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A unique farm-to-fork experience in Sri Lanka's Sigiriya

Shuvajit Payne | 4 min read | 23 Sept 2025, 04:00 pm IST



The main spread at the farmhouse. (Jetwing Vil Uyana)

SUMMARY

A farmhouse kitchen in Sigiriya serves authentic Sinhala food with an invitation to guests to chop, stir and share

Kanthi moves unhurriedly around the kitchen, carrying with her a motherly presence we all recognise, of someone who silently nourishes a household. She tends to clay pots set over a crackling wood fire, where aromatic Sinhalese curries simmer away. Middle-aged and steady-eyed, she cooks the way her mother once did, by instinct and not by a timer. She seems to belong to a generation when cooking was deservedly given hours, and not minutes.

We are in Sigiriya (also known as the 'Lion Fortress'), the cultural heartland of Sri Lanka, amidst the paddies, lakes, and forests of Jetwing Vil Uyana. Once degraded land, the property has been restored into a thriving wetland sanctuary where slender lorises, fishing cats, and even wild jackals roam the same grounds as the guests. Carved out of a quiet corner of its farmland is a modest kitchen — bucolic in spirit, with thatched roofs and clay floors. Kanthi hails from Rangirigama village, a short walk away from this conserved natural reserve. For over a decade, she's been around in many roles — sometimes a labourer, or a cook for special occasions, and since 2021, the face of the 'dining on the farm' experience. Our lunch is yet to arrive, but the lure of a traditional, slow-cooked meal has already stirred up a Pavlovian appetite.

Before the meal, we are urged to wander around the adjoining twelve acres of Vil Uyana's farmlands, cultivated in collaboration with the local community. There is plenty to discover: glossy mangoes hanging low, tender breadfruit with their spiky green skin, berries that stain our fingers as we pluck them. The local caretaker gestures more than he speaks. Still, we understand perfectly when he points out the morning's harvest that will reappear moments later on our plates. So, when we are offered ambarella juice—a cool, faintly-tart drink from the green plum-like fruit, softened with jaggery—we know for sure that it's as fresh as it can get.



Kanthi in her kitchen. (Kunal Bhatia)



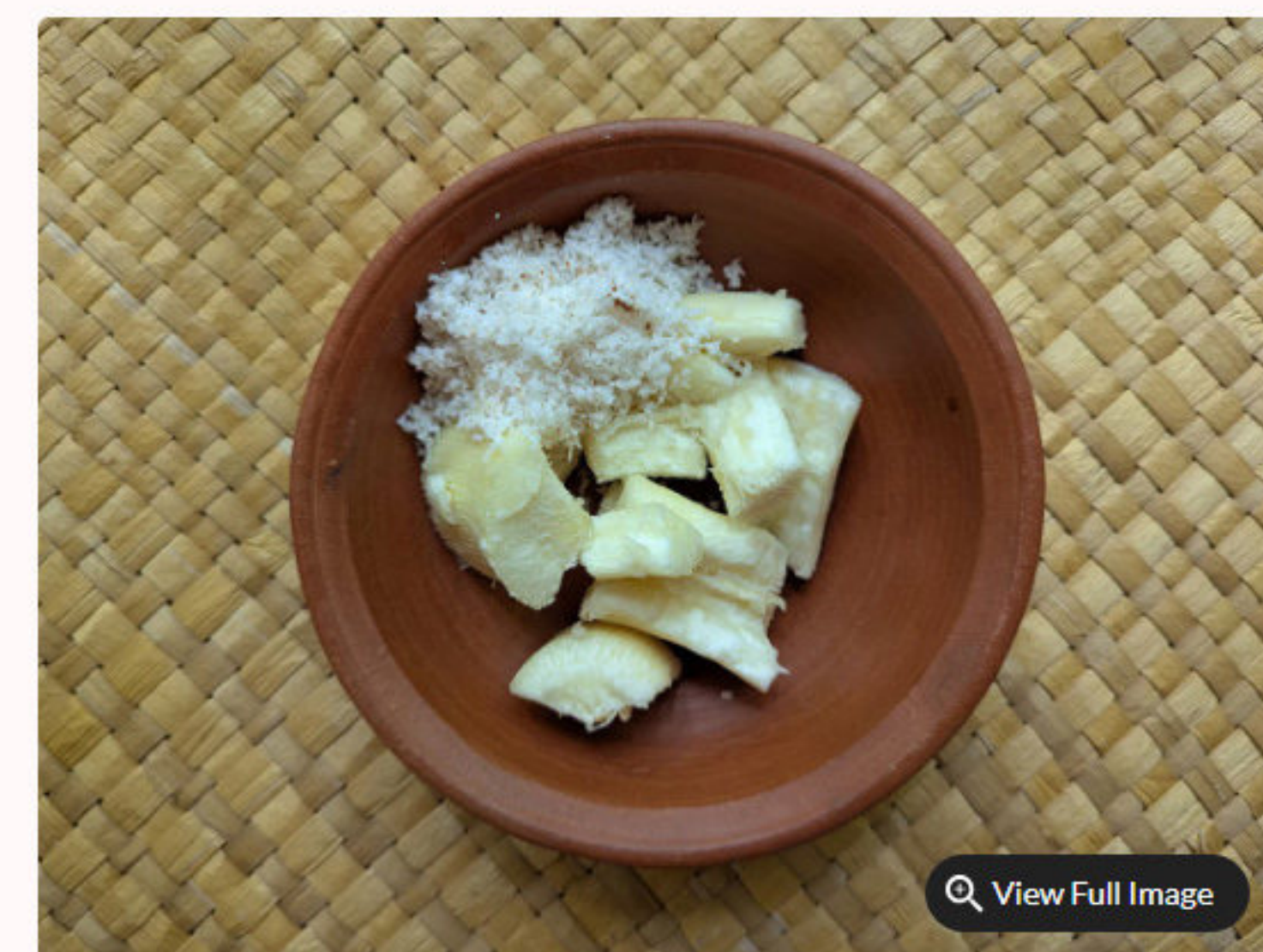
Kanthi in her kitchen. (Kunal Bhatia)

Back in the kitchen, Kanthi is at the tail end of her prep. Her food is rooted in earthiness — in the tools she uses, in the way ingredients are sourced, and how they are eaten. The grinding stone, the firewood hearth, the clay pots, the hand-scraped coconuts — all echo village traditions. For us, many of these are instantly familiar. In Bengal, ambarella is *amra*, often transformed into tangy chutneys that accompany rice. The *miris gala*, Sri Lanka's traditional flat grinding stone slab with a heavy roller, is no different from the *sil batta* (in Hindi) or the *ammi kallu* (in Tamil). A kitchen accomplice explains how the slow, crushing motion of stone-grinding coaxes out essential oils from spices, intensifying flavours, and how the earthen pots over firewood lend food its smoky, earthy taste. Kanthi's ways evoke nostalgia in travellers from across South Asia, reminding us of skills that are gradually fading from social memory. For western visitors, it is a discovery, and a glimpse into the diversity of Sri Lanka's culinary heritage. Either way, the appeal lies in participation. Guests are encouraged to roll up their sleeves to pluck herbs from the garden, pound cinnamon, or stir curries over fire.



Farm fresh produce. (Kunal Bhatia)

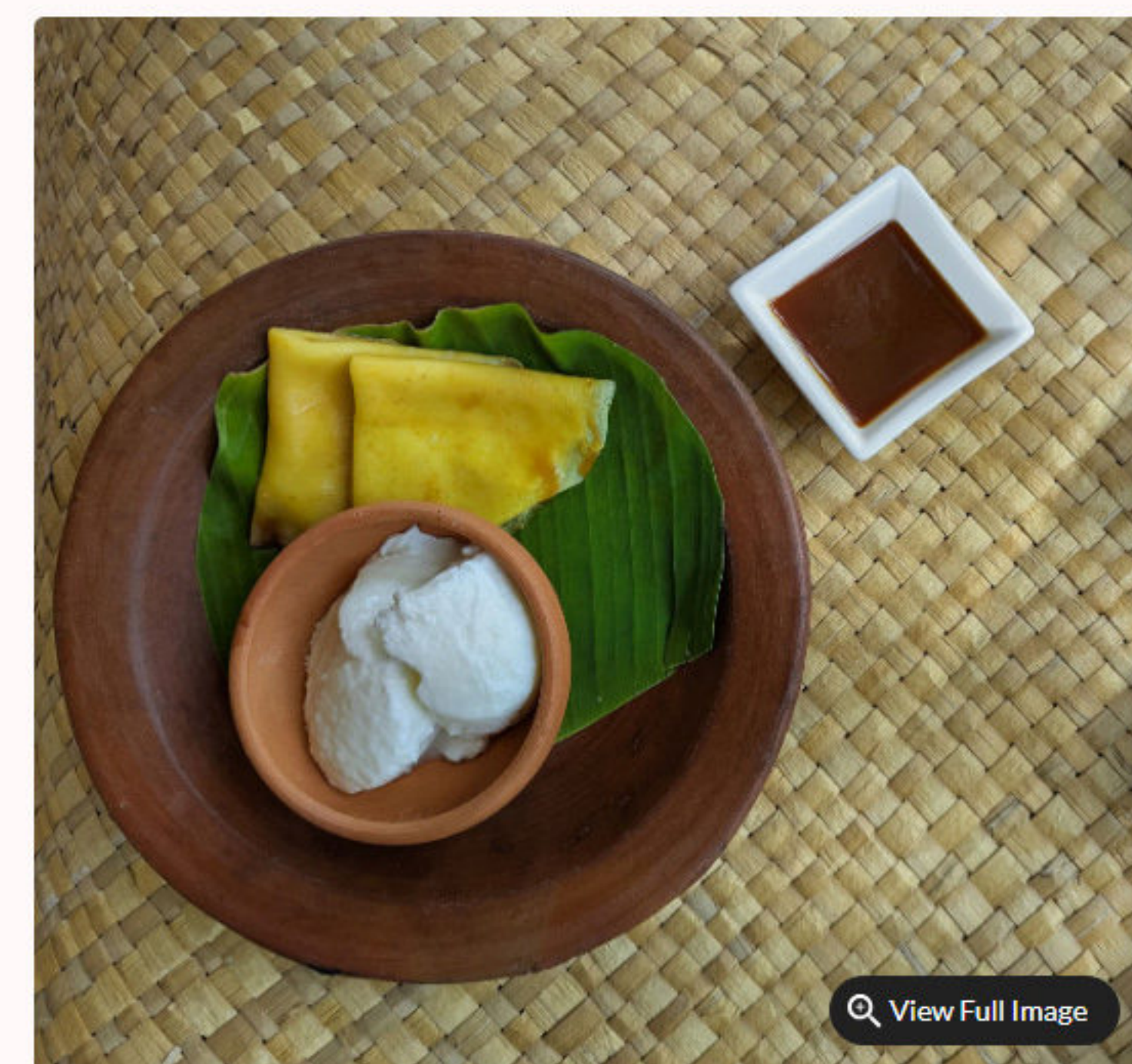
Our appetite has been stoked to the brim by the conversations. We are invited to sit cross-legged on cane mats laid out on the mud platforms. The lids of the vessels are lifted and the dishes are described. We begin gently, with a mellow farmer's broth — light, clear, and brimming with herbs — followed by boiled manioc (cassava) served with freshly-grated coconut. Simple, filling and starchy, it is meant to warm up the stomach before the richer curries follow. The spread unfurls: slow-cooked chicken that falls off the bone, creamy breadfruit stew with its nutty, artichoke-like flavour, and tangy fish *ambuli thiyal* — the country's signature sour fish curry made with *goraka*, a tamarind-like fruit that adds a smoky tartness. There is also drumstick curry, spiced long beans, and a generously garlic-tempered *dhal*. And for it all to rest on is *kahawanu* rice, a traditional red grain prized for its earthy taste and chewy texture.



Manioc with coconut. (Kunal Bhatia)

No Sri Lankan table is complete without *sambols* — fiery relishes akin to the chutneys of Indian *thalis*. We are served *pol sambol*, coconut spiked with green chilli and lime, and *seeni sambol*, a caramelised onion relish that is sweet, spicy, and savoury all at once.

As we eat our fill, the conversation turns to how Vil Uyana's menu shifts with the seasons to keep the fare fresh. Warmer months call for cooling foods such as *kola kenda*, a herbal porridge made from rice and medicinal greens with restorative qualities. Recipes make abundant use of okra, pumpkin, and ash plantain, alongside tropical fruits like mango, papaya and pineapple. When the air turns cooler, other specialities make way: yams, lentil stews, leafy stir-fries, jackfruit curries that are meaty in texture, and finger millets that form steamed cylinders of *kurakkan pittu*.



Pancake, curd and coconut treacle. (Kunal Bhatia)

And then dessert arrives — thin pancakes alongside thick curd drizzled with golden coconut treacle. Locally called *pol pani*, it is a viscous amber syrup made from the sap of coconut flowers, slow-boiled into a caramel-like richness. This is the kind of closing act that nudges us towards the inevitable long siesta.

We sit back relaxed chatting with Vil Uyana's local team about how this experience differs from the farm-to-fork menus of the resort's restaurant. "Equally delicious, yet feels more connected to the land" is the unanimous opinion. "That's for fine dining. This is like a home kitchen. We also grew up eating like this," they add. At a time when experiential dining often leans towards precision plating and reimagining time-honoured techniques, Kanthi lays out something older and rarer: a literal farmhouse plate.

Shuvajit Payne is a Mumbai-based food and travel writer.