

# In South India, chefs serve up a spoonful of history

South Indian chefs have been diving into history, religion and literature to revive indigenous dishes

[Shoba Narayan](#) First Published 24 Jun 2024



A typical South Indian meal served on a banana leaf has seasonal variations. (Istockphoto)

On the sprawling lawns of the Jayamahal Palace hotel in Bengaluru, thousands of people gathered to sample more than 100 vegetarian dishes from across Karnataka. These weren't the usual *idli*, *dosa* and *akki roti*. The dishes included the tart *bilimbi* (averrhoa bilimbi) chutney, rarely served outside Kannadiga homes. Made with a small sour fruit called tree sorrel, this chutney is served with hot rice and inside a *dosai* in coastal Karnataka. Other dishes included *punar puli* or *kokum rasam*, *kumblakai sippe*, or chutney made from the skin of ash gourd, *moodaray kanee* which is a thick soup prepared with horse gram and *navane akki anna*

(foxtail millet rice).

Organised by the food brand MTR Foods to commemorate 100 years of being in Karnataka, the festival named Karunadu Swada was celebrated last month. The brand also published an accompanying cookbook with the same name. *Karunadu* is another name for Karnataka and means the land of black soil. The festival— now in its third edition— begins with MTR chefs and cooks traversing the state to discover home recipes and ingredients, and learning to cook foods in specific ways using specific ingredients. “The 100 dishes showcased in this festival and in the cookbook are a way to reconnect our consumers to their roots,” says Sunay Bhasin, CEO of MTR Foods. The brand also uses this research to create new mass-market packaged products like their *gojju* masala, he adds.

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MTR Foods formed the Centre of Excellence 12 years ago and appointed chef Regi Mathew who has long been associated with Indian food revival as its custodian, along with chef Rajesh M who works with MTR. Over the years, they have collected a lot of material about Karnataka food including indigenous regional ingredients like *kachampuli* vinegar from Kodagu, *mattu gulla* brinjals from Udupi, and *mundu chilies* from Mangaluru.

A recent welcome trend is the flowering of Indian indigenous cuisine, where chefs, restaurants and even home cooks are embracing their native recipes, thanks to access of knowledge and ingredients. “Today, people want to understand the historical layering in what they eat,” says food historian and television personality Rakesh Raghunathan. “Indigenous cuisine is the way forward. Not only does it allow for storytelling, it also pushes the creativity of chefs. In the end, you are eating a spoonful of your history.”

In the effort to serve up history while infusing it with storytelling, chefs are

mining journals and literature, meeting home cooks and local eatery owners, and tracing little known ingredients and recipes. Chef Mathew, who owns and runs the restaurants, Kappa Chakka Kandhari, in Bengaluru and Chennai is an ardent food revivalist, not just at his restaurants and in his role for MTR, but also as an educator. 10 students from the hospitality college Manipal Welcomgroup have just started interning with him for two years. His goal is to "get them excited about regional Indian food so that they return to it rather than go on to become European or Thai chefs."

The keepers of these recipes end up being home cooks and religious institutions. The *pidiyum kozhiyum* that Mathew serves at his restaurant, for instance, is the traditional food of the St. Thomas Christians and is served as part of a *nercha* or religious vow to 12 boys modelling the 12 apostles. The dish has steamed rice dumplings topped with coconut milk and served with chicken.

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At Thanjavur's Mantra Koodam, a resort on the banks of the Kaveri river, I tasted Cholanadu food at the in-house restaurant. There was *vetrilai saadam* or betel leaf rice and *pirandai thokku* (veldt grape pickle) with *kambu adai* (pearl millet dosa). *Pirandai* or *Cissus quadrangularis* is a medicinal plant, called veldt grape, that grows wild all over South India.

Harish Venkat, the general manager of the resort, said that their menu was characterised by three qualities: a clear link to seasonally available ingredients, a connection to local temples and festivals, and the idea of *paati vaidhyam* or grandmother's medicine, alluding to food. The veldt

grape, for instance, was stirred into rice and offered as the *prasadam* at the nearby Lalithambikai temple. Seasonal dishes included the *omam-kuzhambu*, or ajwain dry-roasted with spices and stirred into a thick tamarind paste. He says, "These are medicinal home foods that our mothers and grandmothers cooked. Restaurants don't serve them." Venkat reeled off other dishes that they were serving, and they were tied by one common factor. The first part of the name was the town or village where the particular delicacy came from. For example, *Vedaranyam vanjara meen suttathu* is a grilled seer fish from Vedaranyam in Tamil Nadu. Similar dishes include *Mayavaram mutton curry*, *Papanasam paal kootu* (a savory mix of vegetables with a dash of milk) and *Kadichampadi kaadai varuval* (quail fry). As a Tamilian, I didn't know that there was a village called Kadichampadi, let alone that its quail fry with a unique spice blend. Rather than watering down and adapting dishes to suit tourist palates, the chefs at Mantra Koodam were digging deep into Sangam (300 B.C. to 300 A.D. or so) literature to revive dishes. A starting point, says Venkat, is the Saraswati Mahal Library in Thanjavur with its palm-leaf manuscripts, paintings and poetry describing old dishes. Old Tamil poetry also threw up names. For example, *thenum thinai maavum* (honey and foxtail millet flour) is a sweet *laddu* offered to Lord Muruga on a particular day in the month of *Karthigai* or November-December. "It is not just what you eat, it is when you eat and how you eat the food," says Venkat.

*Angaya podi* is a powder made with neem and berries as a digestive, and typically eaten before the meats. Some dishes like shark-fish scramble (*paal sura puttlu*) are given to lactating mothers. And some are linked to the land and seasonal availability. I tasted an *aviyal* (mixed vegetable preparation) made just with native gourds— snakegourd, ridgegourd, bottle gourd, ash gourd, and yellow pumpkin, and native tubers and yams, that were shallow fried into snacks, such as *valli-kizhangu varuval* or sweet-potato fries.

The dishes of all south Indian states are based on three culinary

principles: availability, connection to culture and food as medicine. I watch several Kannada cooking shows on Youtube, for instance, and learn about dishes such as *karindi* (fermented pickle made with nutrition-rich flax seeds and vegetables). There are Tamil cooking shows such as *Village Cooking Channel* with 24.7 million subscribers, where a group of exuberant village men teach you how to cook a whole goat, and harvest palmyra sprouts or *panang kizhangu*, also considered medicinal and available only at certain times of the year when it is a delicacy. Chef Mathew's version of this is the common Kerala tapioca, called *kappa*. "In Kerala we serve *kappa* with *kudampuli* (*Garcinia cambogia*) fish curry because it neutralises the cyanogen content in raw tapioca," he says. "I visited 275 Kerala mothers and they all do this. They didn't know why but science tells us why."

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The *Merriam-Webster* dictionary describes the term indigenous as "having originated in and being produced, growing, living, or occurring naturally in a particular region or environment." The word takes particular meaning in tropical climes such as India where the fertile land births flavours that are unique and distinct. Anyone who has travelled on a train in India knows this. Each station has specialities that are exquisitely linked to land and culture. In Tamil Nadu, there are indigenous dishes, flavours and ingredients like Sathur cucumbers, Erode's milk, Srivalliputhur's milk sweet or *paal-khova*, Kovilpatti's *chikki* called *kadalai-urundai*.

The other aspect of revival involves debunking common practices in light of new information. The *sambhar*— now inextricably linked to Tamil food— was in fact imported from Maharashtra. Food combinations come through poetry. For instance, a journal article titled *History of Tamil food of Ancient Tamils with special reference to Sangam Literature* by professor Dr. T. Kausalya Kumari of Chennai's Ethiraj College for Women, describes the

use of “steamed *varagu* (Kodo millet) rice, smoked and mashed aubergine and tangy frothy buttermilk” in a song by Sangam Tamil poet, Avvaiyar. This was long before today’s buzz about millets.

Indian restaurants across the world have tried and failed to capture its cuisine under one umbrella. It is an impossible ask given the remarkable diversity of sub-regional foods. For regional or hyperlocal cuisine to thrive, there needs to be a confluence of factors, including access to knowledge for both chefs and consumers, a desire for wellness and therefore unprocessed food of the kind our ancestors ate, pride in culinary culture, and perhaps most importantly a strong economy that supports the food ecosystem. All this along with a democratic backbone that allows for not just the best in the business to rise to the top, but also the quirky mavericks who beat to their own drum. Sub-regional and indigenous cuisine requires both imagination and expertise, and its moment in the sun has arrived. The good news is, you and I are the beneficiaries.

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