



Indian Council for Cultural Relations  
संस्कृत संस्थान, नया दिल्ली  
Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre  
High Commission of India, Colombo

# Sanskarika

Newsletter of the Swami Vivekananda Cultural Centre

DECEMBER 2023



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### CUISINE

# A PLATEFUL OF TRADITIONS

Christmas is one time of the year the Christian community looks forward to the most. It is the day when families gather to celebrate the birth of Christ, attend midnight masses and gorge on festive treats. The dining table on Christmas afternoon is traditionally filled with an assortment of different meat and vegetable delicacies, which would seldom be made at any other time of the year. And celebrations in India are no different, save a few variations in traditional culinary delights. Take for example, Kerala's rendition of the Christmas

roast chicken that is cooked in a cheena chali (a local version of kadai in Kerala resembling a Chinese wok) is a far cry from the Western style of preparing it in the oven. It is served with dark caramelised onions, crispy fried potatoes and a rich brown broth with accents of clove and cinnamon made by deglazing the pot once the chicken is done. The result does, however, resemble a Western roast chicken in appearance, yet it is far juicier, a texture owed to the reverse braising technique used to prepare it.



*Rich rum balls are traditional sweet treats that are relished during Christmas. This truffle-like confectionery cake is flavoured with chocolate and rum and are often stuffed with almond or glazed cherries to accentuate the taste.*

In Kerala, where I grew up in a Christian home, we would sip on homemade pineapple or grape wine that my grandmother (ammamma) carefully stored in her cool, dark alic for months. Another delicacy that is hard to shake off from memory is ammamma's frill, a deep green coconut curry with tenderloin, potato and thickly-sliced onions. Seasonal vegetables like koorka (a small furry tuber also known as Chinese potato), stir-fried with red chilli and garlic, balanced out the meats. An endless supply of her ubiquitous Christmas plum cake meant that we could nibble on it post breakfast, for tea and even as an after-dinner dessert. In India, and

across the world, Christmas is when families and communities come together in celebration over gifts, cake and elaborate feasts. Given that Christianity's origins in India date back almost 2,000 years, different regions across the country have evolved their own distinct traditions. Although Christianity is represented in only 2.3 per cent of India's population, there are several prominent Christian communities spread across the country, especially in the states of Goa, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and in the Northeastern states of Nagaland, Meghalaya and Mizoram.

Evidently, the food-related traditions in these places have



been shaped by how Christianity spread in that region. The people, establishments or influences that brought the faith to different parts of the country have determined the kind of practices that have evolved there. For example, apostle Thomas, who arrived from present-day Jerusalem is credited for introducing the religion to Kerala in 52 AD. This means that the cultural and culinary customs in Kerala would vary from that of Goan Christians who were colonised by the Portuguese in the 16th century. Diasporic Christian communities like the Anglo Indians, who emerged as a direct result of the British Raj, have their own set of traditions.

Mangaluru, in Karnataka, also has a significant population of Christians – many of whom migrated from Goa. According to popular Youtuber and city resident Avril Rodrigues, Christmas in her city is synonymous with kuswar – an assortment of Mangalorean Christmas treats comprising homemade guli-yos (crunchy fried rice marbles), nevri-yos (coconut and sesame-stuffed wheat pastries) and rice laddus. In Puducherry, Anita de Canaga and her mother Pushpa run a small venture named Chez Pushpa, a reservations-only home-cooked meal experience with a focus on French-influenced Puducherry

cuisine. The grand feasts in lieu of Christmas generally begin a week prior here, with the family and the neighboring community coming together to exchange food and gifts. “Banana sweet vadas are prepared first, while reciting a prayer to signify an auspicious start to the festivities. The ingredients are split urad dal, ripe bananas, sugar and oil,” de Canaga recounts fondly. A host of such other pastries and sweets as nei murukkus, ghee balls, laddoos and a decadent called adarasam (a deep-fried dessert soaked in sugar syrup made with rice flour, ghee and cardamom) are also prepared in the week preceding Christmas. These are traditionally distributed to neighbours and relatives before being consumed in-house. On Christmas day, the menu is an elaborate one with specialties like vivikam cake, the Puducherry take on the Christmas plum cake, and the vennaipu!u, a flan-like dessert made with rice flour, coconut milk and sugar. A simple creole salad of boiled eggs, carrots, beetroot, tomatoes and beans dressed with vinegar, olive oil, salt and freshly-ground black pepper is customary as well. The piece de resistance, however, is the fragrant meat biriyani that is served with tomato

sweet chutney, onion pachadi (traditional onion chutney) and aubergine tamarind chutney.

Christmas festivities typically begin by the end of November in Nagaland, where red meat dishes are especially relished. A member of the state’s indigenous Ao tribe, Lipokienla Echa points out, “The most special Christmas dish is the pongsen. Literally translating to ‘cooking inside bamboo’, it is prepared with cubed meat, which is cooked along with ginger, garlic and fresh bamboo shoots inside a hollow bamboo stem.” Another Christmas specialty of Nagaland is the sticky rice biscuit. Made using the indigenous red sticky rice, the rice grains are first ground into flour and mixed with lukewarm water and jaggery, after which it is flattened with the palms and carefully fried. Goa’s distinct traditions and food associated with Christmas are perhaps more popular than other parts of the country. But apart from the sugar-glazed curly sweets called kulkuls, there are many recipes which aren’t as common. Margarida Tavora who owns the celebrated Goan-Portuguese restaurant Nostalgia in South Goa reminisces the unique sweets which were prepared



*Bolinhos de limão or lemon cupcakes, a favourite Goan Christmas treat, is often decorated with whipped cream*



*Cod fish croqueles or pasteis de bacalhau are served as appetisers before the main course in a traditional Goan Christmas meal*

in Portuguese-influenced Goan households back in the 1950s. The Goan version of the date-and-nut Christmas pie called torta de nozes e tamara incorporates jaggery and sesame in addition to the dry fruits and nuts used in Portugal. Teias de aranha are pearly white, tender coconut strips cooked in sugar and presented on star-shaped paper cutouts. Papos de anjos or angel's chin – another dessert of Portuguese origin – is made by whipping leftover egg yolks with sugar. There's also bolinhos de limão or lemon cupcakes, queijadinhas or coconut custard tarts. Goa's savoury contribution to Christmas foods is extensive as well. Meals could

begin with pasteis de bacalhau or cod fish croqueles and rissois de camarão or crumbed prawn turnovers, and be followed by oyster pies and oven-roasted meat.

Even though many grand old traditions across the country are disappearing, there are attempts being made to preserve and celebrate some as well. Nahoum & Sons, an iconic bakery located in the historic New Market in Kolkata, has been making their rich fruit cake ever since Israel Nahoum, who arrived from Baghdad, set up shop in 1902. Although this Jewish bakery has over 140 products in its arsenal, the rich fruit cake and plum cake are

undoubtedly its most popular, especially during Christmas. Isaac Nahoum, the current fourth-generation owner of the establishment, shares the secret to their consistent success. "An uncompromising focus on high-quality ingredients with unique techniques that enable us to keep the prices well below that of our closest competitors," he says confidently. Hunger Inc Hospitality Pvt. Ltd. is a Mumbai-based restaurant company which manages the regional Indian restaurants The Bombay Canteen and O Pedro. Both the eateries have consistently indulged in India-inspired Christmas menus over the years. Whether it is a spin on dishes like traditional delicacies and rice porridge from Nagaland, or the east Indian meat preparations, guests have always gotten a taste of the real Indian Christmas that they otherwise rarely have access to. O Pedro's exquisite Christmas menu this year, put together by executive chef Hussain Shahzad and pastry chef Heena Punwani,

boasts dishes like broccoli escabeche, canned sardines and Christmas strawberry pie. The company's latest venture Bombay Sweet Shop helmed by chief mithaiwala (sweet maker) Girish Nayak offers a special Christmas dessert menu this season with chocolate rum balls, kaju (cashew) marzipan bonbons and winter spice chocolate butterscotch barks reminiscent of the Christmas cake.

Although Christmas culinary traditions unique to India seem to be losing its sheen in recent years, the sentiment of coming together with family and loved ones over good food is still very much intact. In my own family, with my grandmother having passed away a few years ago, the Christmas spread may not be as elaborate or extravagant as she would've made it. But her roast chicken and duck curry certainly continue to be on the menu. And hopefully this year, we'll get it right with the frill as well.



#### THOMAS ZACHARIAS

*Thomas Zacharias is a celebrity chef and the former head of the kitchen at The Bombay Canteen, a Mumbai-based restaurant that was awarded first place in India's top 50 premium dining establishments by Condé Nast Traveller in 2018.*

Source : India Perspectives | Issue 6 | 2020

# Events Calendar – December 2023

SATURDAY	<b>2</b> 10.00am - 2.00pm	<b>Food festival</b> celebrate the Christmas Season with Indian Food Festival Venue: SVCC Auditorium
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THURSDAY TO FRIDAY	<b>7 &amp; 8</b> 4.00 pm - 6.00 pm	<b>YOGA FOR DANCERS</b> by Ms. Nishali Silva Mohiniyaattam dancer Venue: SVCC Auditorium
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TUESDAY	<b>12</b> 7.00am	<b>Online Yoga</b> On the occasion of International Health Coverage Day <b>YOGIC PRINCIPLES OF HEALTHY LIVING</b> by Ajay Kumbhar, Yoga Expert from India
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THURSDAY	<b>14</b> 6.00 pm	<b>'Narthaka Utsav 2023'</b> In collaboration with Abhinayaksehra School of Dance Performers: Shri Shankar Kandasamy (Head of Bharathanatyam Faculty, Temple of Fine Arts, Malaysia) Shri Mohanapriyan Thavarajah (Principal Dancer & Resident Choreographer, Apsaras Arts Dance Company, Singapore) Venue: SVCC Auditorium
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<b>Festival Opening at Jaffna Cultural Centre</b>	6.00 pm <b>14 to 19</b>	THURSDAY TO TUESDAY
<b>9<sup>th</sup> Edition of Jaffna International Cinema Festival</b>		

<b>International Conference on Sanskrit</b> In collaboration with Department of Languages, Bhiksu University of Sri Lanka, Venue: Anuradhapura	<b>20</b>	WEDNESDAY
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<b>Online Yoga</b> <b>YOGA FOR NERVOUSNESS</b> by Ajay Kumbhar, Yoga Expert from India	<b>26</b> 7.00 am	SUNDAY
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Free Events. All are cordially invited.

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