

The fragile flavours of hope

Varuni Wimalasiri and Abhi Phatak reflect on the personal and culinary triumphs of women who survived the Sri Lankan civil war – now the subject of a fund-raising book of stories and recipes

The aroma of cooking fills the house, drifting beyond its walls. Its warmth and freshness are inviting. What promise it holds! A celebration of the present, a reason to be in the moment...

Ayini's hands work like a dancer's, turning and shaping, scooping the dough with an intimacy only she knows. She recounts her memories about food and cooking from her lengthy displacement during the civil war in Sri Lanka, from 1983 to 2009.

Like Ayini, many women had to abandon their much-loved homes and hearths and wander on their own home soil as fighting raged all around them for nearly three decades. Ayini's stories are filled with sorrow, yet laced with gratitude and strength for what she has now managed to reclaim. Her tone is humble despite the utter courage and strength her stories relay.

The abundance and fertility of Sri Lanka's soil and the richness of the foods grown there are well documented. From celebrations to mourning rituals, from curing ailments and illnesses to providing sustenance to women as they progress through milestones in their lives such as puberty and childbirth, food plays a pivotal role in the Sri Lankan way of life. Moreover, wisdom about the medicinal and nutritional benefits of ingredients, and knowledge about ancestral recipes are usually handed down the female lineage and very strongly intertwined with the identity of the traditional Sri Lankan woman.

Losing power over their kitchens would have added to the grief suffered by these women during wartime. It is perhaps deep in their hearts that we might find the meaning of true love for food, created out of yearning for what once was, while providing what little they could to sustain the lives of their families.

Indeed, they would often have sheltered under the very Palmyra palm trees that provided the basis of so many of their traditional dishes, without having any recourse to the tree's products. Enjoying the flavours of their favourite ingredients, which had flowed abundantly to them during peacetime, was but a dream for these women and their families during the war. The very act of eating and cooking became a form of resilience amidst the ongoing violence and its continuous assault on the senses.

"We fled our home in 1990 and didn't return until 2002," one woman recalled. "During that time we couldn't use the products of the Palmyra tree. Since we came back we have started growing our own trees and utilising their products."

Finding even the most basic ingredient in war can be a fortuitous and tremendous feat. Putting together a meal from gathered ingredients became an essential skill. The women became artisans and magicians who found the makings in the most unlikely places and used their imagination to produce meals in what we might only interpret as their way of keeping alive hopes of peace for their families.

In one such story, Janani describes the abundance of lentils and how it was sometimes the only food in the war camps; how she would barter some of her excess lentils for fresh items such as ginger and garlic – ingredients that lifted the taste of her dishes to "temporarily transport all of my family to another, more joyful world, outside of the camps".

Leela, a young mother, sits in her chair in Ayini's kitchen, still as a bird but alert and ready to fly at any moment. She talks about her confinement while in the war camps. She says how thankful she was for the magic coriander seeds in the *malli thanni* that kept her energised for the birth of her

daughter and provided a remedy for her young son's potentially fatal cold.

The women swear by the healing properties of this elixir of roasted coriander seeds, ginger and pepper. It is served during the monsoon time in Sri Lanka to warm the body, ward off colds and help tide the body over till the next source of nourishment – ideal to help replenish us in springtime in the West when our bodies are overcoming the depleting effects of winter. Try it for yourself!

Kudi Neer (or Malli Thanni) – Coriander Water

Cooking time: 15 minutes
Serves 3

Ingredients

$\frac{2}{3}$ cup coriander seeds
9 or 10 black peppercorns
a 2–3 cm piece of fresh ginger, sliced or pounded
3 cups of water
sugar to taste (optional)

Method

Place the coriander seeds and peppercorns in a heavy-bottomed saucepan and dry-roast them over a low heat. As the aroma rises, remove the pan from the heat.

Add the ginger and water to the pan and bring it to the boil.

Reduce the heat and simmer until the liquid has reduced to half or less.

Add sugar if desired, stir to dissolve it, and simmer for another 4–5 minutes over a low heat.

Remove the pan from the heat. Serve the liquid warm for relieving a cold, or cool as a wellbeing tonic.



■ Since the end of the civil war in 2009, Sri Lankans have been starting to rebuild their lives. Recounting their wartime experiences can help ease their journey to healing. On her visits to Sri Lanka to support in the post-war efforts in the north of the island, Abarna Raj, chief executive of Palmera, a Sydney-based Australian social enterprise, saw healing portrayed in women's stories about food. With the help of a group of volunteers, she gathered them into the illustrated story-cookbook called *HANDMADE: Stories of Strength Shared through Recipes*. It is also a tribute to her late mother, who herself fled the civil war.

The book offers insights into the nutritional and medicinal properties of the ingredients used in Sri Lankan cooking. It is also a window into the kitchens and culinary traditions of the previously war-beaten, now reviving north-eastern Sri Lanka. Above all it is a beacon to the courage and strength of a group of 34 women, including Janini and Ayini, who survived the war. Their stories are filled with gratitude, humility and grace, and also lessons in how to cook in the most stretched of circumstances. All profits from *HANDMADE* go to assist people in rural Sri Lanka to reclaim their livelihoods. R



(Top) A woman cooking roti on the street
(Bottom) A woman cleaning lentils in preparation for making dhal

Photograph: Tharindu Amunugama
Photograph: Suja Samivel

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For more information about *HANDMADE* visit www.facebook.com/palmeraprojects/ or www.palmera.org/handmade. For other Palmera projects, see www.palmera.org