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Silicon Valley's Chettinad food is as fragrant as it is spicy

By **Jonathan Kauffman**, Food Reporter

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The colorful Thali Vegetable dish at Madras Restaurant in Sunnyvale.
Sophia Germer / The Chronicle



Much like the role New Orleans plays in America's culinary imagination, the tiny South Indian region of Chettinad has a reputation that belies its size, home to what many say is the most aromatic food in India.


If you've eaten in any of Silicon Valley's Indian restaurants, you may have spotted a dish called "Chettinad chicken" on the menu, probably seasoned with fistfuls of black pepper, red chiles and curry leaves. Over the past few years, restaurants that focus more overtly on Chettinad cooking have multiplied in the South Bay, primarily serving an India-born clientele, and the pace at which new ones appear is escalating.

A Chettinad restaurant chain called Anjappar, which has 60 locations in 11 countries, opened its Milpitas branch in 2009 and doubled down with a Santa Clara location in March. Its main competitor in the South Bay, Aachi Aappakadai, has branches in Sunnyvale and Santa Clara. Chettinad dishes are plentiful at Mountain View's Chennai Kings, which opened last summer, and the 3-month-old Madras Restaurant in Sunnyvale.

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Technically, Chettinad food comes from a region in Tamil Nadu state, just west of Madurai and 250 miles south of the city of Chennai (formerly known as Madras). Starting in the late 19th century, Chettiars — who tended to focus on business and finance — migrated across Southeast Asia. Their business acumen has taken them all over India as well, which is how the food of such a tiny region became well known across the subcontinent.

That said, getting a precise definition of Chettinad cuisine — even from Chettiars — can be tricky. Just to complicate matters, all six Silicon Valley restaurants intersperse Chettinad specialties with North Indian standards, dishes popular across South India, and even a few Indo-Chinese stir-fries.

Ask Anjappar co-owner Selvan Sethuraman what makes his food distinctive, and he responds with a paragraph-long list of spices — black peppercorns, star anise, kalpasi (lichen), cinnamon — followed by the names of a few dishes you're likely to find in Chettinad restaurants, such as Chettinad biryani, a garlic curry called poondu kulombu and his signature Anjappar chicken masala.

Ask Alamelu Vairavan the same question, and the Chettinad-born author of “Chettinad Kitchen” and host of the PBS-TV show “Healthful Indian Flavors with Alamelu” talks about home-cooked dishes: saucy curries called kolumbu, stir-fries called poriyal, and chicken pepper fry, or chicken coated in aromatics and sauteed.

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You'll find both aspects of the cuisine — the homey and the aromatic — on the vegetable thali served at Anjappar's new Santa Clara branch. Surrounding a bowl of basmati rice capped with a toasted lentil wafer are silver cups of a tamarind-soured soup called rasam; soupy sambar (dal with vegetables), dominated by the flavor of toasted pulses (split peas and lentils) and mustard seeds; potatoes stir-fried with turmeric and coconut; deep red beet poriyal; and chickpeas in a bright-red sauce of tamarind, tomato and chiles.

Anjappar's upscale aspirations — great wooden pillars and ornate latticework, menus that build biceps as you lift them — result in an overlarge selection. But Sethuraman swears 70 percent of the dishes are Chettinad. Plus, it's the only place

where you can find kuli paniarum, tiny saucer-shaped cakes of steamed rice, fried golden and studded with green chiles.

Madras Restaurant, which opened in a Sunnyvale strip mall in January, glances more broadly at Chettinad food. Owner Michael Agnel, who worked at Amber India and All Spice for many years, says his restaurant focuses on the street food of Chennai.

“Back home, the Chettinad influence is everywhere,” Agnel says. “People come from the villages (to Chennai) and they brought their flavors. The original Chettinad dishes are more spicy and more aromatic, but they have influenced the entire state.”

Bracketed by dosas, South Indian biryani and Indo-Chinese food, the heart of Madas Restaurant's compact menu is a section labeled “Chettinad express dishes.” Diners choose either a vegetable korma — coconut and mustard seeds are its base note, cinnamon floating over the top — or a doubly spicy chicken salnaa, where chiles and black peppercorns jostle for dominance.

Then they choose the accompaniment: steamed coils of skinny rice noodles, called iddiyapam; quarter-inch thick kal dosas, spongy and a little sour; fluffy steamed iddlis; or Agnel's specialty, egg labba parotta, a hand-stretched crepe capped with a layer of scrambled egg.

The curry-plus-accompaniment sets are a good, inexpensive entry point to the cuisine. You can find them at the tiny Chennai Kings, where Chettinad goat and seafood dishes are scattered throughout a broadly Tamil menu, as well as at the expansive Aachi Aappakadai in Sunnyvale, which draws families and packs of tech workers in equal numbers.

Aachi Aappakadai owner Kalidoss Raju, a Chettiar who grew up in Madurai, says he built the restaurant around rice-flour crepes called appam, from a recipe his grandmother perfected at a roadside stand.

Crepes, not surprisingly, are on every table. Some are parotta, flaky wheat breads served with Chettinad chicken or chopped up and stir-fried with egg. Most are appam, which resemble bowls made of white lace that slowly deflate as diners tear them apart. The crepes are coconut-sweet, spongy at their centers and crisp around the edges.

Aachi Aappakadai's Chettinad dishes are so aromatic you can smell the spices across the parking lot. Raju cites mutton roast, fish kolumbu and a whole crab smothered in a curry-leaf-dominated gravy as his best-sellers. Hitting the apex of fragrance, though, is the restaurant's nattukozhi kolumbu, which tastes as if South India engaged in a "So You Think You Can Spice" competition with Thailand.

Available only on weekends, the "country chicken" curry is the color of wet clay. Like most Tamil dishes, curry leaves, onions and toasted pulses form the backbone of flavor.

But that's only the base layer. As you dip a piece of appam into the gravy, the scents of star anise, cinnamon, fresh ginger and cloves rocket out as if propelled by springs. Black pepper is used to a buzzy degree, and there's a haunting floral note whose source Raju won't divulge.

With chile heat pitched to reverberate at the same frequency as the other spices, nattukozhi kolumbu makes sweat bead up around your lips and eyelashes, and may force you to grasp involuntarily at anything bland in reach.

A more aromatic dish in Silicon Valley would be hard to find. The fact that you can find it at all is good news. As the Chettinad diaspora continues, another continent waits to fall under its spell.

Jonathan Kauffman is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: jkauffman@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @jonkauffman

Where to find Chettinad food

Aachi Aappakadai: 1105 W. El Camino Real, Sunnyvale; (408) 732-2244. Also 3075 El Camino Real, Santa Clara; (408) 243-2778. www.aachiaappakadai.com Lunch and dinner daily.

Top choices: Appam with vegetable khurma (\$8.49) or goat curry (\$8.99), egg kothu paratha (\$9.49), iddiapam with chicken curry (\$8.99), nattukozhi kolumbu (\$9.99, weekends only).

Anjappar: 458 Barber Lane, Milpitas; (408) 435-5500. Also 777 Lawrence Expressway, Santa Clara; (408) 243-5500. www.anjapparca.com Lunch and dinner daily.

Top choices: Kuli paniarum (\$8.50); fish or vegetable thali (\$11.95); special Anjappar chicken, either dry or in a curry (\$10.95/\$11.95); kothu parotta (\$2.95).

Madras Restaurant: 1635 Hollenbeck Ave., Sunnyvale; (408) 245-2111. www.madras-restaurant.com Lunch and dinner daily.

Top choices: Egg labba parotta with chicken salnaa (\$10.50); kal dosa with vegetable korma (\$7.50).

Chennai Kings: 856 El Camino Real, Suite A, Mountain View. (650) 938-1333.

www.chennaikings.us Lunch and dinner daily.

Top choices: Meen varuval (grilled fish, \$9.99), Chettinadu shrimp curry (\$10.99), kal dosa (\$3).

Common Chettinad dishes

First-time visitors to Chettinad restaurants may want to start with a thali (combo dinner) or one of the sets that pair a bread or dumpling with a curry. Here are a few other dishes you may see:

Kuli paniarum (crisp rice dumplings)

Meen varuval (fish coated in spices)

Chicken pepper fry

Kotthu parotta (flaky flatbread stir-fried with egg or meat)

Poondu kolumbu (garlic curry)

Nattukozhi kolumbu (country chicken)

Meen kolumbu (fish curry)

Mutton or goat biryani

Crab masala

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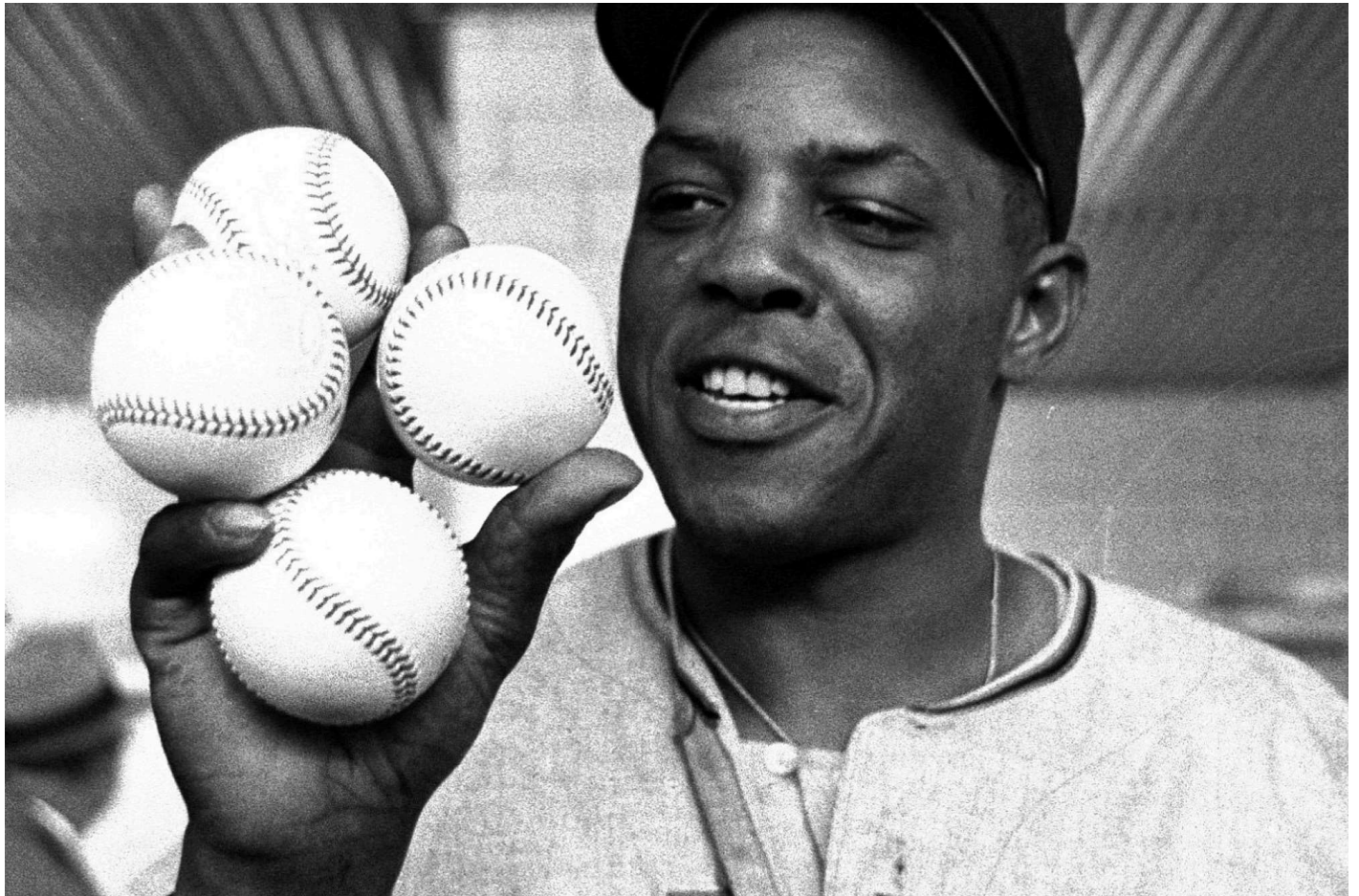
**Jonathan Kauffman**

FOOD REPORTER



Jonathan Kauffman has been writing about food for The Chronicle since the spring of 2014. He focuses on the intersection of food and culture — whether that be profiling chefs, tracking new trends in nonwestern cuisines, or examining the impact of technology on the way we eat.

After cooking for a number of years in Minnesota and San Francisco, Kauffman left the kitchen to become a journalist. He reviewed restaurants for 11 years in the Bay Area and Seattle (East Bay Express, Seattle Weekly, SF Weekly) before abandoning criticism in order to tell the stories behind the food. His first book, “Hippie Food: How Back-to-the-Landers, Longhairs and Revolutionaries Changed the Way We Eat,” was published in 2018.

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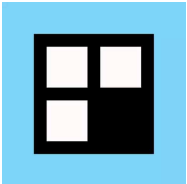
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