

Copra From Michelin 2-Star Chef Sri Gopinathan Opens in San Francisco – Robb Report

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March 1, 2023

This Chef Left His Michelin Two-Star Restaurant to Cook the Food of His Native South India
Srijith Gopinathan's Copra is the most exciting opening in San Francisco this season.

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By Alyson Sheppard

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Chad Santo Tomas

For Michelin two-star chef Srijith “Sri” Gopinathan, his new San Francisco restaurant has one unusual thing going for it.

“This is the one restaurant where I wouldn’t be super nervous to bring my mother to dine,” he said, laughing. “Because being a South Indian mom, she’s very picky about what she eats. Here, I don’t think I have a problem.”

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Gopinathan just opened his latest Indian food concept, Copra, in San Francisco's Fillmore District. While Gopinathan is renowned for blending Indian cuisine with California sensibilities and produce, he's tackling a different region and time period altogether with Copra.

Copra is personal, close to his heart. The focus is geographically narrow and one that has not yet been attempted in the Bay Area. Here, he brings together the cuisines of his childhood, those of Kerala, the state on the southern tip of India where he was born; Tamil Nadu, the adjacent coastal state where he grew up; and Sri Lanka, the island country located just across the Palk Strait from his hometown of Kanyakumari.

Sri Gopinathan, Stephanie Gonnet and Christopher Longoria
Chad Santo Tomas

According to Gopinathan, these cuisines are culturally similar due to centuries of trade and movement along the strait. They speak the same language, look similar and share many ingredients, such as seafood, tamarind, plantains and rice. Copra, the dried flesh of a coconut, is also an essential ingredient in many dishes across the region.

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“India is one country with so many countries inside it. There’s so much going on,” he said. “The Deep South Indian food is foreign for even North Indians. We’re on a mission to actually teach people and show people, what is the difference?”

He has been dreaming of opening this restaurant for nearly two decades. Last summer, Gopinathan left Taj Campton Place, the San Francisco hotel’s restaurant where he had spent 15 years and earned two Michelin stars, to focus on Ettan—which opened in Palo Alto in February 2020 and received a mention in the California Michelin Guide—and opening Copra. Leaving, taking the next step in his career, was natural.

“I think I overstayed at Campton Place in many ways,” he said. “I’ve never for one moment felt uncomfortable making the change.”

While he does hope to open another tasting menu restaurant before he retires, a little gem that will be Michelin star-worthy, he’s pleased to focus on a more casual style of service for now, one that can showcase a very specific and distant cuisine.

“We are in the process of creating a temple for South Indian cuisine in the United States,” he said.

Cauliflower and Green Apple Curry Chad Santo Tomas

At Copra, the menu begins with kadi or “bites” such as Oscetra caviar served with warm Kallappam, a fermented rice and coconut pancake found in Kerala, and small plates like slow-cooked octopus, chargrilled bone marrow with chukka masala, and a sharable chutney and achar (pickle) spread featuring unconventional ingredients like tamarind, ghost chilis and wild gooseberries. Larger plates include a braised lamb shank and a cauliflower-green apple curry, plus plenty of seaside dishes like homestyle crab curry and black cod cooked in banana leaves.

Gopinathan employs 10 varieties of rice at Copra and treats them all differently. Depending on the grains’ shape and color, they may be boiled, steamed or fermented.

Copra is the second project between him and restaurateur Ayesha Thapar, who is from North India originally.

“Just reading the menu is educational because there’s a lot of local terminology,” Thapar said. “We didn’t dumb the menu down so people would understand the dish. You could be a little bit intimidated when you read the menu for the first time. These are very unfamiliar words. Even for some Northern Indians, they are tricky words!”

On the beverage side, Copra offers wines and ciders to complement the spicy dishes, along with non-alcoholic drinks and cocktails highlighting South Indian ingredients like the translucent Clarified Lassi Punch (a buttermilk and yogurt wash with rum, Scotch, amaretto, mango, white pepper, toasted green cardamom, cayenne and star anise).

The lush oasis of the dining room.
Chad Santo Tomas

The 1,670-square-foot restaurant, which seats 140, occupies the space at 1700 Fillmore Street that formerly housed an outpost of Dosa, the upscale South Indian restaurant chain that shuttered during the pandemic. While Dosa's design was sterile, industrial, Copra is warm and lush, like a greenhouse.

Thapar took inspiration from its source material for the design.

"Every aspect of the design speaks to this immersion into a tropical paradise and tries to transport the customer into a different world, where they can experience the food, the drink, the region in an elevated and unexpected homage to the influences of the Indian coastal region," she said.

The menu will change as the seasons change. Expect rabbit to soon replace beef. Gopinathan wants to invite other South Indian chefs into the kitchen for guest series, showcasing other aspects of the cuisine, such as that cooked exclusively in a temple.

The restaurant is booked for the next 30 days.

"We are so pleased and so grateful and so thankful," he said. "It's like coming home for me."

[Click here to see all the images of Copra.](#)

Authors

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Alyson Sheppard writes a regular column on fine dining for Robb Report A former editor at Popular Mechanics magazine and contributing editor at Playboy.com, Alyson's work covering food and beverage...

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