

A taste of Malabar in San Francisco -- from betel leaf toast to fish head curry

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Contrary to my apprehensions, the menu at Copra is accessible and does not test either the imagination or vocabulary of customers, as some new fine dining eateries in India tend to do. The restaurant is run by Michelin 2-star chef Srijith Gopinath (Photos | Sandip Ghose) Sandip Ghose Updated on: 15 Jul 2023, 3:19 pm
5 min read
Coming to San Francisco after years, flaneuring in my favourite haunt Japantown (one of the three remaining in the United States, the other two being in San Jose and Los Angeles), I noticed the signage 'Copra' on a large building at the corner of Post and Fillmore Streets. From the outside it looked like a commercial establishment (I later learnt that it, indeed, housed a bank earlier) but my friend said it is a specialty Indian restaurant started by a Michelin 2-star chef. Before this, the same premises housed "Dosa" -- another Indian fine dining spot run by a Bengali foodpreneur Anjan Mitra (there must be something about the name as Anjan Chatterjee is another famous Bengali restaurateur) which shut down during the pandemic. A little research revealed that Srijith Gopinath is a celebrity Indian chef. He was the Executive Chef at Taj Campton Place in San Francisco, where he earned his two Michelin stars for what he called California-Indian cuisine (Cal-Indian for short). He left The Taj after working with them for over fifteen years to focus on his new restaurants, the high-end Ettan in Palo Alto and the 'fast-casual' Little Blue Door in Los Altos. Copra is his latest venture in partnership with Ayesha Thapar, the Delhi real estate business owner and heir to the Thapar family legacy who is married to the former SoftBank CEO Nikesh Arora. As I have often confessed earlier in these columns, I am wary of nouvelle cuisine eateries. To me, it usually means small portions and astronomical prices, which often go beyond my pay grade. But what hooked me to Copra was the tag of "frill-free food" that I read in one of the reviews. Srijith was from Kerala, it said, and talked of his desire for introducing diners to tropical fruits and vegetables used in his home state. So with some trepidation and

scepticism, I proceeded to make a reservation at Copra. Going through the drinks list, I spotted arrack and decided that is what the doctor would prescribe to go with a Malabari dinner. It tasted as divine as it felt potent going down the throat. I had read about a Kerala arrack named Mandakini being sold in Canada. But on checking the bottle, I found it was Batavia arrack from Indonesia, triple distilled and matured in oak barrels. After taking a sip, my friend decided to switch from her Californian Chardonnay to the Dutch potion, which she certified to be better than single malt. Since then we have been looking for the real stuff at wine stores through the length and breadth of San Francisco with little luck. Contrary to my apprehensions, the menu at Copra is accessible and does not test either the imagination or vocabulary of customers, as some new fine dining eateries in India tend to do. The fare at Copra is primarily Malabar - Kerala and Mangalore - rather than South Indian at large. It is divided into three sections - Kadi, Littles and Large. The first are like nibbles or small bites, like what they call 'touchings' at Kerala toddy shops, more in the nature of antipasti. It has some of the more exotic selections that would go well with drinks. Perigord black truffle soft egg appams, oysters with fermented chillies, tamarind and white soya sauce and caviar on kalappam (mini appams on chatti). The food gets more serious as we enter the "Little" zone, Though meant to be starters - the portions were quite large. We were fascinated by the betel leaf toast. Paan leaves are fried much like palak pakoras topped with bits of tangy mango, avocado, cucumber and bean sprout kosambari salad. The salad makes a refreshing pairing with the crispy paan leaf. An innovation that appeared to be popular with guests was rasam puri - a variation of pani puri that used rasam instead of the traditional pani puri water with a filling of passion fruit, mint, radish and chickpea. Slow cooked octopus in Jaffna curry leaf rub, yogurt, pomelo, mint and purple radish sounded tempting. But, we gave it a pass because my companion is allergic to seafood. That is a problem with restaurants that do not offer a tasting menu. The other two items we tried - the shrimp vennai roast (which only I had) and the Thattukada fried chicken were underwhelming. The spices were as ordinary as ready-made packeted masalas one gets at local Indian stores and did not have a distinct character. The prawns and chicken did not inspire confidence to try the chargrilled bone marrow. I suspect the chukka at the humble Hari Bhavanam in Coimbatore would beat it hands down. Coming to the 'Large' or mains, we got into more traditional territory. There were the vegetables of the day - thoran, potato varuval and green lentil pappu. Cauliflower with green mango curry, which my friend loved, was a good vegetarian substitute for the Kerala meen manga curry. Similarly, black cod replaced the karimeen pollichathu. Kori gassi, lamb Chettinad, and Dindigul style chicken biryani made with jeera samba rice were recognisably close to the originals tweaked for the west coast palate. What I didn't like though were broiled pieces of lamb added to the sauce rather than cooking the meat and gravy together from scratch. The pièce de résistance for us was the fish head curry in black mustard. The sea bass collar melted like butter in the mouth and the coconut rice was the perfect accompaniment to absorb the flavours the fish head imparts to the curry. By then, I figured my glycaemic index would have leaped in the last hour and, therefore, refused to look at the "Sweet" and asked for a filter kapi (coffee). My friend had no such compunction though. But after going through the spread, she was spoilt for choice between esoteric black (kavuni) rice kulfis, pineapple custard (watalappan), semi frozen bay leaf kumquat and sorrel, and nannari sorbet. Eschewing adventure, she decided to settle for a green cardamom chai. Srijith, like a true star, made a curtain call appearance towards the end when most of the guests were on their penultimate course. I talked to him about the only other nouvelle restaurant serving South Indian food I have been to - Avartana at the ITC Grand Chola. He thought it was slightly 'edgy' (no, he didn't say 'over the top') while Copra was closer to home. Srijith and Thapar's other restaurant Ettan was, probably, more experimental. I also mentioned my favourite Kappa, Chakka, Kandhari (KCK). It turned out that he knew the co-owner Regi Mathew well, as they were colleagues at one time in the Taj. We both agreed KCK was hyper-local and hence not in the league of Copra. The final treat came in the form of the check. Including the fine Dutch Indies arrack and Sonoma wine, it was just over 200 dollars. A dinner at some five star speciality restaurants in Delhi would have set us back by much more. I recall a former colleague, the late Irfan Khan, not the actor, but the legendary Communications Head of Unilever, narrating an apocryphal story about Bill Gates finding Indian hotels expensive. I think there may have been an element of truth in Irfan's anecdote. Read the rest of Sandip Ghose's food columns here (The author is a writer and current affairs commentator. He tweets @SandipGhose.) Follow The New Indian Express channel on WhatsApp San Francisco Kerala cuisine Malabar cuisine Show Comments Related Stories No stories found.

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