

DUTCH INFLUENCES

'It remains a mystery how the sole contribution to world culinary heritage made by a country with a virtual monopoly over the trade in spices should have been the Dutch doughnut or "oil ball".'

Bert Natter 2005

This is a pretty harsh judgment and one that doesn't take a lot of countering when you turn to Sri Lankan cuisine as will become clear.

Why the Dutch came

When King Sebastian I of Portugal died heirless in 1578 the dynastic crisis was resolved by the accession of Phillip II of Spain to the throne of a united Portugal and Spain. While Portugal maintained autonomy within the union, its fate was now inextricably tied to the interests of Spain. In 1588 Spain launched its Armada against England with the intention of overthrowing Elizabeth and stopping the English and Dutch Union, influence in the rebellious Spanish Netherlands. With its defeat, Spain closed access to its Portuguese ports to which Dutch spice merchants had enjoyed access.

The Dutch response was to establish the Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie in 1602 (the VOC, or Dutch East India Company), a commercial company that would now be the arm through which the emergent mercantile Dutch republic would vigorously pursue the establishment of its own agreements with the indigenous rulers in control of the spice trade. For its cinnamon supply this meant forging relations with the kings of Sri Lanka and ousting the Portuguese.

The first recorded visit by a Dutchman was in June 1602 from Joris van Spilbergen, who wasn't in fact from the VOC. It was not until 1632 that a mutual agreement was signed between the Kandyan king Rajasingha II and Adam Westerwolt as the representative of the VOC. The basis of the agreement was support from the VOC for the expulsion of the Portuguese from Batticaloa, an expulsion which was extended over subsequent years until the Dutch had captured Trincomalee, Negombo, Galle, Mannar and Jaffna, so ending the Portuguese era in Sri Lanka.

The VOC's main interest in Sri Lanka was cinnamon and it was to bring about the most significant change in the production of this, the transformation from an individualised industry based on the harvesting of wild cinnamon trees to the plantation economy that was to be developed under British rule in the production of rubber and tea.



The illustration is by Jan Huygen van Linschoten from his *Histoire de la Navigation...et de son voyage es Indes Orientales* 1638.

The 17th century Dutch table

A typical day's eating in a wealthy middle and upper-middle class household in 17th century CE Netherlands was built around four mealtimes – breakfast, midday, afternoon and evening. Breakfast was mainly bread with butter or cheese. Midday saw the main meal which would have been a *hutspot* (a one pot meal of meat, sauce and vegetables), a second dish of fish or more meat, and a third dish of vegetables/salads of fruit, perhaps with *koeken* (cake) or *pasteyen* (a spiced meat pie). In mid-afternoon, more bread and butter or cheese. Finally before bedtime, the last meal of the day would be still more bread and butter or cheese and perhaps the remains of the midday meal or a wheat flour porridge. The only difference in the general rural diet was less meat and perhaps porridge at the midday meal. For beverage there was beer, beer and more beer, with buttermilk on the farm. Tea and coffee did not become popular till the end of the century.ⁱ

For a closer look at what the dishes were that made up what looks like quite a limited range of foodstuffs we can turn to *Der Verstandige Kock* (The Sensible Cook) first published in 1667 CE building on around eleven previous books and manuscripts since the publication around 1510 CE of the first cookbook printed in Dutch, *Een Notabel Boecxke van Cokerjje*. It incorporates some of the recipes from these previous books and had a long publishing history of more than ten editions between 1668 CE and 1720 CE.ⁱⁱ

The book begins with recipes for salads of a wide range of leafy greens (lettuce, chicory, cress, catnip, purslane, rocket, borage, and others) and also artichokes, beets, beans, radishes and chicory root, with a simple dressing of oil, vinegar, pepper and salt. There are a handful of recipes for stewing these also and two vegetable soups.

Stews and *hutspots* dominate the recipes for meat and fowl, sometimes with herbs or green vegetables, the sauces flavoured most commonly with salt, pepper, mace, but also sometimes vinegar, citrus, sorrel, cinnamon, cloves, ginger and occasionally saffron. Of particular interest is a recipe for fried meatballs of minced veal with mace, nutmeg, salt, pepper and citrus peel, about which more later.

Fish follows, with recipes for boiling and stewing with the same range of spices as for the meats.

Custards, creamed rice, tarts, and pancakes/waffles make up the bulk of the dessert recipes. Apples feature in many, and pears and cherries are also used. Rosewater is a common flavouring, and ginger, cinnamon, clove, mace and nutmeg are also used.

The final recipes are all for varieties of pastey, meat and fowl spiced as for stews, enclosed in pastry and baked, served with a sauce.

A later addition to The Sensible Cook was a section called The Sensible Confectioner which contains recipes for preserving fruit whole, jams and syrups.

The Dutch heritage in Sri Lankan cuisine.

What of this food profile has left its mark in Sri Lankan cuisine? More than Natter suggests, as it turns out.

The contribution to the sweet pastry list includes *brooder/broeder*, the panettone style Christmas dough cake that is traditionally eaten with lashings of butter and slices of Edam cheese; *aardappelen koek* which are potato and flour pancakes eaten with a sugar and lemon juice filling; *ijzer koekes*, also like a pancake but cooked in an iron press like a jaffle iron; *poffertjes*, a round sweet dough ball cooked in a particular mould; *suikerbrood*, a sugary bread enlivened with the tang of lime ring; and waffles.

Smoore is a kind of *hutspost* or pot roast where the milder spices and flavourings of the Dutch table have been replaced with curry spices – coriander, curry leaves, cinnamon, cumin, fennel, fenugreek, ginger, garlic, chillies – and most particularly coconut milk and lime pickle.

Frikadells are a version of fried meatballs of minced veal spiced with nutmeg, cinnamon, cardamom, pepper salt, and dill, the only recipe in the cuisine that uses the latter. These have entirely disappeared from the Dutch table, frikadells there now being something more akin to a flat meat pattie that is barely spiced.

Some cold climate vegetables probably also entered the cuisine though it's hard to be specific about which.

It may also have been with the Dutch that the three pronged fork, popularised in Europe from the 17th century, became part of the meal utensils.

ⁱ Rose 1989

ⁱⁱ What follows if from the translation by Rose 1989