



CULTURE & LIVING

This new regional restaurant in Bengaluru is all about social sustainability

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From chefs handpicked from toddy shops, tea shops and homes, to food that makes use of local ingredients and is made in local vessels—here's what to expect from Kappa Chakka Kandhari's Bengaluru chapter



Sheelamma travels to the restaurant only to make a chatti meen curry, a Kerala speciality made of pearl spot, cooked in a combination of butter milk and coconut milk. Muthu Kumaran relentlessly makes Ramasseridlis on a vintage mankalam, an earthen pot where fermented batter is cooked with steam that passes through ropes on which the goop rests. The pepper here has been painstakingly sourced from a tiny town in Kerala called Pulpally, the tapioca is from Ramapuram, the ginger is from Thrissur, the tea leaves are from Munnar and the jaggery is from Marayoor.

A meal in Kappa Chakka Kandhari is like a lesson in Kerala's geography and homestyle cooking. For me, there are two notable things about this newly-opened restaurant in Bengaluru. One is the waft of toasty coconut oil that fills up the room, just like how Fierce fills the Abercrombie & Fitch stores across Europe. The second, is that KCK is perfect example of culinary social sustainability.

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In a time when foraging is the rage, and terms like zero wastage, farm-to-fork, nose-to-tail are dropped as casually as I drop fleur de sel on my perfectly ripened Coorgi avocado, here is one restaurant that is trying to be sustainable with more realistic small gestures. It's conserving recipes that may soon become extinct if not tapped in time just like the toddy that KCK turns into honey-like nectar. A simple example of this are the aforementioned Ramasseri idlis, now cooked only by four families in Kerala, and pidis, a form of rice dumplings cooked in coconut milk and served with chicken that are not made outside of the village they originated in.

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Reji Mathew, the chef and owner at KCK, credits the innate nature of Keralite cooking for its sustainable approach. “Look at it this way. I’m cooking homestyle Kerala food, 80 per cent of my menu is all about recreating childhood memories. At home, no one taught us how to minimise wastage; it’s just what home cooking is all about. If I’m making chicken curry, the meat isn’t bubbled in a pre-made base, it’s cooked from scratch. And ideas like free-range meat are common. When

my mother wanted to make chicken, she asked me to go chase the bird and bring it back from the fields,” he says.

Kottayam-born Mathew has been in the cooking scene for over 25 years—he formerly practiced his chops at Bengaluru’s Taj West End, before opening KCK’s first outlet in Chennai in 2018. Launching on Bengaluru’s popular Koramangala Street should finally put a spotlight to his cool methods—like not putting 10 of his chefs (who he handpicked from toddy shops, tea shops and homes) in stringent uniforms, and allowing them to cook with Malayali music playing in the background—thereby giving the rest of us a lesson in social sustainability and inclusivity.

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Apart from a refreshing naivety, home-style chefs bring with them an expertise on using traditional equipment that takes the restaurant notches above at being authentic. One such idea is cooking in urulis, those open-mouthed clay, copper and bronze utensils that we see at spas, filled with floating marigold flowers. “No matter how long you cook food in an uruli, it won’t get burnt. We don’t cover our food when it’s bubbling. The aroma that it lets out makes the diner anticipate a dish, mentally preparing him for what’s to come,” says Mathew.

On similar lines, their kitchen finds ample usage of other traditional equipment like appam chatti, puttu kutti, idiyappam achu and most astonishingly, a copper meat mincer—similar to what you'll see at Daniel Humm's three-Michelin star restaurant Eleven Madison Park in New York. While Humm uses it to mush out Hudson Valley carrots, Mathew minces meat for his erachi cutlets in it.

Almost 35 per cent of the menu is vegetarian, a playground for textures and vegetables that seldom find fame at mainstream restaurants. Take, for instance, dishes such as kadachakka curry, made of dense breadfruit cubes; vazhaipoo cutlet, a cakey banana flower patty; kappa vada, made with tapioca root and chenda kappa, where the steamed root is served bare naked with oil, roughly cut shallots and kandhari.

KCK gets its name from three ingredients that are common in a Kerala kitchen—kappa (tapioca), chakka (jackfruit), and kandhari, a chilli that's strikingly similar to the Thai bird's eye chilli, potent but with an evaporative tingle.



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Mathew tells me that his menu is inspired by various culinary influences that have brushed the coastal state over the years—“the Arabs, Portuguese and Dutch who came here for spice trade, the Muslims from the Malabar region, the Syrian Christian community and so on,” he lists. And these influences are reflected in

the diversity you'll see on his menu.

KCK isn't trying to be a hyper regional restaurant that we see as commonly as a smoothie bar in Bandra. It's a restaurant that's trying to look closely at what's already there in order to represent a cuisine in its full glory—be it by including food from its cities, temple recipes, village secrets and dishes from small towns to even tribal settlements. “Once a bunch of tribals invited us for dinner. They made a pit, heated river stones, placed minimally marinated tapioca on these stones, and just cooked it bare. I brought back the marination recipe and that's the kind of food I want to bring out,” Mathew reminisces. This restaurant is definitely our kappa tea.



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