

METROPLUS

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thereluctantGOURMET SHONALI MUTHALALY

An ode to Onam

FESTIVAL Kerala roots run deep. When it comes to cooking up an *onasadya* there's nothing on the table that slid straight out of a packet

Being a displaced Malayalee can be confusing.

On one hand, we're all defiantly protective about our roots, coconut oil and banana chips. On the other hand, most of us also speak Malayalam with embarrassingly dreadful accents. (Facebook group 'Ende Malayalam Sucks' lists more than 3000 users.)

The hilarious 'I am a Malayalee' song created by Yohan Chako, and set to the tune of Queen's 'I want to break free' has achieved a delicious notoriety on the Internet. (Sample lines: I am a Malayalee / I wear a thin lungi / I'm a card holding member / Of the Marx party.) Yet, as much as we laugh at ourselves, Kerala roots run deep.

As Onam concludes, Malayalees around the world are settling down for a meal that hasn't really changed much in decades. Even if in their everyday life, the sambhar, red rice and pachadis have been edged out by parathas, pasta and instant noodles, this one time, there's nothing on the table that slid straight out of a packet. As kitchens get smaller, and people busier, however, even in Kerala, people choose to eat their Onam lunch at a hotel, the club or get it made by a caterer. But no matter who makes it, it has to stick by the old rules.

P.R. Unnikrishnan Namboodiri, for instance, is a temple priest and an Ayurvedic doctor who uses his spare time to cook, and he's defiantly anti-commercialised meals and easy shortcuts. Although he does cook for huge groups of people, his methods and menu don't change, whether he's in Kerala or Kolkata. Currently at Ente Keralam (a Kerala restaurant in Chennai, which gingerly walks the line between being trendy and traditional) he's rejected the restaurant kitchen, despite its labour-saving devices and convenient workspaces. Instead, he cooks the way he's been cooking for the past three decades, in a specially set up billowing shamianna outside. (away from the chicken stew, red fish curry and Syrian beef fry.) And he hasn't bought a single banana chip.

"Everything is made by me," he says, discussing how, when he travels, the chips are sliced and fried in Kerala and then packed. He also makes the *sarakara varati*, chunks of banana coated in sweet, spiced jaggery and pickles beforehand. He has a repertoire of 22 dishes, so the meal changes everyday. But there are always crisp *pappadams*, about seven side dishes featuring different vegetables from yam to beans, fluffy brown



FROM GOD'S OWN COUNTRY Chef Nambodiri with his Onam feast PHOTO: R. RAGU

rice, sambhar, rasam, curd and four types of *payasam*.

Though people conventionally say the Onam meal has got less elaborate with time, moving from around 64 dishes to a mere (gasp) 26, Unnikrishnan, who has been cooking for about 35 years, says it's actually become more fussy. "Earlier, it was just *kalan*, *olan*, *errussery*, *avial* teamed with chips, *pappadam* and *sambhar*.

And finally two *payasams*."

Either way, you don't need to feel too guilty about eating like a Kerala king. Unnikrishnan, says the meal is, Ayurvedically-speaking, actually good for you. "There's no *masala*," he says, adding "and we use a lot of curd, pepper and ghee." Ghee? "It's excellent for the system." The ginger in the *tangy puli inji* acts as a digestive, as does the tender man-

go pickle. And hot rice on a banana leaf releases healing fragrances. Yet another flavour that reminds every Malayalee of home.

Let's end by singing together with Yohan's home-sick Gulf-based Malayalee. "I can't get used to living without... my Maruti/ I bought it with my dowry. So baby can't you see/ I miss my *kappa-meen* curry."