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Kerala Food

By Liz Canham

Kerala is situated on the South West coast of India right beside Tamil Nadu. The capital is Cochin with its bustling harbour lined with fishing nets and home to fishing boats of all shapes and sizes.

Much of the architecture has been influenced by the Chinese who traded along the coast leaving legacy of cooking pots similar to woks, cleavers and pickling jars. As well as the Chinese, the abundance of spices in Kerala attracted the attentions of the early Phoenicians, Syrians, Egyptians, Greeks and Romans all of whom were happy just to trade and return home. Fighting over the territory didn't begin until the late 15th Century when the British, Dutch, Portuguese and French tried to stake their claims to the spice riches. The British ended up the victors and set up a factory and depot dealing in spices in Tellicherry, a name still associated with good quality pepper.

Black pepper is prolific in Kerala and makes a major contribution to India's input of one third of the world's production. Cardamom too is a native here and the warm, damp growing conditions are ideal for ginger and turmeric rhizomes to flourish.

Kerala is famous for its inland waterways including lakes, lagoons, canals and rivers, collectively known as backwaters, bordered by tropical, lush, greenery and paddy fields as well as homes and schools. The backwaters provide a road network along which transport in the form of canoes, grass-thatched rice boats and overloaded water buses ply their trade.

Kerala means "land of the coconuts" and no part of the coconut is wasted – the oil is used for frying and the dressing of hair. The flesh appears in a large number of cooked dishes and the coir which is produced from the husk of the coconut, is used to make floor mats, mattresses and many handicrafts.

Fish is big business here – a lot of prawns are exported to Japan and USA, having first been peeled and sorted by size by an all-woman workforce and frozen. Squid too goes to Japan as well as frogs' legs to France but the majority is eaten locally.

There are many methods of fishing – Chinese fishing nets attached to upright wooden poles catch what is swimming by. The nets are raised and lowered with ropes and the catch extracted. Trawlers fish

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the deeper waters and, as elsewhere, fill their nets with anything and everything which can't escape through the mesh.

On some beaches you can buy fresh caught pomfret, tiger prawns, red snapper, crabs and mullet, to name but a few and have it stir-fried at a shack where a quick sauce of garlic and shallots is tossed with turmeric and chilli.

The fishermen eat what they call Boatman's Curry. It uses meaty fish steaks such as cod, swordfish or salmon, cooked in a thick spice paste (red chillies, cayenne pepper, paprika, ground coriander, turmeric and grated coconut) which is first fried then mixed with tamarind paste, green chillies, ginger, shallots and salt.

Apart from fish, a popular celebration meal is "stew" for especially for Christians at the end of fasting for Lent. Made from boneless lamb shoulder with potatoes and carrots simmered in spicy sauce of

cardamom, cinnamom, cloves, curry leaves, ginger green chillies and onion with coconut milk added at the end, it resembles a spicy Irish stew.

Another favourite lamb dish is shoulder meat stewed with fennel, spices, vinegar and toasted coconut chips. The sauce is allowed to dry out so it clings to the meat and the dish is finished with fried mustard seeds, shallots and curry leaves.

Duck and chicken are readily available and vegetable dishes are common as many Hindus are vegetarian. Whatever the vegetable, it will very often be mixed with coconut.

Local boiled red rice is eaten with every meal and sometimes appams which are rice pancakes with a spongy centre. Ginger chutney or yoghurt with pineapple may also be served.

Favourite snacks are paper-thin slices of plantain or banana deep fried in coconut oil – the Keralan equivalent of western potato chips.

Liz Canham: As well as a love of Asian cooking and travel as you can see in her

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