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BEING VEGETARIAN IN CHETTINAD

Breaking culinary stereotypes



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By Bindu Gopal Rao

“You must try the Chettinad Chicken,” an acquaintance joked when I mentioned I was in Chettinad, knowing that I was vegetarian. I however would not blame him as this region of Tamil Nadu is known for not just Chicken Chettinad but a host of seafood and red meat dishes. However, what most people do not know is that the Chettians were originally believed to be vegetarian, and it was due to their travels abroad that they added non-vegetarian food to their cuisine.

Hues of History

Visiting the ancient mansions of the Chettinad region, you will find the kitchen in the end of the home, usually in the third courtyard. This is where you will also notice that most of the traditional cooking would happen on open hearths using firewood that adds its own distinctive flavour to the food. The traditional kitchens use the iron iruppu chatty, grinding stones to make the dosa and idli batter as well as the flat grinding stones (the ammi kal) which is like a stone roller to make chilli and other pastes. The Idiyappam press, shallow kadhais for Vellai Paniyaram, Dosai Kal, Idli Chatti, Mathus to churn buttermilk, Aatu Kal a manual grinder and Aapam Chatti are some of the other traditional cooking aids used in the kitchens here. S.Muthiah, writer in a foreword in the book ***‘The Bangala Table: Flavors and Recipes from Chettinad’*** has mentioned that the Chettians were traditionally vegetarian

and even to date their fare at their rituals have vegetarian food. In a foreword in the same book, journalist Guy Trebay says, “A Chettiar table is a groaning board because the cuisine is uncommonly subtle and aromatic, a heritage of Chettiar participation in the centuries-old spice trade, the global import and export of pungent seeds and fruits and barks from places like Cochin and Penang, the Banda Islands, Arab ports in the Strait of Hormuz. To the coconut and rice and legumes that are staples of South Indian cooking they added Tellicherry pepper, Ceylon cardamom, Indonesian nutmeg, Madagascar cloves and blue ginger, or galangal, from Laos and Vietnam.”

Cuisine Cues

In fact, it is said that the best Chettinad food is served at celebratory feasts where teams (or sets as they are called) of cooks spend days creating varied dining experiences and the first meal I sampled in Chettinad was at ***CGH Visalam***, a Chettiar mansion now converted to a boutique hotel by CGH Earth was something similar. This was a traditional vegetarian meal served on a banana leaf and extensive enough to give me a great introduction into the nuances of the cuisine. The dishes served included Vazhakkai poriyal (raw plantain curry), Chow chow kootu (stew made with Chayote), Seenai kilangu karuvadu masala (dry dish made with yam),



Kudamilagai pachadi (a dish made with capsicum and lentils), Vendakai varuval (fried ladies finger chips), Chunda vathal kulambu (sun dried turkey berry), Steamed rice, lemon rice, Sambar, rasam, curd, applam, Buttermilk, pickle, raita and Jawarisi payasam (payasam made with sago). **Sam John**, General Manager, CGH Visalam says, "We source our vegetables from the local farmer markets in the nearby villages. The specialty is the aroma, taste and flavour of the spices which comes from using kalpasi (stone flower) and star anise. The food follows a slow cooking philosophy and hence we only take advance booking for our meals."

Spice Story

The use of spices is a distinctive element of Chettinad cuisine, and most dishes will have the Chettinadu masala as part of its recipe.

"To make a kilogram of the Chettinadu masala, you will need 500 grams of coriander and dry red chilli, 100 grams of fennel seeds and cumin seeds and 50 grams each of dry turmeric, raw rice, lentils, black pepper, and asafoetida. All the ingredients are sun dried and then ground to a fine powder," explains **Tennyson Mathew**, Chef in charge, CGH Visalam. The key to make the dishes is to use the spices in such a way that the dish eventually becomes one full of spices instead of just being spicy. The food is also made in a way that all your taste buds are tickled. So, whether it is Kudamilagai Mandi (a dish made with capsicum, shallots, and garlic), Manga inippu pachadi (sweet and sour dish made with raw mango and jaggery), Karuna kilangu masiyal (dish made with mashed yam, tamarind, and shallots) or Vathal kulambu (Chettinadu gravy prepared with Turkish berry, shallots, garlic, and tomato) this is food for the senses. Ashoka halwa (halwa made with moong dal and wheat flour), Arisi cool payasam (made with raw rice), Aadikkumayam (sweet dish made with

urad dal, raw rice, and palm jaggery), Kavuni Arisi payasam (made with black sticky rice) and Rangoon puttlu (sweet dish made with semolina, coconut and jaggery) are some of the unique Chettinad desserts you must try. And it is a great way to end the meal on a sweet note too. And if you are a vegetarian, do not let anyone tell you that you will not find enough choice in Chettinad!



Here is a recipe of Ennaikathrikai Masala courtesy Vasantha, a home cook from Chettinad and Tennyson Mathew at CGH Visalam.

Ingredients

- Shallow fried brinjal - 100 grams
- Onion sliced - 1
- Tomato sliced - 1
- Garlic chopped - 5
- Ginger garlic paste - 1 tbsp
- Curry leaves - 1 sprig
- Fenugreek seeds - 1 tsp
- Kalpasi - 1 tsp
- Fennel seeds - 1 tsp
- Chettinadu masala - 1 tbsp
- Bay leaf - 1
- Turmeric powder - 1 tsp
- Chilli powder - 1 tsp
- Tamarind water - 2 tbsp
- Gingelly Oil - 3 tbsp
- Salt to taste

Method

- Heat gingelly oil in an iron wok. Add bay leaf, kalpasi, fenugreek, fennel seeds and fry. Add red chilli, curry leaves, garlic, and toss.
- Now add the chopped tomatoes, onions, ginger garlic paste and fry. Add the shallow fried brinjal and fry.
- Add turmeric powder, red chilli powder, chettinadu masala, salt to taste. Now add the tamarind water and let it simmer for a few minutes.
- Add some gingelly oil on the top, fry well and the dish is ready to be served with rice or chapati.

