

**W**E COME TOGETHER WITH OTHER SRI LANKANS—homelander and diaspora, Sinhalese and Tamil, Buddhist and Hindu and Christian and Muslim—over delicious shared meals. Sri Lanka has been a multi-ethnic society for over two thousand years, with neighbors of different ethnicities, languages, religions, living side by side. We try to teach our children to be welcoming to all, to share our unique cultural traditions. That is part of what it means to be Sri Lankan, what it has always meant.

Dark roasted curry powder, a fine attention to the balance of salty-sour-sweet, wholesome red rice and toasted curry leaves, plenty of coconut milk and chili heat. These are the flavors of Sri Lanka, a South Asian island at the crossroads of centuries of migration and trade.

Can we choose the good parts of our culture to cherish, and leave the darker aspects behind? I hope so. I hope food can help provide a pathway there. Come together at our table, sharing coconut milk rice and pol sambol, paruppu and jackfruit curry. Linger over the chai—just one more cup. Eat, drink, and share joy.



In *Vegan Serendib*, novelist and post-colonial academic Mary Anne Mohanraj introduces her mother's cooking and her own American adaptations, providing an introduction to Sri Lankan American vegan cooking that is straightforward enough for a beginner, yet nuanced enough to capture the unique flavors of Sri Lankan cooking.



SERENDIB PRESS



Mohanraj  
VEGAN SERENDIB



Mary Anne Mohanraj

# VEGAN SERENDIB

RECIPES FROM SRI LANKA



*For Karina*

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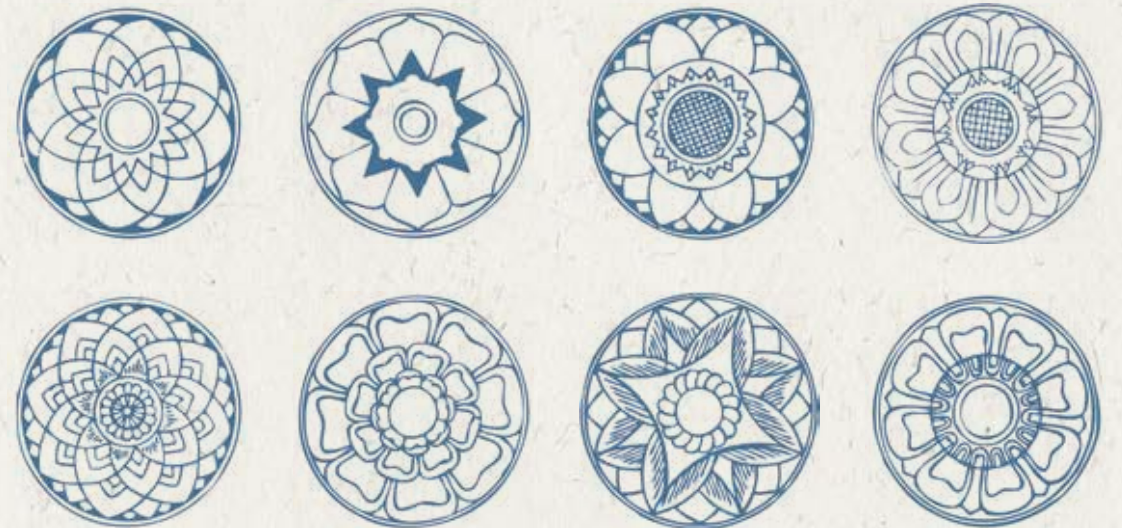
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## INTRODUCTION

**I** must begin this with a confession; I am not actually vegan. I'm not even vegetarian. Which begs the question—why would I write a vegan cookbook? Really, it's because of Karina. A long time ago, I dated a girl who was vegetarian, leaning pretty close to vegan. We dated for three years, and in that time, we ate together a lot. She was vegetarian for ethical reasons, and so to avoid causing her distress, I ate vegetarian during that time as well. And it was just fine, at least while I was cooking for us at home, because I was mostly cooking Sri Lankan food, and there are lots of delicious vegetarian/vegan options in our cuisine. In Sri Lanka, we use coconut milk instead of dairy as a default, delectable vegetables and fruits are available year-round, and many Sri Lankans are vegetarian as part of their religious practice—for these reasons and more, the island has developed two thousand years of rich vegetarian/vegan culinary tradition.

It was a little harder to eat well—sometimes a lot harder—when we went out to restaurants together, or to parties at friends' homes. Often, the only vegetarian option was a salad, and a pretty boring salad at that – some leafy green, probably a little wilted from sitting around, and a few shreds of carrot and slices of tomato. We'd go home still hungry, and sad about not getting to enjoy deliciousness.

It gave Karina so much pleasure when we found a restaurant that had tasty vegetarian options, especially foods she hadn't tried before. She's an adventurous eater, and when I took her to visit Sri Lanka for the first time, she researched and had a whole list of restaurants and foods she wanted to try. We were able to eat very well on our trip!



## INTRODUCTION *from* *A FEAST of SERENDIB*

Flash forward to now—twenty years later, restaurants are slowly improving their vegetarian dishes, with more substantial offerings and a greater variety of them. But Sri Lankan cuisine is still hard to find in the U.S.—there are a few restaurants here and there, especially in New York, and if you go up to Toronto, you’ll find plenty. But where I live, in Chicago, you pretty much have to drive eight hours up to St. Paul to find a Sri Lankan restaurant.

So this book is for everyone who wants to explore Sri Lankan vegan cuisine, whether you’re vegan or not. Maybe you’re doing Meatless Mondays, or you’re exploring a more plant-based diet generally. Maybe you’re looking for more sustainable ways to eat and exist on this planet, or maybe you’re aiming towards a healthier diet. Maybe, like Karina, veganism is an ethical choice for you. Whatever the reason, what you’ll find in these pages is an exciting and wildly varied cuisine, with a multitude of different preparations for vegetables, fruits, even flowers. You’ll learn how to make a master recipe for roasted curry powder, and how to prepare seasoned onions to infuse your dishes with added flavor. You’ll be invited to try a host of traditional preparations, which make up the bulk of the book, and also a few newer dishes, using ingredients that wouldn’t have been available on the island in the old days—I experimented a bit with ingredients like vegan butter, vegan yogurt, and agar-agar in a few recipes.

Hopefully, this book will help make cooking and eating vegan cuisine easy, adventurous, fun, and most of all, fabulously delicious!

—*Mary Anne*

**T**he first time I started writing a Sri Lankan cookbook, *A Taste of Serendib*, it was meant to simply be a Christmas present for my mother—writing down some of her recipes. The book offered a few recipes in each section, and featured sketches that a friend drew, illustrating me and my mother cooking, including a few choice quotes of my mother scolding me in the kitchen: “You cannot read and stir at the same time!”

It quickly spiraled into a book, but the focus was still simple—what little I knew of her recipes. It was designed to be accessible to college students, like the one I was at the time. I was an immigrant who had come to America very young, had grown up eating rice and curry every night, but had only a tenuous connection to the food culture of the homeland.

My mother had had to make many adaptations when she came to America in 1973. She used ketchup instead of tomatoes, for example, because she didn’t have access to coconut milk, and other milks didn’t have sufficient sweetness. (Ketchup also sped along the sauce-making process, since it’s basically a cooked down mixture of tomatoes, vinegar, sugar, and salt.) My mother’s recipes had already changed in America, and as I made them myself, they changed further, adapting to my tastes. When I gave my mother the finished book, she was pleased, but also immediately started pointing out where I’d gotten things wrong. I threatened to do a second edition of the book, with



“Amma’s corrections” all through it in red. I still think that would have been a good book, but she didn’t go for it.

So the book stayed as it was for many years. It could have been left there. But instead, more than a decade later, I started working on a new cookbook, *A Feast of Serendib*.

My husband, Kevin, and I were talking recently about how I choose which projects to work on. There’s often a pressure to spend my time and energy on more commercial projects, the ones that have the best odds of a good payout. This new cookbook should sell some copies; hopefully, it’ll sell lots of copies. But it was hardly the most commercial project I could work on, and making the recipes, some of them over and over again, trying to get them right, was exceedingly time-consuming. If it were just about the money, that cookbook would make no sense at all.

But it’s rarely just about the money. Over the years since I did the first cookbook, I’ve added more and more Sri Lankan recipes to my repertoire. My cookbook shelf has been overtaken by Sri Lankan cookbooks: from classics like the *Ceylon Daily News Cookbook*, to conflict-related books like the beautiful and heartbreaking *Handmade*, to fancy coffee table books full of glorious photos like *The Food of Sri Lanka*, to what is still my favorite, Charmaine Solomon’s *Complete Asian Cookbook*—her Sri Lankan recipes taste like my mother’s, like home.

I enjoy cooking dishes from other cuisines. Ethiopian is one of my favorites, and there are days when I crave sushi. Pizza is a family standby, and my children are built in large part out of pasta and broccoli. But I come back to Sri Lankan food—I cook it at least once or twice, most weeks. These days, I go online and read a dozen different recipes for a dish before I even start making it. I interrogate my Sri Lankan friends (both diasporan and homelander) about their recipes. I want to know how these dishes were typically made, in the villages, for generations and generations back. What should the balance of upu-puli (salty-sour) be? How thick do we want the finished gravy?

If I can’t get a certain leafy green considered key to traditional cookery, I feel such frustration. But I try to accept the truth, that I will likely never cook exactly

how homeland Sri Lankans would. My adaptations of my mother’s adaptations are still tasty.

My husband is white American, for enough generations that he’s not sure exactly where all his ancestors came from. Once, when Kevin and I were talking about naming our first child, about whether to give her a Tamil name, he asked whether we wouldn’t be better off if we didn’t cling so hard to ethnic, racial, nationalist traditions. Divisions. In some ways, I think he’s right. Sri Lanka was riven by ethnic conflict for decades, and the country and its people are still dealing with the aftermath—it would be worth giving up much, if you could thereby make the conflicts end.

But this is who we are; this is what it is to be human. We are composed of our mother’s hand with a salt shaker, the squeeze of fresh lime at the end of the dish. For those of us who are attenuated from the food of our grandparents and great-grandparents, learning how to cook this food, in its many iterations, can feel like filling a hole in your heart. We named our daughter Kaviarasi in the end, a very old Tamil name, which means ‘queen of poetry.’ Diasporic friends of my parents sent us thank you notes, for giving her such a classic Tamil name, for keeping the traditions alive.

I choose this. I choose to put time and energy into learning this food, into



...serving it to my mixed-race children, with the hopes that they will grow to love it too. Kavi comes into the kitchen to ask excitedly, “Oh, are you making curry?” When she asks for it, my heart skips a beat.

We come together with other Sri Lankans—homelander and diaspora, Sinhalese and Tamil, Buddhist and Hindu and Christian and Muslim—over delicious shared meals. Sri Lanka has been a multi-ethnic society for over two thousand years, with neighbors of different ethnicities, languages, religions, living side by side. We try to teach our children to be welcoming to all, to share our unique cultural traditions. That is part of what it means to be Sri Lankan, what it has always meant.

Can we choose the good parts of our culture to cherish, and leave the darker aspects behind? I hope so. I hope food can help provide a pathway there. Come together at our table, sharing milk rice and pol sambol, paruppu and jackfruit curry. Linger over the chai—just one more cup. Eat, drink, and share joy.

As for me, I make no claim to authenticity—there are many more authentic Sri Lankan cookbooks, painstakingly researched. But if there was a thin line drawn with that first cookbook, connecting me to the food of my ancestors, then the last few years of researching and adding recipe after recipe to this cookbook have thickened and strengthened the thread of connection, into a sturdy rope. One that you might use when lost, to find your way home.

I’ve come to appreciate the long history, the gathered wisdom of a thousand thousand cooks, who have known that with the perfection of hoppers at breakfast, all you need is a little fresh coconut sambol to accompany it. The more I cook these recipes, the more I grow to love this food.

I hope other readers of this cookbook will feel the same, and will love Sri Lanka, its food, and most of all, its people, along with me.

—*Mary Anne Amirthi Mohanraj*  
August 2019

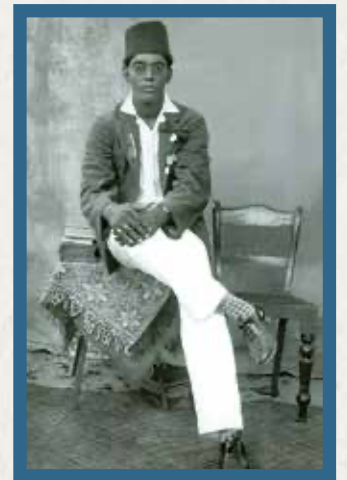


## ETHNIC HERITAGE *and* COLONIAL INFLUENCES

**M**y family is of the Tamil ethnic / cultural / language group, and almost all of the recipes that follow are Sri Lankan Tamil. (I have given Tamil names for some dishes, although for many, using English naming is common—my parents and their siblings will refer to cutlets, for example.) About sixteen percent of the Sri Lankan population is Tamil, a large percentage of whom came to Sri Lanka over two thousand years ago, settling primarily in the North and East; our cooking has diverged significantly from that of Indian Tamils from the southernmost state of Tamil Nadu.

Another group, the Hill Country / Indian Tamils, were brought over in the 19th and 20th centuries to work the coffee and tea plantations by the colonizers; some also came on their own as merchants and traders. The majority of the island’s population is Sinhalese (about seventy-four percent), with a significant population of Moors (speaking Arabic-influenced Tamil, though many are also fluent in Sinhalese). There are also some smaller groups, including Malays and the indigenous Veddahs.

Sri Lanka experienced three waves of colonization—Portuguese (arriving 1505), Dutch (arriving 1602), and British (arriving 1802). All of the colonizing groups, along



My paternal grandfather,  
C.V.E. Navaratnasingam, principal of  
Delft Maha Vidyalaya

with the Hakka and Cantonese laborers they brought to Sri Lanka and more recent Chinese migrants, have left their culinary imprint on the island.

## SRI LANKAN MEALS

I'm often asked what is characteristic of Sri Lankan food, and how it differs from Indian food. The second question is difficult, because it's usually Americans asking me, and they're used to Americanized Indian food, which is often fairly generic and watered down—not actual food from India, which is dramatically different, depending on whether you're talking Mughal-influenced North Indian cuisine, mostly-vegetarian Gujarati, etc.



Two main elements of Sri Lankan cuisine are our use of dark-roasted curry powder across the island and goraka (a souring fruit, similar to tamarind) in Sinhalese cooking. You won't find goraka in recipes here, though, as my Tamil family doesn't use it. Other characteristic elements include wholesome red rice, plenty of chili heat, curry

leaves, lots of coconut milk and shredded coconut, and usually a touch of tang (from tomato, vinegar, tamarind, or lime). We do also eat a wide variety of non-vegetarian dishes, which I think is somewhat unusual in South Asia, given religious prohibitions, but can be traced to a long-standing multiethnic and multi-religious population. An island at the nexus of trade routes absorbs many culinary influences.

Sri Lankan cuisine has particularly strong similarities to Goan cuisine, in the Portuguese influence—more vinegar in the curries, plenty of coconut milk and coconut. Sri Lankan cuisine also has commonalities with South Indian cuisine—the dry spiced poriyals, the commonality of sambar and rasam (with plenty of tamarind), with idli, thosai, and uppuma for grain-based dishes.

I came to America when I was two years old, and so I never ate like a Sri Lankan would back home; for example, I had usually cereal for breakfast growing up in Connecticut. A typical Sri Lankan breakfast is some idli and sambar, or string hoppers and sothi, perhaps with paruppu (lentils). I grew up disliking lentils and have only recently learned to love them, but most people in Sri Lanka eat lots of lentils regularly. If you were feeling fancier, you might make hoppers for breakfast (but you'd have to plan that the night before). Uppuma is also a nice change, usually with some curry. I've gotten addicted to eating American pancakes with curry—the sweetness of the pancakes works really well with a spicy curry.

As a child, I would have often eaten a sandwich for lunch, but in Sri Lanka, lunches are rice and curries, often eaten around 3 p.m., and dinners are the same, often eaten around 9 p.m. Generally we would serve plain white rice, a curry or two, and a sambol or pickle. Appetizers and fancier accompaniments are usually saved for when guests



My mother, Jacintha Mohanraj, my sister, Mirmalini Mohanraj, and my paternal grandmother, Regina Navaratnasingam

or more family come over, although you'd likely keep containers of sambol or pickle around, for added flavor. Some of my American friends are surprised when I tell them that I had rice and curry for dinner every single night when I was growing up—what can I say? If your mother is an excellent cook, then you never get bored by a little repetition.

The fancier dishes, the hoppers and pittu and stringhoppers—those were all saved for parties. Usually, we stuffed ourselves on the delectable appetizers (called short eats), but somehow always managed to find room for dinner and then dessert. If you need one more little bite to fill out a table, some fresh fruit sprinkled with cayenne, salt, and lime is always appropriate as appetizer or accompaniment.

*Note: Sri Lankans eat with their right hand, not with utensils, generally. It takes a little practice to learn how to make a neat little ball of rice and curry with your fingers, but more than a few of my friends have learned how over the years. Note that many of our recipes use whole spices such as cardamom pods, cloves, and cinnamon, that are not meant to be bitten into—when you're eating with your hands, it's easy to pick out and avoid those as you have dinner.*

*If you're planning on eating with a fork, you may want to either grind those spices before adding them, use pre-ground versions (generally not as strongly-flavored, so you may want a bit more), or tie them into a bit of loose-weave muslin that you can dig out before serving (this works better for a more liquid curry). If hosting a dinner party where guests will be eating with their hands, set a finger bowl at each place, so they can rinse and dry their fingers without leaving the table.*

## A FEW CAVEATS

I learned to cook from watching my mother; I would ask her how to make a dish, and she would say, “Just watch.” So I did, and I wrote things down, and sometimes I would pester her with questions: when she tossed in some black mustard seed, I'd ask her how much she'd put in, and when she answered “three pinches”, I'd estimate what

that meant in teaspoons. I've tried to convert to standard measurements when I can, for your convenience (and if you need metric, I recommend using an online metric converter—if you tell it three cups, it'll tell you how many grams).

But I wouldn't recommend being too tied to the precise measurements in the recipes. Learning from my mother, I quickly found that it wasn't much use, trying to write down exact recipes. When I started cooking myself, I found that the appropriate amounts often varied from day to day, depending on a strange chemistry of interactions that I am not skilled enough to describe. Don't be afraid to add a little less cayenne, or a little more coconut milk or ketchup, or vice versa!



My maternal grandmother, mother, and many siblings and other relatives.

## Green Jackfruit Curry / Palakkai Kari

(30 minutes, serves 6)

**Y**oung jackfruit has a soft and delicate texture and flavor. It's easy to find online in cans, packed in brine; it's also often available at grocery stores, especially ones that cater to vegetarians. If you can find it frozen (often in Indian stores), that will hold up very nicely to cooking, and be much less labor-intensive than working with fresh. This savory curry sauce is delicious served with rice, a green vegetable, and chutneys, pickles, and/or sambols.

*Note: For details about how to use ripe jackfruit, see the Ripe Jackfruit Curry recipe.*

2 medium onions, chopped fine  
1 Tbsp. ginger, chopped fine  
3 cloves garlic, chopped fine  
3 Tbsp. vegetable oil  
¼ tsp. black mustard seed  
¼ tsp. cumin seed  
1 Tbsp. cayenne  
1 tsp. Sri Lankan curry powder  
1 lb. young jackfruit, cut into bite-size pieces  
½ cup ketchup

1 tsp. salt  
2 Tbsp. lime juice  
1 cup coconut milk + 1 cup water

1. In a large pot, sauté onions, ginger, and garlic in oil on medium-high with mustard seed and cumin seeds until onions are golden / translucent (not brown), stirring as needed. Add cayenne and cook 1 minute, stirring. Immediately stir in curry powder, ketchup, salt, and lime juice.
2. Add jackfruit and stir on high for a few minutes. Add coconut milk and water, stirring gently to combine. Turn down to medium, and let cook 15–20 minutes, stirring occasionally; add water if needed. Serve hot with rice or bread.



## Hoppers / Appam

(30–45 minutes + overnight fermenting time, makes 12)

If I had to pick the perfect Sri Lankan meal, this would be it. There's nothing like breaking off a crisp piece of hopper and scooping up some curry and a bit of seeni sambol. Delectable.

These rice flour pancakes have a unique shape; fermented batter is swirled in a special small hemispherical pan, so you end up with a soft, spongy center, and lacy, crispy sides—that contrast is the true glory of the hopper. Typically you'd make two plain hoppers per person, and maybe a sweet hopper to finish up.

*Note: You can buy instant hopper mix, available online, and just add water, which will work fine, and doesn't require overnight planning ahead. Many diasporic Sri Lankans I know use that option regularly.*

If you don't have a hopper pan, you can make hoppers in a regular frying pan; you just won't get quite as much of the crispy sides. It's a little time-consuming to make hoppers, since each one must be individually steamed for a few minutes, but with practice, you can have four hopper pans going on a stove at once. I'd recommend starting with just one pan at a time, though! Serve with curry and seeni sambol.

2 cups South Asian rice flour (or a mix of rice and wheat flour)

1 tsp. sugar

pinch of baking powder

½ tsp. salt

2 cups coconut milk

extra coconut milk and jaggery for sweet hoppers

1. Mix first five ingredients thoroughly in a large bowl, cover, and set in a warm, turned-off oven to ferment overnight. (In a cold climate, fermentation may not occur without a little help—I turn my oven on to 250°, and when it's reached temperature, turn it off and put the covered bowl in the oven to stay warm.)
2. Mix again, adding water if necessary to make a quite thin, pourable batter.
3. Heat pan (grease if not non-stick) on medium, and when it's hot, pour about ⅓ cup batter into the center. Pick up the pan immediately and swirl the batter around, coating the cooking surface. The sides of the hopper should end up with holes in them: thin, lacy, and crisp—if the batter is coating the pan more thickly, mix in some hot water to thin it down. Cover and let cook for 2–4 minutes—you'll know it's ready when the sides have started to brown and the center is thoroughly cooked. A silicone spatula will help get the hopper out of the pan.
4. For sweet hoppers, after swirling, add a tablespoon of coconut milk and a teaspoon of jaggery to the center of the pan, then cook as usual.

