankan steamed pudding dessert watalappam, replacing the unobtainable coconut milk and palm sugar with cow's milk and Milo. It was not a success..

As the South Asian population in Australia grew so also did restaurants, now including Sri Lankan restaurants. Naan, tandoor, thalis, Basmati rice, hoppers and stringhoppers (steamed mats of vermicelli) being the cuisines standard bearers. (I am vehemently opposed to butter chicken, a dish created in the kitchens of Indian-Britain which has none of the character of Raj Anglo-Indian dishes) Spice shops were perfumed aisles in which to linger selecting fresh Sri Lankan vegetables – snake beans, the tree bean murunga (fondly called drumsticks because, well, they do look like green drumsticks), bitter gourd, jak fruit, siambala (tamarind). When we first arrived in Australia there was to my knowledge just one spice shop in Bondi Junction. Relatives migrating to Australia or Britain or Canada smuggled in spices in their luggage, seeds of vegetables too.

With the ending of the Vietnam war and the refugee/ boat people influx into Australia in the 1970s pork bahn mi, fresh spring rolls and pho were added to the mix along with pristine white bible tripe (so named for its folded meat fancied as the pages of a book – but why the bible and not another book I have no idea). Chilean empanadas were a feature at community gatherings/fund raisers of those who escaped the Pinochet government. As Australians holidayed more and more in Thailand, tom yum, green curry, bird's eye chillies, galangal and lemongrass became synonymous with Thai cuisine. Late in the day but very welcome was Japanese tempura, the bento box, miso soup, sashimi and the sushi train, nibble sized treats on a saucer under see-through lids on a conveyor belt where you watch avidly as that particular morsel gets to you - but someone else gets it first. The novelty hasn't worn out.

New dishes kept being introduced to me: Turkish gozleme stuffed with spinach or mince and cheese; Egyptian koshari with lentils, noodles, fried onions and tomato sauce; Turkish salep stretchy ice cream made from orchid root and mastic; camel burgers at the Lakemba Night Markets during Ramadan; halo halo, the Filipino mix of shaved ice, sweetened fruits, jellies, and milk topped with ice cream and custard. Not all of them were taken on. I recently had a Colombian cup of hot chocolate which had cubes of squeaky cheese in it – sorry Colombia but never again.

In the second decade of the new century my palate is well and truly multicultural as is the Australian table.

Evidence for the latter comes from my Facebook friends' responses to the question 'What are your top three non-Anglo Australian foods and why?'

- All the tradies around Hornsby have banh mi rolls at smoko – gone are the pies! My faves are Teriyaki Salmon Bento Box, Rice paper rolls and I'm partial to the odd lamb kebab.
- Char Kway Teow, Agadashi Tofu, Pastitso.
- Rendang, laksa and babi kecap
- Beef rendang, Japanese bento box, Sri Lankan split pea dhal
- Masaman Lamb Shank – rich, sticky and deep with flavour; Cassolette – comforting, homey: spring rolls – Quick snacks with different textures in a single bite
- Banh xeo, prawn or vege laksa and agadashi tofu
- Prawn and veg laksa, zaru soba with ebi tempura and banh mi
- Hainan Chicken, Chinese salt and pepper squid chicken, pad see ew
- Phô because of the beef broth and all those fresh green herbs and shoots, lime, chilli; Most Lebanese food with its seeds, lemon, oil, veg and meat, also because you have several different dishes that go so well together on the table; Japanese for its artfulness and clarity of tastes at one end of the spectrum and the combo of chicken egg rice mushrooms and mirin the 'chicken and egg' dish at the other end
- Borscht (all variations: Polish, Hungarian, Russian, Ukrainian etc; Blini – these are gluten free buckwheat pancakes – savoury with salmon and dill; and Dairy options I choose goats cheese, Sweet with fruit and carrot salad (Polish). Why? They're delicious. They're my childhood. They're my obsessions. Easy to make. Hard to find these days in restaurants
- Banana Flower Salad – Vietnamese; Massaman Curry – Thai; anything Greek or anything Turkish
- As takeaways – banh mi, sushi, kebab
- Prawn laksa, agadashi tofu, gozleme
- Samosa, felafel and dumplings
- Laksa, sushi, Peking duck
- I love sashimi, a good palak paneer with naan or papadums, and a good Tom Yummy
- Tough Question, I agree you can't leave out Banh Mi, probably Authentic Mexican street burritos, third is tough vegetable and tofu laksa
- Italian ricotta and spinach pie; Maltese-style marinated and fried rabbit, spaghetti carbonara
- Falafel and hummus salad on rolled-up large-format Phoenician wholemeal flatbread or lavash bread. My staple take away as a student. Healthy and comfort food. Takes me back; Phô, particularly with beef brisket and tendon, with Thai basil and mung bean sprouts and stick noodles, chilli, and lemon; Goan fish curry. With chapati, naan or rice. I try it every time I go to Indian Eateries and I make my own Goan curry blend too.
- Spanakopita, agadashi tofu, green papaya salad
- Paneer dosa (or any dosa), felafel sandwich (preferably with pickled turnips), tapas of the non-meat kind)
- Perfect agadashi tofu is divine; Turkish ice cream is the best I've ever eaten; porcini mushroom pasta in Italy.

My thanks to all my FB friends who again have been generous in contributing to my food research.