

## **Pol Roti: A Shining Star in the Shadow of Rotis**

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Pol roti, a Sri Lankan dish, filled me with anticipation as I waited for my mother to finish cooking it. There was something magnetic about its aroma, simple ingredients, and how it brought the family together around the dinner table. This essay explores pol roti's cultural, historical, and personal significance in my life and my family's heritage. This dish has flour, coconut scraps, green chili, and onions. There is a strong aroma of coconut scraps, and you can smell the spice of the chili. Green chili pepper is a key ingredient that adds a fiery, vibrant kick to the dish. This is often used to balance the sweetness of other ingredients.

When the raindrops fall to parched ground, the dust that rises from it evokes a compelling sense of reconnecting with nature. As the cold air settles and the sky turns dark and gloomy, this creates the perfect atmosphere for a person to enjoy this dish. It offers an indescribable sentiment that resonates with people.

The waves of warmth blow onto you as you bite into this bread's crispy exterior yet chewy and soft interior. There's sweetness, but it is infused with the right amount of tanginess and spice. When this is accommodated with sambal, your mouth isn't ready to handle the blast of flavors it's getting. I chose this dish because it was a comfort dish for me; my mom made it, and it would be the highlight of my day when I was younger. I would do whatever to pass the time as she cooked it—do homework, ride my bike, or see how fast I could run up and down the stairs.

I like it because it's a simple, light dish that can fill your stomach if you have a few. It also is a dish that makes me appreciate my mom more because I know the amount of effort she went through to make even the simplest dishes appetizing. Whenever I have pol roti, I remember my mom telling me this story of gratitude. The story was about a lazy son who always complained about his hardworking mom's food. One day, responding to his complaints, she invited him to work in the paddy field. He had worked very hard that day, and to his surprise, it was the best thing he had ever tasted when the food was ready. He then realized that the food wasn't the issue, but his ingratitude was.

There are three ingredients for making pol roti. The ingredients are coconut, roti, and green chilis. Firstly, it comes from coconut, which comes from the coconut palm and is classified as a fruit. It most likely originates from Indo-Malaya; it appears externally large, brown, hairy, and smooth (Encyclopedia Britannica). It contains a sweet, white sponge mass with the fruit's liquid and meat. According to Ramin Ganeshram, coconuts float like nuts, traveling to other hemispheres. Legend has it that, otherwise, through Arab traders, it moved from India to East Africa (Ganeshram). As for roti, there is substantial evidence that it originates in southern India (Suvie). It is produced through agricultural work, such as growing wheat and grains. The dough known as roti forms after mixing wheat flour with water.

Green chili pepper is a witchcraft that originates in South Central America. They are hollow vegetables with a green exterior and contain white seeds and flesh in their interior. Its main characteristic is that it is associated with spice. Coconut and green chili are commonly used worldwide, while roti is versatile and used in many parts of Asia (FOOBY). Cooking involves roasting, which provides it with its distinctive and enchanting texture. It can be done either in a pan or oven. Coconut is usually stored in a frozen version, and green chili and roti are available in stores. The coconut is scraped into shreds during its preparation. The chilies are chopped into small pieces. They are then integrated into the roti.

Now, delving into the health benefits of coconuts, we say that coconuts are a known superfood. "The American Heart Association recommends 30 grams of coconut oil for men and 20 grams for women daily." The root cause of heart disease is inflammation, and coconut oil reduces it. It helps treat Alzheimer's disease because the ketones from coconut oil create an alternate source of energy to help repair brain function. Coconut enhances digestion by aiding the body's absorption of fat-soluble vitamins. It increases HDL (good) cholesterol levels and aids in weight management, which are great for heart and metabolic health (Draxe).

Moving on, roti prevents constipation, and because of its high fiber, it regulates bowel movements. Stale rotis are beneficial for those with diabetes as they slow the process of releasing glucose, preventing blood sugar levels from spiking. Bassi roti is an example of how roti can help with weight loss. Bassi roti is rich in fiber, essential for nutrition, and facilitates a full feeling when eating (“Don’t Throw Away the Stale Rotis”). The satisfaction obtained from this full feeling can be sustained over extended periods, which helps reduce overall calorie intake. Another example of roti’s health benefits is ragi roti, a valuable source of plant-based protein containing amino acids like lysine, which is scarce in other grains (“Discover the Surprising Health Benefits of Ragi Roti”).

Thirdly, chilies are high in vitamin C, which is essential for vitamin function and healing. They are a source of potassium, which may reduce heart disease risk. They contain capsaicin, which has been studied to have potential anti-inflammatory properties. When consumed often, capsaicin helps promote weight loss and relieve pain. They are also high in antioxidants such as capsanthin and violaxanthin, which help fight cancer risk and oxidative stress (“Jalapeño Health Benefits”).

In short, pol roti is known for its versatility, unique texture, and flavor. It showcases a variety of flavors and health benefits. Each ingredient contributes its own distinctive flavor and health benefits. Combining coconut, roti, and green chilies creates that gratifying experience. From the roti’s roasted texture to the spicy notch in the green chilies dabbled with the sweetness of coconut, the salty mix becomes the cherry on top if that’s not enough flavor to handle in your mouth. The harmony in sweetness, saltiness, spiciness, and texture invites you to luxuriate in a gourmet immersion from a simple delicacy.

Pol roti, a simple, coconut-based flatbread enjoyed for generations in Sri Lanka, was created due to the cultural influences of grated coconut within food preparations. The geographical region of Sri Lanka, with its abundant coconut palm trees, is another reason for the popularity of this dish. Delving into the origins of roti, there is substantial evidence that it originates from southern India, where it was produced through agricultural work, such as growing wheat and grains. As a developing country, many people discovered this dish due to its accessibility and filling nature. For instance, people working in paddy fields find it easy to make pol roti with locally available ingredients. Making pol roti involves forming a dough, known as roti, by mixing wheat flour with water and kneading it until it reaches a smooth consistency. The dough is then divided into small portions and flattened into thin, round discs.

Pol roti is often enjoyed in households; it can be eaten during any meal. The difference between an Indian roti and a Sri Lankan roti is that coconut tends to be more attributed to a Sri Lankan roti. Although there are similarities with Sri Lankan rotis, such as the texture being chewy yet soft, the exterior displays a slight crispiness at the edges. The contrast between the soft interior and crispy exterior is enticing. However, the coconut used in Sri Lankan rotis is a flavor that’s nostalgic to many. Indian rotis, such as chapatis or parathas, have a bland/neutral taste due to their lack of incorporation of grated coconut. This addition establishes a sweeter, fruitier, and richer feeling of taste. “Coconuts are one of Sri Lanka’s top crops, making up about 12% of its agricultural production. The country is the fourth-largest exporter of coconut products worldwide, including desiccated coconut, virgin coconut oil, and coconut water (Sri Lanka Business).”

Pol roti, a versatile dish, can be served alongside a coconut sambal condiment. The sambal, with its combination of grated coconut, the spice of red chili peppers, the granular taste of the Maldivian fish, and an unexpected kick of lime, adds a unique flavor profile to the dish. This dish can be made in many different ways, as there are numerous variations of roti. For instance, makki roti is made from maize flour, jonna roti is made from sorghum flour, aloo roti is made with grated boiled potatoes, and so on. Some regions may cook pol roti with their local spices, which could alter the flavors, showcasing the versatility and adaptability of this dish.

Although the dish can be perceived as casual food, it has dedicated specialty times. Many like to go out, sit near the rain, and enjoy the food. Inhaling the earthy smell of the ground, feeling the windy breeze from the rain, and a cup of piping tea with steam caressing their skin while quenching their thirst. As for conflicting debates about pol roti, there don’t seem to be many debates about the origin. The term pol is taken from Sinhalese, meaning coconut. Sinhalese is also a language that the majority of ethnic Sri Lankans speak. Subsequently, it is known to originate in Sri Lanka from its variation of roti; the ingredient coconut is what makes it Sri Lankan (Joy of Eating the World).

Pol roti was initially prepared with flour, water, and coconut. A staple ingredient was grated coconut. To start, the dough is cooked on a tava/griddle. After this step, it is placed in a tandoor oven. Subsequently, a mortar and pestle would crush spices and things like tomatoes, onions, and green chili. The dough would usually be kneaded by hand, then water would be added. In the recent past, as modern technology has progressed. We have equipment such as an electric oven, an electric dough mixer, and a coconut scraper, which helps save a lot of time and energy on activities like kneading the dough and grating the coconut (“The Evolution of Traditional Indian Cooking Techniques”). Instead of a tava, an electric griddle can be used, and the wood-fired stoves can be replaced with gas stoves. Additionally, variations in the preparation can occur, such as desiccated coconut being used rather than fresh coconuts in places where fresh coconuts could be less accessible.

Many families, such as mine, use pre-packaged ingredients, such as frozen grated coconut, and the modern appliances available to speed up making this dish (flex). Even though this dish can be consumed regularly, such as for breakfast, it plays a hybrid role in also being able to be consumed in festivals. Pol roti serves as a unifying factor, bringing together Sri Lankan families in America and reminding them of the rich food and culture of Sri Lanka.

Moreover, it serves as a powerful tool to teach their children and future generations the importance of preserving their ethnic identities and not being swayed by the influence of American culture as a means of fitting in. Today, many Sri Lankan households, including mine, prepare pol roti with pre-packaged items such as frozen shredded coconut. These contemporary conveniences make the process considerably faster and more efficient, requiring less time and effort to cook the dish.

Despite these time-saving accommodations, pol roti remains memorable in our family's traditions. Pol roti is more than merely a meal; it signifies our cultural connection to Sri Lanka and a bridge for our identity in a nation like America. In a country like America, people may be shunned and bullied for eating foods of their ethnic origins. However, eating this dish is a stance against those who say otherwise, to take honor and respect for your food and culture. It's a movement to unapologetically clasp to who you are and not let anyone change that.

While pol roti can easily be consumed as a regular part of our everyday meals, it also plays a more significant role during festivals and family reunions. The dish is often prepared in Sri Lankan American households and fed during major cultural and religious holidays, such as Puthandu, the Tamil New Year, or Eid Al-Adha. It's also given in Indian festivals such as Lohri and Mankar Sankranti, Sarson da Saag, and Makki Di Roti (afoodiehousewife). For many of us living in the U.S., pol roti is a form of cultural preservation. When serving this dish with other Sri Lankan families in America, consuming it reminds children and younger generations to hold their roots deeply in their hearts. It teaches them not to feel the need to “fit in” or assimilate into American culture just because it's not the norm of the land to consume this dish.

I've seen a lot of circles throughout my life and have been able to discern the shape through pattern recognition around my life and in my surroundings. As I put the so-called circle in my mouth, I was relieved to find it was an edible object, but what was it? Alright, circle-shaped bread, with bright specs of green and purple in it. As a child, I wasn't always keen on trying new foods. I didn't like some foods because of the smell, and some just because of the sight of making food come at me, like Blobby from Hotel Transylvania.

You could say I had some unpopular takes on certain foods; for example, forgive me if you're a pasta lover. I couldn't get myself to like it, the ones I had encountered in person or shows; why so much sauce? Couldn't there be less? It would be more to my liking if there were perhaps sauce lightly drizzled throughout with some better consistency instead of just seemingly tarnishing the dish with a dump of sauce on the spaghetti.

My pickiness for food had gotten concerning, and some force in the universe needed to convince me to try something new. When my mom challenged me to try something new, I hesitated initially, but I quickly became intrigued when she handed me the round, colorful piece of bread. My ego wouldn't falter for mere food to succumb to defeat; as a result, I had willingly agreed. My mom called my name; I rushed out of curiosity, intrigued to see what she offered. Oh, Roti, I thought this wasn't anything new. But as I looked

more in scrutiny, I metamorphosed into an alien that had just entered the planet Earth. “Greetings, human. Will you escort me to the intergalactic banquet? Do you mean the kitchen? If that’s what you call it, sure.”

Immediately noting the bright specs of colors throughout the roti, the onions, the chilies, and the coconut came, then the crispy outer edge; it was a delicate piece of bread. My carnivorous instincts kicked in; my brain’s communication panel workers had initiated the green light to start munching. It was a burst of different flavors, from sweet to salty to spicy. Which flavor do I process first? Just like mice get allured by traps with cheese in them. I was lured by the inviting scent and taste of the food; it had its calling.

On November 23, 2024, I sat down with my mom in the kitchen of our family home and asked her about her nostalgic memories and connection with pol roti. What I learned from that conversation opened my eyes to the deep cultural roots and emotional connections that make this dish important to our family.

My mom explained that pol roti reminded her of her father, who passed away several years ago. She fondly remembered how, during rainy days, he would enjoy pol roti with her father. "It wasn't just the food itself," she said. "It was the comfort it brought." She also recalled how, every morning, the act of preparing pol roti set the tone for the day. It was more than just a meal; it was a ritual, a family tradition. Cooking it together brought a sense of togetherness that extended beyond the kitchen.

In Sri Lanka, pol roti was often made for more than just daily meals—it was part of the community's cultural fabric. My mother shared how, when someone passed away after precisely the 20th day, the family would make 50 or even 100 pieces of pol roti, which would be distributed to relatives and neighbors to gather good deeds for the deceased individual. This wasn't merely an act of charity but a religious practice. The smell of fresh coconut wafting through the air would attract the attention of neighbors, who would often drop by to inquire if my mother was making pol roti. It was a time for sharing, community, and bonding—when everyone came together to eat roti and solidify each other’s connections. (Strand)

One of the most remarkable parts of our conversation was when my mom spoke about the coconuts used in making pol roti. She would pick fresh coconuts from her backyard in Sri Lanka, ensuring they were ripe and fragrant. "The coconut you pick in the morning is the coconut you use that day," she said. The freshness and aroma of the coconut were a key part of what made pol roti so special. However, in the United States, fresh coconuts are harder to find, and the ones available often lack the same richness and flavor. My mother lamented that this difference in quality has affected the taste of pol roti here. The lack of the fragrant, freshly picked coconut, which would fill the house with its intoxicating aroma, made it difficult to recreate the same sense of warmth and connection that came with making pol roti in Sri Lanka.

As our conversation continued, I understood that pol roti wasn't just about the bread itself but about what it represented. It was a way of connecting with the past, honoring tradition, and maintaining a sense of community. It was a way of preserving family bonds, even as the world changed. In Sri Lanka, where the houses were close together and the neighbors were like extended family, food played an important role in building and maintaining those connections. "Everyone knew each other," my mom said. "There was always someone to share a meal with." Unfortunately, that sense of community is more complex to replicate in the United States. People live more isolated lives, and relationships often feel more transactional. I could see the sadness in my mom’s eyes as she spoke about how food, once a medium for connection, has become more of a solitary experience here. Yet, despite this, she continued to make pol roti for our family, keeping the tradition alive, even if it didn't have the same communal aspect that it once did. (Thowfeek)

Reflecting on this, I realize that making pol roti with my mother has become a way of preserving a recipe and a piece of our cultural identity. Through this simple dish, we stay connected to our Sri Lankan roots and maintain the values of generosity, community, and family passed down through generations. Living in a place that often prioritizes individualism and material gain, Pol Roti reminds us that true wealth lies in our relationships, the bonds we build with others, and the traditions we carry forward. It is not just about the food itself but about the love, the memories, and the shared experiences that come with it.

As I continue to make pol roti with my family, I understand that it is more than just a meal—it is a living, breathing part of our history. It connects us to our past, shapes our present, and will continue to be passed down to future generations. In this way, pol roti is not just a dish but a timeless expression of love, culture, and tradition.

When I first set out to tackle this extensive paper about food, I wasn't sure how it would unfold. However, as I began writing, I realized the process reminded me of making pol roti. Both share a cyclical

structure. For example, cooking pol roti involves kneading and repeatedly refining the dough until it reaches a desired shape. Just as kneading dough requires patience, so too does the process of drafting and revising a paper. Writing follows a web-like process, moving through brainstorming, researching, editing, and writing—repeating these steps in a loop. Similarly, cooking does as well as it can be repetitious in process.

I never would have asked my mother about her experiences with pol roti—her memories and stories about the first time she ate it—if not for this project. But once I did, I learned so many fascinating details about her that I hadn't known. My family and I, consuming this dish in a place and culture far from Sri Lanka, reaffirm our cultural identity. The future of this dish depends on my children and grandchildren continuing to cherish the simplicity of our cultural food, taking pride in our identity, and resisting the pressure to conform to other cultures.

In conclusion, this dish has taught me to appreciate the modern conveniences I have in a first-world country. It has also shown me that food can be more than just sustenance; it can serve as a cultural bridge. I hope to foster cultural continuity for future generations by walking on this bridge. Finally, pol roti has become a symbol of both writing and culture—though it has evolved, it still retains its traditional value. The beauty of it lies in its ability to remain ever-changing, expansive, and timeless.

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## The Nostalgia of Pol Roti



- Pol Roti is a traditional Sri Lankan flatbread infused with coconut scraps, onion, flour, and green chili. I believe it symbolizes unity in cultural preservation
- As a child that was a picky eater, Pol Roti was a dish that didn’t bother me when it came to the appearance, sight, or smell
- The reason why I choose this project was because the word Pol in Pol Roti means coconut, and coconut is a significant part of my Sri Lankan culture. Sri Lanka being a tropical island, the coconut has esteemed value when it comes to the scent and freshness of it.

### Ingredients

#### 1. Flour

Wheat flour is the foundation of this dish as it contributes to the overall texture and flavor of this dish

#### 2. Coconut Scraps

This adds the moisture and sweetness to the roti

#### 3. Green Chili

This is where the spiciness factor kicks in. In addition, it adds a more sophisticated flavor, being combined with saltiness and sweetness

#### 4. Onions

The aromatic smell of Pol Roti can mainly be attributed to onions and coconut



### **Atmosphere**

- Where do you usually eat Pol Roti? Pol Roti can be consumed during special occasions such as during a wedding, it would be served with sweets and fruits to guests.
- But Pol Roti isn't just conformed to special occasions, it's a simple dish that can be consumed for breakfast
- Most Sri Lankan people like consuming it on a rainy day as it connects you with nature. It would be paired with a drink like tea, and people had a strange sense of being allured by the smell of the soil and the ground as the water soaked into it.



### **Personal Memories**

#### **A Story of Gratitude**

When I was a child, my mom used to tell me this story of a lazy boy who used to hate his mom's cooking and one day after working hard in the field it grew his appreciation for his mom's food.

#### **Mom's Connection**

As I interviewed my mother about her personal experience with this dish, she told me about how her mom taught her how to first start cooking through this dish. Not only was she taught the basics of cooking, but also learned the workings of different shapes.

#### **Traditions and Values**

Back in Sri Lanka, resources are easily attainable and for cheap. My mom's family used to grow coconuts in her backyard and this would be used as hair oil as well.

#### **The Problem with Modern Convenience**

Although, things such as prepackaged coconut are available here in America. To get prepackaged coconut, you'd have to spend a lot more money and time compared to in Sri Lanka where coconut can be found right by you.

#### **Assimilation/"Fitting In"**

Being in a region where this food is foreign to this culture in order to teach kids the importance of culture and its foods. Sri Lankans will unite and serve our traditional foods to children, in order to teach them to not feel the need of assimilation. Pol Roti isn't just a food, it's a cultural bridge! Resources Assimilation/ "Fitting In" The Problem with Modern Convenience

### **Regional Adaptations**

#### **Past vs. Present**

With the advancement of technology, traditional tava/griddle cooking can now coexist with electric equipment. Whereas, back home water would have to be conserved in buckets due to water cuts. Furthermore, gas stoves would be used instead of electric which does have an element of danger in it.

#### **Accompaniments like Coconut Sambal**

Coconut Sambal is a condiment that goes with Pol Roti. It includes maldive fish, green chili, and coconut.

#### **Varieties in Making**

Roti comes in many forms, including Makki roti, Jonna roti, and it can be made differently depending on region and occasion.



The act of cooking Pol Roti mirrors the writing journey—each step is repetitive until refined well, paralleling the writing process.

### **Conclusion**

Cultural Continuity: This dish serves as a vessel of cultural continuity, ensuring that our culinary traditions thrive amidst changing societal landscapes. Legacy for Future Generations : Sharing the making and enjoyment of Pol Roti establishes connections with the past while paving the way for future generations to cherish and uphold cultural practices.