

March 9, 2005

EATING SRI LANKA

Rice & Curry, String Hoppers, and Rotty



With a generic name like "Rice and Curry", Sri Lanka's national dish may seem simple, but in no way is it plain. A typical rice & curry meal might include:

- Rice (either white or "red" -- what we'd call brown rice or whole grain)
- Dal -- a curry made from lentils -- like a thick soup
- Four or five fruit/vegetable dishes, typically eggplant, jackfruit, breadfruit, tomatoes, onions
- One or more meat or fish dishes
- Pappadam (thin, crispy wafers)

Almost everything is cooked with coconut milk and/or features grated coconut. The dishes have various levels of spiciness and textures. Some ordinary, some quite pungent. You order by specifying if you want veg or non-veg rice & curry—if non-veg, you get to specify the type of meat. Whatever they have in the kitchen is what you get for the veg dishes. Sri Lankans eat rice & curry for breakfast, lunch and dinner. So did we (usually).

The root of the dish, as you might guess, is rice. Lots of it. The diners are served from a communal plate of rice which is about twice their collective ability to consume. Diners place a big mound of rice in the center of the plate, then take the various curries and surround the rice with them, leaving a spot in front to mix them. To the right is a typical rice-curry spread for five people.

Rice and Curry is traditionally eaten with just the fingers of the right hand. There's a bit of art to it; you put bits of all the curries together on a patch of rice and mash them around enthusiastically. Form your fingers into a shovel sort of thing. Squeeze the bundle together in your hand, and pop! it into your mouth, using your thumbnail as a launcher. Yes, you end up with curry-colored, curry-flavored fingers. Thoughtfully, a water bowl appears as if by magic to rinse off the hand, and a towel to dry off -- or newspaper in bargain places. You might get a napkin, but they're always small, and the mess is way too much to clean with a little bit of paper.

Another key rice & curry staple—at least for us westerners, at dinner—was beer. Lots of beer, in 600ml (about 1 1/2 pints) bottles. Fortunately not expensive. Beer drinking demonstration photo to the right.

Food is typically completely prepared just before service -- it takes so long that typically, we'd place our orders well in advance (an hour and a half, or the previous night for breakfast), and specify when we'd be back for the meal. This is a great idea for freshness and food safety in such a hot climate -- but it does take some getting used to.

It was challenging as Westerners, to get a decent level of spiciness in the food. I'd guess this has a bit to do with most light skinned people here being European and not accustomed to "fiery" food. Erik and I (Scott), who both enjoy some



kick in their food, had a lot of trouble convincing the locals that yes, indeed we wanted our food spicy. Then we learned about *kata sambol*, a fire-like paste of shallot, red chilies, fermented fish, and a bit of lime juice; "sure to liven any party". When we would ask for it, waiters seemed astonished that we'd eat it, and would ask us "whether that was really what we wanted". It wasn't that hot. One brought "chili sauce" (ketchup) instead. When we persisted, we got... *fire*.



Rice and curry is also available on practically any city street in the form of lunch packets (see picture to the left), selling for 40 or 50 cents. Since you're eating it with your hand -- no utensils are required! Rice & curry was more expensive in restaurants—\$1.00 or \$1.50 (each) at local joints; at the more upscale tourist restaurants we'd pay as much as \$3.00 for a non-veg rice & curry dinner. (Plus another couple of bucks for the beer).

Hoppers, a rice-curry variant, are a bit like soft-shell tacos made out of rice flour—you fill them with various tasty bits, roll them up and eat them.. String hoppers are just strange. They're also made from rice flour, but extruded into vermicelli-thin disks maybe a half-inch (1cm) high and 3" (10cm) round. They're boiled briefly, cooled and served in piles (like the mounds of rice). You top the vermicelli disk with *dahl* or what-have-you, and pop it into your mouth. It is certainly efficient. Our guide couldn't come up with any explanation for the term "Hopper", but later in India we found a similar thing called, eponymously, *appam*. That mystery might be solved.

That leaves us with rotti. While "hopper" sort of evokes a feeling of grasshoppers (which we've also eaten...), rotti just does not sound that appealing. Actually, it comes from the Indian word "roti" -- which refers to about any bread. Some are plain, some stuffed, and served with the same variety of dishes.

There was plenty of western food to be had in Sri Lanka -- but it invariably disappointed. Besides, if you want to just eat "like home" -- why not stay there... it's cheaper!

One of our more "interactive" tours was a cooking course on how to prepare a typical Sri Lankan rice/curry dinner. We started out with the basic Sri Lankan spices (shown at the top of page 1), which include tumeric, chili, curry leaf, fenugreek, shallots, garlic, cumin, cinnamon, tamarind paste, pepper (white & black), ginger, cloves, cardamom, salt, and others I can't remember now.... We ate in the traditional fashion (with our hands; banana leaves served as plates)... and stuffed ourselves.



I get the feeling we're going to be pining for a good local rice/curry shop once we get home...