

KERALA CUISINE

The **cuisine of Kerala** is linked in all its richness to the history, geography, demography and culture of the land. Because many of Kerala's Hindus are vegetarian by religion (e.g., brahmins or namboodiris, Nairs etc.), and because Kerala has large minorities of Muslims and Christians that are predominantly non-vegetarian, Kerala cuisine has a multitude of both vegetarian and non-vegetarian dishes.

Like other South-Indian cuisines, Kerala cuisine (called *pachakam* in Malayalam) is predominantly spicy. Coconuts grow in abundance in Kerala, and consequently, grated coconut and coconut milk are widely used in dishes and curries. Kerala's long coastline and strong fishing industry has contributed to many fish-based delicacies, particularly among the Christian community.

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 cuisines of each area. Malabar has an array of non-vegetarian dishes such as pathiri (a sort of rice-based pancake, usually paired with a meat curry), porotta (a layered flatbread), and the Kerala variant of the popular biriyani. In contrast, traditional Travancore 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 melon ('paavaykka').

Amorphophallus ('chena'), Colocasia ('chembu'), Ash gourd ('kumbalanga'), etc. Garlic is predominantly used in south-Kerala dishes as well.

In addition to historical diversity, the cultural influences, particularly the large percentages of Muslims and Syrian Christians (also see Syrian Christian Cuisine of Kerala) have also contributed unique dishes and styles to Kerala cuisine.

RICE MAIN COURSE OF FOOD

The essential ingredient of the daily diet is rice. Breakfast, lunch or dinner, it is some rice preparation or the other, served along with a variety of fish. Fish is consumed in a variety of ways - it is preserved after being dried and salted or cooked in a delicious coconut gravy. Prawns, shrimps and crustaceans constitute some of the other famous delicacies.

MORNING MEALS

After the morning dose of coffee, a typical Malayali household serves breakfast that may either consist of soft idlis, prepared out of a paste of fermented rice and black pulses, or dosa, an oval spread of the same ingredients. Well-seasoned appams or periappams, made by mixing this paste with tomatoes, onions and other handy vegetables, are some of the other morning culinary delights.

BREAKFAST

Kerala cuisine offers many delicious vegetarian breakfast dishes that are relatively unknown outside the state. These include *Puttu* (a cylindrical dish made of rice powder and grated coconut) and *kadala* (a curry made of chana), idli (fluffy rice pancakes) and *sambar*, *dosa* and *chutney*, *Idiyappam* (string hoppers - also known as *Noolputtu*), *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 *moli* (the most common dish is black pomfret in a coconut based sauce).

MIDDAY MEALS

Midday meals consist of boiled rice that may be mixed with moru (curd or bitter milk) or rasam (thin clear pepper water or soup) and a range of vegetables. Pachadi is a delicious dish, cooked out of tiny pieces of mango, mixed with hot spices. Sambar, pulses prepared with vegetables is a standard daily fare. Thoran, a coconut-based dry fish dish that is mixed with minutely chopped vegetables, herbs and curry leaves, and similar to avial, which is cooked in a sauce, is another delectable dish. Pappaddakams, or crunchy round flakes made of rice flour, chutneys (a kind of sauce) and pickles, are scrumptious additions without which a meal is incomplete.

Wheat preparations are more popular in Muslim establishments. Well-prepared spirals called barottas and pathiris are made from refined flour, fried in oil and served with vegetables and curries. Chappathi, poori (a sort of baked or deep fried equivalent of bread) may be cooked optionally.

LUNCH & DINNER

The staple food of Kerala, like most South-Indian states, is rice. Unlike other states, however, many people in Kerala prefer parboiled rice (rice made nutritious by boiling it with rice husk). *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.

Rice is usually consumed with one or more curries, *upperis* (dry curries), rasam, chips, and 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. Kerala cooking uses coconut oil almost exclusively.

Popular vegetarian dishes include sambar, aviyal, Kaalan, theeyal, thoran (dry curry), puli-sherry, o-lan, erisherry, puli-inji, (payaru (mung bean)), kappa (tapioca), etc. Vegetarian dishes often consist of fresh spices that are liquefied and crushed to make a paste-like texture to dampen rice.

Common non-vegetarian dishes include stew (using chicken, lamb, or fish), traditional or (*naadan*-style) chicken curry, fish moli, fried fish (*Karimeen* porichathu), etc. Biriyani, a Mughal dish, was popularised by the Keyi family in Kerala, consists of rice cooked along with meat, onions, chillies and other spices.

SADYAS

Kerala is known for its traditional banquet or *sadhya*, a vegetarian meal served with boiled rice and a host of side-dishes. The *sadhya* is complemented by payasam, a sweet milk dessert native to Kerala. The *sadhya* is, as per custom, served on a banana leaf, and is a formal-style meal with three or more courses of rice with a side-dish (usually sambar, rasam, buttermilk, etc.).

DESSERT

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* (rice), *Ada payasam* (with ada, a flat form of rice), banana, dal, etc. Ada payasam is especially popular during the festival of Onam. Most payasams can also be consumed chilled.

Other popular desserts include *Unniappam* (a sweet fried ball of flour), pazham-pori (banana slices covered with a fried crust made of sweetened flour), kozhukkatta, etc.

SPICES IN KERALA CUISINE

The main spices used are cinnamon, cardamom, ginger, green and red peppers, cloves, garlic, cumin seeds, coriander, turmeric, etc.

PICKLES & OTHER SIDE DISHES

Kerala cuisine also has a variety of pickles and chutneys, and crunchy pappadums, banana chips, jackfruit chips, *kozhalappam*, *achappam*, *cheeda*, and *churuttu*. Also, shown in the picture is a banana leaf. People in Kerala use banana leaves as plates. North India uses metal trays as plates, which is much different from the way the people of Kerala eat.

COOKING UTENSILS

There are utensils that are used in Kerala which are significant to cuisine in Kerala. An *aduppu* is a square harth, *tawa* a griddle, and *Cheena Chatti* (literally chinese pot) a deep frying pan.

FOOD OFFERING IN RITUALS

Food is extremely important when it comes to rituals or festivals. Food offerings in ritual are important in Kerala and throughout South India. Food offerings are often related to the gods of religions. In India, there are numerous offerings for Hindu gods and there are many differences between food offerings in North and South India. Most offerings contain more than one type of food. There are many reasons why people use the practice of food offerings. Some are to express love, or negotiate or thank gods. It can also be used to “stress certain structural features of Hinduism” (Ferro-Luzzi 1977, 508). Of course, not every ritual's gods require food offerings. Most have a liking for certain foods. For example, butter is one of the preferred foods by the god Krishna. Also, wild orange and a sugarcane stalk are related to Ganapati (Ferro-Luzzi 1977, 508).

There is a division of the Hindu pantheon into pure and impure deities which is stressed, but shaped by food offerings. Pure deities are offered vegetarian foods while impure deities are offered meat due to their craving for blood (Ferro-Luzzi 1977, 509). A specific dish is offered to both pure and impure deities. That is a flour lamp which is made of sweetened rice-flour paste which is scooped out and packed with ghee. The flour lamp is only partially baked and then eaten (Ferro-Luzzi 1977, 509). Another aspect of food offerings is the hierarchy that foods have. It may seem strange that there is a hierarchy for foods, but it is because there is a dual opposition between the pure and impure deities which is hierarchal (Ferro-Luzzi 1977, 509). There are two gods which have this dual opposition. They are Vishnu and Siva. Ferro-Luzzi explains that Vishnu is viewed as kind while the offerings that are given to Siva are more 'frugal'. An offering to Siva might be likely to be plain rice with no salt or other toppings, while an offering to Vishnu may resemble a South Indian dish which can consist of rice with other side dishes. An example of a food that is acceptable to one god over another is green and red chilies. Green and Red chilies are not acceptable for Vishnu's offering, but Siva has cravings for chilies (Ferro-Luzzi 1977, 510). Specifically in South Indian offerings, they are offered in numbers. For example, the number three is important in Kerala offerings. There are the *trimadhura* which translates into 'the three sweets' (Ferro-Luzzi 1977, 512). All of these practices of food offerings in ritual are important in Kerala culture as well as South Indian culture.

DIVERSE OF INGREDIENTS

A melange of aromas resulting from the free use of pepper, cardamom, cloves, turmeric, ginger, chillies, and mustard, used in most curries, fill the kitchens of the well-to-do, but generally the poorer folks content themselves with kanji (rice with water) and take fish with tapioca. Most dishes in Kerala are cooked in coconut oil and are incomplete without a mandatory use of coconut in some form or the other.

GLOSSARY OF VEGETABLES & SPICES

✱ Amorphophallus: Chena	✱ Asafoetida : Kayam
✱ Ash gourd : Kumbalanga	✱ Banana : Pazham
✱ Bengal gram : Mani Kadala	✱ Big Gram : Van Payar
✱ Bitter gourd : Kaipakka (Pavakka)	✱ Black gram : Uzhunnu
✱ Cabbage : Mottakkoosu	✱ Cardamom : Elakkaya
✱ Nutmeg : Jathikka	✱ Cashew nut : Kasuvandipparippu
✱ Green Chili Pepper : Pacha mulaku	✱ Coconut : Nalikeram, Thenga
✱ Coriander : Malli or Kothamalli	✱ Cumin : Jeerakam
✱ Drumstick : Muringakkaya	✱ Fennel : Perumjeerakam

* Fenugreek : Uluva or Vengayam
* Ginger : Inji
* Green gram : Cherupayar
* Cucumber : Vellarikka
* Colocasia : Chembu
* Papaya : Karmosa(Wayanad), Omakaya
* Egg plant : Vazhuthananga, brinja
* Milk : Paal
* Onion : Ulli, Savala, Sabola
* Black pepper : Kurumulaku
* Potato : Urulakkizhangu
* Raisin : Unakka mundiri, Kismis
* Sugar : Panjasara
* Tomato : Thakkali
* Gooseberry : Nellikka
* Cinnamon : Karuvapatta

* Garlic : Veluthulli
* Shallot : Chuvannulli or Cheriyulli
* Jack fruit : Chakka
* Snake gourd : Padavalanga
* Ground nut : Nilakkadala
* Tapioca : Kolli, Kappa, Marichini
* Jaggery : Sarkara (vellam)
* Okra / Lady's finger: Vendakka
* Pea : Payar
* Plantain : Nendrakka, Etheke
* Pumpkin : Matthanga
* Salt : Uppu
* Tamarind : Puli
* Guava : Perakka, Poyyakka
* Clove : Karayampoo
* Coconut oil : Velichenna