

# Food of Love



From island to island – Emily Simpson savours the exotic aromas of Sri Lankan cuisine.

It looks like any brick bungalow in a sleepy suburban street, but step inside the small living room of the Samaratunga home and a carnival scene unfolds. There's Jackie, our hostess, draped glamorously in gold jewellery and a jewel-blue sari, while Auntie Gertie looks gorgeous in her scarlet ensemble. Spicy hors d'oeuvres circle among guests and anticipation builds as our host Rohan, resplendent in crisp white shirt and sarong, glides from kitchen to table bearing dish after dish of fragrant delicacies. Uncle Roderick (once cook for the King of Bahrain) lends a culinary hand while eight-year-old Sash plays with his baby triplet sisters – Chloe, Roselle and Chanel – who watch the kaleidoscope with three sets of wide, brown eyes.

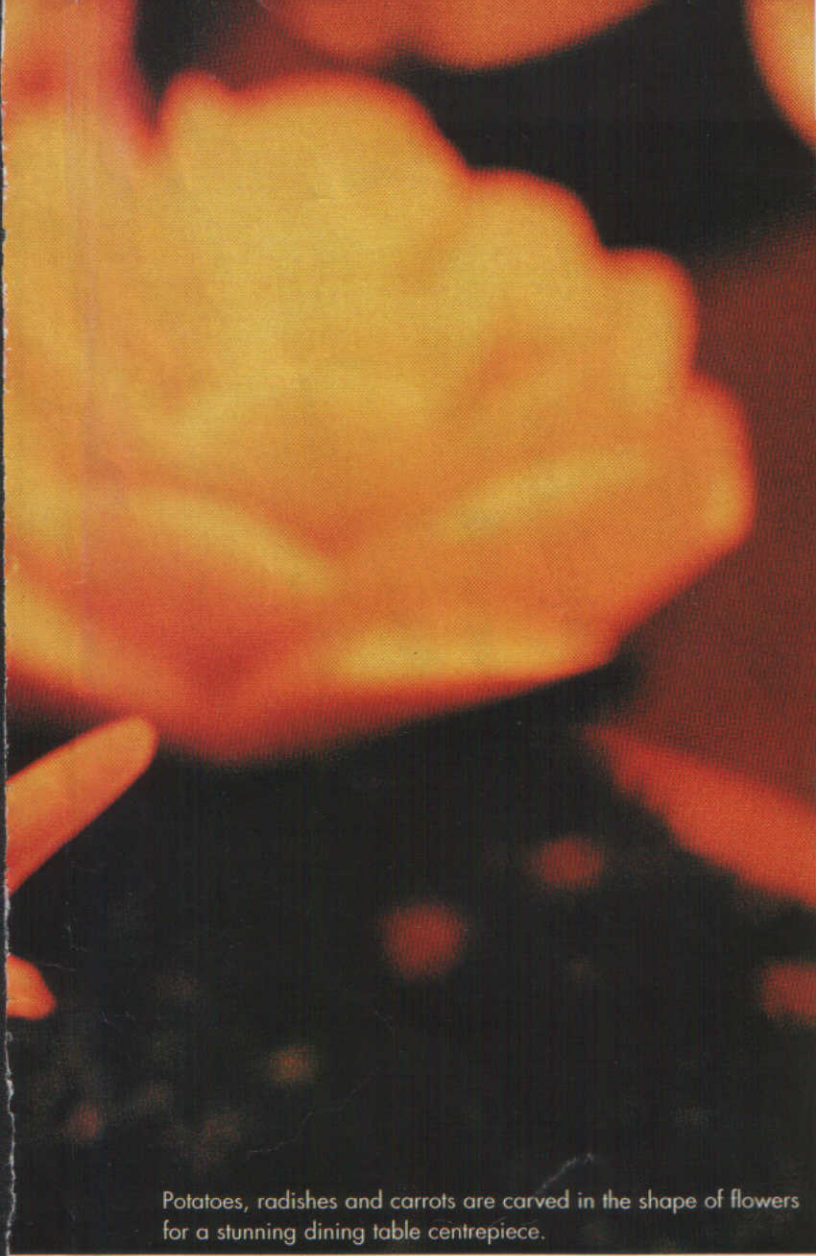
They say food prepared with love tastes the best, which might explain why Sri Lankan cuisine is so divine. Eating, in this culture, is a very social affair. "In Sri Lanka you always have visitors," says Jackie. "People don't ring up and say, 'I'm coming over' – they just arrive, and you make sure they stay for a meal. Or if you cook something that takes a long time to prepare you

send some down to your neighbour. Food is always shared."

Should you be invited to share a Sri Lankan meal, get yourself around there swiftly because this is one nation that knows how to entertain. Behold the dining table. Curries of fish, chicken and juicy king prawns, rice dishes, coconut dishes, hoppers (like a crêpe), string hoppers (a rice noodle) and the centrepiece – a group of humble root vegetables carved into an exquisite bouquet. Such elegance, such refinement ... wait a minute, where are the knives and forks?

Oh. There aren't any. Sri Lankan food, it transpires, is eaten with ones fingers. You gather food from around the plate with three fingers (forefinger excluded) until you have a little ball of different flavours which you deftly flick into your mouth with your thumb. Deftly, that is, if you're born to it. After a few minutes of fumbling around like a toddler, I decide it's best to spare myself and everybody else and request a fork. My hosts readily comply; "although it's not quite the same with a fork," advises Jackie. "You can't mix the flavours."

But, despite my fork, the meal is delicious – the chicken and



Potatoes, radishes and carrots are carved in the shape of flowers for a stunning dining table centrepiece.



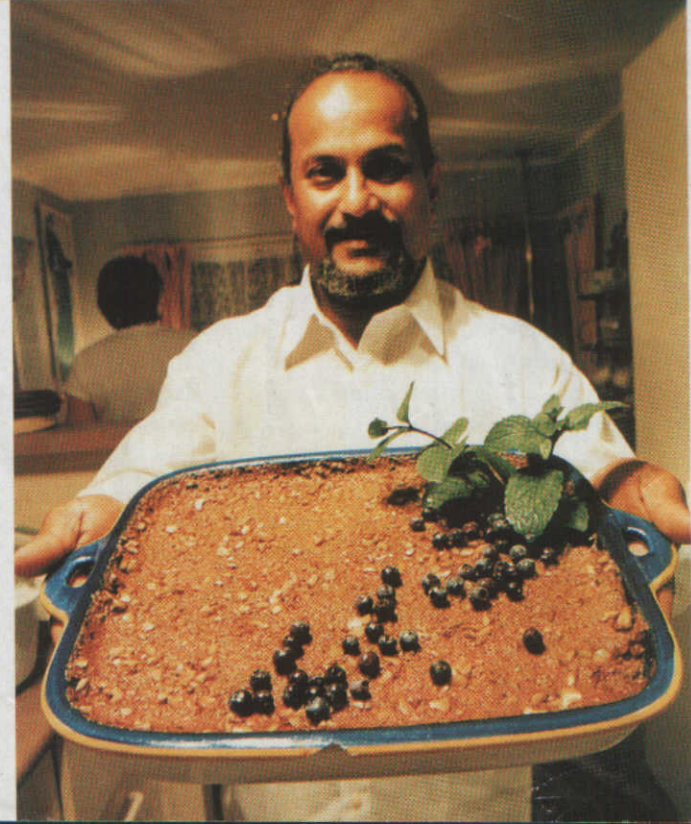
Above right: Rohan, left, and Jackie Samaratunga and friend Gertie Weerakoon (Auntie Gertie), right. Below: Rohan holds a Wattalappam – a dessert similar to cream caramel but made with coconut cream, coconut palm nectar, eggs and spices.

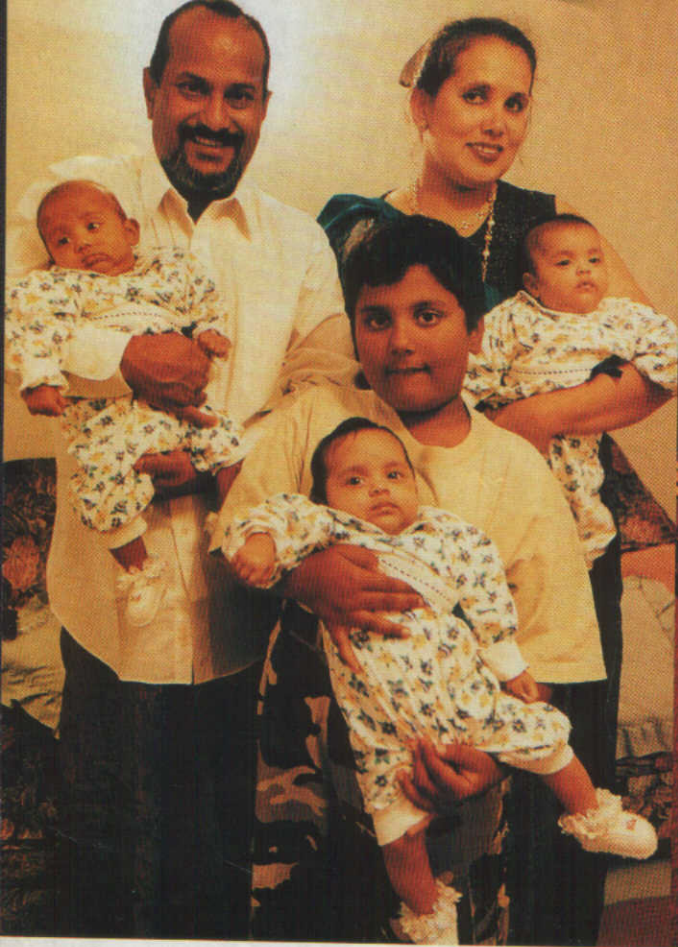
fish curries subtle, the prawns fiery, the sambol salty.

There are reasons for this food being so good. A lush island in the Indian Ocean, Sri Lanka has a history of being fought over and remains a hot spot, but if the endless scrapping has had one positive outcome, it is a rich and varied cuisine. The country is a cultural melting pot that has brewed for 2000 years.

The largest and oldest ethnic group is the Sinhalese. In ancient times these kings were friendly with Indian kings, explains Rohan. They married Indian princesses, adopted the Buddhist religion and ate a similar diet of curries and rice. "But being a tropical country Sri Lanka has a lot of tropical spices like cardamon, cloves, cinnamon, nutmeg, lemon grass," he says. "And the spices are usually roasted which gives our curries a completely different flavour to Indian ones – ours tend to be milder and more aromatic."

Later Sri Lanka became a port of call for spice traders from Arabic countries and Malaya, and the brew was further





Left: The recently doubled Samaratunga family. Rohan holds Chloe, Sash holds Chanel and Jackie holds Roselle. Centre: A plate of hors d'oeuvres (the star-shaped waffle-like koki is a spicy nibble which evolved from the Dutch koekje). To the right is some parsley sambol (see overleaf for recipe). Right: King prawn curry is a traditional dish of Sri Lanka's Nagambo region where there is a large lagoon.

enriched. The Dutch, British, and Portuguese, who all colonised Sri Lanka at various times, added the odd dish too.

With such an elaborate cuisine, it's hardly surprising that meals in Sri Lanka are so lovingly prepared and savoured.

At least, they used to be. Sadly, the long, languid afternoon feasts have been giving way to a hastier, Western style of eating.

But Jackie and Rohan remember when their mothers and grandmothers would spend the morning concocting up to 16 dishes for the afternoon *Daval Came* – and the whole family would gather to enjoy it. The mothers, Jackie recalls, would hand-feed their children until they were about six or seven years old. "It's just a lovely custom," she says. "This way they can make sure their children eat everything."

Family bonds are very strong in Sri Lanka and, since the arrival of her triplets, they're something Jackie sorely misses. For the first time in twelve years, she's homesick. "All of a sudden I feel if I had more family here the whole scenario would be different," she says wistfully. "In Sri Lanka I wouldn't be alone for a minute. There would always be family and neighbours around."

Jacqui comes from Colombo, the capital of Sri Lanka. She's a *Burgher* which means she's partly of European descent and was raised in a Christian, English-speaking household. At Christmas, her family would eat rice and curries but they would also have the Dutch *brudher* – a fruity, spiced bread.

Pure Sinhalese and a Buddhist, Rohan grew up in a place called Kandy in a traditional Sri Lankan household. The kitchen was an entirely female domain but he must have learned

something by osmosis because one day he decided to whip up a curry for his father. "He really appreciated it," Rohan recalls. "I thought, 'okay, maybe I can cook.'" It was a timely realisation because Rohan had just missed out on university entrance by a hair's breadth, so he decided to go to catering school instead.

He met Jackie in a Colombo hotel – he was chef, she was behind the bar. His gourmet flair and her outgoing personality have continued to complement each other. "I've always been a people-oriented," says Jackie. "We make a good team."

The Samaratungas moved to New Zealand twelve years ago. For two years now, they've run The Continental Café – specialising in Sri Lankan cuisine. But now that the family has literally doubled in size, Rohan wants a business he can run from home. He's devising a range of curry dishes to sell through supermarkets. No doubt it will be a success because the Kiwi pallet is proving very receptive to Sri Lankan food. "New Zealanders are trying different foods now – not like ten years ago," says Rohan.

The West Auckland suburbs must seem a poignant distance from Sri Lanka – "the pearl of the Indian Ocean" where elephants roam tropical forests. But New Zealand is home to the Samaratungas now. Being an island, and a semi-tropical one at that, it suits their cooking ventures. "In some ways we've found cooking a Sri Lankan dinner is easier here," says Jackie. "Good meat and fish, readily available spices ... Foodwise I think New Zealand is one of the best countries to be."

And we can count ourselves lucky to be adding a little Sri Lankan spice to our own island melting pot.



Clockwise from top left: Sash dines in Sri Lankan style – with his fingers. Tomato rosettes. Gertie's sari is draped in the fashion of her home region of Kandy. The spice tray includes dried chillies, fenugreek, mustard, cardamom, cloves, cinnamon sticks and, across the middle, a stick of 'karapincha' or curry leaf, which is available from Asian vegetable stores and some supermarkets.

## KUKUL MUS (CHICKEN) CURRY

Serves 4-6

1kg boneless chicken pieces  
 3 tbsp Sri Lankan curry powder  
 (see Cook's Tip)  
 2 tbsp chilli powder  
 2 tsp turmeric  
 2 tsp vinegar  
 10cm piece fresh ginger,  
 peeled and finely  
 chopped  
 8-10 large cloves garlic,  
 peeled and finely  
 chopped  
 ¼ cup oil (not olive)  
 1 onion, peeled and finely  
 chopped  
 4 curry leaves  
 5 cinnamon sticks  
 1 tbsp whole cloves  
 1 tbsp whole cardamoms  
 1½ tbsp chopped green chillies  
 Pinch fenugreek  
 ½ cup water  
 1¾ cups coconut milk or cream  
 Salt and pepper to taste

1 Cut the chicken into 5 cm pieces and marinate in the curry powder, chilli powder, turmeric, vinegar and half the chopped ginger and garlic.

2 Heat the oil in a heavy-based frying pan and then add the chopped onion, the remaining ginger and garlic, the curry leaves, cinnamon sticks, cloves, cardamom, chillies, and fenugreek. Cook until lightly browned.

3 Add the chicken and cook for 5-8 minutes. Add the water, cover and simmer until the chicken is tender.

4 Stir in the coconut milk or cream and cook until the chicken is well done and the gravy is the preferred thickness.

5 Season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve over steamed rice with pickles, chutney and poppadums.

## SRI LANKAN CURRY POWDER

3 tbsp coriander seeds  
 1 tbsp cumin seeds  
 1 tbsp fennel seeds  
 1 tsp fenugreek seeds  
 1 small piece of cinnamon stick  
 6 whole cardamoms  
 6 fresh curry leaves  
 1 tsp cayenne or chilli pepper

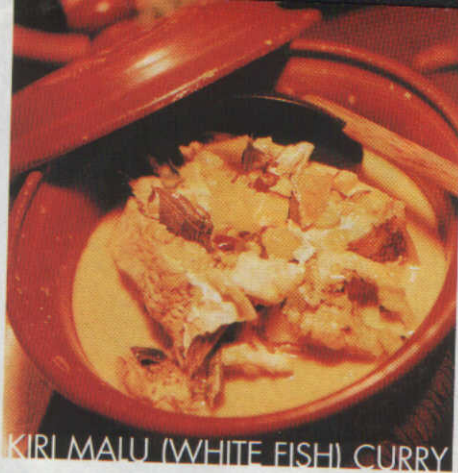
1 In a pan, dry roast the coriander and cumin seeds until they smell fragrant but are not burnt. Cool.

2 Place the roasted seeds into a small food mill, along with the fennel and the fenugreek seeds, as well as the cinnamon, cardamom, curry leaves and cayenne or chilli powder and process until finely ground.

Keep in an airtight container.

### Cook's Tip

Sri Lankan curry powder is sweeter than Indian. Look for it in specialty food shops. Or try Allyson's recipe (above right).



KIRI MALU (WHITE FISH) CURRY

Serves 4-6

- 1 kg fresh white fish on the bone
- 1 medium onion,  
peeled and finely chopped
- 10 cloves garlic, peeled and finely  
chopped
- 2 green chillies, finely sliced (deseeded  
if wished)
- 1 cinnamon stick
- Pinch fenugreek
- Juice of 1 lime or lemon
- 2 segments gamboge (see Cook's Tips)
- 1 ¼ cups thick coconut cream
- 1 cup water
- 7 peppercorns
- Salt to taste

- 1 Clean the fish and cut into large chunky pieces on the bone.
- 2 Place in a large saucepan with the remaining ingredients except the salt and lemon juice. Simmer for 10-15 minutes.
- 3 Season with salt and lemon juice. Serve with rice, poppadums and other accompaniments.

#### Cook's Tip

Gamboge is an acid fruit used in Sri Lanka, and most commonly bought dried in segments. Look for it in specialty Asian shops.

#### GOTU KOLA (PARSLEY)SAMBOL

- 300g fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 1 ¼ cup grated fresh coconut
- 2 green chillies, chopped (deseeded if  
wished)
- 50g Maldive fish (dried tuna flakes)
- ½ onion, peeled and finely chopped
- Salt to taste
- Juice ½ lemon

- 1 Chop the parsley very finely, using a food processor if you have one.

- 2 Mix together all the ingredients and season with salt and lemon juice.

#### POL (RED COCONUT) SAMBOL

- 3 cups grated fresh coconut
- 1 tbsp chilli powder or paprika
- 3 green chillies, finely diced (deseeded  
if desired)
- 1 small onion, peeled and finely  
chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, peeled and finely  
chopped
- 50g Maldive fish (dried tuna flakes)
- ½ cup coconut cream
- Salt to taste
- Juice of ½ lemon

- 1 Mix together all the ingredients and then season with salt and lemon juice. Garnish with curry leaves or lemon slices.

#### Cook's Note

If using desiccated coconut, you will need about 2½ cups. Reconstitute it by soaking it in ¼ cup of additional coconut milk or cream.