

Step Inside New Restaurant Copra, a Stunning Tropical Oasis Serving Southern Indian Chutneys and Curries in San Francisco - Eater SF

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San Francisco

Copra, the latest restaurant from chef Srijith Gopinathan and partner Ayesha Thapar, opened February 18.

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Step Inside Copra, a Stunning Tropical Oasis Serving Well-Spiced Southern Indian Chutneys and Curries

The latest restaurant from star Bay Area chef Srijith Gopinathan is now open

by

Lauren Saria

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Photography by Patricia Chang

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Lauren Saria
is the editor of Eater SF and has been writing about food, drinks, and restaurants for more than a decade.

Opening a restaurant always takes a substantial amount of time, but chef Srijith Gopinathan says his latest San Francisco spot has been in the works for almost two decades. At least, that's how long he's been dreaming about opening a place that pays homage to the food he grew up eating in his home state of Kerala, on the southwestern tip of India. He started jotting down ideas for a future restaurant about 18 years ago, he estimates. "This is a project which is extremely close to my heart and it's very personal," Gopinathan says. "Everybody says that when they open a restaurant, but it's very true for me."

And at long last, Copra opened on Saturday, February 18 at 1700 Fillmore Street, on the corner of Fillmore and Post streets near Japantown. The stunning restaurant specializes in food from Kerala and the surrounding areas including Sri Lanka, which share many culinary similarities, the chef says. The restaurant takes its name from the dried coconut ingredient Gopinathan says is pretty much ubiquitous in the food from the region. "It's used across this cuisine, one common ingredient," he says. "It's

repeated — it’s almost impossible to not have coconut in some form, so I thought it’s important to honor that.”

The menu starts with kadi, which literally translates to “bites,” Gopinathan explains, though more colloquially it refers to snacks. “We call it ‘chai and kadi’ in the evening,” he says. “So a cup of tea and a bite. It’s a casual term.” The shortlist of snacks includes San Francisco favorites — think oysters and caviar — but also kola urundai, fried meatballs typically made with mutton or lamb, though here Gopinathan does a vegetarian riff starring Mamu, a mushroom protein the chef helped develop. A lengthy list of smaller plates, helpfully labeled “Little,” spans everything from slow-cooked octopus and fried chicken to a salad with sweet mango chutney vinaigrette and jackfruit steamed in banana leaves. Gopinathan is particularly excited about a number of plates from this section of the menu including a sharable chutney palette, which allows diners to select four chutneys to enjoy along with various lentil crisps. “They’re not the regular chutneys you would see,” he says. “In this case, I’m digging a little deeper into what I used to enjoy when I was back home.” The chutneys, which might include a gooseberry selection and one made with ghost chiles and brown butter, will change seasonally. Gopinathan is also excited to have betel leaf and eggplant in the mix. The pungent and spicy betel leaf typically acts as a digestif after a meal in India, the chef explains, but the crop being grown by Girl and Dug farm is mild enough to be fried and served with a sweet and sour eggplant dish. On the more hearty side of the menu, large plates include cauliflower and green apple curry, spice-crusted red snapper, and a half Cornish hen roasted in black curry rub. Gopinathan says the Konkan crab curry is a specialty of Southern India made with caramelized dried coconut, tamarind, and shallots. “It’s a very homely, a very dirty, and delicious dish,” he says with a laugh. “We’ll give you extra napkins.” It’ll come with egg appam, a thin pancake made from fermented rice batter that he hasn’t seen in the Bay Area until now. The chef also calls out the black cod pollichathu as a special offering, a dish he enjoyed on special occasions back home in India. The fish, which is crusted in shallots and wrapped in banana leaves, gets cooked in a skillet and served with coconut curry and red matta rice.

West Bev Consulting worked on the cocktail menu, which Gopinathan says will star South Indian ingredients including coconut, yogurt, and tamarind. There's a clarified lassi punch made with a buttermilk and yogurt wash and a number of drinks made with arrack, a spirit made with either coconut flowers or sugarcane that's popular in Kerala. Sommelier Ceri Smith of Biondivino also put together a list of wine and co-ferments like Æblerov's Okapi 2020, "a cider, wine, and beer hybrid flavored with hops and a touch of lilac flower," per a press release.

Gopinathan partnered once again with Ayesha Thapar on Copra; Thapar also designed and co-owns the Michelin Guide-worthy Ettan in Palo Alto. For Copra, Thapar created a lush tropical oasis out of the former Dosa space, which now bursts with climbing vines and swinging macrame art. "When I thought about this concept, I never thought or expected to have such a beautiful space," Gopinathan says. "She's done an excellent job of making sure the space is so beautiful." After so many long years of dreaming about a restaurant that would bring so many of his favorite dishes to the Bay Area, the chef says he's confident diners will welcome Copra with open arms — even if many of the dishes may be unfamiliar. "Some of the dishes are really uncompromised in spices," he cautions, with a smile.

Copra (1700 Fillmore Street in San Francisco) opens on February 18 and serves dinner from 5:30 to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 5 to 10 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 5 to 9 p.m. Sunday.

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