



## Change of Guard in the Kerala Kitchen

*Around Onam time, everybody pulls out an OnaSadhya recipe collection. We decided to go forward and check out the exciting fusion of contemporary and traditional that is re-shaping Kerala's food trends.*

By BINDU GOPAL RAO

**B**efore chillies were introduced into Indian culinary practice by the Portuguese around the 16th century, our mainstay was the Kerala pepper. Sought after the world over, the spice (along with many other precious Kerala spices) transformed kitchen preparations all over the world and triggered a fabulous exploration of the sea routes, bringing new knowledge to completely unrelated

areas: astronomy, ship-building, medicine, science, languages and religion. Birthed with a stunning array of ingredients from a lush land, perfected at the confluence of culinary traditions from around the world, the gourmet heritage of Kerala is a delicious ode to the ancient history of this fertile land.

And now, an imaginative young group of new chefs are building an

exciting repertoire of Nouvelle Kerala Cuisine, founded on old recipes, lost in the transition to a newer and more impatient age. The trending term is "hyper-local cuisine" – recipes and ingredients that are used in tea shops, toddy shops, homestyle food and highway shacks and which speak a distinct culinary language of that particular region or even village stretch.



Chef Regi Mathew, Culinary Director & Co-owner, Kappa Chakka Kandhari



TV celebrity chef Suresh Pillai



Lejina Ramachandran, Food blogger

### Changing Tides

These cuisines are wrestling to find their position in a market which is flooded with Arabic-influenced cuisines – because of the sheer numbers of Malayalee immigrants working in the Gulf region for over sixty years now. Smaller outlets offering these hyper-local cuisines are now opening in

larger cities and as highway restaurants. 'Madhuvettante Chayakkada' (Brother Madhu's Tea Shop), 'Veettile Oonnu' (home-made lunch) and menus are limited with only a few specialty dishes which are locally very common and doing very well.

The trend has found a new voice in the work of rising gastronomic stars like Chef Regi Mathew, Culinary Director & Co-Owner Kappa Chakka Kandhari (Chennai & Bengaluru), food blogger Lejina Ramachandran, TV celebrity chef Suresh Pillai who shot to fame as a contestant from India on MasterChef UK and a long list of chefs in the diaspora who have taken Kerala cuisine abroad and fashioned a new approach to retain the authenticity of the regional taste while working with non-traditional ingredients. Gifted chefs like Jomon Kuriakose, the Executive Chef at LaLIT London, England has been putting payasam, duck

mappas and adding a twist to the regular dishes with innovative plating and visual appeal. His Kappa Meen Curry, for example, is a great favourite, served with a beautifully balanced slice of seared red mullet (instead of the Malayalee sardine), a mound of cassava mash and warm fish curry. In Kerala, the process has meant the re-discovery of traditional recipes with painstaking attention to local ingredients, food history and methods. Regi Mathew and his partners, for example, traced over 800 recipes in a network of kitchens across the

state.

"When it comes to Kerala cuisine, many are under the impression that the big hitters such as biryani or parotta are all there is to it. But once you start exploring, you realise what an enormous universe this is. What we wanted to do (at Kappa Chakka Kandhari) was present the food that we've grown up



Non-veg set menu at Kappa Chakka Kandhari

eating at home. So, we conducted in-depth research for almost three years across the entire state, visiting around 265 houses and 70 toddy shops. And we found a wealth of recipes that most people outside the state would have no clue about," says Chef Mathew.

### Myriad Influences

Kerala cuisine has been witnessing a massive change in the past decade. The key factors reshaping the kitchens of Kerala are the Gulf Malayalees – whether still in the GCC or as





LEJNA RAMACHANDRAN'S

## Panchara Paata

### INGREDIENTS

- 2 eggs
- ½ cup Jeerakashala rice
- 2 nos banana
- 2 tbsp sugar

### PREPARATION

Step 1: Wash and soak rice for three hours. Grind it to a smooth dosa batter consistency.

Step 2: To the batter, add the two eggs and around 2-3 tablespoons of water.

Step 3: Pour oil halfway in a saucepan and heat it. The size of your saucepan will determine the size of the panchara patta. Beat the batter till it froths. Skim off the froth and keep it aside in a vessel.

Step 4: Once there are around five ladles of froth start pouring this froth into hot oil. The froth should disintegrate and spread in the oil. Keep beating the batter, collecting the froth, and pouring it in the oil.

Step 5: Pour the froth in layers till the panchara patta is around 1-1½ inches thick. Gently poke a wooden skewer into it and gently try to move it. A well-made panchara patta will rotate easily.

Step 6: Once it starts turning golden brown gently take it out with a wooden skewer and try to strain as much oil as possible.

Serve the panchara patta with banana and sugar. Crush the panchara patta in the banana and sugar, mix well and relish.

returnees, they bring a familiarity with Arabic cuisine and a preference for richer ingredients to their woks; the recent pandemic which encouraged especially the millennials to turn to ordering out and the rise of social media with its army of food bloggers, food influencers – and most importantly, food stylists, who have turned the tables on the traditional approach to plating even a heritage dish like *Avial*.

While Malayalees have always preferred their traditional home-cooked fare over restaurants, the meteoric rise of Arabic restaurants across the state is proof of how much influence Arab cuisine has had.

"Historically, the Arabs, Portuguese and the Dutch have brought their foods to the land, and this has resulted in unique dishes whether it was the Biryani or *Mutta Maala* in the *Mappila* cuisine or the *Meen Mollee* of the Syrian Christian cuisine. Today, you find *Mandi* and *Khushka* and the now ubiquitous shawarma as a mainstay in many restaurants in Kerala," says Nazaneen Jalaludheen, entrepreneur and granddaughter of Umme Abdulla, a respected author of several Malabar cookbooks.

Wherever they migrate to, whether within India, to the Gulf or to the West, the Malayalee palate craves authentic home-cooked food. Lejna Ramachandran, a Mumbai-based Malayalee food blogger, documents her food experiments on her Instagram page @lejnakitchen and says social media has "...given rise to home businesses that cater to these specific needs. Ordering in food is a trend that caught up during the pandemic with national players like Swiggy and

other local delivery businesses ready to oblige. The pandemic helped a lot of people explore cooking and this has enabled a lot of home chefs to look at a culinary career. They have started catering services from the comfort of their home and it is received well as the need for hygienic home-cooked meals is always in demand."

Deepu Joseph, Sous chef, Conrad Bengaluru says, "Using fresh ingredients and improvised plating techniques, has helped Kerala cuisine to try few fusion tricks whilst keeping taste and flavour intact." He also credits a new class of women pro chefs like Master-chef Latha K. and non-Malayalee culinary stars who helm five-star specialty kitchens in the tourism-rich state, for not only mastering the

complexities of Kerala culinary techniques but also spicing up the modern Kerala kitchen repertoire.

### Do the New

The fertile soil, the undulating coastline and thick pockets of forestation as well as a long and ancient history of sophisticated civilization all mean that Kerala cuisine offers a multitude culinary styles, tastes and textures for the vegetarian and the meat-eater – in fact, meat and seafood are relished throughout Kerala. Owing to its strategic sea ports and spice trade, the state's cuisine has been influenced by various cultures like Arabic, Portuguese, Jewish, Indonesian, Syrian and Tamilian cooking.

Today, new age chefs with their knowledge, are exploring smaller though newer formats. As a result, there is an emergence of smaller cafes, bakeries, and home baking establishments that are adding a whole new dimension to the gourmet culture of the state. More local ingredients are being used to promote sustainability, and fresh seafood and meat from local sources help bind the flavors better. For example, adapting to the Indian palate, hamburgers are now being substituted with mutton and water buffalo meat patties.

"Easy availability of raw material through online platforms and retail stores have made it easier for the home chefs to experiment and offer new dishes. Post the pandemic, home chefs have begun catering food for smaller events and for home deliveries. They specialise in traditional food which is their area of comfort and expertise. Customers, too, are more comfortable ordering from home chefs as they believe this offering cooked in the home kitchens are healthier and of a reliable quality," says Chef Mathew.



Clockwise from top right: Chatti Chor, Toddy Shop Memories Set Menu, Pazhan Kanji, from Kappa Chakka Kandhari

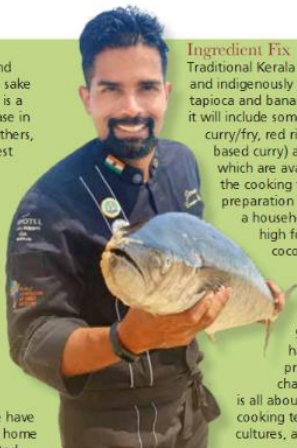


## CUISINE

### Food stories

While on one side, ready to eat foods and fast foods are gaining popularity for the sake of convenience, on the other side, there is a focus on health and an associated increase in exploration of traditional foods that mothers, and grandmothers cooked and an interest in the stories behind these dishes. For instance, people are interested in knowing what kind of foods are cooked during monsoon season and the reasoning behind them and how it influences the body and mind. Millennial chefs are bringing a lot more creativity and innovation to the table by enhancing the food presentation and garnishing techniques to make the food look instagrammable. At the same time, they are also deeply aware of the food history and authenticity of a dish and its taste.

"Social media and YouTube food culture have had a significant influence, especially on home cooks. Food influencers have also impacted the way people consume and imagine their everyday dinner menu. I believe that chefs are experimenting across cuisines, and this will result in some unique flavours. Malayalee cuisine has always been influenced by foreign foods," says Nazaneen Jalaludheen. Jerson Fernandes, Executive Chef, Novotel Mumbai Juhu Beach, believes that Kerala cuisine is getting a modern makeover. "Plating styles, recipes, presentation, and the whole thought process of Kerala food are being re-looked at by giving it a twist in taste and flavour. Animation in food has become integral to every cuisine, impacting not just Kerala cuisine but every single cuisine worldwide. The same food served today looks more modern and enticing not just because of how it is presented but also because of how it is perceived. Kerala food is today on the world map; thus, fusion food in Kerala cuisine seems to work well, especially with dishes from the Gulf region, which are highly influenced by the Kerala culture and vibe."



Jerson Fernandes, Executive Chef, Novotel Mumbai Juhu Beach

### Ingredient Fix

Traditional Kerala cuisine relies heavily on coconut and indigenously available vegetables including tapioca and bananas. If you look at a regular lunch, it will include some greens (usually stir fried), a fish curry/fry, red rice and a moru curry (buttermilk-based curry) and a sambhar or a kootu, all of which are available from local sources. "While the cooking time may not be very high, the preparation time can be tedious (especially for a household where the workloads are very high for both spouses). Tasks like grating coconut and cutting certain vegetables can be time consuming and are being replaced by frozen grated coconut and pre-cut vegetable alternatives available in stores. So, while the food consumed daily has largely remained the same, the process of preparation has undergone change," adds Jalaludheen. Kerala food is all about a mix of both ancient and modern cooking techniques, fresh ingredients, diverse cultures, and usage of the best coconut oil.

### Fusion Files

Cooking techniques like smoking, searing, braising, slow cooking and the like have always been practiced in Kerala. But it is being practiced more professionally due to the advent of professionally trained chefs. Chef Suresh Pillai has beautifully shown how the method of searing can be incorporated in a traditional dish, giving birth to his very famous Fish Nirvana. There is a slow but steady change in the presentation of classic dishes; the techniques are becoming better keeping the fundamentals of the cuisine the same. "There are many chefs who have gone abroad and trained in the kitchens of bigger, busier hotels and they have returned with the updated knowledge of technique and trends. That is getting incorporated in the..."



Clockwise from top right: Chatti men Kozhi Curry- Kappa Chakka Kandhari



Nazaneen Jalaludheen, Entrepreneur and food influencer

food and it is getting refined, but it still stays rooted in tradition. In terms of impact on Kerala cuisine, it is only on the technique and the plating. The introduction of the steak houses and the burger joints are very noticeable additions to the food scene in Kerala, and a pointer to the fact that more Keralites are open to trying new and different cuisines and methods," says

Yogender Pal, Executive Chef, Grand Hyatt Kochi and Culinary Specialist, South West Asia.

### Going 'Back Home'

The new trend is more focused on 'back home' cuisine. Everyone loves to keep a small kitchen garden even if it means just a couple of potted plants on their balcony. Every Malayalee house, anywhere in the world will always have a curry leaf plant. People have also started understanding the benefits of using local ingredients. There is also a noticeable movement of returning to cook using traditional cookware, earthenware, and cast-iron vessels. People are increasingly seeking comfort in familiar food and there has been a huge movement of returning to their roots with food. Recipes of grandmothers are being replicated in modern homes and thanks to social media these are coming into the limelight and reaching many more people. The most striking thing about Kerala cuisine is that it thrives on using the produce closest to where one stays. Most of the dishes are slow cooked in traditional cooking utensils - it stays true to the

### CHEF REGI MATHEW'S

## Prawn Kizhi

### INGREDIENTS

- 20 nos. small prawns
- 100 grams sliced shallots
- 25 grams chopped ginger
- 20 grams chopped garlic
- 25 grams chopped green chilli
- 2 sprigs curry leaves
- 25 ml coconut oil
- 1 cup grated coconut
- ¼ tsp turmeric powder
- ½ tsp chilli powder
- ½ tsp mustard seeds
- 2 tbsps Kudampuli water (Malabar Kokum, soaked in water)
- Salt to taste
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 tsp freshly ground pepper powder

### PREPARATION

#### FOR THE PRAWN FILLING:

Step 1: Wash and clean the prawns/shrimps well, and marinate with little turmeric powder, lemon juice and salt and set aside.

Step 2: Heat the coconut oil in a pan, add mustard seeds. When they crackle, add the shallots (small onions called pearl or 'sambhar' onions), ginger, garlic, green chilli and curry leaves and sauté until the onion turns soft and transparent.

Step 3: Add chilli, turmeric powder and pepper, sauté well, then add marinated prawns and cook till 3/4th done, then add grated coconut and kokum water mix, check the seasoning and remove from fire and prepare the Kizhi.

#### FOR THE KIZHI:

Step 1: For the Kizhi, take eight medium sized round cut banana leaves and blanch gently over a warm tawa. Spread little coconut oil over each banana leaf and put 4 pieces of prawns in the centre with the masala.

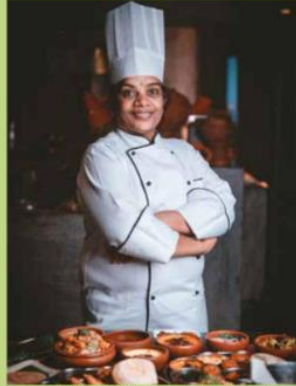
Step 2: Hold the edges of the banana leaf and bring them up together and tie the top of the banana leaf with fiber from the banana stem (or some stout thread) to form bundles.

Step 3: Steam for approximately 10 minutes and serve hot.





## CUISINE



Chef Latha K, first woman chef in Kerala

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while sticking to her roots. This helps to take forward a legacy of food steeped in history and culture which is also adaptive to recent times," says Lejina Ramachandran.

### Unique Techniques

Most of the Kerala vegetarian dishes are made with minimal ingredients and aren't cooked for long, thus retaining the nutrients and freshness. This is evident in the recipes of the traditional *Ona Sadhya*. Most of the dishes have less than 5-10 minutes cooking time. The vegetables used in the day-to-day

heritage. The techniques used are still authentic and traditional.

### Wow Women

The women professional chefs are a big part of the culinary fabric of Kerala. The ladies preserve the traditional old recipes and keep them alive across generations. Chefs from other parts often take inspiration from the cuisine in terms of flavor profiles and techniques and use them to create contemporary dishes. Change is the only constant. The new breed of chefs are abreast with the happenings around the world and track new trends as they are active on social media. This helps them identify and experiment with flavours and dishes. "Though the domestic kitchens are inevitably ruled by women, the professional kitchens still are largely male-dominated in nature. Chef Latha K, the first woman chef in Kerala gives women a hope to join and excel in the hotel industry. Women chefs have a deep knowledge of their roots and the indigenous methods of cooking and recipes. Home chefs like Abida Rasheed who comes with an abundance of knowledge and expertise in Moplah cuisine, are aware of the trends in the food industry while sticking to her roots. This helps to take forward a legacy of food steeped in history and culture which is also adaptive to recent times," says Lejina Ramachandran.



cooking are ones that are commonly found and sourced locally. "But with the focus on careers completely shifting away from agriculture it has become difficult to source these vegetables and thus the state has become dependent of the neighbouring states for the same. Also, the food habits have changed with the arrival of 'super foods' like broccoli, avocado, blueberries etc. The change in culture and food habits has led to heritage food taking a back step and almost becoming forgotten. *Mutta Maala* is a dessert from Malabar. It is a dish that has Portuguese influences, it is adapted from *Fios de Ovos* but tweaked to suit our palette. This used to be the main dessert served during *Puthiyapla Thakkaram*, or the feast for the groom. Today it is only made in a few homes and is not found commercially as the process to make it is cumbersome," says Lejina Ramachandran.

### Sweet Nothings

The varied flavours include an excellent selection of desserts and one such is '*Pradhaman*' meaning 'Number One' and as the name suggests this is the key/star dish of any *Sadya* in Kerala. At any *Onasadya* *Ada Pradhaman* and *Chakka Pradhaman* are perhaps the most popular and favourite.

As Fernandes says, "Kerala food is one of my favourites as it's super rich and uses the freshest and purest of simple ingredients just like the culture, history, and traditions of Kerala. I always make an active effort to indulge in this cuisine whenever I get the time and opportunity."

Having said so much, are you ready to sample a slice of Kerala?

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Photo Credits: Ashok Raj, Sanjay Ramchandran, Vinayak-Grover.

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An interesting story on the origin of *Chakka Pradhaman* finds mention in a folk song '*Mannan Pattu*' that was written based on '*Chilappathikaram*', a Tamil classic dating back to third or fifth century BCE. In the song *Kannaki*, who goes by the name *Deviyaal* is searching for her lost husband. The jackfruit tree which knows of her husband's whereabouts informs her by breaking its branch and revealing him hiding. *Deviyaal* is overjoyed and blesses the tree with lots of children. These children are jackfruits and hence for every celebration jackfruit is made into a sweet dish. For Onam, the jackfruit is used to make the *Chakka* (jackfruit) *Pradhaman*. During Onam, *Chakka Varattiyathu* is cooked with coconut milk and Marayoor Jaggery [this variety of jaggery is specifically used for its dark colour, purity and because it does not have any salt in it]. "Once the *Chakka Varattiyathu* is cooked on a slow flame, it attains the desired consistency. Nuts and raisins fried in ghee are used to garnish it. *Pradhaman* is different from *payasam* as the former is double cooked. In the case of *Chakka Pradhaman*, first the *chakka varattiyathu* is made and then it is cooked with coconut milk and jaggery to make *Chakka Pradhaman*.

"Jackfruit *Pradhaman* is a time-consuming preparation but since the '*chakka varattiyathu*' is prepared well in advance, it makes cooking this *Pradhaman* a lot easier in the final stage. Jackfruit grows in abundance in Kerala, practically in the backyard of every home in the state. Because it often ripened and got wasted as there weren't many takers in the earlier days, grandmothers would cook the *Chakka Varattiyathu* like a jam and store it to use for festive cooking later," says Mathew.