

Sri Lankan curry and tea

Curry and Ceylon tea are synonymous with Sri Lanka. I would like to discuss curry and tea based on my 1.5-month stay in Sri Lanka since February 2016.

Story of Sri Lankan curry

“There is no way out because everything is very spicy!” “I damaged my stomach by eating hot food for one month.” “I have had many different types of food but Sri Lankan curry was the hottest.” When my assignment in Sri Lanka was confirmed, these are what people told me of their experiences in Sri Lanka. However, Sri Lankan curry is not that hot. When one orders rice and curry in Sri Lanka, they serve 4-5 different kinds of vegetable curry dishes such as lentil, French bean, potato and gourd. These are not so hot. So, what is hot are the additional meat or fish curry you order. These are extremely hot! At first you feel gentle sweetness, then the heat goes through your brain and sweat pours out of your pores. Then a mixed sensation of pain and heat overtake the entire mouth. The curry dishes that are “as hot as the devil” are called “Devil” in Sri Lanka. I am not sure who named them but it is spot on. People mix the hot devil and mild vegetable curry dishes by hand, making them the right level of spiciness before eating. Once used to it, intricate mixing of spices becomes addictive and one does not get bored with the dishes even if eating them every day.



Many small bowls of different types of curries. Apart from devil, we can request additional small bowls.



Sri Lankan curry serviced on a plate. This side on the right is the chicken devil.

Story of Sri Lankan tea

In Sri Lanka, milk tea called “Kiri tee” is favored. The tea is extremely sweet. When I was offered the tea for the first time at a farmer’s house, I could drink only half. Tea leaves are divided into different grades depending on their size. In Japan, Orange Peko, which comes with large leaves, is popular. In Sri Lanka, however, people use fine tea leaves called “Dust” and make tea by boiling them. The water becomes very dark brown rather than orange. It is too bitter to drink as it is. People add milk to the strong tea and make it mild by whipping it to make Kiri tee. In some shops, they sometimes taste a little bit like cocoa. I heard later on that some people add Milo to Kiri tee. “Nestlé Milo” is a cocoa-based drink which I also used to drink as a child mixing it with

milk. I felt a little nostalgic with the mysterious cocoa-flavored tea.

By the way, Sri Lanka has a custom called “bed tea”. In the upper-class households, house maids (and mothers in normal households) make Kiri tee in the morning for family, and bring a cup to the bedside. What a graceful custom! Sweet tea as soon as you wake up. Luxurious! I asked my friend “Does the custom still exist?” The answer was yes. At home his wife, and at his parents’ home his mother, would bring tea to his bedroom every morning. Wonderful! Another person told me with a bitter smile, “Yes, for the first years of marriage my wife brought tea to the bedroom, but now I make my own.” It seems to vary from household to household. I researched this custom further and it seems that this is originally a British custom. House maids would make tea for their masters, or husbands would make tea for their beloved wives. When I mentioned this to my friend, he said with a smile “Let’s not tell that to my wife.”



Nuwara Eliya – a famous tea producing area. Wherever you look, tea estates spread.



Sri Lankan milk tea called Kiri Tee. Extra mild and frothy!

After the stay

Before leaving for Sri Lanka, with warnings from my seniors, I was worried how I could survive with the country’s food. But of course, it is easier to do something than worry about it. I ate curry dishes every day. I eventually had 2-3 cups of the sweet tea every day, and began to think it is delicious. I greatly enjoyed curry and tea during my stay in Sri Lanka.

After returning home

I used to be a coffee person, and after coming home, I stopped drinking tea every day. However, whenever I see tea on sale, I tend to look at the label. I was surprised to see an ingredient description “using Nuwara Eliya tea leaves” when I picked up packages from large tea brand companies. I also found tea from Kandy and Dimbula. I didn’t know in the past but these are all tea growing areas in Sri Lanka. I became happy finding Sri Lanka closely in Japan. Even if you are a coffee person, why not try tea from time to time. Your tea is likely to be Ceylon tea.

(By Sawada, April 2016)