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Copra, the new South Indian and Sri Lankan restaurant from the team behind Palo Alto's Ettan. (Chad Santo Tomas)

First Taste: Copra, an Enchanting Take on Coastal South Indian + Sri Lankan Eats
By Shoshi ParksMar 10, 2023 Like a lot of us, I was devastated when the pandemic put the final nail in the coffin of an already-financially-floundering Dosa, shutting down its palatial send-up to South Indian food on Fillmore Street. So, when I heard that the space would once again celebrate the region's cuisine, my first thought was that it takes some serious guts to replace the restaurant that made SF fall in love with South Indian food.Indeed, from its stunningly unique interior design to its bold menu, Copra is nothing if not ballsy.(Chad Santo Tomas)Brought to life by Michelin-starred chef Srijith "Sri" Gopinathan and restaurateur Ayesha Thapar, the pair behind the gorgeous Palo Alto eatery Ettan, Copra hardly resembles its predecessor. Although it features dishes from southern India, it draws from the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where Gopinathan spent his early years, as well as from the nearby island of Sri Lanka. Dosa and appam, a bowl-shaped crepe made from fermented rice and coconut milk, are just one small part of a complex, coastal-inspired menu, not its primary focus.In its interior too, Los Angeles-based collaborators Schoos Design and Studio Mood have interpreted South Indian motifs completely differently than they did at Dosa. Whereas the previous restaurant was brightly painted and hung with sparkling statement chandeliers, at Copra they use natural materials and traditional crafts to transport guests to the motherland. Vines hang everywhere in the dining room, transforming it the way the jungle transforms the ruins of an ancient temple.One side of the restaurant is intimate and enclosed with curtains of rope. Overhead, intricate macrame light fixtures and woven, upside-down baskets hang like fruit from the trees. The other side, the one dominated by the bar, with high ceilings and a wall of ceramic jugs and jars, is airy and atmospheric. Combined, the effect is completely enchanting.(Chad Santo Tomas)Cauliflower and green apple curry with tangy coconut gravy, cilantro, ney-choru, and raisins.Beguiled, I turn to the menu. It's a little overwhelming, if I'm being honest. It's not just that I don't recognize a number of the dishes—thayir vadai chaat, chili baj pav, black cod pollichathu among them—I don't even recognize some of the ingredients used in their descriptions (what is Malabar parotta? What about ney-choru?) My knowledgeable server has the answers (flatbread and ghee rice) but I'm still grateful that, this time around at least, chef Gopinathan is choosing the food of my meal (one of my favorite perks of the job).While I wait for the first dish to arrive, I sip a lemon chili cocktail from a rye-and-bourbon-forward menu kissed with South Asian aromatics. The only gin-based offering, my drink is herbaceous with yellow Chartreuse, lemongrass, mint, and pops with subtle Thai chili and Batavia arrack, a fermented red rice and sugar cane spirit. My partner goes for a clarified lassi punch, a buttermilk-and-yogurt-washed rum and scotch option spiced with green cardamom, cayenne, and white pepper, and soured with pineapple and mango.Soon, three selections from Copra's list of small plates arrive simultaneously, each with vastly different but complementary flavors. The torn salad is piled with bitter chicory, wedges of bright pomelo and grapefruit, slices of avocado, and chunks of perfect potato-filled samosa, then dressed with cilantro-backed sweet mango chutney. The shrimp vennai come dusted and drizzled with nose-tingling chili chutney, brown butter, and curry leaves roasted into an enticing, whisper-thin crust. They're both absolutely delicious but it's the rasam poori, a crispy, golf ball-shaped shell, into which you pour a tropical soup made with passionfruit and mint, that steals the show for its playful presentation and explosive flavor.Clarified lassi punch with pineapple, cayenne, mango, green cardamom, white pepper, rum, and Scotch.(Chad Santo Tomas)From the large dishes, chef sends out two of his favorites. The dry-curry-encrusted varuval hamachi collar arrives lounging in a bath of slurpable fish-head gravy and accompanied by bowls of snow peas and coconut rice. Alongside the juicy yellowtail, our server delivers a cauliflower and green apple curry. It's his mom's favorite thing on the menu, he tells us, and we immediately declare it ours, too. The curry is a beautiful balance of tangy green apples, sweet coconut and raisins, and savory heat-packed spices. "It's like navratan korma on steroids," I blurt out between bites, grinning with delight.Uncomfortably full, we nevertheless greet dessert with open mouths. I fall hard for the palkova and pear, a pastry layered with Indian custard and meaty poached pears with subtle hints of nutmeg, rose water, and grated milk. My partner, not historically an ice cream lover, can't get enough of the bay leaf-dusted slice, a semifreddo perched on a compote of

strawberries and sugar cane syrup, and dotted with tiny slices of kumquat. By the time the last dish has been cleared, something has shifted. I'm no longer thinking of the space as Dosa's old one. I'm thinking of it simply as Copra. I'll never not miss SF's original South Indian juggernaut but this entirely new species of fantastic, flavorful South Asian restaurant is a captivating alternative, and I can't wait to return. // Copra is open for dinner Tuesday through Sunday; 1700 Fillmore St. (Japantown), coprarestaurant.com Chef Sri Gopinathan (left) with WestBev cocktail consultants Stephanie Gonnet and Christopher Longoria. (Chad Santo Tomas) Related Articles Around the Web Copra (@coprarestaurant) • Instagram photos and videos › Copra, a new Indian restaurant from chef Sri Gopinathan, opens in S.F. › Step Inside New Restaurant Copra, a Stunning Tropical Oasis ... › [san franciscos an-francisco#san-franciscos an francisco#san francisco#san francisco fillmore street indian foods](#) [sri lankan food](#) [copra restaurant](#) Related Articles

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