Introduction

How true. I was born and raised in Sri Lanka, fondly known as the “Pearl of the Indian Ocean,” and grew up in a comfortable home with loving parents and four siblings. Food was a big part of our lives. I was only nine years old when I started my “apprenticeship” in my own home under the watchful eyes of kitchen helpers. I learned how to cook, not so much with the spectrum of taste and its intriguing flavor sensations, but with the fragrances of herbs and spices.

Sri Lankan and Indian cuisines are the most aromatic of all cuisines. Their captivating flavors and fragrances are unparalleled, and these tastes are a big part of me, who I am, and what I do. I traveled, studied, and apprenticed in England and in France, where I experienced the taste and grandeur of French food. In doing so, I discovered new ingredients and techniques, new flavors and textures. The French preparations and garnishes were fascinating; taste sensations were unreal. And they still live with me. Building on knowledge I had gained as a “child apprentice,” I continued to learn and appreciate flavors from around the world. My study of the characteristics of individual herbs and spices enabled me to appreciate them better.

My late husband, Ranjit, and I decided to make the great island state of Hawai‘i our home, and it is now a big part of my life. In multiethnic Hawai‘i, Asian Pacific cuisine evolved with seafood as a central focus. My first taste of ocean-fresh raw fish happened here. I soon came to enjoy Hawaiian food and became good at preparing it, too. In the past, I was the executive chef of the famous restaurant The Willows, where we served what I proudly think of as the best of Hawaiian food. I was fortunate to have taught at the University of Hawai‘i’s Culinary Institute of the Pacific. Hawai‘i is truly blessed, with its bounty of seafood, exotic fruits, and farm-fresh vegetables. They inspired me to formulate the recipes for this book, which celebrate the ingenious use of herbs and spices with the bounty of Hawai‘i. The recipes reflect my appreciation of what Hawai‘i has generously offered me—friendly people and their aloha, the fresh air and water, the warm Hawaiian sun, and especially the beautiful sunsets!

The structure of our taste starts very early in life.

MARK MILLER, chef
Red Sage, Washington, DC
This book contains recipes I love and enjoy cooking. Some of the recipes and spicing styles are unique and true to my heritage. Some preparations are elaborate. But they are all delicious and easy to make. Most importantly, my purpose is to bring the special flavors of the bounty of the Hawaiian Islands to the table.

Traditionally, food items added to a dish in order to enhance flavor were known as condiments, as in the case of simple American mustard, ketchup, and pickles. Today accompaniments are a favorite category of food that is commonly used around the world to add flavor to a dish; they are very different from the condiments of the past. Accompaniments can be cooked or uncooked preparations and sometimes are referred to as relishes. They make eating more pleasurable.

Chutneys, relishes, pickles, sambals, and preserves are culinary delights and are generally known as accompaniments. Most of the appealing accompaniments come from Asia—especially from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Indonesia. It is well known that food has been influenced through the ages by the South Asian use of spices. Accompaniments that originate from these countries have assertive and bold flavors, intriguing fragrances and aromas, and an enticing appearance. Some are cooling and soothe palates; some are hot and awaken appetites. These are palate teasers that take a main dish from ordinary to heavenly. Thus they are as important as the main dish. They are served not only as accompaniments to certain foods but also as essential components of main dishes or meals. For example, an Indian or Sri Lankan meal of rice and curry is incomplete without a dollop of chutney, relish, pickles, or sambal. The number and variety of these taste-tingling morsels set these meals apart. The addition of simple accompaniments such as Mint and Coconut Relish (p. 63) and crisp fried poppadum will make every mouthful of even a simple meal flavorful and satisfying.

Accompaniments are not limited to rice and curry and breads but may be used with Western main dishes, too. I create menus with accompaniments that add accents of color, texture, and fragrance to dishes. While these accents are flavor enhancing, spices are what make these delicacies unique. Besides their fragrance, spices impart mystique to food; they also have medicinal and curative values. Asafetida, a spice, was a popular condiment in Rome during the first century. It was a favorite of Roman gourmet Marcus Gavius Apicius. It still is a favorite in India but is not commonly used in Sri Lanka. Although it is known for its anti-flatulence properties,
I use it for its mystical aroma rather than for its health benefits. Asafetida is available in health food stores and specialty grocery stores in cities around the world. As a general rule, spices stimulate appetite and are thought to enhance blood circulation. Cloves and turmeric are known for their antiseptic properties. The combination of coriander and ginger is believed to act as a decongestant.

Accompaniments are always served in small portions. Some relishes, such as Fruit “Chaat Masala” (p. 29), are presented as appetizers or salads and side dishes. Rhubarb and Green Apple Preserve (p. 213) is served as an accompaniment to roast pork or lamb and as a topping for coconut ice cream. Some preserves, such as Spicy Winter Melon Preserve (p. 204), accompany poultry dishes, while others, such as Brandied Cherries (p. 220), are good to enjoy on their own.

Generally, chutneys can last a long time. For example, once opened, jars of Hawaiian Mango Chutney (p. 2) and Green Mango Chutney (p. 3) can be refrigerated for three to four weeks. In contrast, relishes and sambals must be used quickly. They have poor keeping qualities, so they are made in smaller quantities. Hot Green Cilantro Relish (p. 37), for example, has to be used soon after preparation. Some of these items can be refrigerated for a day or two only. Generally, pickles, especially sun-dried pickles, can last as long as ten to twelve years. In fact, pickles improve with age. Hot and Spicy Lime Pickles (p. 101) could last for six to eight months.

Some of these preparations are available commercially. However, it is exciting to use seasonal foods in innovative ways and make them yourself. Sustainability is survival for many, and we can help our farmers by using local produce. Almost all fruits, vegetables, and some flowers—especially Hawai’i’s underutilized fruits and vegetables—can be made into delicious preserves.