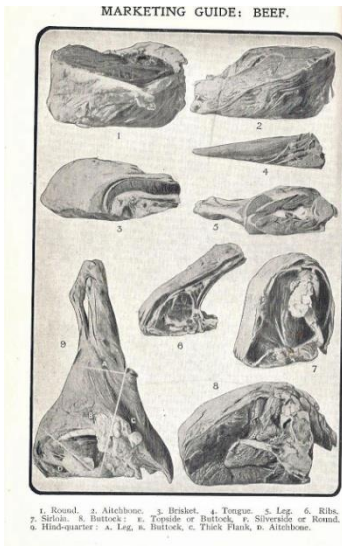


BRITISH INFLUENCES

Unlike the Portuguese and the Dutch East India Company, the British did not colonise Sri Lanka for its spices, at least not initially. British interest began with wanting to maintain using the superb Trincomalee as a site from which to protect British interests in Southern India from French incursions post the Seven Years War (1756-1763 CE) between the two nations. The British had been able to use the harbour while it was under the control of the Dutch but now feared that they would lose this as France forged a stronger link with the Dutch through a defensive alliance in 1795 CE.

When the French, who were Catholics, occupied Dutch territory in that year, the Dutch stadholder, who was Protestant, sought refuge in Britain, and the British used this to get a letter from him (the Kew Letter) commanding all governors of Dutch colonies to hand these over to the British. The result was that the British gained possession of the entire coastal area of Sri Lanka in 1795-96 CE. For the first years these territories were jointly managed by the British East India Company operating out of Madras, and the Crown. However in January 1802 CE the territories became the British Crown Colony of Ceylon and the East India Company's role was relegated to trade. It was not until 1818 CE that Britain crushed the kingdom of Kandy and this too then became part of the Crown Colony.ⁱ



British food in the 18th and 19th centuries

A look at British food at the time of the colonisation of Sri Lanka presents a picture of blandness and stodginess. British cookbooks targeted at the emerging middle class housewife of the time show a turn away from the dishes of the French court and toward plainer food, both in flavour and presentation. There was an emphasis on economy as against former extravagance.ⁱⁱ

*'...the swelling ranks of middle England liked their simple, plain fare, enjoying roast and boiled meats, pies, and puddings. Roast beef became part of the construction of a British national identity, in opposition to the fancy sauces of France. The invention in the late 17th century of a muslin cloth for steaming, fed England's obsession with puddings - previously, a cook would have had to obtain fresh animal guts in which to steam her pudding. And the English had an enormous appetite for puddings, whether stuffed with meat or game, or oozing with butter or custard.'*ⁱⁱⁱ

Even as late as 1880 CE, Sir Henry Thompson wrote:

'On questioning the average middle-class Englishman as to the nature of his food, the all but universal answer is, "My living is plain, always roasted and boiled" – words which but too clearly indicate the dreary monotony, not to say unwholesomeness, of his daily food; while they furthermore express his satisfaction, such as it is, that he is no luxurious feeder.'^{iv}

This is reflected in perhaps the most famous, and certainly the most reprinted, English cookbook of the time, Isabella Beeton's Book of Household Management, which while showing 'superficial signs of French indulgence [] is mainly "plain English".^v

But it wasn't only the middle class whose food was plain. Richard Jeffries writing in 1872 CE of the diet of the Wiltshire agricultural labour writes:

'(it) consisted of bread and cheese, with bacon twice or thrice a week, varied with onions... his cottage scents the road with the odour of boiled cabbage, of which he eats an immense quantity. Vegetables are his luxuries...He eats huge onions raw; he has no idea of flavouring his food with them, nor of making those savoury and inviting messes of vegetable soups at which the French peasantry are so clever.'^{vi}

Things were better for the wealthy 'enjoying such delicacies as vermicelli and macaroni from Italy, curry, pilau rice and mango pickle from India, and even turtle soup containing freshly imported turtles from the West Indies. They grew exotic fruits in their hothouses, and kept ice-cream in their ice houses.'^{vii}

The British legacy in Sri Lankan cuisine

'Whether British rule was ultimately good or bad for India is a matter for scholars to decide. But no sane person who ever ate food prepared in the kitchens of the Raj can have any doubts about Britain's culinary legacy: it was universally malign. Never in history has so much bad food been served by so many to so few'.

Tiger-Wallahs: Saving the Greatest of the Great Cats, Geoffrey C Ward & Diane R Ward.^{viii}

On the evidence of Hilda Deutrom's *Ceylon Daily News Cookery Book*, first published in 1929 CE, British food became dominant in the households of the Burghers of Sri Lanka (those descendants of the intermarriages of the Portuguese, Dutch and French with Singhalese and Tamils. Of the 1672 recipes in that book, 104 are identified as Kandyan and Singhalese curries, 33 as Tamil, 57 are Indian/Sri Lankan sweets, and 21 are Indian/Sri Lankan pickles. Thirteen are Dutch and Portuguese sweets, and there are a handful of Portuguese and Dutch savoury dishes also. The remaining 1444 recipes are minor variations on the kinds of dishes found in Isabella Beeton's compendium. For example, among Deutrom's puddings those also in Beeton include cabinet pudding, canary pudding, caramel pudding, chocolate pudding, date pudding, golden pudding, roly poly pudding and semolina pudding. They share beef a la mode, steak and kidney pie, roast beef, stewed calf's feet, stuffed bullock's heart, stewed ox-tail, mutton (boiled, braised, roasted, stewed, chops), chicken (boiled, croquettes, pie, roast). The same holds for fish, cakes, breads, tarts, pastries; a continuation of plain British food onto the tables of Sri Lanka.

As with the adoption of methods from other cuisines before it, variations on British food using Sri Lankan staples emerged. Vegetable cutlets use brinjal, breadfruit and dhal, along with Worcestershire sauce and bacon and mince meat. Indigenous yams are treated in the same ways as potatoes. Roast pork is accompanied by a sauce from limes, onions, Worcestershire sauce and chillies; roast beef is devilled with chillies, lemon grass, garlic, ginger, mustard and more Worcestershire sauce. Fresh grated coconut or cashews are added to a basic bread pudding; jaggery is added to a plain dough for a sweet bread; rice flour is used to make a cake.

Tea

Arguably the biggest influence on Sri Lankan cuisine of the British years, however, was the introduction of tea and its adoption as the hot beverage of choice. Coffee had been introduced during the Dutch era and was the significant plantation crop until the outbreak of a leaf disease – *Hemileia vastatrix* – beginning in 1869 led to a decline in production per acre that saw the almost complete abandonment of coffee by the 1890s.^{ix} Tea was introduced experimentally in 1860 but as the coffee industry declined, more planters turned to tea with considerable success until it became

The bedrock of the island's economy by the last decade of the nineteenth century, a position it held till well after the mid-twentieth century'.^x

The order of meals

The other influence of the British period was the adoption of an order of meals during the day that put British food and Sri Lankan food on the tables but never together. It's beautifully summed up in this quote from Allan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama* (1990) about an Indian middle class family, but equally applicable to Sri Lankan Burghers and Sinhalese middle class households.

'From Victoria, Eugene learnt that curries might be eaten at lunch, but at dinner never, dinner being, for all Totters of the blood, a formal affair. That lunch was of India (or India Britonised), while dinner was of Britain (or Britain Indianized). That lunch was not a light meal but a heavy one, dinner being, however, no less heavy. That curry, wet or dry, is eaten with a dessertspoon, dessert being eaten with a teaspoon. That mulligatawny soup might precede lunch, but at dinner the soup must be clear, a consommé perhaps of trotters; that a pigeon might swim in chili gravy at noon, but at night must be roasted; that pickles might accompany the first, but chutneys were for the second; that gulab jamuns might be eaten at the first, but a British pudding must follow the second'.

ⁱ De Silva pp237-248; 276-306

ⁱⁱ Mennell pp88-89

ⁱⁱⁱ British Library <http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/booksforcooks/1700s/1700sfood.html>

^{iv} Mennell p206

^v Mennell p213

^{vi} Mennell p219

^{vii} British Library <http://www.bl.uk/learning/langlit/booksforcooks/1700s/1700sfood.html>

^{viii} Ward C G & D R 2000

^{ix} De Silva pp365-366

^x De Silva p368