

Sappadu @ 601



Pic. by R. Raghu

SO, WHY in the world would anyone want to spring clean their wallet for food that they get at home? The 'Yellai Sappadu' at the Park's stylish Coffee Shop '601' abounds in rasam, paruppus and kootus, all very desi and very familiar, without the usual 601 twists – a dash of rosemary here and a swish of whipped cream there.

"Because this kind of food is served only to the family, usually at religious functions," says Viji Varadarajan, an authority on the quietly surviving vegetarian cuisine of Thanjavur and Palghat.

Quick note for all you burger-and-apple pie types out there: Kerala and Tamil Nadu are home to a number of ancient temples where priests both conduct rituals and keep time-honoured recipes alive, using traditional iron griddles, pots and pans for everyday cooking.

According to Viji, unless you have the good fortune of living in a family in which these recipes are still remembered, you're unlikely to ever get a chance to dip into the cuisine's delicious thakkali vengayam chutneys (tomato-onion chutney) and paruppu payasam (lentils simmered in milk and jaggery.)

She says that none of the South Indian restaurants serve this cuisine, and even in

If you crave the kind of food your grandmother made, check out the Yellai Sappadu festival at The Park

homes, when visitors arrive, the resident food whiz is more likely to whip out the instant paneer-butter masala packet than the sambar powder. The Park's Yellai Sappadu, however, sticks to the old formulas, with interesting results.

The food arrives on a tray covered with a leaf, and a colourful array of bowls, all brimming with a fascinating range of accompaniments. Don't even think of eating this kind of food with a fork. "You have to use your fingers, because you have to feel the textures," says Viji, "How else do you know whether the rice is sufficiently saturated with rasam?"

There's a grainy paruppu usili (steamed thuvai dal, cooked with beans and carrots), a semi-sweet pooshnikkai mor kootu (ash gourd simmered in spiced yoghurt and coconut) and a delicious steaming rasam to

flood it all with.

"The rasam's made with raw dal. The dal from the paruppu usili is taken and put into it, and it gets cooked in the rasam," says Viji, to explain why it's so different from the usual peppery rasam served everywhere.

There's also a creamy green keerai masiyal (south Indian spicy spinach) and semolina in two flavours – a fragrant coconut semolina and pale yellow lime semolina. The meal is accompanied by homemade vadams. (Reportedly sourced from a secret location in Mylapore.)

In spite of all the competition, however, the akkara vadisal is what steals the show. A version of the well-loved chakkara pongal, this is made of rice, dal and jaggery, but stirred with thickened milk, instead of water.

A word of caution, if you like food that makes your ears go red, this might be a little bland. And if you're looking for flash and dash, stay at home. This is the kind of food your grandmother makes: homey, wholesome and totally unpretentious.

The Yellai Sappadu costs Rs. 295 per head and is on between April 9 and 11 for dinner. Call 52144000 for details. ■

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