

A mango tart with history

Rakesh Raghunathan demonstrates how flexible heritage rice can be, conjuring it into inventive dishes and contemporary desserts at Amethyst's Wild Garden Cafe

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Let me tell you about dessert first: I cannot wait till the last paragraph. The mango phirni tart arrived like a slice of sunshine, featuring a resplendent yellow filling topped by slivers of Alphonso mangoes. As I scoop it out, I realise the mango has been blended into a phirni made of *thooyamalli*, an indigenous fine grained, fragrant rice from the Kanchipuram region in South India.

Next came the *Riz au Lait*, a French dessert made using *navara* rice and milk pudding with a hint of espresso caramel, which adds a fragrant, smoky note. *Navara* is unique to Kerala and is known for its immunity building medicinal properties.

The desserts are part of a menu put together by Chennai-based food historian Rakesh Raghunathan for a festival organised in collaboration with Sempulam (CIKS) and Amethyst's Wild Garden



Cafe. Sempulam, a Centre for Indian Knowledge Systems, has been helping communities create an all-natural food produce ecosystem by working with farmers and buyers for the past 27 years.

“The highlight here is the use of various varieties of indigenous or heritage rice. I have exclusively developed In-

Taste of the season The tart is filled with a mango phirni made with the heritage rice, *thooyamalli* ■ SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

dian recipes for this festival with a twist, and have also innovated certain dishes from other cultures,” says Rakesh, adding, “This provides a platform to present our unique rice varieties and showcase their distinctive flavours and textures.”

He worked with the restaurant's kitchen for over a month to put together the menu, which includes *kaivari samba ven pongal* arancini, Italian-inspired rice spheres filled with cheese, then coated with bread crumbs and deep fried. *Kaivari samba* is a tasty rice from the dry region of Tiruvannamalai, reportedly rich in calcium, magnesium and folic acid.

There is also a *kalanamak* Bannur mutton pulav. The stone flower compliments the aroma of *kalanamak* rice well in this preparation. *Kalanamak* also known as Buddha rice, has a low glycemic index, and is said to contain more than 40 minerals.

“When the tsunami struck in 2004,

the farmers in the Nagapattinam district were hit as sea water had entered the farm lands making paddy cultivation impossible, we intervened and helped by way of identifying saline resistant *Kalarpalai* rice. Then during the subsequent years, the farmers benefited by adapting to this variety,” says Vijayalakshmi, director, Sempulam Sustainable Solutions.

She adds, “We found out that *Kalanamak*, grown in UP, was also saline resistant and got those seeds for our farmers: that is how we brought this rice variety into Tamil Nadu.” Vijayalakshmi goes on to explain how indigenous rice varieties tend to be hardy, as many are saline resistant, pest resistant and even drought resistant.

Rakesh also recreated the national dish of the Egyptians, the *Koshari*, for this menu, using the *kuzhiyadichan* variety of rice, which blends well with mildly spiced lentils, tomato puree, chickpeas and pasta. *Kuzhiyadichan*, grown in the water starved Ramnad belt in Tamil Nadu, is known for high nutritional value and flavour.

K Vijayalakshmi says there is an in-

creased awareness about the high nutritional value of indigenous rice. She adds that they are hoping this festival will encourage the urban population to gain first-hand experience of how versatile indigenous rice can be and thereby widen the market for it.

For my main course, I choose Anandanoor *sanna thenga pal sadam* (coconut milk pulav), which is rich with coconut milk and an abundance of ghee. Cultivated in Andhra region, this unpolished rice has delicious flavour.

For non-vegetarians, there is *mullan kaima*, a variety of rice grown by the tribals in the Wayanad belt of Kerala, loaded with minerals and vitamins, and Kongu Nadu mutton biriyani.

Rakesh also cleverly uses *Karunkuruvai* rice, which has a pleasing nutty flavour (instead of the usual arborio) to make a creamy French onion risotto.

As for dessert? Let's pause and think about that *thooyamalli* mango phirni tart one last time.

The Indigenous Rice Food Festival is on at the Wild Garden Cafe, Amethyst from May 13 to 24; 10am to 11pm. For further information, call 45991633.