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Copra: Reinventing Indian Cuisine

By David Landis, The Gay Gourmet—

I’ve been following the culinary career of talented chef Srijith Gopinathan since even before he earned two Michelin stars years ago at Campton Place. He went on to launch the lauded Cal-Indian eatery Ettan in Palo Alto. Thankfully, he has returned to the city with business partner Ayesha Thapar to open Copra in Pacific Heights (in the former Dosa space). In short, we’re glad he did.

Copra (which translates to dried coconut kernel) is a love letter from the chef to his native Indian states, Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Both are situated in the south, bordering the coast near Sri Lanka. The influence of those areas is felt throughout the menu, highlighting the local spices (including chilies, curry leaves, mustard seeds, turmeric, tamarind, black pepper, cardamom, clove, ginger, and cinnamon), as well as the area’s abundance of rice, fish, and coconut. It’s an appetizing choice not prevalent in San Francisco, and I welcomed trying something new.

I dined there recently with my husband and well-known cheese expert and author Laura Werlin. It was unanimous: we all fell in love with this welcome addition to Fillmore Street. Since my loyal readers regularly listen to my opinions, I thought I’d turn the tables and first let you know what Laura had to say:

“The first course comes when you walk in the door. It is a visual feast of hanging macrame ropes—lots of them. There are wooden pillars, woven light shades, and floor-to ceiling cubbies, each with its own unique piece of pottery or basket. Together, the dramatic design signals this is going to be more than a meal and instead an experience. The bold but not too spicy flavors, the vibrant colors of the sauces, dips, chutneys; the deep golden brown of the uber crunchy fried, yet greaseless, juicy chicken; and the explosive flavor package of perfectly cooked spiced cod wrapped in banana leaves (a dish that could easily be ho-hum but one for which Chef Sri (as he’s known) has raised the bar a hundredfold)—is just the beginning. The welcoming staff brings warmth alongside the extraordinary dishes, and together with the balanced yet explosive ingredient combinations inherent in each dish, Copra is unquestionably one of the most satisfying restaurant experiences I have ever had, both inside and out.”

Undoubtedly, with Chef Sri at the helm, this restaurant aims for Michelin quality. The design, as Laura pointed out, is contemporary, with a throwback to the fern bar rope designs of the ’70s. The soaring

ceilings create a buzzy, inviting, fun atmosphere, but thankfully you can still talk. I will say that the wine list is quirky. It's more for oenophiles than regular restaurant goers and was the only disappointment during the evening. The Canary Islands Dolores Cabrera Bianco was funky (not my favorite); the Eric Kamm Pinot Gris from Alsace was a little fermented and effervescent. So, I settled on a Botanist gin up, which was perfect. (According to its own description, the restaurant also offers "an eclectic cocktail program crafted in a collaboration between Nora Furst, Stephanie Gonnet, Christopher Longoria of West Bev Consulting, and acclaimed mixologist Varun Sudhakar, who is based in Kerala.")

We started with the steamed delta asparagus accompanied by a lentil dumpling, tomatoes, coconut, and turmeric. It was like a mouthwatering, delicious vegetarian meatball with just-picked produce and tropical accents. The torn salad with pomelo, avocado, chicory, and mango vinaigrette was a refreshing palate cleanser.

For the chutney course, you get to pick four different types, and they're served with a poppadom (a thin, round, crispy Indian bread). Our favorites? The wild gooseberry and the burnt chili and tamarind chutneys. Our next course was new to me—a dish called rasam poori—and it's a winner. It consists of sprouted chickpeas, radish, mint, and passion fruit—an unexpected but delicious combination.

For a fiber intermezzo, we enjoyed vibrant green, fresh snow peas. Then, as Laura indicated, the star of the evening was the black cod in banana leaves, with moilee broth (a coconut-based curry): so different and yummy. Thattukada fried chicken, a staple Indian street food, came next, with fennel, red chilis, shallots, black pepper, and masala crumbs. The unusual spices make this dish come alive, and yet it's still crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. Southern or Korean fried chicken, beware: this might be the next big thing. A rice cake with egg and black truffle, all gently mixed together, was another standout. In a nod to the former Indian restaurant, Dosa, Chef Sri serves a savory crepe with potatoes and a variety of sauces. A side dish of rice with pineapple and fried onions is another tasty tropical twist. For dessert, we sampled another dish I've never tried before: watalappan. It's a flavorful blend of pineapple, cashews, butterscotch cream, and palm sugar—light, sweet, and just the right ending to a wonderful meal.

Footnote: The Robb Report just came out with its ranking of top 10 new American restaurants and guess who's on top? Copra!

Hats off to Chef Sri and partner Ayesha: Copra is a restaurant to watch.

Bits and Bites: Pride

It's still Pride Month, and many restaurants and retailers are offering celebratory specials. Here are a few:

One Market is showcasing a "Drag Race Margarita": grilled jalapeno-infused Espolon Reposado tequila, with fresh lime, agave nectar, strawberry, and of course, the obligatory "secret ingredient."

Their Pride bite is a "Rainbow Latke," with sweet corn purée, roe, smoked salmon, and avocado.

Tribini's canned espresso martinis (ready-to-drink vodka with espresso) come in a variety of flavors: double espresso, toasted hazelnut, and golden espresso with creamy liqueur. For every four-pack sold during Pride month, the brand is donating \$1 to help queer youth at Waltham House.

Castro-based Kokak Chocolates is kickstarting Pride celebrations ahead of its third anniversary. The retailer's queer Filipina chocolatier Carol Gancia has created special artisanal chocolates for the season. These include: the "Rainbow Love Truffle Collection," colorfully placed in a rainbow-shaped box, featuring nine heart-shaped single-origin chocolates in hazelnut praline and kalamansi (a Philippine lime) truffle flavors; and the "Say It Louder Truffle Collection," featuring four colorful Pride flag designs with 12 premium assorted flavorful truffles, such as vanilla sea salt caramel. Kokak Chocolates has just added chocolate pastries that are absolutely scrumptious, including a dark chocolate brownie, a dark chocolate cupcake muffin with caramel, and a dark chocolate chip cookie.

Soon to come? Lunches with an Asian and Filipino twist. Stay tuned!

There's a new social hub and nightclub welcoming the LGBTQ+ community in Oakland called Fluid510 (a nod to an open space for all genders). "We are endlessly proud of what we accomplished with The Port Bar, and we wanted to extend that sense of community with a space that celebrates the vibrant, diverse culture of Oakland and the greater Bay Area—a place where all are welcome and treated like old friends," said co-owner Richard Fuentes. "With Fluid510, we're elevating Oakland's nightlife experience and showcasing the incredible potential of this city as it enters its post-COVID renaissance."

In addition to an ongoing schedule of events and shows with unique nightly themes, Fluid510 features "an expertly crafted cocktail selection from General Manager Yao Liow, formerly of Kincaid's and Palomino, and an elevated bar food menu from chef Alessandro Campitelli, formerly of Contrasto."

According to Eater, the food menu will offer "staple items, including a zhuzhed up grilled cheese sandwich, fries, and pizza, done in Campitelli's style. There are also standout dishes such as grilled octopus, plus a number of options for vegetarians ... including an upcoming vegetarian moussaka dish, as well as a pea hummus dip."

Salty City NA CocktailPhoto by Chad Santo Thomas

Another highlight in Oakland: The annual Oakland Black Pride Festival will take place June 28–July 2. It celebrates the moments in queer history that sparked activism and progress toward equality, and many of the Black and brown LGBTQ+ activists who have helped fight for liberation. High 5ive, the Kissel Uptown Oakland hotel's rooftop bar & lounge (named for baseball's first out professional player, Glenn Burke), is the first stop on the Queer Bar Crawl, which will begin Friday, June 30, at 6 pm. Otto's Uptown Kitchen on the ground floor of the hotel will host a Sunday brunch on Sunday, July

2.

One Market: <https://tinyurl.com/bvjheu4j>Tribini: <https://tinyurl.com/bccaa9ye>Kokak Chocolates:
<https://tinyurl.com/2n2xuyz2>Fluid510: <https://tinyurl.com/2hcnv28>Laura Werlin:
<https://tinyurl.com/4pmrzz39>Oakland Black Pride: <https://tinyurl.com/ycktfab3>Kissel Uptown Oakland
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