

French connection

The cuisine of Pondicherry blends French and Indian sensibilities to create one-of-its-kind Franco-Tamil food

BY BINDU GOPAL RAO



Croissants at Bread & Chocolate

Old-world charm, stunning ocean view, swaying palm trees and French architecture—this is what Pondicherry is all about. The French influence in the city is something you can't miss out—it is not only evident in its stunning architecture but also in its food. The French took roots from 1674 to 1962 when the city was a part of French India. The town has a unique Franco-Tamil culture that makes its cuisine what it is, with ancient recipes passed on from one generation to another.

Regional focus

As one would expect from a coastal town, seafood plays a prominent role in their cuisine. The Indo-French cuisine mystically combines a variety of spices in a manner that all the flavours are in equilibrium. Celebrity chef Ananya Banerjee says, "Authentic French cuisine uses fewer spices as compared to Indian cuisine. In fact, several French types of meat were embodied in Indian cuisine and made spicier for the Indian palate."

According to her, the individuality of the French and Indo style gives birth to a novel taste which is nothing less than marvelous. "While French food demands everything to be cooked, served and savoured individually, Indian cuisine features the mix-cook-serve composite dishes. This is where the uniqueness of the Indo-French cuisine stands out," she says.

Creole cues

Le Dupleix by Hidesign, a heritage property located in the heart of the French town, is known for the discovery of 'Creole' cuisine—a blend of Tamil and French that is unique in Pondicherry. Being part of a coastal town, seafood plays a prominent role at Le Dupleix where they serve Pondicherry fusion cuisine. The menu has lot of seafood like rasam aux crevettes, which is traditional south

Indian spiced soup with coconut milk and shrimps, and fried nethili which is mildly spiced and deep-fried Indian anchovy fish served with aioli. "We also have tawa fried fish wherein we use red snapper fillets served with mashed potatoes and mix lettuce. Coconut is used in several dishes and French accompaniments like onion soup, salad and bread are also served as part of this cuisine," says chef Peram Mohan Babu Naidu, executive chef, The Promenade and Le Dupliex, Pondicherry. Another French dish with Pondicherry-style adaptation is tawa pepper lamb where the mutton is cooked in a pressure cooker along with the spices, then fried with garlic and onions, roasted and finally finished with black pepper. "Free range chicken is deep fried and then sautéed with fresh Pondicherry spices and then tossed with tomatoes, onion and garlic which is called poricha kozhi served with french fries and mixed lettuce. Vegetarians can revel in curried vegetables and green peas stew with lemon couscous in curry sauce. Since Le Duplex's ingredients are all organic, the flavours come out in all the delicacies," says Naidu.

Ingredients matter

Vegetarians can indulge in the smoked eggplant that is a local specialty. This dish is prepared by charring eggplant over coal before crushing and serving it. Stuffed cabbage and capsicum curry are other vegetarian delicacies here. Dishes like soya pancakes, bisques and rice baguettes are the traditional favourites.

A special preparation of prawns with nung, a delicate fruit that is common in Pondicherry, is a must try. The gravy prepared is crisp and pungent akin to lemongrass gravy. Pouillon baisse is a dish that is a local adaptation of profound French bouillabaisse. This dish has its own peculiar taste with the incorporation of green chilies, bay leaf, cinnamon, ghee, car-



An authentic Pondi meal by Pushpa at Pondicherry

Rasam aux Crevettes (courtesy The Promenade and Le Dupliex)

Ingredients:

- ▶ Coconut milk - 50ml
- ▶ Prawns - 40g
- ▶ Mustard seeds - 2g
- ▶ Curry leaves
- ▶ Green chilly- 5g
- ▶ Chopped tomatoes- 20g
- ▶ Shallots- 5g
- ▶ Fish stock- 200ml
- ▶ Coriander leaves chopped- 5g
- ▶ Lemon juice- 1 lemon
- ▶ Turmeric powder- a pinch
- ▶ Sunflower oil- 15ml
- ▶ Salt- to taste

Method:

- ▶ Heat the oil in a sauce pan and add mustard seeds to crackle.
- ▶ Add curry leaves, green chilies and turmeric. Stir in few seconds.
- ▶ Add chopped shallots, tomatoes and sauté for few more minutes.
- ▶ Add coconut milk and stock, cook it until it boils and then add coriander leaves and seasoning.
- ▶ Add the prawns and cook the prawns until they are just tender and soft.
- ▶ Correct the seasoning and finish off by stirring lemon juice.
- ▶ Garnish with coriander sprig and coconut milk.

rots, beans, turmeric, potatoes and coconut milk. “The difference lies in the ingredients and in the preparation of the dish. The resulting taste may differ and can perhaps be a little more on the subtle and rarefied side. The rest of the recipes are French originated but have integrated Indian spices for a unique touch. To put in simple words, Pondicherry cuisine is a fine fusion of Indian food with a French twist,” says Ananya.

Authentic meals

When you are in Pondicherry, an experience that you must not miss is to book for a meal with Pushpa De Canaga a home chef who hosts a table called ‘Chez Pushpa’ (which means Pushpa’s house). This meal can only be pre-booked and you can also learn some cooking tips from Pushpa when you are at her home. “The French Indo cuisine has the Indian spices but to

make it less spicy coconut milk is used. Some typical dishes include fish assad, creole salad, roasted chicken with beans and carrot and fries, roasted pigeon, pork vindali, pork vadavoum curry, meatball curry, mutton thalicha, vegetables with minced beef, Indian leaves with prawns. I cook these dishes at home in authentic Pondi style and serve the meal on a banana leaf,” says Pushpa.

Say cheese

It was around the 1980’s that the culture of handmade farm cheeses began in Auroville. “The milk is supplied from farms in Auroville as well as by farmers from surrounding villages. At present there are professional cheese makers from Italy and Holland producing cheese in Auroville. They produce over 10 varieties of cheese using natural ingredients; it is also handmade. All cheeses contain only

natural whole cow milk, salts, vegetarian enzymes and seasoning cultures. No preservatives, artificial flavors, emulsifiers or colors are used. This approach keeps the authentic texture and taste of traditional farm cheese and guarantees the natural balance of vitamins, proteins and fat which gives cheese its unique characteristics,” says Naidu. Pondicherry’s cheeses are really making its mark especially in the Indian market and there are several cheese makers as well as a handful of very popular cheese factories in Pondicherry. They are pioneers in recreating varieties of French and Italian cheese. “The interesting part is that they bring in a twist of Indian flavours to these cheeses. The most unique flavour I tasted is curry patta—very hot and chilli flavoured cheese,” says Ananya. Different types of cheese that is produced in Auroville are parmesan cheese, gruyere, cheddar, auroblochon,

gorgonzola, lofabu, swissly, feta, jeera, Philadelphia, farm, mozzarella, ricotta, and goat cheese.

Decadent desires

The confectionery at Pondicherry also need special mention. For instance, the croissants at Bread & Chocolate (a new age café) are authentically French and handmade by co-founder and head chef, Daniel Trulson. “In the true French style, we often make extra so, a day-old croissants can be converted to almond croissants. Bread & Chocolate is also the only official Mason & Co chocolate shop. We even make pain au chocolate using Mason & Co dark chocolate,” says Mansi Reddy, director, partnerships and marketing, Mason & Co, a homegrown chocolate brand from the region. So, the next time you are in Pondicherry, stop for some culinary treats—it’s sure to add a dash of spice to your holiday. □