

1999

## Stringhoppers

Romesh Gunsekera

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Gunsekera, Romesh, Stringhoppers, *Kunapipi*, 21(2), 1999.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol21/iss2/16>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: [research-pubs@uow.edu.au](mailto:research-pubs@uow.edu.au)

---

## Stringhoppers

### Abstract

In 1956, my father was thirty-nine years old. He didn't even know how to boil an egg. But within two years he was creating the kookiest dinners in Washington and had the World Bank eating out of his hand. When he got back, everybody wanted to know how he had done it. 'Easy,' he would say, shrugging his big, round shoulders. 'Stringhoppers. I fed them stringhoppers.' His friends were mystified.

ROMESH GUNESEKERA

## Stringhoppers

In 1956, my father was thirty-nine years old. He didn't even know how to boil an egg. But within two years he was creating the kookiest dinners in Washington and had the World Bank eating out of his hand. When he got back, everybody wanted to know how he had done it.

'Easy,' he would say, shrugging his big, round shoulders. 'Stringhoppers. I fed them stringhoppers.'

His friends were mystified.

The stringhopper he invoked is now the centrepiece of Sri Lankan cuisine, but it is neither native nor foreign. Like the Indian buffalo's mozzarella in Italy, or the shifting shape of the English tongue, the stringhopper was born out of wanderlust and a confluence of culture. A saucer-sized pancake of vermicelli squeezed out of a perforated mould, each stringhopper is like a nest of stories; a perfect emblem for Asia's hub of trade routes in the past. But nobody knows for sure how it came to be.

'How did you know how to make them?' his friends would ask.

'I looked in the *Daily News Cookery Book*,' he would say, beaming. 'I had this pang, a real hunger, for stringhoppers. So I made them myself. What else to do? A whole crowd came over.'

But he had not simply produced stringhoppers, he had turned them into an atlas of entwined colours: red, yellow, green and blue. The colouring was his invention. The austere world of the Colombo *Daily News Cookery Book* did not admit to this kind of improvisation. Its starchy prose was always absolutely deadpan.

The word quickly spread: 'He got them to eat bright blue stringhoppers! You know, blue is like poison, psychologically inedible. He must have a real knack for handling those World Bank fellows.' His career as an international negotiator took off. 'From Jericho to Bretton Woods!' he would joke. Even today in Sri Lanka, blue stringhoppers are exotic; in Washington in 1956, they were mind-blowing.

For my father, getting strangers to eat strange food was at the heart of the human story, the point at which the old world slips into myth and a new world stumbles free. The meal was where we could begin to understand each other, even as we recognized the briefness of our encounter.

Tolstoy Coomaraswamy who, after my father, probably has eaten more

stringhoppers than anybody else I know, claimed they were inspired by Marco Polo's visit to our island seven hundred years ago. Tolstoy was the biggest talker of my father's generation; a big, beaky journalist who had not strayed out of Colombo for forty-five years but who recounted the fabulous journey of Marco Polo as though it were his own. He leaned against the kitchen cupboard and watched my father show me how to mix the dough. 'When Marco Polo touched down in Ceylon –' Tolstoy's voice jibbed as he fixed his compass points, 'actually Jaffna – he found that his host had laid out a real beach feast. Marco Polo was fêted, you know, even though later the bugger said we were all a bunch of lazy, drunk, mean-spirited layabouts. They put the works out: grilled seer fish, jackfruit, curried jungle fowl, heaps of pearly rice on plantain leaves like little temples in a velvet jungle and small hot spots of Malay pickle. Spoons carved out of coconut and tortoiseshell dishes, a really mouth-watering table.' A rivulet of his own dribbled out with his words.

'Over lunch Marco told our King Sendernam about his travels in China and the noodles he had discovered: the prototype for pasta. He couldn't get over them. He described them with his hands, you know. He told the king about Kublai Khan's favourite concubine who had been wrapped up in them: thin gossamer strings that were unravelled at a midsummer banquet in the dance of the seventeen noodles with everybody shouting '*Gambay!*', knocking back the rice wine and ogling like mad. Imagine eating it! All that sweet sweat like butter melting on each noodle as it was stripped off a real, top-notch sex bomb.'

I squeezed the dough into the stringhopper mould and looked up at Tolstoy. His eyes were huge and round.

'Only later when the fellow was lying down for an after-lunch nap, letting the ocean breezes cool his swollen feet, did Marco realize he had been a little tactless in talking so much about Chinese noodles to our people. He knew he had made a real blunder when Tikka, his local minder, started quizzing him on the noodle-making. Tikka was a clever *kolla*. A brilliant mongrel of our Middle Ages. He spoke Tamil, Sinhala, Sanskrit, Arabic, a smattering of Mandarin, Malay and a new harbour-front pidgin: Latin and Anglo-Saxon. All staccato. He told Marco about his family going all over the place; his great-grandfather had been an ambassador to Rome and somebody else had been the first Chinese travel writer Fa-Hsien's guide eight hundred years earlier. But Tikka's ancestors were not cooks, you know, or if they were, they had kept the noodle a secret.'

I imagined this Tikka talking: '*Our chief wannabe big-big king-man. Wannabe know-how makum eff-dish kenoodle of uhu.*' A sharp, dark, bulging head whispering salaciously. '*Nous wannabe makum the kenoodle big-big to impoke Marco Polo II much-such than Chinoise courtesan hokum-hooker, next time OK?*'

'Concubine,' Marco would have corrected.

'Concubine, courtesan, same-same treacle man. What the duck it matter?'

Marco Polo had spent only two weeks on the island, Tolstoy told us. Marco had coveted the king's massive ruby, but when he realized he could not get it, he dismissed the whole place as not worth another mention. 'Congealed ox blood,' he had snorted into the history books. On his last night on this then noodle-less island, after the sun had sizzled into the hot sea, Marco had dreamed again his most intense recurring dream: the dream of his mother's *knedliky* – a mitteleuropean dumpling she had discovered on her honeymoon at a snowbound inn in the Carpathian mountains. Marco Polo's father had apparently been so enthralled by the dumplings the innkeeper's daughter prepared every night of that blissful week that his mother had resolved to learn the art of this foreign cooking for the long-term health of her new marriage. Tolstoy said that Marco had grown up eating dumplings every day of his boyhood. And that night in a Lankan beach hut, thousands of miles from Venice, when Marco dreamed of them again, he realized that what the Chinese noodle left wanting, despite an orgy of eating, was the round, firm, springy shape of a crumpet rising like the moon. 'My little dumpling,' his mother had cooed so innocently all his childhood, an endearment he found himself echoing around the world as he sweetened bed after bed, searching for immortality among the pillow heads of love.

The next morning, he had said to Tikka, 'You know, never mind the noodles, what I really dream about are my mother's dumplings.' He described them: round, soft but firm, budding. A mixture of hope and home.

'*Niha, niha,*' Tikka had grinned, 'but how-do-you-do the eff-dish dumpling?'

At this point in the story, Tolstoy leaned forward as though he himself were about to invent a new dish for the world. 'When Marco described the business of pounding grain to make flour, mixing it with warm water to make your dough and then kneading it and kneading it and kneading it, Tikka noticed the similarity to making noodles in China that Marco had talked so much about at the lunch table the previous day. Tikka got so excited, fellow couldn't wait to get away and talk to the cook.' In a wonderful visionary moment he had seen how his imagination could straddle the whole known culinary world of 1294 and pull together Marco Polo's mother's dumplings and Kublai Khan's favourite noodles into a dish that would gobstop the entire island. A steamed rice-noodle dumpling disc hinting of youth and love and hope and home that would spread across the sea to Kerala, Tamil Nadu, all of south India, Malaysia, Africa and, in time, the UK, the USA, the whole world. 'The next morning, the stringhopper was born, and our Tikka was jubilant,' said Tolstoy, grinning and helping himself to a handful of my freshly steamed

ones.

'Bravo,' my father cheered. '*For he on honeydew hath fed, and drunk the milk of Paradise.*' Honeydew? Perhaps Coleridge should have written stringhopper?

Ranil Jayawardene, an agronomist-turned-amateur-historian, now very big in pigs, and a former colleague of my father's, dismissed these imaginings about noodles and stringhoppers. 'Bunkum, sheer bunkum,' he said when I told him Tolstoy's Marco Polo story. 'Marco Polo is fantasy. Fiction. One big lie. All this foreign food: hoppers, stringhoppers, *kavum*, *kokis*, things to do with flour and grease, all of this unhealthy stuff comes from western imperialism. Portuguese leftovers, that's what they are. The Portuguese and the Dutch, they are the ones who left this mixed-up food, two hundred years after your Marco Polo. Then the Britishers brought their mad beverages: coffee, tea, gin and tonic. Stuff to spoil our tongues, our language, even our bloody bowels you know.'

To Ranil, cuisine reflected cartography and was determined by history. The New York waffle replicated a grid city, the folded crêpe mimicked those angular Parisian junctions, and the stringhopper was a map of the tangled route the Portuguese had been taken on to confuse their sense of direction when brought before the king. Ranil said that after the Portuguese had subdued the king with Lisbon cannon shot and Madeira cake, they made the cooks create the stringhopper as a reminder of how they arrived. 'It belongs to a bad time,' he said.

But surely the stringhopper, like everything else, must belong to those who make it?

Ranil slowly sucked in his thick blue lips. 'I have to admit,' he said, 'your father's stringhoppers were something else ...'

In the end, for my father, the stringhopper was what knitted reality together as he travelled the world: Beijing, Manila, Kabul and finally London. A mixture of hope and home, art and life, society and solitude. And although each of the vermicelli threads that sprouted out of his stringhopper press had an intrinsic beauty of its own, the real delight, he would say, was in getting the texture of the dough right. And when he did, he would beam like a poet who had perfected an unbreakable line connecting the past with the present. A real lifeline.