

INDIA



STEVE DUNK



# Profiles of



India  
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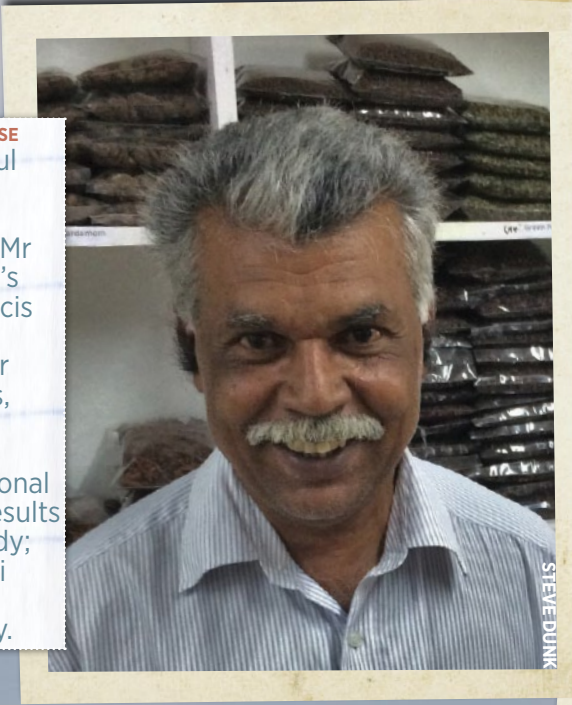


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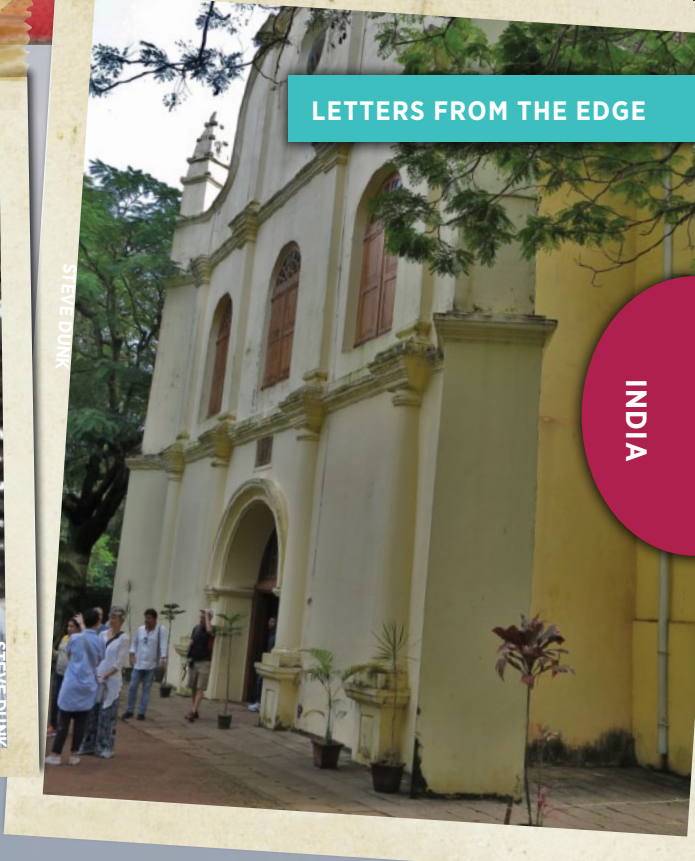


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PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Nimmy Paul prepares prawns in her uruli cooking pot; Mattancherry Palace; Mr Abraham of Abraham's Spice Garden; St Francis Church, Fort Kochi; Rajkumar A. at Periyar National Park; Fungus, Periyar National Park; Common bushbrown butterfly, Periyar National Park; Cooking class results at Bar-B-Que Thekkady; Dhobi wallah at Dhobi Khana. **MAIN PHOTO** Rice fields of Alleppey.



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# KERALA

by CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT



RAJKUMAR A





PHOTOS THIS SPREAD  
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

The author's cottage at Spice Village Resort; Kerala backwaters, Alleppey; Nutmeg fruit; Thomas greets an Alleppey fishmonger; Pathimugam bark tea.



«THE SCREEN DOOR CREAKS a quiet complaint as I ease it shut and slide into a rattan chair. Beneath the low-thatched eaves of my cottage, I ponder the trees emerging from the morning mist and warm my hands gratefully on my coffee glass. According to the card on my nightstand, the brew is *podì kappi*, “the traditional black coffee of the local people in the High Range area.” I only know it is hot and dark and redolent with cardamom, cumin and fenugreek. As caffeine and sun make inroads on my hazy dawn, a soft hoot emerges from the canopy: an unseen langur monkey alerts his family to my presence.»

Cook  
A

INDIA



NIMMY PAUL

SERVES 2-4 AS PART OF AN INDIAN MEAL

## Meen Molee

### Kerala-Style Fish Stew

*MILD AND CREAMY meen molee is available everywhere in Kerala. This version by Nimmy Paul is perfect for those who prefer their Indian flavours with less heat.*

**Vegetable Oil** 1 tsp

**Ghee** 1 tsp

**Cinnamon Stick** 1

**Cloves** 2 whole

**Red Onion**  
1, thinly sliced

**Green Chile**  
1, thinly sliced  
or minced

**Fresh Ginger**  
1" piece, crushed

**Curry Leaves** 1 sprig  
(10-15 leaves)

**Fish** 250 g fillet

**Tomato**  
1, thickly sliced

**Salt** to taste

**Thick Coconut Milk**  
or **Coconut Cream**  
½ cup

- 1 HEAT** the oil and ghee in a wide clay, enamel, or non-stick pan over medium heat. Add the cinnamon stick and cloves and stir briefly until fragrant.
- 2 ADD** the onion, chile, ginger and curry leaves. Cook until the vegetables are softened.
- 3 PUSH** the mixture to the sides of the pan and place the fish in the pan in a single layer. Cook until one side is golden, then turn the fish and cook the second side.
- 4 PUSH** the fish to the side. Add the tomato and cook lightly.
- 5 BRING** all to the centre, making sure that the fish is covered with the vegetable mixture. Sprinkle with salt, remove from the heat and set aside to steep.
- 6 JUST** before serving, reheat until the pan begins to sizzle. Remove from the heat, stir in the coconut milk and serve.
- 7 DO** not reheat after adding coconut milk.

...To date, Kochi is a leader in the global spice trade...



RAV

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD  
FROM TOP LEFT

Fishing boats in Kochi harbour; Sheril prepares aloo masala at Bar-B-Que Thekkady; Photos of Nimmy Paul and her mother, circa 1970 and 2010; Peppercorns on the vine.

«The High Range peaks where I sit are the Western Ghats, a spine of mountains dividing the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu in southern India. For the past days, I've been exploring the Kerala side, entering the region like legions before me through the port city of Kochi.

One hundred and sixty kilometres away and almost 900 metres below my current perch, Kochi sprawls across 17 islands, its harbour abuzz with container ships, ferries and commercial fishing boats, its thoroughfares spangled with billboards of local film and football stars. A field of shiny panels fuels its fully solar-powered airport — the world's first — that welcomed nearly 9 million travellers last year.

Local guides are quick to tell pale-skinned visitors like me that Kochi (formerly known as Cochin) was the first European settlement on the Indian subcontinent. Indeed, our tour of the Fort Kochi enclave boasts several notable remnants of colonial Europe. Mattancherry Palace, with its stunning murals of scenes from the Indian epics, was built by the Portuguese for the local Raja in 1555. St Francis Church reflects the tides of imperial fortune with both Portuguese and Dutch tombstones, and its newer British monument to the fallen of the First World War. Even the Dhobi Khana — a laundry collective where proud wallahs still wield the heavy flat-irons of their ancestral trade — can trace its origins to the need to keep colonial officers' uniforms pristine.

But long before European carracks and *fluyts* sailed here across the Arabian Sea, Kochi was an important trading centre, proffering spices to Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, Romans and Chinese since 3000 BC. Chief among these was pepper — a spice indigenous to Kerala. To date, Kochi is a leader in the global spice trade and is home to the International Pepper Exchange.

Pepper, too, remains a cornerstone of the local cuisine — together with coconut in its many forms — according to Kerala cooking guru, Nimmy Paul. Known for her focus on technique and her dedication to teaching that to others, Nimmy has appeared three times at the American Culinary Institute in Napa and has featured regularly in the international press. At her elegant Kochi cooking school, she takes us through the preparation of *Mezukuperry* (a garlic-and-chile-seasoned vegetable stir-fry); then a marinated prawn dish that makes the most of her *uruli* cookware (hammered from heavy bell metal). The Masala Curry fish up next is a recipe from her mother, she says, who died four years ago today. As she sautés ginger and garlic in coconut oil and adds curry leaves and coconut milk, Nimmy's





references to her mother speak to a close life-long bond — as do a pair of tender photographs that I discover on an ensuing kitchen prow. Lunch includes a velvety squash soup and other entrées along with the demo dishes, and is presented in a series of beautifully plated courses, each dish more refined than fiery.

As with most perennial centres of trade, Kerala's cultural influences are diverse, evident not only in the series of building renovations that occurred at the hands of successive conquerors, but in the religious composition of the populace — which is 19 percent Christian, 25 percent Moslem and 55 percent Hindu. The cuisine reflects these myriad influences, too, and — in a break from most regions of India — includes beef.

The cultural diversity extends to the countryside, where we see elements of cross-pollination in religious architecture — such as the lotus flower that anchors a cross on a Roman Catholic church in Chennamkary village, and the Hindu-style pillar and tiered oil lamps that mark the church entrance. The man who points these out to us is Thomas Zacharia: rice farmer, Sunday School teacher, and our guide through the backwaters region of Alleppey. His is a Syrian Christian family, whose ancestors were among the first to begin the reclamation process that created these islands around 1000 AD — and his parents were the first in the area to begin hosting visitors, long before bridge construction put Kerala's scenic backwaters on the tourist trail.

But their Green Palms Homestay is less about the comfortable accommodation than it is about sharing the rhythms of community life with their guests: the cycles of flooding and draining the fields that produce short, fluffy Keralan rice; the nurturing of coconut groves for oil, milk, toddy and coir; the snake boat races, weddings and other rituals that mark the calendars of Hindu, Christian and Moslem neighbours alike. As we walk along the dikes and past the heavily nodding rice stalks, Thomas greets each villager by name. We take to the water in traditional jackfruit-and-coir canoes — an eco-friendly alternative to the houseboats whose burgeoning numbers now place serious strain on local waterways. Enamoured with kingfisher and bee-eater spotting, and the call-and-response folk songs chanted by Thomas and his canoe crew, we arrive late for the lunch prepared by Thomas' mother Anna and siblings, Maria and Matthew. It's a veritable feast of traditional Keralan food.»

Cook

LETTERS FROM THE EDGE



NIMMY PAUL

INDIA

SERVES 2-4  
AS PART OF AN INDIAN MEAL

## Mezukuperatty

### Garlic Stir-Fried Vegetables

*THIS STIR-FRY PERFECTED* by Nimmy Paul is an excellent way to use any vegetables in season. Experiment with your own favourite combinations.

#### Vegetables

1 cup, cubed or julienned

#### Shallots

5, minced

#### Garlic

5 cloves, minced

#### Curry Leaves

1 sprig (10-15 leaves)

#### Chile Flakes

¼ tsp

#### Ground Turmeric

¼ tsp

#### Coconut Oil

1 Tbs

Salt to taste

- 1 IF** using hard vegetables like potatoes, yams, beets, etc., parboil first with a few curry leaves, or chop finely.
- 2 CRUSH** the shallots and garlic together with salt in a mortar and pestle. Heat the oil in a heavy pan over medium-low heat. Add the crushed ingredients and cook until softened.
- 3 STIR** in the turmeric, curry leaves and chile flakes. Cook until caramel coloured.
- 4 ADD** the vegetables and stir-fry until tender.



SERVES 2-4 AS PART OF AN INDIAN MEAL

## Masala Curry Fish

*THIS FISH RECIPE, handed down to Nimmy Paul by her mother, features classic elements of Keralan cuisine — especially coconut milk and coconut oil.*

**Fish** 250 g, cut into pieces

**Coconut Oil**  
1 Tbs

**Red Onion**  
1 large, minced

**Green Chile**  
1, minced

**Fresh Ginger**  
1" piece, crushed

**Garlic**  
3 cloves, minced

**Cumin Seed**  
½ tsp

**Apple Cider Vinegar** 1 Tbs

**Indian Chile Powder** 1 tsp

**Ground Turmeric**  
¼ tsp

**Curry Leaves**  
1 sprig  
(10-15 leaves)

**Coconut Milk**  
½ cup

- 1 HEAT** the oil over medium heat in a clay pot or coated (Teflon or enamel) pan. Add the onion, chile, ginger, garlic and cumin seed and stir gently until caramel coloured. Stir in the cider vinegar. Remove from heat to cool slightly.
- 2 MIX** the chile powder and turmeric in 2 Tbs water to create a paste. Add to the pot and return to the heat. Stir gently, cooking until the oil begins to separate from the mixture.
- 3 STIR** in the curry leaves. Add the fish pieces, stirring gently to coat with the masala sauce. Cover and simmer until fish is done, about 10 minutes.
- 4 JUST** before serving, drizzle in the coconut milk and combine gently.



«including salads rife with coconut and pink flower petals; curries of duck (a local specialty), fish, water buffalo and potatoes; and sides of rice, *uddapams* and chutneys — all served on a large banana leaf and eaten with our fingers.

Then we're on the road again, heading inland through plantations of rubber and tea, climbing ever higher among the steep slopes of the Western Ghats. Our destination is the Spice Village Resort in Thekkady, one of twenty CGH Earth Experience hotels scattered across Kerala and Tamil Nadu, each eco-sensitive and individually designed to capture the essence of the place in which it is located. As we settle into thatched cottages modeled on those of the local Manan people, the night scent wafting through the 12-acre botanical garden leaves no question as to where we are: deep in the heart of spice country.

It's here that I commune over *podu kappi* with the shy langur monkeys. Here, too, that before my breakfast *dhosa* (a millet flour crepe, with sweet or savoury accompaniments), I choose from a selection of herbal tonics (like cumin-rich *jeera* water, or pink tea infused with sweet pathimugam bark). And here that the staff of 50 Mile Restaurant guide me through the tongue-twisting local specialties created from ingredients sourced — you guessed it — within fifty miles — and where I add a fiery quail dish and a dried beef salad to my list of Keralan favourites.

But there's much to discover beyond the resort. Beneath the pepper vines and nutmeg trees of Abraham's Spice Garden, Mr Abraham picks leaves and fruits for us to smell and taste from an encyclopedic collection of tropical edibles nurtured over 65 years by his grandfather and himself. A tall jackfruit anchors the garden as a bulwark against hunger, should all else fail — but it seems little fails here among the cacao and coffee, ginger and galangal, turmeric, basil, cardamom and citrus. Some of this edible wonderland finds its way into the curries and *thorans* of another banana-leaf-plated lunch — and we plunder more from the shelves of Abraham's comprehensive spice shop.

STEVE DUNK



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD FROM TOP LEFT River crossing, Periyar National Park; Thomas of Green Palms Homestay, Alleppey; Church spire, Alleppey; Ingredients for aloo masala, Bar-B-Que Thekkady.



**Mattancherry Palace**  
[www.facebook.com/pages/Mattancherry-Palace/129122997130152?rf=231064910262843](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Mattancherry-Palace/129122997130152?rf=231064910262843)

**St Francis Church**  
[www.stfrancischurch.org](http://www.stfrancischurch.org)

**Dhobi Khana**  
[www.facebook.com/pages/Dhobi-Khana/2090442787848243](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Dhobi-Khana/2090442787848243)

**At Home with Nimmy & Paul**  
[www.nimmypaul.com](http://www.nimmypaul.com)

**Green Palms Homestay**  
[www.greenpalmshomes.com](http://www.greenpalmshomes.com)

**Spice Village Resort (50 Mile Restaurant)**  
[www.cghearth.com/spice-village](http://www.cghearth.com/spice-village)

For prime waterfront accommodations in Fort Kochi, check out sister hotel, Brunton Boatyard  
[www.cghearth.com/brunton-boatyard](http://www.cghearth.com/brunton-boatyard)

**Abraham's Spice Garden**  
[www.abrahamspice.com](http://www.abrahamspice.com)

**Periyar National Park**  
[www.periyartigerreserve.org](http://www.periyartigerreserve.org)

**Bar-B-Que Thekkady**  
[barbqthekkady@gmail.com](mailto:barbqthekkady@gmail.com)

Nearby Periyar National Park is an important tiger and elephant reserve, and the traditional homelands of two indigenous groups — semi-nomadic hunters, fishers and honey-harvesters whose ancestors may have arrived here in the first wave of homo sapiens out of Africa. Under the sharp-sighted guidance of indigenous park rangers Raj and Prakash, we discover monkeys and mongoose among the birdlife and wildflowers, and wild dogs on a sambar deer kill. Raj outlines the symbiotic relationship between a caterpillar and its host plant as thoroughly as he stalks a Malabar Grey Hornbill for an optimum photo-op. His palpable passion — as he cradles a newly-hatched dragonfly in his palm, or points to a quartet of Kerala bison cresting a ridge — is more than a little contagious, and our wildlife experiences become an indelible trip highlight.

If Raj is passionate, then Sheril — a former *tuk-tuk* driver and creator of Bar-B-Que Thekkady — is positively ebullient. In an energetic hands-on cooking experience, Sheril and his family guide our vegetable-chopping, coconut-grating and bread-shaping efforts, as we scribble notes and try to digitally capture both technique and laughter for posterity. I thrill in twirling and coiling the dough for my favourite *paratha* bread. Eventually, we enjoy the fruits of our labour with Sheril's signature dish — chicken marinated in spices for seven hours, then barbecued over a charcoal fire. Conscious that my Keralan highlands sojourn is coming soon to an end, I help myself to seconds and make a silent vow: to replicate Sheril's remarkable pineapple curry in my kitchen back home.

And, before I leave Kerala, to savour one more *podu kappi* in the morning mist.

Calgary-based food and travel writer **CATHERINE VAN BRUNSCHOT** booked her tour to Kerala and beyond with Alberta Food Tours [www.albertafoodtours.ca](http://www.albertafoodtours.ca) and is still trying to replicate Sheril's pineapple curry. You can read more of her work at [www.catherinevanbrunschot.com](http://www.catherinevanbrunschot.com)