

# THE HINDU

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FLAVOURS

## Time-tested and traditional

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There's more to Chettinad cuisine than just the spice factor. Read on...

Photo: Special Arrangement



**The famous kuzhi paniyaram...**

Though the next gen professes to be "with it", can afford fine dining, love fusion food and rave over international cuisine, they keep coming back to comfort food, which is home cooked using Amma's traditional repertoire of dishes. In the kitchens of yore it was only oral tradition that led to cooking everyday food that the whole family enjoyed. With the support of discerning publishers like Westland who encourage traditional cooks to document their culinary skills, languishing recipes have been retrieved and revived with a little tweaking, of course.

Alamelu Vairavan has effectively capsuled about 170 recipes in her book Chettinad Kitchen drawing upon the expertise of experienced cooks in extended families besides her own. Her move to the U.S. as a young bride without knowledge of cooking nudged her into learning from a professional cook employed by her aunt in New York. Generally speaking, one appreciates traditional cooking, when one is whisked away to foreign lands, and the hankering for childhood favourites leads to constructive action.

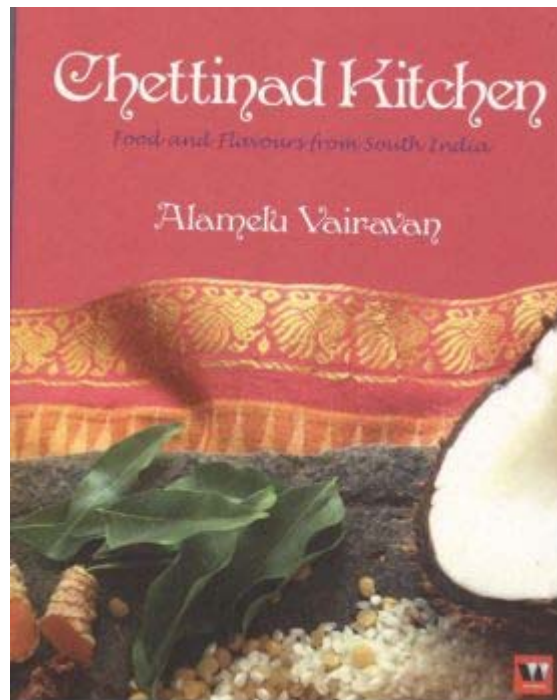
### Non-fussy and direct

I appreciate a cookbook which is non-fussy and direct, offering clear instructions, readable and, of course, doable. Chettinad Kitchen is all that, classifying the recipes into vegetables under different categories like

Accompaniments, Breakfast, Chicken, Chutneys, Desserts, Egg Dishes, Kulambu, Mutton, Pachadi, Rasam, Rice, Sambar, Seafood, Soups, Spice Powders... The list is exhaustive, and each vegetable listed can be used in a variety of ways. It helps to use seasonal vegetables, which flood the market periodically.

If you are a sambar enthusiast there are nine varieties to choose from, and six different rasams including prawn and chicken rasam. The sour gravies are classified as kulambu, most being tamarind-based curries. Black pepper and cumin powder feature in most of the recipes and the author suggests that this be prepared ahead and stored for regular use.

Simply written, even the most amateur of cooks will not find Alamelu's recipes daunting; on the other hand, they work pretty well. The spices have been toned down to suit contemporary taste as living out of India does cause the taste buds to protest when curries and sauces are too fiery and the bite intimidating.



What is puzzling is the inclusion of mushroom, capsicum and zucchini in a traditional cookbook. To use zucchini or broccoli in a poriyal feels strange, and seems out of place. But then there are other time-tested recipes that more than make up.

Like the padappu dosai for instance. The padappu ritual is observed in Chettinad in memory of loved ones who have passed on. This is a special family event and the padapu dosai is served with yoghurt rice and kathrikkai kulambu. The nutritive value being high, this dosai can be relished at any time.

Among the non-vegetarian dishes I would recommend the irachi podimas (stir-fried mutton), meen kulambu (Chettinad fish curry) and garlic and pepper chicken stir fry.

Topping the list of the favourites in vegetarian preparations is the kathrikkai chutney... which I teamed with ven pongal. The other famous Chettinad classic recipes like kuzhipaniyaram (rice dumplings) and vellai paniyaram (white crepes) are also listed here. Finicky dieters should try out the aappam recipe. It has no coconut, and they are safe if they have it with the conventional stew either with chicken or vegetables, which is a Kerala combination! Or you could have it with sweet syrup suggested by the author.

## **Helpful**

What is helpful is a glossary of typical Chettinad dishes, a multilingual glossary of ingredients and a list for you to shop if you are interested in Chettinad food. A few unusual dishes like sundiya (fried meat balls wrapped in plantain bark) could have been included, as there are quite a few books on Chettinad cuisine with run-of-the-mill similar recipes. To me a cookbook should excite with challenging recipes. A book that can be kept on the kitchen shelf for quick reference, Chettinad Kitchen will be appreciated by beginners and seasoned cooks alike.