



من ساحل التوابل إلى موائد الضيافة: أثر النكهات العربية في إثراء
المطبخ الكيرالي وتجربة الضيف المعاصرة

From The Spice Coast To The Guest Table: The Influence Of Arabic Flavors In Enriching Kerala Cuisine And The Contemporary Guest Experience

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Introduction

Kerala, known as "God's Own Country," has long been a melting pot of civilizations and cultures. Its strategic location on the Malabar Coast served not only as a gateway to stunning natural beauty, lush green hills and tranquil waterways, but also as a vital stop on the ancient maritime trade routes that connected East and West. This ongoing interaction not only enriched the region economically but also forged a unique social and cultural fabric, most profoundly reflected in its culinary arts.

Despite general recognition of this diversity, the specific depth of Arab influence on Kerala cuisine and the role this heritage can play as a strategic asset in the hospitality sector to attract a specific and important tourist segment - those from the Middle East - have not received sufficient study and analysis. The relationship between the two regions goes beyond the mere exchange of goods; it is a story of profound human and cultural fusion that has given birth to the Mappila community and its distinctive cuisine. This study is based on the basic premise that Mappila cuisine is not merely a secondary regional cuisine, but rather a living archive documenting centuries of Arab-Indian cultural exchange. Understanding and strategically utilizing this heritage can significantly enrich the Arab guest experience, transforming food from a mere consumer commodity into a bridge of cultural and historical communication. By analyzing its historical roots, comparing culinary traditions, and studying specific dishes, this research aims to provide a clear vision of how to transform this culinary heritage into an authentic and impactful hospitality experience, enhancing Kerala's position as a leading global tourist destination.

Chapter One: The Roots of Convergence: Historical Relations between the Arabian Peninsula and the Malabar Coast

Understanding the Arab influence on Kerala cuisine requires revisiting the deep historical roots that shaped the relationship between the two regions. This relationship was not merely a passing trade interaction, but rather a long-term cultural and social integration process that led to the emergence of a new identity that left a lasting mark on all aspects of life on the Malabar Coast, including food.

1.1 The Spice Trade: Relations Spanning Thousands of Years

Trade relations between the Malabar Coast and the Arabian Peninsula date back centuries before the advent of Islam, with some historical sources dating back to the reign of King Solomon. Kerala, the "Land of Spices," was the main source of precious commodities such as black pepper, cardamom, cinnamon, cloves, and ginger, which were in high demand in the markets of the Middle East and Europe. Arab traders from Yemen, Oman, and Egypt excelled at exploiting the monsoon winds to sail across the Arabian Sea, establishing a thriving trade network.

Arab traders maintained their monopoly over the maritime spice trade in the Indian Ocean throughout the Middle Ages, until the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut in 1498, ushering in a new era of European competition. This long history of Arab commercial dominance ensured a continuous flow not only of goods, but also of ideas, cultures, and people.¹

1.2 The Origins of the Mappila Community: A Cultural and Social Bridge

A natural consequence of these ongoing trade relations was the settlement of many Arab merchants on the coasts of Kerala, particularly in cities such as Calicut and Kodungallur. These merchants not only engaged in trade but also married local women, giving birth to a new generation and a unique community known as the Mappila, descendants of Arab fathers and Kerala mothers.

With the advent of Islam in the seventh century CE, these merchants brought with them the new religion, which spread peacefully and gradually throughout the region. Local rulers welcomed the Muslims and granted them free land to build mosques and residences, where they lived in harmony and cooperation with the existing Hindu and Christian communities. The Cheraman Juma Mosque in Kodungallur, believed to be the first mosque in India, is a living testament to this early history and peaceful coexistence. This long-term stability and intercultural intermingling distinguishes Arab influence from subsequent European colonial influences, which were primarily exploitative in nature.²

1.3 Linguistic and Cultural Integration

The depth of cultural integration is clearly evident in the emergence of Arabi-Malayalam, the local Malayalam language written in the Arabic script. This language was not merely a tool for commercial communication; it also became the language of literature and religion for the Mappila community, with many valuable books written in it, including *Tuhfat al-Mujahidin*, which chronicles the resistance to Portuguese colonialism.

This influence also extended to the performing arts, with the emergence of distinct art forms such as Oppana, a dance performed by women at weddings, and Duff Muttu, a percussive performance using tambourines, both of which bear clear Arabic rhythmic and melodic influences. Mappila Paattu songs also blend Arabic melodies with local themes, creating a unique musical genre. This establishment of a hybrid

¹ Nikita Toppo, Kerala's Mappila Cuisine, History Of This Culinary Heritage Of The Malabar Coast, Times Now News

² Stephen F. Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Mappilas of Malabar, 1498-1922* (Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 17-39

cultural, linguistic, and artistic identity paves the way for understanding how The culinary fusion was no less deep and rooted.

Chapter Two: The Indigenous Flavor Palette: Characteristics of Traditional Kerala Cuisine

To understand the extent and depth of Arab influence, it is first necessary to define the features of authentic Kerala cuisine as a reference point. This cuisine has been shaped over centuries by local geographic, agricultural, and cultural factors, giving it a distinct identity based on a trio of essential ingredients and well-established culinary traditions.

2.1 The Land of Coconut and Spices

The identity of Kerala cuisine is primarily based on the ingredients abundantly provided by its natural environment. Coconut is at the forefront of these ingredients, used in all its forms: grated, as condensed milk to add texture and creaminess, or as a frying oil. Rice, which is widely grown in the region's fertile fields and constitutes the staple food of the population, is followed by tapioca, an important source of starch. As the "Land of Spices," Kerala cuisine is incomplete without the generous use of the local spices that have shaped its economic history. These spices include aromatic curry leaves, mustard seeds that pop in the hot oil at the beginning of cooking, turmeric for color and flavor, black pepper, once known as "black gold," and tamarind for a distinctive acidic note.

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2.2 Sadhya: The Pinnacle of Vegetarian Cuisine

The pinnacle of Hindu culinary tradition in Kerala is Sadhya, a full-fledged vegetarian celebratory meal served on special occasions such as Onam and weddings. This feast is traditionally served on a fresh banana leaf and consists of dozens of dishes, sometimes as many as 28 at a time.

The centerpiece is boiled red rice, surrounded by a variety of side dishes (curries), appetizers, pickles, and desserts. The most famous of these dishes are Sambar, a lentil and vegetable stew; Avial, a mixture of vegetables cooked in a coconut and yogurt sauce; Thoran, a dry dish of chopped vegetables with grated coconut; and Kaalan, a thick curry based on yogurt and banana or yam. The meal concludes with Payasam, a pudding made from milk or coconut milk with rice, vermicelli, or lentils. Sadya, with its emphasis on the balance of flavors (sweet, sour, salty, spicy) and its reliance solely on plant-based ingredients, represents the basis by which the transformation brought about by subsequent external influences can be measured.

2.3 Traditional Cooking Styles

Traditional cooking styles in Kerala rely on extracting maximum flavor from natural ingredients. Steaming is a common method, as in breakfast dishes such as puttu, cylinders of rice flour and coconut, and idiyappam, steamed rice vermicelli. Frying in coconut oil is also used to prepare popular snacks such as banana chips and pazham pori. In addition, cooking in traditional earthen pots (manchatti) was popular, as it was believed to enhance the flavors and preserve the nutritional value of the food. This emphasis on vegetarian dishes and simple cooking methods provides a clear contrast to the culinary traditions brought by Arab traders.

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³ Yadu Suresh, Malabar Culinary Culture: Cultural appreciation of Arab flavor, International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT), Volume 9, Issue 3 March 2021, pg: 569-578

⁴ K. T. Achaya, *Indian Food: A Historical Companion* (Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 118-121, 230-232

Chapter Three: An Arab Imprint on the Land of Spices: An Analysis of Mappila Cuisine

In contrast to traditional Kerala cuisine, which is predominantly vegetarian, Mappila cuisine is the direct result of centuries of interaction and integration between the culture of the Malabar Coast and that of Arab and Persian traders. It is a truly hybrid cuisine, adopting new ingredients and techniques and reshaping them to suit local tastes, resulting in a unique and distinct culinary identity.

3.1 The Birth of a Hybrid Cuisine

Mappila cuisine is defined as a unique blend of Keralan, Arabic, Persian, and later European culinary traditions. The most notable feature of this cuisine was the extensive use of meat, particularly beef, lamb, and goat, which was uncommon in traditional Hindu cuisine. Ghee was also introduced as the primary cooking medium alongside coconut oil, adding a distinct flavor and depth to dishes. In addition, dates, a staple of the Arab diet, found their place in some Mappila sweets and snacks.

3.2 Borrowed and Developed Techniques and Flavors

The Arab influence was not limited to ingredients alone; it extended to cooking techniques. Slow-cooking meats, which allow the meat to tenderize and infuse it with flavor, became a hallmark of Mappila dishes. Prominent among these techniques is dum, a method of cooking in sealed pots over low heat. This technique has clear Persian and Arab origins and is primarily used in the preparation of biryani. New dishes have also emerged that blend local ingredients with imported techniques, such as Irachi Puttu, a traditional steamed puttu dish layered with spiced minced meat.

In terms of flavor, Mappila cuisine has enriched the local spice palette. While it continues to use Kerala's staple spices, such as black pepper and curry leaves, it has also incorporated more "warm" spices popularized via Arab trade routes, such as cinnamon, cloves, cardamom, nutmeg, and star anise. This combination creates complex aromatic combinations that distinguish Mappila dishes from others.

3.3 A Comparative Analysis of Traditional Keralan Cuisine and Mappila Cuisine

To illustrate the extent of the transformation brought about by Arab influence, the following table provides a direct comparison between the basic characteristics of traditional Keralan cuisine (represented by the sadya feast) and Mappila cuisine. This comparison is not intended to demonstrate the superiority of one over the other, but rather to highlight how two different culinary cultures interact to produce something both new and authentic.

Kerala's culinary landscape is characterized by its unique duality of traditional Keralan cuisine and Mappila cuisine. Traditional cuisine, represented by the vegetarian sadya feast, draws its essence from local agricultural produce. It relies primarily on lentils and pulses as a source of protein, with coconut oil as the primary cooking fat, and boiled red rice as the main grain. Its flavors are pure and straightforward, based on the triad of mustard seeds, curry leaves, and turmeric, and its sweetness is derived from jaggery (palm sugar) and banana.

In contrast, Mappila cuisine tells a story of cultural exchange with the Arab world. It's a meat-rich cuisine, with beef, lamb, chicken, and seafood taking center stage. It uses a combination of fats such as ghee and coconut oil, and prefers aromatic rice varieties such as kaima to make the legendary Malabar biryani. Its flavors rely on warm, complex spices such as cinnamon, cloves, and cardamom, and its sweets feature Middle Eastern touches such as dates and rosewater.

These differences are also reflected in its cooking styles. While traditional cuisine favors methods that preserve the authentic flavor of ingredients, such as steaming and boiling in dishes such as avial, Mappila cuisine leans toward more complex techniques such as braising (dam), deep-frying, and grilling. Together, these two cuisines represent a rich canvas that expresses Kerala's diverse cultural heritage, one

rooted in local traditions and the other woven with the threads of global maritime trade. The table clearly shows that the Arab influence was not a marginal addition, but rather a fundamental shift that introduced new categories of ingredients (red meat, ghee) and complex cooking methods (slow cooking and layering), greatly expanding the scope of the local cuisine and creating a rich and diverse food culture.

Chapter Four: Case Studies in Culinary Fusion

To gain a deeper understanding of how this cultural fusion is embodied in tangible dishes, this chapter examines two key case studies: Malabar Biryani, the iconic dish of Mappila cuisine, and a host of other dishes that display clear Arab influences, demonstrating that this influence was not limited to a single dish but rather a holistic phenomenon.

4.1 Thalassery/Malabar Biryani: The King of Kerala Dishes

Thalassery Biryani (also known as Malabar Biryani) is considered the ultimate embodiment of successful culinary fusion. It is a dish that adopts a foreign concept (the layered Persian/Arab rice dish) but adapts and authenticates it entirely using local ingredients and techniques, creating a product that is both global and local. **Origin and Lineage:** Unlike North Indian biryani, which is associated with the royal kitchens of the Mughal Empire, Malabar biryani is believed to have reached the coast of Kerala directly via Arab and Persian traders. Its birth and development are attributed specifically to the Mappila community in the Malabar region, specifically in the city of Thalassery, which was an important trading center.

Unique Ingredients: The most distinctive feature of Thalassery biryani is the use of a unique variety of aromatic, short-grain rice called kaima or jeera kasala. This deliberate choice, rather than the long-grain basmati rice common in most other biryanis, gives the dish a distinct texture and aroma, reflecting a clear process of "authenticity." The Mappila community did not want to simply imitate a foreign dish; they wanted to make it their own, and the use of kaima rice makes it distinctly Malabar. **Pakki and Dum Cooking Technique:** Thalassery biryani is characterized by its Pakki Biryani, where the meat (often chicken) is fully cooked with the masala mixture first, then layered with partially cooked rice. The pot is then tightly sealed (often with a dough) and hot coals are placed over the lid. This is the Dum technique, which allows the trapped steam to cook the rice and slowly meld the flavors. This technique, of Persian/Arab origin, ensures that the final dish is moist, aromatic, and non-greasy.

Final Flavor: Malabar biryani is characterized by its balanced and aromatic flavor, where the "warm" spices (cinnamon, cardamom, cloves) are dominant without being overly hot. It is usually served with side dishes that complement its flavor, such as raita (yogurt salad), coconut and mint sauce, and date or lemon pickle, again reflecting the balance between foreign influences and local tastes.⁵

4.2 Beyond Biryani: Other Arab Imprints

The influence of Arab cuisine is not limited to biryani. There are many other dishes in Mappila cuisine that bear clear influences:

Kuzhi Mandi: The spread of this dish in Kerala in recent years is living proof of the continuity of cultural exchange. Mandi is a popular Yemeni rice and meat dish, cooked in an underground pit (tandoor). This dish has been adopted in Kerala with slight modifications and is very popular, confirming the similarity in taste between the two regions.

Pathiri: A very thin flatbread made from rice flour, it is a staple in Mappila dishes and is usually served with various curries. This bread is similar in its delicacy and preparation to the thin, unleavened breads of the Middle East and is believed to be a local development of the Arabic bread.

⁵ Umami Abdulla, *A Kitchen Full of Stories* (Penguin Books, 2018)

Alisa: Another dish that shows a direct connection is a mash of wheat and meat (usually chicken), slowly cooked until it becomes creamy. This dish is almost identical to the famous harees dish of the Gulf countries, which is traditionally served on special occasions and during Ramadan.

Desserts and Snacks: Arab influences are also evident in desserts, such as Muttamala, a dessert made from egg yolk threads cooked in sugar syrup, similar to some desserts from the Arab region. Unnakaya, fried pancakes filled with banana, coconut, and cashew nuts, demonstrate the use of local ingredients in a foreign-inspired setting.

These diverse examples confirm that the culinary fusion was comprehensive and profound, producing a rich menu that reflects the long history of human contact between the Malabar Coast and the Arabian Peninsula.

Chapter Five: Translating Heritage into Experience: Food Tourism and the Middle Eastern Guest

After reviewing the historical roots and culinary analysis, the research now turns to exploring the contemporary dimensions of this heritage in the tourism and hospitality sector. Mappila cuisine, with its rich history and shared flavors, represents a unique strategic opportunity for Kerala to enhance its appeal as a leading tourist destination for visitors from the Middle East and the Arabian Gulf.

5.1 Kerala as a Tourist Destination for the Arab Market

In recent years, Kerala has become a favorite destination for tourists from the Arabian Gulf. Its main attractions are its stunning natural beauty, which offers a haven from the desert climate, from the tea plantations of Munnar to the wildlife sanctuaries of Thekkady and the enchanting water bodies of Alappuzha and Kumarakom. In addition, the state offers a sophisticated tourism infrastructure, including luxury resorts and hotels that meet the hospitality standards expected by Gulf tourists, with an emphasis on privacy and family-friendly services.

5.2 Gastronomic Tourism as a Key Attraction

Globally, food is no longer just a biological necessity during travel; it has become a key driver for choosing tourist destinations. Studies indicate that travelers spend a significant proportion of their travel budgets on food experiences, seeking authenticity and the stories behind the dishes. With its diverse and rich culinary history, Kerala has all the ingredients to become a leading global food tourism destination, capable of attracting a wide range of travelers seeking unforgettable culinary adventures.

5.3 Understanding the Arab Guest: Familiarity in Exoticism

To successfully target the Arab market, it is essential to understand the motivations and expectations of this segment of tourists. Arab and Gulf tourists in general are looking for halal food, which is readily available in Kerala thanks to the large Muslim community. But more importantly, they are looking for familiar flavors that provide a sense of comfort in a new environment. This is where the true strength of Mappila Cuisine lies.

It offers the Arab guest a unique experience that can be described as "familiarity in exoticism." When he tastes a plate of Malabar biryani, or a lamb stew spiced with cardamom and cinnamon, he immediately recognizes the flavors essential to his cuisine, but he experiences them in a new and exciting Indian context, with the addition of curry leaves or coconut milk. This delicate balance between the familiar and the new creates a pleasurable and relaxing dining experience, avoiding the "culture shock" that some overly exotic cuisines can cause, while simultaneously offering something new and interesting. It's not simply an attempt to imitate Arabic food in India, but rather an invitation to discover how Arabic flavors have evolved and adapted to a new environment over the centuries.

5.4 Current Situation: Opportunities and Challenges

In major cities in Kerala, such as Kochi and Trivandrum, there are numerous restaurants serving "Arabic" or "Middle Eastern" cuisine, such as mandi, shawarma, and grilled meats, indicating an existing demand from tourists and locals alike. However, the real challenge and opportunity lies in going beyond this generic offering. Instead of presenting Kerala as a place where Arab tourists can find food that resembles their homeland, it should be marketed as a place where they can discover a part of their culinary history. There must be a shift from simply offering "Arab food" to promoting Mappila cuisine as an authentic local heritage and an integral part of Kerala's identity, a heritage it shares with the Arab world.⁶

Chapter Six: Strategic Recommendations for the Hospitality Sector in Kerala

Based on historical and culinary analysis, and to fully leverage the potential of Mappila cuisine, the Kerala hospitality sector can adopt a set of integrated strategies aimed at transforming its culinary heritage into a unique and impactful guest experience, especially for the Arab market.

6.1 Menu Architecture and Storytelling

Leading hotels and resorts in Kerala, such as those in Kochi and Kumarakom, should go beyond simply including one or two Mappila dishes on their global menus. The recommendation here is to design specialized menus or prominent sections titled "Mappila Culinary Heritage" or "Flavors of the Spice Route." More importantly, storytelling should be incorporated into these menus. Instead of simply listing the name of the dish and its ingredients, a brief and engaging description can be added that tells its historical story and its connection to trade with the Arabs. For example, next to a dish called "Thalassery Biryani," it might read: "A royal dish born from the encounter of Arab traders with the spice kings of Malabar, featuring aromatic local kaima rice and slow-cooked using the time-honored 'dam' method to preserve all its flavors." This approach transforms dining into a cultural and educational experience.

6.2 Developing Integrated Culinary Experiences

To deepen the guest experience, hotels and restaurants must go beyond their boundaries and offer immersive experiences. This can be achieved through:

Mappila Food Trails: Organizing guided tours that take guests to historic cities like Kozhikode (Calicut) and Thalassery, to visit established restaurants famous for serving authentic Mappila cuisine, such as Paragon, Rahmath, and Zain's Hotel.

Specialized Cooking Classes: Offering interactive cooking classes within hotels, focusing not only on Kerala cuisine in general, but also on Mappila cuisine, with an emphasis on dishes with clear Arab origins, such as biryani, bhaji, and alisa. This experience can be a memorable experience for many tourists.

6.3 Targeted Marketing Strategies

Marketing campaigns targeting the Arab and Gulf markets should reflect this historical depth. Rather than focusing solely on the landscape, Kerala should be promoted as a unique culinary destination. **Digital Marketing:** Using social media platforms and Arab travel blogs to publish engaging content (photos, videos, articles) highlighting the "Arab culinary heritage of Kerala."

Specialized Tour Packages: Collaborating with travel agencies in the Gulf countries to design "food tourism packages" that include accommodation in hotels featuring Mappila restaurants, food tours, and cooking classes.

⁶ Lucy M. Long, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Food and Drink in America* (Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 264-268

Food Festivals: Organizing annual food festivals in Kerala that are not generic, but rather specialized under a theme such as "A Meeting of Flavors: From Arabia to the Malabar Coast," inviting renowned chefs from the Arab world to participate, creates significant media exposure.⁷

6.4 Staff Training

The most critical element for the success of these strategies is the human element. Hospitality establishments must invest in training their staff, especially restaurant workers, on the history of Mappila cuisine and the stories behind each dish. When a waiter can proudly explain to an Arab guest that the biryani they are eating is the result of centuries of cultural exchange between their ancestors, they transform from mere service providers to cultural ambassadors. This human interaction is what creates a memorable experience and turns a satisfied guest into a loyal marketer of the destination.

Summary

This research has demonstrated that the relationship between the Arabian Peninsula and the Malabar Coast was not merely a fleeting trade relationship, but rather a profound and long-term cultural fusion, the most prominent manifestation of which was the birth of Mappila cuisine. The analysis revealed that this cuisine is not simply a local version of Arabic cuisine, but rather a unique and independent culinary entity that has successfully blended Arabic ingredients and flavors with the local environment and taste of Kerala, producing iconic dishes such as Malabar biryani.

The study's findings confirm the main premise that this shared culinary heritage is not just an interesting historical fact, but a vital and valuable strategic asset for the tourism and hospitality sector in Kerala today. By offering an experience of "familiarity in exoticism," Mappila cuisine can uniquely cater to the aspirations of the Arab guest, presenting familiar flavors in a new and exciting cultural context. Transforming food from a meal into a historical narrative, and from service into a cultural dialogue, is key to delivering a profound and impactful hospitality experience that exceeds guest expectations. Accordingly, the study recommends that stakeholders in the Kerala tourism sector - including tourism boards, hotels, resorts, and tour operators - adopt an integrated strategy focused on promoting Mappila cuisine as a cultural bridge. This includes menu design, developing immersive culinary experiences, directing marketing campaigns, and staff training. Investing in this shared heritage will not only enhance Kerala's appeal to the Arab market but will also contribute to the preservation and documentation of this unique culinary legacy for future generations. Finally, this research calls for further anthropological and archaeological studies to document traditional recipes that may be on the verge of extinction and encourages academic collaboration between institutions in Kerala and the Arabian Gulf to explore this rich and shared history.

⁷ Steven Pike, *Destination Marketing* (Butterworth-Heinemann, 2016), pp. 115-135, 251-268

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