

# Food for Thought -- This Food Doesn't Travel: Sri Lanka's Cuisine, An Island Unto Itself, Is Mainly Undiscovered

By Robert Templer

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Outside of Sri Lanka, there seem to be few places where you can eat hoppers, pittu and the array of curries and sambols that rival Thai food for their invigorating, bright tastes and colors. The Muslim traders who visited this island for centuries named it Serendib, from which we get the word serendipity, a wonderful but chance discovery.

That is what Sri Lankan food feels like. You feel a sense of amazement at the variety of configurations of rice, coconut, vegetables and fish -- the basic building blocks of the food. The introduction to the "Ceylon Daily News Cookery Book," first published in 1929 and still in print, gives some sense of what makes up Sri Lanka food and where it gets its variety.

The Buddhist Sinhalese trace their roots to northern India, and there are inflections of this in their food. The Hindu Tamils brought in southern Indian foods, such as the pancakes known as dosa (or thosai in Sri Lanka) and hotter curries. Malay (the use of shrimp paste and sambols) and Arab influences (pulao and biryani dishes) came from traders who have visited Sri Lanka for thousands of years.

## FULL TEXT

The only Sri Lankan restaurant in Hong Kong closed recently, diminishing the presence of this varied multiethnic cuisine that deserves much more attention than it gets around the world.

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"There are first dishes known to many generations of Sinhalese and Tamils. Then there are the other eastern dishes introduced to Ceylon by the Arabs, Malays and Moors. Finally, we see in our list of Ceylon recipes the influence of the Portuguese, Dutch and the British."

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The Portuguese had the greatest culinary influence of the successive European colonists who ruled the country from the 17th century. From them, Sri Lankans got not just chilies and the other flavorings of the New World but also fried foods -- the word *temperado*, or the anglicized *tempering*, is still used to describe frying a food in oil and spices.

The bakeries that line the streets in Sri Lanka are filled with cakes, cookies and curry puffs that owe their origins to Portugal and Holland. Alongside these are the Sri Lankan answer to fast food, known as "short eats," many of which are similar to British savories.

One of the distinctive features of Sri Lankan food are dishes known as *mallums*, or *mallung*. These are grated or shredded vegetables, roots or greens cooked with coconut.

The cuisine also uses an extraordinary range of greens -- including the leaves of potato, sarsaparilla, tamarind, passion fruit, sweet potato and a huge array of other plants, most of which don't have English names. These dishes double as an essential part of the Sri Lankan pharmacopoeia, used to treat everything from rheumatism to infertility. Ayurvedic treatments attempt to balance the intake of foods classified as hot or cold.

The scent of spices wafting from Sri Lanka was once said to reach so far out to sea that ships' captains would call their passengers on deck to smell the island before they could see it. It is still a major producer and consumer of spices. The flavors of Sri Lankan curries are more complex and varied than those eaten in the mostly northern Indian restaurants around the world.

The "Ceylon Daily News" has recipes for more than 100 different curries. Many are marked by their use of seafood and most distinctly acidulating ingredients such as mangos, lime, tamarind, tomatoes and even vinegar. Crab and fish curries as well as those that use cashew nuts are densely flavored not just with spices but with pastes of dried and fermented fish.

If there is one dish in Sri Lanka that needs greater exposure, it is one of the most common: *hoppers*. These bowl-shaped rice and coconut pancakes have a soft center surrounded by a crisp, lacy frill.

Making them the traditional way is extraordinarily labor-intensive. Rice is soaked, pounded into a flour and then roasted and sieved. Yeast and the water of a coconut are added, making a batter that is left to ferment slightly overnight. The next morning coconut milk is added and the batter is left to prove again before being cooked in a hopper pan, which looks like a tiny wok. Hoppers sometimes come sweetened with *jaggery* (palm sugar) or with an egg cooked in the center.

A variant of the dish are *string hoppers*, in which a dough of rice flour and coconut milk is squeezed through a press to form small mats of soft noodles that are then steamed and eaten with curry and *mallums*.

*Pittu* is another variant of rice and coconut, this time steamed in a bamboo tube until it is served as a granular cylinder that absorbs the thin gravies of the curries served with it.

On special occasions, the staple is *kiributh*, or milk rice, a rich dish of rice cooked in thick coconut milk. It's regarded as a highly auspicious dish, always eaten during the Sinhalese new year celebrations when astrologers advise on everything from which direction women should stand while cooking to which particularly lucky ingredients should be added. They often specify the time at which the *kiributh* should be eaten. All Sinhalese sit down in the same direction at the same time to eat this simple dish that brings together the great staples of their fertile land.

So why, with all these unusually flavorful dishes, is Sri Lankan cuisine so hard to find? Haleema Dheen Careem, owner of Club Sri Lanka, the Hong Kong restaurant that closed in October after 14 years, says it's overshadowed by Indian food, which is everywhere. Indian food is milder, which appeals to the masses, and has tandoori cooking, which is widely popular. (Sri Lankan cuisine has no equivalent.)

Mrs. Dheen Careem's restaurant was going strong for some time. On weekend nights, she says she'd typically draw 100 people. Business began to drop off about five years ago when Mrs. Dheen Careem, a strict Muslim, stopped selling alcohol. That, she believes, sealed her fate. Despite the end result, she prides herself on having introduced the city to something new.

"Hong Kong people now know about Sri Lankan food," she says.

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Hal Lipper contributed to this article.

### Culinary Colombo

Where to eat in Sri Lanka: The best food is found in private homes. If you can't get an invitation to dinner then stay in a guest house that provides meals. Otherwise there are some good restaurants in Colombo, the capital.

One is the Palmyrah Restaurant at the Hotel Reduka, 328 Galle Road, Colombo 3 (Tel: 573-598). It's a slightly gloomy, subterranean clone of a thousand hotel coffee shops, but the Tamil food is excellent. It's the one restaurant that most locals recommend, and it's full of enthusiastic diners. The kottu roti -- a dish of roti chopped up and cooked with chicken, vegetables and spices -- is excellent; it comes out as a Sri Lankan variant of the Singaporean dish kway teow. The fish and shrimp curries are good.

The restaurant at the Galle Face Hotel has good hoppers and lobster curry. The Galle Face is at the south end of Galle Face Green (Tel: 541-010). There are many good Muslim restaurants that serve biryanis and curry. Hoppers are available in many roadside restaurants or sometimes in the rest houses that dot the country.

## DETAILS

**Business indexing term:** Subject: Restaurants Hotels & motels; Industry: 72251 : Restaurants and Other Eating Places 72111 : Hotels (except Casino Hotels) and Motels 31194 : Seasoning and Dressing Manufacturing

**Subject:** Restaurants; Hotels & motels; Rice; Spices; Recipes

**Publication title:** Asian Wall Street Journal; Victoria, Hong Kong

**Pages:** P8

**Number of pages:** 0

<b>Publication year:</b>	2000
<b>Publication date:</b>	Jan 21, 2000
<b>Section:</b>	Personal Journal
<b>Publisher:</b>	Dow Jones & Company Inc.
<b>Place of publication:</b>	Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Country of publication:</b>	United States, Victoria, Hong Kong
<b>Publication subject:</b>	Business And Economics--Banking And Finance
<b>ISSN:</b>	03779920
<b>Source type:</b>	Newspaper
<b>Language of publication:</b>	English
<b>Document type:</b>	NEWSPAPER
<b>ProQuest document ID:</b>	315487047
<b>Document URL:</b>	<a href="http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-this-doesnt-travel-sri-lankas/docview/315487047/se-2?accountid=11311">http://search.proquest.com.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/newspapers/food-thought-this-doesnt-travel-sri-lankas/docview/315487047/se-2?accountid=11311</a>
<b>Copyright:</b>	Copyright Dow Jones & Company Inc Jan 21, 2000
<b>Last updated:</b>	2022-11-08
<b>Database:</b>	ProQuest One Business, ProQuest Central

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