

Curry, hoppers and wattalappam. Memories of childhood dishes.

June 2025

My earliest food memory is of eating rice and dhal hand fed by our cook. She expertly mixed rice and dhal into small off-shape balls that were popped into my mouth. When I grew tired of eating she made a last mouthful and urges me to eat this *aliya cutta*, a ball for the elephant. Why it is named thus I didn't ask and so I never knew.

At the flour end there were large slices of thick white bread coated with lashings of butter and jam- often strawberry jam. The bread was from the bakery near our street. I would often go there and hang around just for the smell. In a small room at the front the bakers were absorbed in a game of cards and knocking back some alcohol. They paid no attention to me. Glimpsed in the back yard were the ovens to which they would go from time to time to see how the current batch of loaves was going. Eager to see the loaves I would go into the yard. I don't recall seeing anything other than the bread being baked, certainly no cakes.

Hoppers, bowl shaped pancakes made from a batter of fermented coconut milk and rice flour, were a Sunday treat, either plain or with an egg cooked sunny side up in it. The batter would be put into a hot hopper pan and swirled to create this pancake thick at the bottom and lacy up the sides. I'd put onion sambol or a curry put into bowl, break off bits of its frilly sides and dredge the add-ins. Sometimes the egg would be runny and dredgeable too.

String hoppers are nothing like hoppers. They are long strings of rice flour squeezed through a perforated end of a cylinder onto a bamboo open weave mat and then steamed. I had a go at squeezing but the dough was too thick for me. We used to use curries that were quite wet with them. I had fun pulling it apart.

I liked anything that used coconut like pittu - a mixture of rice flour and grated coconut steamed in a cylinder the bottom of which was a perforated disc to allow steam to make its way up through the pittu cooking it as it went. When steam escaped out of the top the pittu was ready. It was pushed out of the cylinder and then cut into rounds. It was a tad stogie so like stringhoppers had to be served with a soup or gravy.

The soup was mainly mulligatawny. The story goes that mulligatawny was created by cooks in the households of the Raj to satisfy their bosses when they asked for soup, soup not being in Indian cuisine.

Kiribath or milk rice was another Sunday treat. The rice was boiled and when ready thick coconut milk was added to it and it was simmered again to a thick mass. It was lifted onto a banana leaf, tray, or platter where it would 'set' into a low thick cake. It was smoothed flat. When it was firm it was cut into diamonds or squares and eaten with a curry or with an onion sambol, my preferred way.

I recall eating a surreptitious dosai or two. Surreptitious because we were strictly parently forbidden to go into a shop where dosai was being made. They usually were

Tamil shops and the folks thought that every one of them was a gambling and drinking dive. But my brothers and I occasionally would head to the nearest shop after school and have one from our pocket money. It was usually a masala dosai it certainly didn't taste like a hopper. It was the mixture of dhals and fenugreek and other spices and then the dry well spiced potato curry that hooked me. When we came to Australia in 1962 there were few Indian restaurants in Sydney and none of them served dosai. It wasn't till Southern Indians were here opening restaurants seeking to emphasise their difference from Northern India eateries that I could enjoy a dosai without guilt.

Sambols were accompaniments to every non-Anglo meal. My top three favourites were onion sambol, seeni (sugar) and pol (coconut) sambol. Each of them is very simple to make.

At the entrance to our lane was a tall hedge of red shoe flowers, what we always called a hibiscus for no apparent reason. It bloomed continuously or seemed to. We would gather a heap of the flowers, carefully taking off the green cup which held them, then boil them up, strain them, and there you had hibiscus tea of a purplish colour. We'd drink it with plenty of condensed milk.

There was a massive tamarind tree at the end of our lane. In tamarind season we would attack it with long poles hitting the tamarind to the ground. Ripe tamarinds were traded with the achcharu woman at the main road. We'd get a paper cup's worth of the achcharu. She would add fresh tamarind to her concoction. We'd sometimes knock down green tamarind heedless of the visit to the toilet that was sure to follow. We'd keep some of the ripe ones for curries at home.

Speaking of the achcharu woman is a good spot to talk about achcharu itself. It's concocted like a regular pickle except it's fresh. The woman who sold it at the top of the road would be there squatting all day - as dust lifted by vehicles swirled around her in front of a chatty, a baked earthenware cooking pot. Sometimes she would be cutting more fruit for the achcharu. Other times she was having a smoko or watching people passing by who every now and then paused to buy some achcharu. This came served in a paper cone which of course just got wetter as you ate from it. So just what is in achcharu? Sliced green mango, green pawpaw, Sri Lankan olives - veralu, sliced ambarella - golden or hog plum, sliced carrot, pineapple pieces, chilli powder, vinegar, sugar, and sometimes tamarind.

Billings were the sourest fruit I have ever come across. There was a billing tree in the house next door to us, separated by a concrete wall on their side, next to which grew a billing tree. When in season it put out lots of baby cucumber looking billings. I used to eat the fruit when it was still a little under-ripe. My mouth would cringe up but I didn't care. I loved the sourness of it.

Achcharu is like a very fresh pickle. My go to regular pickle was lime pickle. I still make it when the lime tree in the yard is fruiting.

In Australia when the first avocados were coming to fruit and veg shops they were marketed as a vegetable. I would see folk slicing avocado for a salad, mashing them on toast, or scooping them out of the half-shell with some vinegar and or salt. This was a peculiar sight for me. Back in Sri Lanka I ate avocados as a dessert the flesh mixed with condensed milk. A few years ago, in Indonesia on a boat I was offered this and was blissed.

I had at least one cup of tea a day with a heap of condensed milk in it. When I came to Australia there were dire warnings about condensed milk precisely because of the sugar content. I swapped to everyday milk in my tea. I went a step further and began to not have milk at all. A slice of lemon doesn't go astray in a cuppa. We never had coffee in Sri Lanka as far as I can recall – if I did it was undoubtedly one of those powdery ones.

I had faludas, though, and loved having those jelly basil seeds in my mouth. Mind you, I also like the ice cream, rosewater, and vermicelli. King coconuts were a source of a welcome drink. The seller would slice the top off it and hand it across for me to drink, which I usually managed without it spilling out the sides of my mouth. When I finished, I would hand it back to him. He would have made a sort of spade shaped server from the top bits of the fruit. He would then cut the coconut a bit more and I could then scoop out the slippery jellyfish flesh.

My two favourite curries were pork and crab. I favoured pork for its fat content and its greasy mouth feel. The curry also had one of the more obscure spices – goraka, a.k.a. gamboge, curled pieces of dark citrussy fleshy bitterness taking the place of lime or tamarind as the souring agent in curries. It matched the pork perfectly. The pork itself was cut into small pieces a third to half of it sometimes being fat.

Half the excitement of the crab curry was getting the crabs into hot water to boil them up a tad. After church on Sunday we would go to the fish market close-by. Dad would look carefully at the crabs and select two or three based on some criterion I couldn't fathom. The crabs all had some sort of wooden peg behind their front legs and tied up with string. When we got them home they'd first be put on the kitchen floor, the pegs would be removed and the string cut and we – my brothers and I – chased them around the kitchen floor til Rosalind, our cook, had water boiling and would pluck the crabs up by their pincers and drop them into the boiling water. The curry she cooked up then with them was transporting – chillies, turmeric, garlic, ginger

Street food-wise there were green mangoes mixed with chilli and salt, veralu was served the same way. Vadai were small deep fried cakes of yellow dhal and spices – masala vadai or the same cakes with a small prawn embedded in the top.

Then there are the two supreme dishes – Christmas cake and lamprais. The Christmas cake is a fruit cake like no other – with its combination of the customary dried fruits mix, ginger preserve, choko pickle, rose water, preserved white pumpkin, and semolina instead of flour. I loved being a part of making it with my granny and our cook. I'd be given a big wooden spoon and do a lot of the early mixing sitting cross-legged on the kitchen table. But the time always came where the mixture was so full of ingredients

that I could barely move the spoon through it all. When the cake was ready to be baked granny would walk it across the lane to my uncle's house – he had an oven, we didn't. When it was baked and had cooled down slices of it were wrapped first in green or red cellophane then in greaseproof paper ready for bringing out during Christmas visits.

Lamprais a whole meal baked in banana leaf – yellow rice - made with saffron or turmeric, frikadells – supposedly of Dutch origin (I went to a Dutch specialty shop once looking for them and found only sausage-like ones), an eggplant curry - a curry made from four meats – mutton, pork, beef and chicken, a chilli sambol, a cucumber sambol, and prawn blachang – a thickish paste. Some people put a boiled egg in it too. Opening up the parcel the aroma of all these was intoxicating. And the mix in each mouthful was blissful.

For dessert there was always watalappam a baked or steamed pudding of coconut milk, jaggery (palm sugar), egg and spices.

My favourite meal was boiled manioc (a tuber with a yellow flesh), green lentils, and onion sambol. I'd break off some of the manioc, mix it together with the lentils and sambol. Each mouthful was a taste sensation.

When we came to Australia that diet was completely turned on its head. When we arrived we lived on an orchard and oranges and apples became the fruits. The *Australian Women's Weekly* provided my mum with the recipes for the Western diet we now adopted. We had a respite every Sunday when we would go to my uncle's house for a full-on Sri Lankan lunch.

When mum was pregnant and after the birth of her fourth child my dad took over the cooking and he who had never stepped into a kitchen began turning out curries. His pork curry and liver curry were sublime! Mum settled in to making jellies, fruit salads and bread and butter pudding. She tried to make watalappam with Milo to no avail.