

# KERALA CUISINE

## INTRODUCTION

The cuisine of Kerala is linked in all its richness to the history, geography, demography and culture of the land. Since many of Kerala's Hindus are vegetarian by religion, and because Kerala has large minorities of Muslims and Christians that are predominantly non-vegetarians, Kerala cuisine has a multitude of both vegetarian and dishes prepared using fish, poultry and meat.

For over 2000 years, Kerala has been visited by ocean-goers, including traders from Greece, Rome, the eastern Mediterranean, Arab countries, and Europe (see History of Kerala). Thus, Kerala cuisine is a blend of indigenous dishes and foreign dishes adapted to Kerala tastes. Coconuts grow in abundance in Kerala, and consequently, grated coconut and coconut-milk are widely used in dishes and curries as a thickener and flavouring ingredient. In fact, the literal meaning of Kerala is **Land of Coconuts** Kerala's long coastline, numerous rivers and backwater networks, and strong fishing industry have contributed to many sea- and river-food based dishes. Rice is grown in abundance, and could be said, along with tapioca (manioc/cassava), to be the main starch ingredient used in Kerala food. In Kerala, Tapioca is known as **the poor mans starch**. Having been a major production area of spices for thousands of years, black pepper, cardamom, cloves, ginger, and cinnamon play a large part in its food.

## HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES:

Pre-independence Kerala was split into the princely states of Travancore and Kochi in the south, and the Malabar district in the north; the erstwhile split is reflected in the recipes and cooking style of each area. Both Travancore and Malabar cuisine consists of a variety of vegetarian dishes using many vegetables and fruits that are not commonly used in curries elsewhere in India including plantains, bitter gourd ('**paavaykka**'), taro ('**chena**'), Colocasia ('chembu'), Ash gourd ('kumbalanga'), etc. However, their style of preparation and names of the dishes may vary. Malabar has an array of vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes such as **pathiri** (a sort of rice-based pancake, at times paired with a meat curry), **porotta** (a layered flatbread, said to come from South-East Asia), and the Kerala variant of the popular biriyani, probably from Arab lands. Central Travancore region boasts of a parade of dishes that is largely identified with the Christians of the region.

In addition to historical diversity, the cultural influences, particularly the large percentages of Muslims and Syrian Christians have also contributed unique dishes and styles to Kerala cuisine, especially non-vegetarian dishes. The meat eating habit of the people has been historically limited by religious taboos. Brahmins eschew non vegetarian items. However, most of modern day Hindus do not observe any dietary taboos, except a few who belong to upper caste (Nambudiris, Nairs of Malabar). Muslims do not eat pork and other items forbidden by Islamic law.

## VARIATION OF KERALA CUISINE

Based on the religions and topography, "Keraliya paachaka shailee" is sub divided into three distinct but very overlapping categories. The differences show up only in a few of the dishes which are a speciality that are made on religious occasions.

### Hindu Cuisine

Being a Hindu state from the very beginning, almost everything that all the other cuisines have is similar or slightly modified version of the original Hindu cuisine in Kerala; all but with a few variations giving way to the vast diversity to Keralite cuisine. To understand it furthermore we shall discuss the other two cuisines.

## Malabar Cuisine

Malabar forming the northern Kerala is a mix of cultures. Malabar cuisine is noted for its variety of pancakes and steamed rice cakes made from pounded rice. Malabar food is generally mildly flavoured and gently cooked. The mutton is cooked tender, the rice flaky and delicately spiced with the right portions of condiments, to leave the taste lingering for long. That is the special brand of Malabari Moppila biriyani. Biriyani - whether mutton, chicken, fish or prawn - is the USP of Malabar cuisine.

## Syrian Christian (Suriani)

The cuisine of the state of Kerala, India, is influenced by its large Christian minority. A favourite dish of Kerala Syrian Christians is **stew**: chicken, potatoes and onions simmered gently in a creamy white sauce flavoured with black pepper, cinnamon, cloves, green chillies, lime juice, shallots and coconut milk. They also prepare stews with chicken, lamb, and duck. Places like Kottayam, a Christian centric zone has arikada, appam, rice, banana fry, and payasam served during marriage and other parties.

Other dishes include **piralen** (chicken stir-fries), **meat thoran** (dry curry with shredded coconut), fiery, sardine and duck curries, and **meen molee** (spicy stewed fish). This is eaten with **appam**. **Appams, kallappams, or vellayappams** are rice flour pancakes which have soft, thick white spongy centres and crisp, lace-like edges. **Meen vevichathu** (fish in fiery red chilli sauce) is another favourite item. In addition to chicken and fish, Syrian Christians also eat red meat. For example, **erachi orlarthiathu** is a beef or mutton dish cooked with spices.

Christian cookery specially caters to people with a sweet tooth – crunchy **kozhallappam, achappam, cheeda, churutu** etc

## INSIGHT INTO A TRADITIONAL KITCHEN

In the traditional homes of Kerala called **tharavads**, the cooking centres around the hearth, that has four to six stoves called **adupus**. Chopping and food preparation is accomplished on the kitchen table, using little wood handled knives for vegetables and a large cleaver for meat and seafood. Equally important is the little stone mortar and pestle in which small amounts of spices or chillies are crushed or pounded. The kitchen countertop holds the grinding stone on which most of the daily spices are crushed or ground. It also contains several large blocks of wood on which meat and fish are chopped. A deep stone sink for pot wash can be found in a smaller room adjoining the kitchen.

A storeroom, adjacent to the kitchen is where large reserves of staples and farm produce are kept. Larger homes have separate rooms for various tasks. For e.g., the **granary or nellu ara** is a large wooden room within the kitchen where the food grains are stored, or the **ora pera**, which is a large room in which large amounts of rice flour, halwa and snacks called **palaharam** are prepared.

Many traditional kitchens function in the above manner even today with a smaller modern kitchen close to the main kitchen, housing conveniences like gas stoves, electric grinders, microwave ovens and coffee makers.

## SPECIAL EQUIPMENTS

- **CHEMBU**: It is a vessel made out of copper or brass used for steaming or boiling food. Now aluminium is more frequently used.
- **PUTTU KUTI**: It is used for steaming rice flour paste called puttu. It has a round base pot in which water is boiled, and a tall cylindrical tube above this base in which rice flour and coconut are layered and steamed.
- **CHEENA CHATTI**: Literally meaning “Chinese pot”, this is a round-bottomed vessel with two handles similar to a wok. The round bottom spreads the heat evenly through the base and into the food; which makes it ideal for sautéing and deep frying.

- **APPAM CHATTI:** This is a heavy round bottomed vessel made of iron with a lid similar to the cheena chatti. It is used to prepared stews.
- **KALAM:** It is a large rice vessel in which water, tapioca or rice is boiled.
- **URALI:** This is a wide mouthed squat vessel made of bell metal which gradually warms up and retains heat for a long time. It is multipurpose: it is used to fry and roast meat, to cook halwas and to dry roast rice flour.
- **MEEN CHATTI:** It is a round bottomed earthen pot used to prepare fish curries.
- **CHERAVA:** This is used to grate coconut. It has got ridged metal blades resting on a wooden platform. The coconut is first halved and then grated on this equipment.
- **URAL AND ULAKKA:** A *ural* is a large drum – shaped stone used for pounding rice and spices with a long wooden rod called *ulakka*.
- **AMMI AND AMMIKUUTI:** This equipment contains a flat grinding stone called *ammi* with a cylindrical stone called *ammikuuti* and is used for grinding wet masalas.
- **THAVI:** These are ladles made from the coconut shells, which have a long bamboo handle. *Muttamala*, a speciality dessert, is made by passing egg yolks through a one – holed thavi into a sugar syrup.
- **IDOONI ACHU:** This is a noodle press for preparing thin vermicelli from rice doughs. These vermicelli are used for *idiyappams and puttus*.
- **KUDUKKA:** Traditionally, earthenware clay pots are used for cooking food in Kerala. The clay pots are commonly called *kalams, meenkalam and kudukku*.

### **FEATURES OF KERALA CUISINE**

- Kuttanad is known as the “Rice Bowl of India”, and thus the staple food of the Kerala, like most South-Indian states is **rice**. Unlike other states, however, many people in Kerala prefer **parboiled rice (Choru)** (rice made nutritious by boiling it with rice husk). A variety of **red rice called Carmague rice** is also very commonly used.
- Apart from rice, other sources of starch include **tapioca and wheat**.
- **Coconut (thenga)** is the chief ingredient here. Coconuts grow in abundance in Kerala, and consequently, coconut kernel, (sliced or grated) coconut cream and coconut milk (*thenga pal*) are widely used in dishes for thickening and flavoring. It is used fresh and dried. *Its oil is used as the cooking medium*. Palm oil and vegetable oil also finds limited use.
- Owing to the weather and the availability of spices, the Kerala cuisine is **richly spicy** especially the hot ones. The main spices used are cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, green and red peppers, cloves, garlic, cumin seeds, coriander, turmeric, and so on.
- Few fresh herbs are used which mainly consist of the commonly used **curry leaf**, and the occasional use of fresh coriander and mint.
- Vegetarian dishes often consist of **fresh spices that are liquefied** and crushed to make a paste-like texture to dampen rice.
- Kerala's long coastline, numerous rivers and backwater networks, and strong fishing industry have contributed to many **sea and river food based dishes**. *Arabian influence is preparation of biryani and fish*. The Malabar coast of Kochi, Trivandrum, and Kovalam have enough of fresh fish supplies. In Alleppy too the use of seafood is common.
- **Tamarind (puli) and lime** are used to make sauces sour in North Malabar areas; the Travancore region uses only **kodampuli** (*Garcinia cambogia*), as **sour sauces or gravies** are very popular in Kerala.
- Kerala cuisine also has a **variety of pickles and chutneys**, and **crunchy pappadums**.
- The back garden of almost every household provides *green chillies, plantains, papaya, jackfruit, pumpkin and other vegetables* and so these are very commonly used in the cuisine.

- Steaming, blanching, simmering are commonly used **cooking methods**. Fermentation is also used.
- **Jaggery or molasses** is a common sweetening ingredient, although white sugar is also used.
- Kerala is known for its traditional banquet or **sadhya**, a vegetarian meal served with boiled rice and a host of side-dishes served especially during special occasions and festivals.

## **A TYPICAL DAY AND ITS MEALS**

### **Breakfast**

Kerala cuisine offers many delicious vegetarian breakfast dishes that are often relatively unknown outside the state. These include **Puttu** (made of rice powder and grated coconut, steamed in a metal or bamboo holder) and kadala (a curry made of black garbanzo beans (chana), **iddali** (fluffy rice pancakes), sambar, dosa and chutney, **pidiyan, Idiyappam** (string hoppers - also known as **Noolputtu and Nool-Appam**), **Paal-Appam**, a circular, fluffy, crisp-edged pancake made of rice flour fermented with a small amount of toddy or wine, etc. **Idiyappam** and **Paalappam** are accompanied by mutton, chicken or vegetable stew or a curry of beef or **fish moilee** (the most common dish is fish in a coconut based sauce).

### **Lunch and dinner**

The staple food of Kerala is rice. Parboiled rice (**Choru**) (rice made nutritious by boiling it with rice husk) is more preferred. **Kanji** (rice congee), a kind of rice porridge, is also popular. Tapioca, called **kappa** in Kerala, is popular in central Kerala and in the highlands, and is frequently eaten with fish curry

Rice is usually consumed with one or more curries. Accompaniments with rice may include **upperis** (dry braised or sautéed vegetables), rasam, chips, and/or buttermilk (called *moru*). Vegetarian dinners usually consist of multiple courses, each involving rice, one main dish (usually sambar, rasam, puli-sherry), and one or more side-dishes.

Popular vegetarian dishes include **sambar, aviyal, Kaalan, theeyal, thoran (dry curry), pulisherry (morozhichathu** in Cochin and the Malabar region), **olan, erisherry, pulinji, payaru (mung bean), kappa (tapioca)**, etc. Common non-vegetarian dishes include stew (using chicken, beef, lamb, or fish), traditional or chicken curry (**Nadan Kozhi Curry**), chicken fry (**Kozhi Porichathu/Varuthathu**), fish/chicken/mutton molly (fish or meat in light gravy), fish curry (**Meen Curry**), fish fry (**Karimeen Porichathu/Varuthathu**), lobster fry (**Konchu Varuthathu**), Spicy Beef Fry (Beef **Ularthiyathu**), Spicy Steamed Fish (**Meen Pollichathu**) etc. Biryani, a Mughal dish consists of rice cooked along with meat, onions, chillies and other spices.

Although rice and tapioca may be considered the original Kerala starch staples, wheat, in the form of chappatis or parathas (known as **porottas** in Kerala), is now very commonly eaten, especially at dinner time. Grains such as ragi and millet, although common in the arid parts of South India, have not gained a foothold in Kerala.

### **Sweets and Desserts**

Due to limited influence of Central Asian food on Kerala, the use of sweets is not as widespread as in North India. Kerala does not have any indigenous cold desserts, but hot/warm desserts are popular. The most popular example is undoubtedly the **payasam**: a preparation of milk, coconut extract, sugar, cashews, dry grapes, etc. Payasam can be made with many base constituents, including **Paal payasam** (made from rice), **Ada payasam** (with Ada, a flat form of rice), **Paripu payasam** (made from dal), **Pazham pradhamam** (made from banana), **Gothambu payasam** (made from wheat). **Ada payasam** is especially popular during the festival

of Onam. Most payasams can also be consumed chilled. Fruit, especially the small yellow bananas, are often eaten after a meal or at any time of the day. Plantains, uncooked or steamed, are popularly eaten for breakfast or tea.

Other popular sweets include **Unniappam** (a fried banana bread), **pazham-pori** (plantain slices covered with a fried crust made of sweetened flour), and **kozhukkatta** (rice dumplings stuffed with a sweet mixture of molasses, coconut etc.). Cakes, ice-creams, cookies and puddings are equally common. Generally, except for payasam, most sweets are not eaten as dessert but as a tea-time snack.

### **Pickles and other side-dishes**

Kerala cuisine also has a variety of pickles and chutneys, and crunchy pappadums, banana chips, jackfruit chips, **kozhappam**, **achappam**, **cheeda**, and **churuttu**.

### **Beverages**

Being mostly a hot and humid area, Keralites have developed a variety of drinks to cope with thirst. A variety of what might be called herbal teas is served during mealtimes. Cumin seeds, ginger or coriander seeds are boiled in water and served warm or at room temperature. In addition to the improved taste, the spices also have digestive and other medicinal properties. **Sambharam**, a diluted buttermilk often flavoured with ginger, lime leaves, green chilli peppers etc. was very commonly drunk, although it has been replaced to some extent by soda pop. Coffee and tea (both hot) drunk black, or with milk and white sugar or unrefined palm sugar (**karippatti**), are commonly drunk. Numerous small shops dotted around the land sell fresh lime juice (called **naranga vellam**, or **bonji sarbat** in Malayalam), and many now offer milk shakes and other fruit juices.

### **SPECIAL NOTES**

**SADHYA:** Sadhya is Traditional Big Feast. An improperly laid Ela (plantain Leaf) is an indicator. The food is served on a *plantain leaf*. The narrow tip of the leaf should face the left and service should start from the bottom half of the leaf, where a small yellow banana is placed followed by jaggery coated banana chips, plain banana chips and papadum. Then beginning from the top half of the leaf, lime curry, mango pickle, *inji puli*, lime pickle, thoran, Vegetable Stew or Olan, Avail (thick Mixture of Vegetables), Pachadi (Raw Mango and Curd Mixture), Elisseri (Vegetable like Pumpkin or Green Banana) and khichdi. Rice served at the bottom centre. Sambhar and kalan are then poured on rice. Once the meal is over, the pradaman dessert is served and after that rasam is taken with rice or even separately.

### **ONASADHYA**

**Onam** heralds the harvest festival and is also according to folklore the time of the year when the king Mahabali, the legendary ruler of an ancient golden era in Kerala, returns from the depths of the nether world to visit his beloved subjects.

Onasadhya is the most delicious part of the grand festival called Onam. It is considered to be the most elaborate and grand meal prepared by any civilisation or cultures in the world. It's a feast which if enjoyed once is relished for years. Onasadhya is prepared on the last day of Onam, called Thiruonam. People of Kerala wish to depict that they are happy and prosperous to their dear King Mahabali whose spirit is said to visit Kerala at the time of Onam.

Rice is the essential ingredient of this Nine Course Strictly Vegetarian Meals. All together there are 11 essential dishes which have to be prepared for Onasadhya. Number of dishes may at times also go up to 13. Onasadhya is so elaborate a meal that it is called meals, even though it is consumed in one sitting. There are almost 64 dishes served. Onasadhya is consumed with hands; there is no concept of spoon or forks.

*Traditional Onasadhya meal comprises of different varieties of curries, upperies - things fried in oil, pappadams which are round crisp flour paste cakes of peculiar make, uppilittathu - pickles of*

various kinds, *chammanthi* - the chutney, *payasams* and *prathamans* or puddings of various descriptions. Fruits and digestives are also part of the meal.

The food has to be served on a tender Banana leaf, laid with the end to the left. The meal is traditionally served on a mat laid on the floor. A strict order of serving the dishes one after the another is obeyed. Besides, there are clear directions as to what will be served in which part of the banana leaf.

### **COMMON DISHES OF THE CUISINE**

- APPAMS AND ISHTEWS: These are from the Syrian Christian cuisine. Fermented rice paste is cooked on special wok and eaten with stew. The stew could be a vegetable stew or even meat stew called *masa ishtews*.
- ERACHI ISHTU: This is a meat stew from the Moplah cuisine. Meat cubes and potatoes are cooked with coconut milk, chillies and ginger garlic paste.
- KOZHI CURRY (CHICKEN MALABARI CURRY): The ingredients used in the preparation of this dish are coconut oil, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, sliced onions, garlic, crushed shallots, crushed green chillies, ginger and garlic along with masala powders. This is cooked in coconut milk and the tempering is done with curry leaves, mustard seeds, and coconut oil and is poured over it.
- MEEN MOLEE: This is a fish preparation in a thin gravy in which different extracts of coconut milk is used along with sliced onions, slit green chillies, garlic and ginger. Ground masalas prepared with turmeric, a pinch of garlic, and red chillies are added and fried. Some tomatoes can also be added.
- MEEN PORICHATHU (SHALLOW FRIED FISH): This is a shallow fat fried fish preparation in which the fish is marinated with turmeric, lime juice and salt followed by a mixture of spices, ginger and garlic paste. It is served with roundels of onion, lemon wedges and fried curry leaves. The fishes commonly used for this preparation commonly includes pomfret, kingfish and pearl spot cut into darne.
- ERACHI VARATTIYATHU (BEEF MASALA): This is a dish consisting of beef cubes cooked in a thick gravy. The preparation is finished by adding garam masala, chopped coriander, chopped curry leaves and lemon juice.
- Another version of the same dish can be prepared with coconut, fenugreek instead of aniseed and turmeric.....it is then called *erachi ularthiyathu*.
- PATHIRI: This is a flat bread made from rice flour and wholewheat flour which can be either deep fat fried or steamed. It can sometimes be stuffed with meat.
- MALABARI PARATHA: These are flaky shallow – fried parathas often served with various veg and non – veg curries. The dough is kneaded to a very soft consistency and then flattened by flipping on the table. Oil is then applied on the thin dough and rolled like a lachcha paratha. It is shallow fried until crisp.
- PUTTU: This is a breakfast item which are thin vermicelli strands of rice dough that are steamed in a special utensil called puttu kutti. Many kinds of puttus are made and these quite resemble the string hoppers made in Sri Lanka.
- IDIYAPPAM: These are thin vermicelli of rice which can be eaten during any meal. To make this rice flour is cooked with hot water until it resembles a dough. It is then pressed through *idooni achu* or a vermicelli press.