



Trivandrum is the perfect place to delve into the intricacies of Kerala's cuisine. And nothing is more authentic than its vegetarian restaurants ...



## FEAST ON A LEAF

The pinnacle of Kerala's vegetarian cuisine is the *sadhya*, which literally means "feast" in Malayalam, the local language. Keralites eat the meal on special occasions such as Hindu weddings or at Onam, the 10-day harvest festival that takes place once a year, around the start of September. The meal is served on a banana leaf plate and is a feast as much for the eyes as it is for the taste buds. Each dish adds a different splash of colour and the tastes and textures are carefully chosen to play off each other. "The whole of Kerala cuisine comes out on that banana leaf," Sashi Jacob, Corporate Chef at The Muthoot Plaza hotel, says.

The full *sadhya* service comprises up to 18 dishes, each laid out on the

leaf in a specific place and order. There's no meat or dairy. The meal starts with three kinds of pickle – lemon, mango and ginger – at the top left of the leaf. There are also both sweet and salty banana chips to the bottom left. Next there's *pachadi* (yoghurt with bitter gourd), *kalan* (coconut with raw banana and red bean) and *olan* (pumpkin, coconut milk and ginger).

The "main courses" such as *avial* (a thick mush of drumstick vegetable, coconut milk, curd and curry leaves), *kootu* curry (a hot and sweet curry with vegetables, banana and coconut) and *sambar* (curried stew of lentils and vegetables) are followed by buttermilk and the sweet *payasam*, or *pradhama*n dessert.

*This page: The chef from the Classic Avenue Hotel and Restaurant tosses Indian chapatti bread.*

It is hard to say what percentage of the population in Trivandrum is vegetarian. Only temple priests and orthodox Hindus are likely to stick to the diet year round. But much of the city goes vegetarian at different points in the year. During festivals such as Onam [see sidebar], the bulk of the city's population forsakes meat temporarily.

Some people just eat "pure veg" for a bit of variety. At the Nishagandhi Festival in late January, schoolteacher John Mathunny was tucking into some vegetarian food with his wife and two kids. "All the restaurants serve chicken, fish, oily items. So this is just for a change," he explains. Whatever the motivation, vegetarian food is very popular in Trivandrum. That means dishes such as *avial*, a greenish-yellow soft vegetable pulp seasoned with coconut oil and grated coconut. Or there's *rasam*, a hot pepper water made with tomato and tamarind. *Sambar* is a pea and vegetable stew with peppercorns and tamarind. *Thorán* is a cooler, lighter dish with shredded coconut and finely chopped vegetables.

For breakfast, Keralites dip their *appam* – a pancake that is both steamed and baked so that it is crispy at the edges and doughy in the middle – into a sweet but hot vegetable stew with coconut milk, carrots and curry leaves. Or they crumble rice or wheat *puttu*, a crumbly dry pulse traditionally cooked in a

bamboo tube, into chickpea curry. For a dry dish, they crush the *puttu* with a light Kerala *pappadam* into green pigeon peas.

Some places in Kerala have more of a tradition of vegetarian food and Trivandrum was one of the hubs of vegetarianism, although that is changing as traditions break down and people incorporate different cuisines. "Trivandrum used to be a totally, totally vegetarian place," Jacob says. "Now it has changed, people use almost any ingredients now."

That can lead to innovation. Jacob occasionally judges cooking competitions in the city and he notes that traditional recipes are increasingly being adapted. For the traditional desserts of *pradhama*n and *payasam* – thick sweet dishes based on coconut milk, fruit and jaggery (palm sugar) – he may now see 80 or 90 variations, some using exotic ingredients such as hibiscus or marigold flowers.

