

Salt and Sweet: A Taste of Kerala

By

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Abstract

Kerala, fondly known as God's Own Country, is celebrated for its rich and vibrant flavors, crafted with ingredients like coconut, spices, and curry leaves. Kerala's culinary heritage is influenced by its diverse communities, including Hindus, Christians, and Muslims, each bringing unique flavors and traditions to the cuisine. The various spice plantations make it the spice capital of India. Freshly grated coconut is generously added to almost every meal, enhancing texture and taste. In certain gravies, coconut oil is used for tempering, adding an irresistible aroma to the food. The exquisite combinations of flavors make Kerala cuisine truly distinctive. The experience becomes even more delightful when the food is served on a banana leaf. This not only enhances the taste but also offers several health benefits. Banana leaves are known for their natural antibacterial properties, nutrient-rich surface, biodegradable nature, easy disposal, and traditional and cultural significance.

Keywords

South India, Kerala, Sadya, Idiyappam, Ela Ada, Banana leaf.

Sadya

I will start this article with a glimpse of **Sadya**, which means "banquet" in Malayalam, before delving into two prominent dishes.

Sadya is a popular and traditional Kerala meal with many vegetarian dishes for festivals like Onam, Vishu, and weddings. The spread is colourful and quite filling yet the tummy asks for more. The taste is unmatched and different needless to say soothing for the stomach. The flavours, sweetness, tanginess everything you will find in one meal of

Sadya. Most importantly the meal is served in a specific order and eaten with hands, which enhances the experience.

I will not go into detail as the picture below says it all.



Image 1: Sadya

In this article, I am going to share two unique foods that are not only famous but also age-old dishes.

Idiyappam, also known as string hoppers, is a simple yet soulful dish made from just three ingredients: rice flour, salt, and water. It is also referred to as Indiappa or Noolappam. The names idiyappam and noolappam both derive from Tamil lingo. The word 'Idi' means broken down and Nool means string or thread.

This is a culinary speciality throughout the Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Karnataka and the country of Sri Lanka. After the initial preparation, cylindrical dough balls are placed in a hand press to form thin noodle strands. These are then arranged in a flat, disc-like shape and steamed. The steaming process preserves the nutritional value of rice flour while making it light and easy to digest. Traditionally, Idiyappam is served with vegetable stew. It is also enjoyed with sweetened coconut milk or spicy egg curry.

This dish has also spread to Southeast Asia, where it is known as Putu Mayam. Since it is steamed, Idiyappam is considered a healthy food choice even for diabetic people. It contains

vitamin E which is good for our skin. It also consists of carbohydrates and is rich in fibre, and minerals.

It has been a staple breakfast for generations, often prepared using a wooden or brass press.

In recent years, Idiyappam has gained popularity beyond Kerala and Tamil Nadu, finding its way into Indian restaurants worldwide. Many South Indian eateries in countries like the U.S., U.K., and the Middle East serve Idiyappam with coconut milk, vegetable stew, or spicy curries. Its light, gluten-free nature appeals to health-conscious diners. Idiyappam is also widely available in frozen form, making it even more accessible worldwide.



Image 2: Idiyappam

The combination of jaggery, coconut, and milk makes desserts an irresistible treat for the taste buds.

One such traditional delicacy from Kerala is **ELA ADA**, a treat prepared across the state and enjoyed during festivals and special occasions. It can be savoured as both a snack and a dessert.

Ela Ada is rich in fibre, containing around 13.6 grams, making it one of the healthiest delicacies, also known as Vazha Ila Ada. It is a steamed rice dumpling made from rice flour dough, stuffed with a sweet filling of cardamom-infused coconut and jaggery.

The smell and taste of the banana leaf in which the Ada is wrapped enhances the flavour of the steamed sweet.

Ela Ada is a heavenly yet healthy treat, combining the sweetness of coconut and melted jaggery, all sealed within a layer of steamed rice flour dough. It is typically served as an evening snack or as part of breakfast. Ela Ada can be made using wheat or rice flour, with fillings varying to suit different tastes. Since it is steamed rather than fried in oil or ghee like most desserts, it stands out as one of the healthiest delicacies.

While Ela Ada is associated with Kerala, similar steamed snacks exist in Tamil Nadu and Karnataka although with variations. This dessert is also offered as Prasadam during temple rituals and festive occasions.

Why is Ela Ada Wrapped in Banana Leaf?

The use of banana leaf in Ela Ada is not just for aesthetics but plays a crucial role.

Natural Aroma & Flavor: When steamed, the banana leaf imparts a mild, earthy fragrance to the ada, making it more flavorful.

Non-Stick & Eco-Friendly: The leaf acts as a natural non-stick wrapper, eliminating the need for oil or butter. It is biodegradable, making it an eco-friendly choice compared to plastic or foil.

Health Benefits: Banana leaves contain polyphenols, natural antioxidants that may get infused into the food during steaming and aid digestion.

Ela Ada is sometimes made using turmeric leaves instead of banana leaves, giving it a unique aroma.

While the classic version contains a mixture of jaggery and coconut filling, the regional and modern variations are made of ripe jackfruit pulp known as Chakka Varatti for a fruity twist.

cooking ripe jackfruit flesh with jaggery and ghee until it thickens into a sweet preserve or reaches a jam-like consistency. The rich, indulgent taste of this Varatti is simply exceptional. Another alternative is spiced lentils or vegetable filling instead of sweet ones.



Image 3: Chakka Varatti

Conclusion

We all know food is considered to be an energy. It is not just the process of cooking but also the state of mind that matters when preparing food. When you are happy while cooking, all the positive energies pass on to your meals, leading to good health. That's the power.

References

- Images from Wikipedia

About the Author

Sheela Iyer is a B.Com graduate from Swami Vivekananda College and, a diploma holder in Materials Management from Welingkar's Institute of Management Development & Research, from Mumbai, India.

She spent 16 years in the logistics industry as the Customer Service Head (PAN India). Passionate about poetry, she writes in both English and Hindi, exploring various themes and emotions. An avid reader, she enjoys books across different genres. Her poems and articles have been published in various books and are well-received on social media. She actively contributes to various platforms and has earned numerous accolades for her work.

