

TAMIL NADU CUISINE

Tamil Nadu is famous for its hospitality and its deep belief that serving food to others is a service to humanity. Traditionally, vegetarian dishes predominate the menu, including a variety of sweets and savories. It was developed over many centuries by Tamils who live in the region of present day Tamil Nadu in Southern India, India and Tamils of Sri Lanka. It is characterized by the use of rice, legumes and lentils, its distinct aroma and flavour achieved by the blending of spices including curry leaves, tamarind, coriander, ginger, garlic, chili, pepper, cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, cumin, nutmeg, coconut and rose water. The word "curry" is actually derived from the Tamil word 'kari' which meant "sauce".

Tamil Nadu has a wide range of vegetarian and non-vegetarian delicacies to offer. The food here gets its flavor from a host of spices and condiments used in Tamil Nadu. Coconut, tamarind and asafoetida are a must for almost all vegetarian recipes. Garam masala is avoided in Tamil cuisine. In Tamil Nadu Coconut oil is normally used as the medium of cooking. Chutneys and mixed spice are served in the lunch and enhance the taste of the meal.

In Tamil Nadu, a typical meal consists of rice (mostly steamed), lentils, grains and vegetables. Chettinad cuisine of Tamil Nadu is particularly famous all over the country. This cuisine is hot and spicy and provides delectable variety in mutton, chicken and fish dishes. Chettinad Pepper Chicken is one of the most famous dishes in Tamil Nadu. The Tamil style of Mughali food can be tasted in the Biryani and Paya. Paya is a type of spiced trotters broth and is eaten with either Parathas or Appam.

Rice and legumes play an important role in Tamil cuisine. To quote Yamuna Devi, author of Lord Krishna's Cuisine (Penguin Group): "in no other cuisine are rice and legumes used with such creativity" as in Tamil cuisine. Lentils are also consumed extensively, either accompanying rice preparations, or in the form of independent dishes. Vegetables and dairy products are essential accompaniments.

On special occasions, traditional Tamil dishes are prepared in almost the same way as they were centuries ago. Preparations that call for elaborate and leisurely cooking, and served in traditional style and ambience. The traditional way of eating a meal involves being seated on the floor, having the food served on a banana leaf, and using clean fingers of the right hand to transfer the food to the mouth. After the meal, the fingers are washed, and the banana leaf becomes food for cows. This is a very environment friendly way of life.

Because of modernization, cosmopolitan culture and the break-up of the joint family system, compromises and adaptations are being made. A movement towards a simpler cuisine can be sensed. Urbanization has introduced Western-style seating arrangements at traditional events with tables, chairs, plates and cutlery becoming the norm, and food being served buffet-style.

Despite changes in practices and their cultural implications, Tamil cuisine retains its basic character in the use of ingredients, and its aroma and flavour remain unchanged.

REGIONAL

Over a period of time, each geographical area where Tamils have lived has developed its own distinct variant of the common dishes in addition to dishes native to itself.

The Chettinad region comprising of Karaikudi and adjoining areas is known for both traditional vegetarian dishes like appam, uthappam, pawl panyaram and non-vegetarian dishes made primarily using chicken. Chettinad cuisine has gained popularity in non-Tamil speaking areas as well.

Madurai and the other southern districts of Tamil Nadu are known for non-vegetarian food made of Mutton, chicken and fish. Parota made with maida or all-purpose flour, and loosely similar to the north Indian wheat flour-based Paratha, is served at food outlets in Tamil Nadu, especially in districts like Virudhunagar, Madurai and the adjoining areas. Parota is not commonly prepared at home as it is a laborious and time-consuming process.

The western Kongu region has specialities like Santhakai/Sandhavai (a noodle like item of rice), oputtu (a sweet tasting pizza-like dish that is dry outside with a sweet stuffing), and kola urundai (meat balls). Ceylon Tamil cuisine, not only bears similarities to Tamil Nadu- and Kerala cuisine but also has many unique vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes. It features dishes such as puttu (steamed rice cake) and Idiyappam or Sevai, (known in other parts of the world as string hoppers), which is particularly very popular.

Eating-out in its capital city Chennai, is a great experience and provides a glimpse of the unique lifestyle of the city. Chennai is known for its cuisine, brought to the city by people who have migrated from different parts of Tamil Nadu. Its rich traditions offer a variety of dishes, not only vegetarian but also Non-Vegetarian food. Chennai has a large collection of restaurants, some of them are unique 'Speciality Restaurants', which serve 'Indian Cuisine' with an ambience to match, while most others cater South Indian tiffin and meals, at very reasonable prices.

MEALS TRADITIONAL

Food is generally classified into six tastes - sweet, sour, salt, bitter, pungent & astringent and traditional Tamil Cuisine recommends that you include all of these six tastes in each main meal you eat. Each taste has a balancing ability and including some of each provides complete nutrition, minimizes cravings and balances the appetite and digestion.

- ? **Sweet** (Milk, butter, sweet cream, wheat, ghee (clarified butter), rice, honey)
- ? **Sour** (Limes and lemons, citrus fruits, yogurt, mango, tamarind)
- ? **Salty** (Salt or pickles)
- ? **Bitter** (Bitter gourd, greens of many kinds, turmeric, fenugreek)
- ? **Pungent** (Chili peppers, ginger, black pepper, clove, mustard)
- ? **Astringent** (Beans, lentils, turmeric, vegetables like cauliflower and cabbage, cilantro)

A typical meal (Lunch or Dinner) will be served on a banana leaf. the staple diet is rice, steamed rice will be served along with a variety of vegetable dishes like sambas, dry curry, rasam and kootu. Meals are often accompanied by crisp appalams. After a final round of rice and curds or buttermilk or both, a meal is concluded with a small banana and a few betel leaves and nuts. For a non-vegetarian meal, curries or dishes cooked with mutton, chicken or fish are included.

DELECTABLE TAMIL MEALS

In Tamil Nadu cuisine, breakfast or tiffin includes idly (steamed rice cakes), dosai (a pancake made from a batter of rice) and lentils crisp fried on a pan, vada (deep fried doughnuts made from a batter of lentils), pongal (a mash of rice and lentils boiled together and seasoned with ghee, cashew nuts, pepper and cumin seed), uppuma (cooked semolina seasoned in oil with mustard, pepper, cumin seed and dry lentils). Most of the dishes in Tamil Nadu are eaten with coconut chutney, sambas (seasoned lentil broth) and mulaga podi (a powdered mix of several dried lentils eaten with oil).

The Tamil Lunch or meals consists of cooked rice served with different kinds of vegetable dishes, Sambas, chutneys, Rasam (a hot broth made with tamarind juice and pepper) and curd (yogurt). The non-vegetarian Lunch includes curries or dishes cooked with mutton, chicken or fish. Tamil meals are incomplete without crisp Papads or Appalam.

MEALS RESTAURANT

An Indian meal in restaurants is generally called 'Thali'. Its usually served on a round tray made of either Silver, Stainless steel or even Brass, with a selection of different dishes in small bowls. Depending on the regional cuisine they specialize, they offer a choice of vegetarian or non-vegetarian delicacies which are native to that region. For example one may encounter South Indian (veg) thali, Chettinad thali, Mumbai thali, Rajasthani thali or Gujarati thali.

Rice, even if it is in a modest amount seems to be essential to the popular definition of thali. While North Indian Thali consists mainly Indian Bread, like Chapati, Roti, Paratha, Phulka or Naan along with rice, South Indian Thali comes mostly with rice. In North Indian cuisine Pooris, Chappattis are offered first and the waiter serves the rice later, often in a separate bowl. The rest of the items like different Curries, Sweet and other miscellaneous items (Appalams, Papad, Pickles and Beeda) is similar for both North Indian and South Indian Talis.

Thalis in some restaurant's may include "bottom-less" refills on all components of food. the idea is that one eats until fully satisfied. Such thalis are referred to as 'unlimited' thalis. In some places the term means that everything in the plate excepting a few items like the Sweet or Vada is open to unlimited happenings.

Finally a banana, beeda, and a glass of juice or lassi will be offered.

Pure vegetarian restaurants under the brand name of Udupi cuisine, which is synonymous with delicious vegetarian food all over world, serve a variety of tiffin and vegetarian meals, mostly from South Indian state of Karnataka. Many of these restaurants have nowadays diversified and offer other Indian and Indianized Chinese dishes as well.

REFRESHING TAMIL DRINKS

Tamil Nadu, especially Chennai, is famous for its filter coffee. Most Tamils have a subtle disliking for instant coffee, therefore filter coffee is more popular. The preparation of filter coffee is almost like a daily chore, the coffee beans have to be first roasted and then ground. The coffee powder is then put into a filter set and hot boiled water is added to prepare the boiling and allowed to set for about 15 minutes. The decoction is then added to milk with sugar to taste. The drink thus prepared is then poured from one container to another in rapid succession to make the perfect frothy cup of filter coffee. An exotic drink that refreshes you and the taste that lingers.

TYPICAL TAMIL FEAST VIRUNDHU SAPPADU

Tamil culture is known for its hospitality. 'Virundhu' in Tamil means 'Feast', when guests (Friends, Relatives) are invited during happy ceremonial occasions to share food, love and laughter. 'Sappadu' means a full

course meal, which can be either Lunch or Dinner.

During Virundhu Sappadu, guests sit on a coin mat which is rolled out on the floor and a full course meal is served in the traditional way, on a Banana Leaf which is spread in front of the guests, with the tip pointed left.

The host will ensure that the menu includes as many variety of dishes as possible and guests are served as many helpings as requested. The dishes are served in a particular sequence, and each dish is placed on a particular spot of the banana leaf. Guests are expected to begin and end eating the meal together and do not leave in middle of a meal. One look at the leaf after the food is served and guests will know the community, the status, the exact wealth of the family and from which part of Tamil Nadu they originate.

The top half of the banana leaf is reserved for accessories, the lower half for the rice. In some communities, the rice will be served only after the guest has been seated. The lower right portion of the leaf may have a scoop of warm sweet milky rice Payasam, Kesari, Sweet Pongal or any Dessert items. While the top left includes a pinch of salt, a dash of pickle and a thimbleful of salad, or a smidgen of chutney. In the middle of the leaf there may be an odd number of fried items like small circles of chips either banana, yam or potato, thin crisp papads or frilly wafers Appalams and vadai.

The top right hand corner is reserved for spicy foods including, Curry, hot, sweet, or sour and the dry items. If it is a vegetarian meal, the vegetables are carefully chosen, between the country ones-gourds, drumsticks, brinjals-and the 'English'ones, which could be carrot, cabbage, and cauliflower. (If it is a non-vegetarian meal, a separate leaf is provided for the fried meats, chicken, fish, crab, and so on.) But again, the variations are presented carefully, one dry one next to a gravied one.

There may be side attractions such as Poli, Poori, Chappati, few of the famed rice preparations such as Ghee Pongalor Puliodarai particularly if the family comes from Thanjavur, known as the rice bowl of Tamil Nadu.

Traditionally, sweets are eaten first. Afterhaving worked through the preliminaries, the long haul starts with the rice, which is generously doused with Ghee along with steam cooked lentils, Sambar the highly spiced lentil-based dish follows and this is succeeded by More-Kulambu(yoghurt and spices with coconut), Puti-Kulambu (spicy sour curry with vegetables and tamarind) and Rasam.

With every course the leaf is carefully replenished, the guest's protests being totally ignored. After a final round of rice with curds or buttermilk or both, it concludes with a small banana a few betel leaves and nuts.

The beetel leaf chewing is a traditional habit said to aid digestion and in olden days it was reserved for couples only. In today's world no such restrictions are imposed. The beetel leaf is packed into a little 'package' with edible calcium paste layered on top and a pinch of coarsely powdered beetel nuts or a half beetel nut.

TREATYOURTASTE BUD

The cuisine of Tamil Nadu is counted among the popular cuisines in India. It is enjoyed by the people of the country and equally relished by the foreigners coming to India. Dishes like Idli, Dosa, Sambhar and Rasam are the most exotic dishes among the south Indian cuisine. The south Indian platter or Thali is also very popular, comprising various vegetables, along with dominant coconut flavor. Another highlight of South Indian cuisine is, comprising along highlight a sweet dish prepared during the harvest festival 'Pongal'. Every visitor coming to India, makes sure that he does not miss tasting this mouth watering cuisine. So, just look for restaurant that serves south Indian cuisine and taste some of the recipes and drinks from Tamil Nadu, after which you wont be able to resist tasting other delicious dishes of this state also.

COMMONLY CONSUMED ITEM

Rice, the major staple food of most of the Tamil people. Lunch or Dinner is usually a Meal of steamed rice, served with accompanying items, which typically include sambas. dry curry, rasam, kootu and thayir (curd) or moru (buttermilk).

Tiffin or Light meals, which is often served for breakfast or as an evening snack_ usually include one or more dishes like Idli's,Pongal, Dosai, Chapati, Sevai, Vada which is of 2 kinds - (methmadai and paruppuvadai) Vadai.

Tiffin or light meals is served for breakfast or as a snack. These are usually one or more dishes like Idli, Dosai, Idiyapparn, Pongal and Vadai along with coconut Chutney, Sambas and Milagai podi. Tiffin is usually accompanied by hot filter coffee, the signature beverage of the city.

? Chettinad dishes Like appam, uthappam.

? Parota made with maida or all-purpose flour, perhaps similar to the north Indian wheat flour based paratha.

? Upma, made from wheat (rava), onion, green chillies.

? Sevai or idiyappam. Rice noodles made out of steamed rice cakes.

Coffee is the most popular beverage. Coffee is a major social institution in Southern Indian Tami I tradition. Its also called the Madras (a) Chennai Filter Coffee and is unique to this part of the world. They generally use gourmet coffee beans of the Arabica variety. The making of filter coffee is like a ritual, as the coffee beans are first roasted and then powdered. Sometimes they add chicory to enhance the aroma. They then use a filter set, few scoops

of powdered coffee, enough boiling water is added to prepare a very dark liquid called the decoction. A 3/4 mug of hot milk with sugar, a small quantity of decoction is then served in Dabarah/Tumbler set, a unique Coffee cup.

Another popular beverage is strongly brewed tea found in the thousands of small tea stalls across the state of Tamil Nadu and adjoining areas.

Dosai, crepes made from a fermented batter of rice and urad dal (gram), and is accompanied by Sambas; also see Masala dosai.

- ? Idli, steamed rice-cakes, prepared from a fermented batter of rice and urad dal (gram), and side-dishes are usually different kinds of chutney or sambhar
- ? Upma/Uppittu, prepared from semolina (rava), onion, green chillies, and certain spices
- ? Puli-yodarai, Puli=Tamarind, thurai/thoran=fry, is an exotic Tamil dish and widely specialised among Iyengars and famous throughout Karnataka as Pulihora, it is a mixture of fried tamarind paste and cooked rice, the tamarind paste fried with sesame oil, asfoetida & fenugreek powder, dried chilly, groundnuts, urad dal, mustard seeds, coriander seeds, cumin seeds, curry leaves, turmeric powder and seasoned with light jaggery and salt.
- ? Sambas, a thick stew of lentils with vegetables and seasoned with exotic spices Rasam, lentil soup with pepper, coriander and cumin seeds
- ? Thayir sadam, steamed rice with curd
- ? Sevai or Idiyappam, Rice noodles made out of steamed rice cakes.
- ? Appam
- ? Kottu
- ? South Indian Coffee, also known as Madras Filter Coffee, is a sweet milky coffee popular in Tamil Nadu. It is quite similar to the Cappuccino and Latte varieties of coffee in the United States of America.

Other snack items include murukku, seedai, bajji, mixture, sevu, and pakoda which are typically savory items.

SPECIALITIES

Koozh - Porridge. They also have Koozh which is poor man's breakfast and lunch but its considered rich man's health drink.

INFLUENCE ABROAD

Historically, Tamil cuisine has travelled to Burma, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand via traders (Nagarathar) from Tamil Nadu. Along with Chinese, it has influenced these international cuisines to what they are today. South African Indian cooking is also influenced by Tamil cuisine, which was brought by indentured labourers in the late 19th century.

CULINARY INFLUENCE FROM OTHER PART OF WORLD

Chennai is a major tourist destination, so its also popular for cuisines from other parts of the world. While Indian (which includes a diverse range of cuisines from other states of India), European Continental, and Chinese cuisine have been around for a long time, Mexican, Italian, Thai, Korean, Japanese and Mediterranean cuisine to name a few, have become popular with many restaurants exclusively specialising in these cuisines.

TAMIL CULINARY TERMINOLOGY ABSORBED IN ENGLISH

- ? The "Tamil phrase milagu thanni, meaning pepper soup, literally pepper water, has been adapted in English as muligutwanny.
- ? The word Mango is derived from the Tamil word Maanga or Maangaai.
- ? The word Rice and the equivalent Tami I word Arisi may have the same roots.