

Tastings along India's Turmeric Trail

by Lee Daley

Centuries of invasions and immigration, of comings and goings by marauders and merchants have cumulatively left their mark on every corner of Indian culture. This intermingling of influences has created one of the world's most popular cuisines. What better framework, I thought, for a deeper appreciation of the country's culture than through its food? Hardly an original idea but certainly a worthy one.

During my ten-day trip, I visited four different regions of the country. Staying with one hotel group - The Leela- my journey began in Mumbai, went south to the beach resorts of Goa and Kerala, then on to Bangalore, home of high tech and Bollywood. At each destination, I sampled dishes from several different regions of the country and talked with resident chefs, all masters at their craft and passionate about creating consistently memorable meals for the hotels' guests. The meals were incredible. Their knowledge was encyclopedic.

What unifies all Indian dishes is the spices that give them their characteristic fragrance and flavors. No two cooks will turn out the same dish. It's not only the quantity of a particular spice or herb, but the timing. The point in the cooking process when a spice is added and the degree to which it is combined with other spices creates the subtlety and individuality of any particular dish. "It's a feeling in the hands that creates the final result", Maximilano Cotilli told me. Master Chef Max oversees the roof-top Leela Mumbai Stella Restaurant.

When Chef Max arrived in Mumbai directly from Rome three years ago, he was unaccustomed to the number of vegetarian diners he encountered. "For me it was an exciting challenge," he says. All of the Leela Hotels serve both Northern and Southern cuisine. But Mumbai, as an international city, has assimilated western influences too and here you'll often find superb fusion cuisine.

The Mumbai Stella Restaurant Wine List offers more than 200 selections from all over the world but, when I talked with Davide Zubani, Leela's sommelier, he told me about India's newly coined "Napa Valley Region," where Cabernets and Shiraz's are the most important grapes. In the city of Naska, Davide made several blind tastings, comparing Australian Shiraz vintages with locally made Reveilo Reserva Shiraz 2005. This was the winery's first production and he was so impressed, he added this selection to Leela's wine list. "I thought it was Australian for sure," he says, "When I tasted it, I found it to be supple with oaken fruit of marmalade jam and slightly earthy." David's philosophy: "We try not to follow, but to anticipate, to be ahead, to be ready. The goal is to achieve the highest quality in food combined with a wide choice of quality wines."



Each Indian state favors different spices and dishes. Keralans in India's South prefer spicier flavors. Here, free use of turmeric, chilies, mustard, pepper, cloves and cardamom predominates many dishes as does liberal quantities of coconut milk. Along the Keralan coast, locals enjoy fish practically every day.

Generally speaking, Southern recipes call for adding spices individually while in the North, cooks grind various spices and make a pungent powder they call garam masala. Northern food is often richer, more exotic with sauces, butter and saffron creating a spicier menu while, in the South, fish and coconut are mainstays. All regions emphasize freshness and local ingredients.

Spices often serve multiple purposes. For example, turmeric, a spice widely used in curries, is one of nature's most powerful healers. First used as a dye, its medicinal properties have revealed themselves over the centuries. Long known to be an anti-inflammatory, scientists are now finding that turmeric is a natural wonder, benefiting many of mankind's maladies. So pervasive is turmeric that most American baseball fans seldom realize this peppery powerhouse gives the spicy mustard on their ballpark hot dogs its warm yellow color.

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Kerala, itself, located on India's South West coast is where foreign seafarers first set foot on Indian soil. Rumor has it that King Solomon sent his ships to trade off the Malabar Coast as far back as the mid-900s B.C. The Phoenicians, Romans, and Arabs followed and to this day, Arab nationals still commission ships to be built here. Later, when the Portuguese discovered a sea route around Africa, they colonized Goa. Many married local women and settled down. It wasn't until 1961 that India was able to wrest the region away and return it to the Indian Union. Adding to this stewpot of cultural ingredients were the Dutch, the French and the British, all drawn to the abundance of spices literally worth their weight in gold back home. No country in the world produces as many kinds of spices as India. Kerala, called "God's own country," is still the heart of its spice trade.

"In Kerala, herbs and spices are used to enhance flavor, not overpower it. If you're having fish, you should taste the fish," Senior Sous Chef Thomas Joseph told me. We were having tea at The Cafe, Leela's poolside eatery at their Kerala resort hotel. As Chef Thomas told me about his philosophy for the Café, my eyes feasted on the view. We were sitting by one of the two infinity pools. Just beyond, stretching even more infinitely was the azure Arabian Sea. The resort, built on a rock face, sits cradled between two wide-sweeping beaches. The surf below roared ashore, white caps prancing on the sand in a kind of primal dance.

I've just enjoyed the breakfast buffet, a mix of foods typical of The Café's menu which serves mostly continental and South Indian cuisine. Here, however, no one is confined to just the menu. "A guest can request any meal," Chef Thomas says, "and I'll prepare it. Given a bit of notice, I'm happy to prepare Beef Wellington, but what's really important is using locally grown, fresh ingredients."

Two of the Leela Hotels, those in Goa and Kerala, offer the added choice of an Ayurvedic diet, combining the benefits of a medical consultation with an individually tailored diet of healing foods. Ayurvedic medicine, which had its beginnings in Kerala more than 5,000 years ago is a mind/body centered healing tradition. Naturally, many of the individually tailored healing menus use local spices and herbs. Many are actually grown on the hotel grounds.

Called the "Science of Life," Ayurveda considers each individual as a cell in the body of Mother Nature. The Leela's Divya Spa offers everything from a one-day relaxation program to a 28 day Wellness Package. Never one to pass up a massage, I indulged myself with two healing sessions. While each masseuse worked medicinal oils into every pore of my body, anything but relaxation was impossible. Each morning I participated in open-air Yoga classes at sunrise in the mediation hall overlooking the sea. All in all, it was pure Nirvana. My jet lag disappeared for the first time since leaving home and I felt miraculously rejuvenated.

A highlight of my stay in Kerala was a backwater rice boat day trip arranged through the hotel. Endless miles of branching backwaters lace the waterways throughout the state. For a modest fee, I hired a boat for the day. Usually a crew of three or four men works each converted rice boat. While one or two will tend to the cooking in the tiny kitchen at the rear of the vessel, another will be sure to ask, "Cold drink?" Fresh pineapple? Hungry for lunch or tea?" I felt like royalty while glimpsing a tableau of traditional villages interspersed with stretches of wilderness along the riverside. We branched off into more narrow channels bursting with bird life including a magnificently hued kingfisher- crimson, turquoise and white with an orange beak. My houseboat was equipped with a front viewing lounge, private bath, and double bedroom for overnight stays.

When we came to a canal too narrow for the rice boat's bulk, the crew docked at a landing where I climbed into a hand-hewn canoe. A shaded dirt path along the canal passed small villages where washerwomen waved and schoolchildren gave high signs as we passed. Sheltered by coconut palms and fringed with wild ginger, the canal ride was a glide through an impressionistic painting.

For a simple recipe that translates easily to Western kitchens, from Jamavar Restaurant at the Leela Resort in Goa, [click here](#).

Getting there:

Lufthansa Airlines has been flying passengers to India for more than forty years. I flew from San Francisco with a stopover in Frankfurt en route to Mumbai. For such a long haul flight, whenever possible, Business or First Class makes a huge difference is one's state of energy upon arrival. In Business Class, I was able to really stretch out on the flat-bed surface seat that extended to nearly six and a half feet. Food and wine service was also star quality on the intercontinental flight. In Frankfurt, Lufthansa has just opened a deluxe First Class Lounge Area with spacious monsoon showers, hairdryers and bathrobes. A separate Cigar Lounge and Office Units complement the Wining and Dining Areas. Website: www.lufthansa.com, Telephone: 1-800-645-3880.

Where to stay:

Upon arrival at Mumbai International Airport, I was whisked to my hotel, the Leela Mumbai, via their complimentary transfer. Amazingly, the hotel, a mile from the airport, is set amidst eleven acres of lush gardens. The Leela Group was founded by its 86-year-old chairman, Captain C. P. Krishnan Nair. an avid gardener and environmentalist, Conde Nast Traveler Magazine recently named his Leela Palace in Bangalore the Number One business hotel in the world. Under his guidance, several new hotels will open in the next three years. With properties now in Mumbai, Bangalore, Goa and Kerala, the next unveiling near Lake Pichola in Udaipur will be built in the style of a traditional Indian palace. It is scheduled for opening early 2009. For reservations and information to all Leela Palace Hotels, go to www.theleela.com. Email: central.reservations@theleela.com.

Recommended reading:

In her new coffee table book, "Entertaining from an Ethnic Indian Kitchen," author Komali Nunna showcases traditional Indian kitchen secrets. Born in India but now living in Southern California, Nunna has self-published a beautifully illustrated love poem to Indian hospitality.

"The Vale of Kashmir," by Photographer John Isaac with introduction by Art Davidson. While this superb coffee-table photography book depicts an entirely different region of India, it speaks to the universal dignity and strength of the Indian people, to the beauty and diversity of the terrain and to the underlying perseverance of the population. Published by W.W. Norton & Company, New York.



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