

Ring In Onam With Copra's Fine Coastal Kerala Cuisine

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Ring In Onam With Copra's Fine Coastal Kerala Cuisine

After Ettan and Little Blue Door, top chef Srijith Gopinathan presents Copra, a celebration of Kerala and Sri Lankan cuisine

by  
Shalini Kathuria Narang  
August 24, 2023August 24, 2023  
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Acclaimed Michelin Star chef Srijith Gopinathan (Image credit: Patricia Chang)

Copra is personal: Chef Sri  
Acclaimed Michelin Star chef Srijith Gopinathan's latest labor of love opened its doors earlier this year at the corner of Fillmore and Post streets near Japantown in San Francisco. Founded in collaboration with entrepreneur Ayesha Thapar, Copra is the latest upscale Indian restaurant serving

Kerala and Sri Lanka's coastal delicacies. Thapar and Gopinathan also own upscale Ettan in Palo Alto and Little Blue Door in Los Altos. Where Ettan boasts a Cal-Indian menu, and Little Blue Door serves Cal-Indian comfort food, Copra is featured as a coastal southern Indian food destination. "I wanted to get closer to where I came from in my cooking career and Copra features the most personal cooking that I have ever done," says Chef Sri.

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Copra is the dried coconut kernel used to extract coconut oil. Coconut is the cornerstone of Indian and Sri Lankan coastal cuisine and the restaurant aims to encapsulate this union. Coconut is the base for the many signature dishes at the restaurant. The menu includes dishes that Gopinathan enjoyed in his childhood at street carts, toddy shops, carnivals, weddings, festivals, seafood barbecues, and shacks on the beach in his native state of Kerala.

Preparations are rooted in family traditions, and recipes passed on by his grandmother, mother, mother-in-law, and aunts make up the cuisine of the specialty eatery. Its decor has a tropical feel— a wooden greenhouse with macramé, floor-to-ceiling shelves with local artisanal, hand-woven chandeliers, and vintage tropical wallpaper.

Rasam Poori, created by Michelin Star chef Srijith Gopinathan for Copra.(Image credit: Chad Santo Tomas)

The cod that melts in your mouth

We started our evening with the Perigord Black Truffle Soft Egg Appam with pepper and chives, accompanied by a turmeric-infused cocktail and a jaggery mixed cocktail. The starter delicacy spiced with coconut vinegar was unique and simple. This is from the starters/snacks menu called kadi, a casual term meaning bites in Malayalam.

Other snacks included San Francisco favorites — oysters and caviar. We also tried pani puris, which were a bit too tart for my taste, but beautifully presented with an easy-to-pour pani puri water mix.

We tasted Thattukada Fried Chicken embellished with curry leaves. The tender chicken was not oily but well done, and the spices had soaked in fully. In the main course, we tried the Vegetable of the Day, which has three homestyle vegetarian recipes. The dish included New Potato Varuval embellished with fennel, coconut, and curry leaves; Smoked Green Lentil Pappu with onions, garlic, and tomatoes and Green Papaya Thoran topped with mustard, coconut, and green chillies.

The tour de force of the evening, however, was the Black Cod Pollichathu, —wrapped in banana leaves, shallot crust served with ghee (butter) rice, and Moilee Broth. The soft cod melted in my mouth and is undoubtedly a must-have on the menu.

"Copra has been received very well by locals and patrons who come to enjoy the authenticity of the cuisine. Palates towards Indian food have become more educated with time and travel," says Chef Sri.

More desi outlets in the offing

Thapar and Chef Sri's latest collaboration, Eylan, will open at Stanford's upcoming Middle Plaza development in Menlo Park. "While I am emotionally involved wherever I work, I keep thinking of new things. We will launch something new in the Bay Area in the first quarter of next year," says Chef Sri, who feels that Indian food has grown from being considered a cheap, spicy, curry-based offering, to a mainstream food choice that is celebratory and varied. He predicts more regional Indian cuisine offerings will be available in places with growing Indian diaspora populations in and outside the U.S.

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