The Food of Madras: Culinary Histories and Recipes of a City

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Introduction

Madras—today officially known as Chennai—has always been a city read as much through its kitchens as through its streets and harbors. Waves press against the

Marina while, inland, markets and messes hum with routines that feel eternal and yet are constantly remade. Sailors, students, secretaries, and spice merchants have each left a trace in the way the city eats. This book takes food as a lens on social change, revealing how recipes preserve memory, how markets broadcast power, and how a plate can map the movement of people and ideas across centuries.

The Food of Madras combines culinary history with practical recipes to trace the city’s gastronomic evolution. We move from street stalls to Anglo-Indian kitchens, from bazaar counters to club dining rooms, asking how trade, colonialism, and migration shaped local tastes. Archival fragments—menus, advertisements, handwritten cookbooks, market ledgers—sit alongside oral histories from home cooks, caterers, and stall owners. Each chapter braids narrative with a small suite of workable recipes, inviting readers to test arguments in the most concrete way possible: at the stove and at the table.

A port city learns to eat by negotiating what arrives and what is already beloved. Pepper financed fortunes here long before chilies from the Americas rewrote heat; tomatoes and potatoes found places beside tamarind and drumstick; rice and millets defined daily sustenance even as coffee and sugar traced plantation economies. “Madras curry” traveled outward as a packaged idea while, at home, rasam, sambar, thokku, and podi multiplied in forms as varied as the neighborhoods that make them. Through these exchanges, taste registers the rhythms of trade winds, taxation, scarcity, and celebration.

Colonial rule transformed kitchens as surely as it redrew maps. Local cooks adapted to foreign palates; Anglo-Indian households evolved dishes that were neither entirely British nor wholly indigenous; clubs and cantonments standardized menus that later migrated into canteens and cafeterias. Caste and class shaped who cooked, who ate with whom, and which foods could cross thresholds. At the same time, institutions—railways, colleges, factories—created new publics at long tables, where affordability, speed, and hygiene negotiated with memory and desire.

Migration within and beyond the region continually refreshed the city’s repertoire. Chettinad spicework, Kongunadu pragmatism, and Andhra heat threaded into urban tiffin rooms; coastal Karnataka’s Udipi restaurateurs codified an ethic of efficiency and vegetarian abundance; Sowcarpet’s Marwari and Gujarati communities expanded a vibrant vegetarian marketplace; Muslim traders and craftspeople made festival foods part of the city’s seasonal clock. North Chennai’s Burmese atho stalls, Sri Lankan Tamil kitchens, and the more recent presence of East and Southeast Asian workers in the IT corridors remind us that Madras has never stopped learning new flavors for familiar hungers.

Material culture anchors these stories. An ammikkal’s slow grind, a kal chatti’s gentle heat, an eeya chombu’s resonance in a perfect rasam—each vessel shapes technique

and taste. The wet grinder rearranged domestic labor; the refrigerator changed leftovers and festival planning; the brass coffee filter and dabara-tumbler turned morning into ritual. Attention to tools, fuels, and spaces allows us to read recipes not just as lists of ingredients but as records of technology, time, and touch.

This is a book for food historians and for home cooks equally. Every chapter concludes with recipes that balance fidelity to place with practical guidance: measurements are standardized, techniques are explained, and when an ingredient is hard to find, thoughtful substitutions are offered without flattening the dish’s character. Cook the recipes as you read, and let the results calibrate the arguments; interpretive claims taste different when they simmer on your own stove.

Finally, a note on names and scope: I use “Madras” to signal the longue durée of the city’s foodways and “Chennai” to honor its present. The city’s cuisines are plural and contested; what appears on these pages is an invitation to debate, annotate, and adapt. If the archive lives in libraries, it also lives in tiffin carriers and spice boxes. May these chapters help you read both.

CHAPTER ONE: Shores and Spices: How a Port City Learned to Eat

Long before the East India Company envisioned a trading post on a sliver of the Coromandel Coast, the shores that would become Madras were already ancient arteries of exchange, their sands imprinted by footsteps from distant lands and their air thick with the scent of spices. The Bay of Bengal, far from being a barrier, was a highway, carrying dhows and larger vessels laden with commodities that shaped not just economies, but appetites. This stretch of coastline, with its shifting river mouths and productive hinterland, was a place where food was both sustenance and currency, a testament to the land's bounty and the sea's connections.

The story of Madras's culinary beginnings isn't a singular origin myth, but a tapestry woven from myriad threads of arrival and adaptation. Indigenous communities, adept at coaxing sustenance from the land and sea, had long established patterns of eating centered on millets, rice, and a vibrant array of local produce. Their methods of preparation—grinding, fermenting, pickling—formed the bedrock upon which subsequent layers of influence would settle. These were the first palates, finely tuned to the rhythms of the monsoon and the produce of their immediate environment.

One cannot speak of early coastal foodways without acknowledging the profound impact of pepper. This small, potent berry, native to the Western Ghats, was the true

"black gold" of the ancient world. Long before Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope, Arab, Roman, and later Chinese traders sailed these waters specifically for it. Its presence here wasn't merely a matter of commerce; pepper permeated local dishes, offering a pungent heat that contrasted with the sweetness of jaggery and the sourness of tamarind. It was an essential flavor, deeply embedded in the culinary grammar of the region, and a harbinger of the global exchanges to come.

The bustling port of Mamallapuram, a little south of what would become Madras, stands as an archaeological echo of these early mercantile activities. Here, ships from Rome and other distant empires exchanged gold and wine for textiles, precious stones, and, crucially, spices. The residual culinary impact of these early Roman contacts might be subtle, perhaps in the introduction of certain cooking techniques or preservation methods, but the sheer volume of trade suggests a constant cross-pollination of ideas and goods, including food items that found their way into local diets.

Beyond pepper, a host of other spices—cardamom, turmeric, ginger, and cinnamon—were also part of this vibrant exchange. Each played a role in the evolving flavor profile of the region, contributing to the complex, aromatic layers that define South Indian cuisine even today. These spices weren't just for flavoring; many were valued for their medicinal properties, blurring the lines between food, medicine, and ritual, a distinction that remains fluid in traditional Indian gastronomy.

The land itself provided a diverse larder. The fertile plains fed by rivers like the Cooum and Adyar, though now largely urbanized, were once agricultural hubs. Rice, of course, was paramount, cultivated in wet paddies and forming the basis of countless meals. But alongside it, various millets—ragi, kambu, thinai—thrived in drier conditions, offering a more robust, nutritious alternative, particularly for those engaged in manual labor or living in less irrigated areas. These grains dictated meal structures, from hearty porridges to steamed preparations.

The proximity to the Bay of Bengal meant an abundance of seafood. Fishing communities along the coast developed sophisticated methods for catching and preserving fish. Fresh catches were grilled, curried, or fried, while dried fish—karuvadu—provided a vital source of protein during lean times or for inland communities. The flavors of the sea, often paired with sharp tamarind and fiery chilies (once they arrived), were distinct and deeply cherished, forming a culinary sub-identity within the broader coastal palate.

Coastal salt pans also played a crucial role. Salt, a fundamental seasoning and preservative, was a valuable commodity, shaping trade routes and even political boundaries. The availability of local salt influenced curing processes, allowing for the creation of various pickles and preserved foods that extended the shelf life of seasonal produce and meats, vital in a climate where spoilage was a constant concern.

The arrival of different mercantile communities, particularly Arab traders, brought new ingredients and cooking styles. While the specific culinary contributions are harder to pinpoint from this early period, their presence facilitated the introduction of new preserving techniques and possibly a wider array of dried fruits and nuts. Their long-standing trade networks connected the Coromandel Coast to the broader Indian Ocean world, a culinary superhighway that carried not just goods but also ideas about food preparation and consumption.

These early centuries, before any significant European settlement, laid the groundwork for Madras's unique gastronomic identity. It was a cuisine shaped by geography—the fertile plains, the productive coastline, the open sea—and by exchange. The flavors were bold, centered around the interplay of sour, salty, pungent, and a subtle sweetness derived from jaggery and natural sugars. The techniques were honed over generations, maximizing flavor and nutrition from readily available resources.

The establishment of a permanent European trading post by the British East India Company in 1639 on a fishing village then known as Madraspatnam marked a pivotal turning point. This act, while seemingly a singular event, was merely the culmination of centuries of existing trade and interaction. The British, like those before them, were drawn by the region's commercial potential, particularly its spices and textiles. But unlike previous traders, their intent was not just commerce, but control, which would profoundly alter the culinary landscape.

When Francis Day and Andrew Cogan acquired the land for Fort St. George, they weren't building on a blank slate. They were inserting themselves into a vibrant, established food system. The local populace already had their rhythm of eating, their preferred ingredients, and their ingrained culinary traditions. The incoming Europeans, initially a small contingent, had to adapt to these existing structures, at least in the short term, even as they began to introduce their own tastes and demands.

The initial European diet would have been a stark contrast to the local fare. Preserved meats, ship's biscuits, and perhaps some imported grains formed the staple for the early settlers. However, the practicalities of sustained living in a new environment quickly necessitated engagement with local food sources. Fresh provisions were essential, leading to an immediate demand for local produce, poultry, and fish, creating a market for local vendors and producers.

This early interaction wasn't a one-way street of European imposition. Local cooks, hired to feed the European residents, were the first cultural intermediaries in the kitchen. They began to interpret foreign palates through the lens of their own culinary knowledge, leading to the nascent forms of what would later become Anglo-Indian cuisine. The immediate impact might have been subtle—perhaps a milder curry for a

European palate, or the incorporation of a locally available fruit into a traditional British dessert.

The very act of establishing a fortified settlement meant a concentration of people and a predictable demand for food. This stimulated local agriculture and fishing, drawing produce from the hinterland and creating a more formalized market system. The Kothawal Chavadi, an early market area, likely began to grow in prominence around this time, centralizing the trade of fresh goods for both the local population and the burgeoning European community.

The British brought with them not just their own dietary habits, but also new agricultural ideas and food processing technologies. While these would take time to fully manifest, the seeds were sown in these early decades. The demand for specific European vegetables or fruits, for instance, might have encouraged local farmers to experiment with new crops, slowly diversifying the agricultural output of the region around Madras.

Crucially, the early European presence solidified Madras's identity as a port city with global connections. The ships that arrived brought not just goods from Europe, but also influences from other parts of the world they had touched—the Americas, Africa, and other Asian ports. This constant flow of maritime traffic meant a continuous, albeit sometimes slow, introduction of new ingredients and culinary ideas into the local ecosystem.

One of the most significant, yet gradual, introductions was the chili pepper, brought from the Americas by Portuguese traders. Its fiery heat would eventually displace black pepper as the primary source of pungency in South Indian cuisine. But this was not an overnight revolution. It was a slow, creeping adoption, as farmers began to cultivate it and cooks discovered its intense flavor, forever altering the spice profile of the region. The chili's arrival is a testament to the globalizing forces that converged on these shores.

The exchange went both ways. European ships departing from Madras carried not just textiles and spices, but also a taste of the local. Ingredients like tamarind, coconut, and specific local vegetables might have been carried abroad, influencing cuisines in other colonial outposts or even finding their way into European kitchens, albeit often in a simplified or exoticized form. The term "Madras Curry Powder" would eventually become a global phenomenon, but its roots lie in these early maritime exchanges.

The establishment of Fort St. George, therefore, was not just a political and economic act; it was a culinary one. It accelerated the mixing of food traditions, created new demands, and formalized a cross-cultural kitchen laboratory that would evolve over centuries. The shores that had always been open to the world now had a fixed point of intense interaction, where the ancient flavors of the land met the tastes of

newcomers, forever altering how the city would learn to eat.

Recipes from this nascent period are scarce, often recorded only in fleeting mentions in journals or administrative documents. However, we can reconstruct the spirit of these early coastal meals. Imagine robust fish curries, perhaps flavored with a blend of indigenous spices and the newly arriving chili, served with steaming rice or hearty millet flatbreads. Picture simple vegetable stir-fries, seasoned with locally grown turmeric and mustard seeds, providing a counterpoint to richer gravies. The emphasis would have been on freshness, seasonality, and the ingenious use of available resources.

The legacy of these early interactions is evident in the foundational elements of Madras cuisine: the centrality of rice and millets, the pervasive use of tamarind and coconut, the distinct warmth of indigenous spices, and the eventual, fiery embrace of the chili. These were the building blocks, the culinary syntax, upon which all future chapters of Madras's food story would be written. The shores had fed their people for millennia, and now, with new arrivals and new ingredients, they were preparing to feed a city with an ever-expanding palate.

RECIPES

Here are two recipes reflecting the early foodways of the Madras coast, prior to significant European influence and before the widespread adoption of chili peppers. They emphasize indigenous spices, local produce, and the foundational grains of the region.

1. Karuvadu Meen Kuzhambu (Dried Fish Curry with Tamarind and Pepper)

This robust curry showcases the importance of dried fish as a protein source and the ancient use of black pepper for heat and flavor.

Yields: 4 servings **Prep time:** 20 minutes **Cook time:** 30 minutes

Ingredients:

- 150g dried fish (e.g., anchovies or small seer fish), soaked and cleaned
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil
- 1 teaspoon mustard seeds
- 1 teaspoon fenugreek seeds
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 4-5 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 small piece ginger (about 1 inch), grated
- 2 sprigs curry leaves
- 1/2 teaspoon turmeric powder
- 1 tablespoon black pepper powder (freshly ground is best)
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin powder

- Small lemon-sized ball of tamarind, soaked in 1 cup warm water and pulp extracted
- 2 tomatoes, chopped
- 1 drumstick, cut into 2-inch pieces (optional, but traditional)
- 1/2 cup water (or as needed)
- Salt to taste (be mindful of saltiness from dried fish)

Instructions:

1. Soak the dried fish in warm water for 15-20 minutes. Rinse thoroughly under running water, scrubbing gently to remove any excess salt or sand. Cut into smaller pieces if necessary. Set aside.
2. Heat sesame oil in a heavy-bottomed pan or clay pot (manchatti) over medium heat. Add mustard seeds and fenugreek seeds. Once mustard seeds splutter, add the chopped onion and sauté until translucent.
3. Add crushed garlic, grated ginger, and curry leaves. Sauté for another 2-3 minutes until fragrant.
4. Stir in turmeric powder, black pepper powder, and cumin powder. Cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly to prevent burning.
5. Add the chopped tomatoes and drumstick pieces (if using). Cook until tomatoes soften and release their juices, about 5-7 minutes.
6. Pour in the extracted tamarind pulp and 1/2 cup of water. Bring the curry to a gentle boil, then reduce heat and simmer for 10 minutes to allow the flavors to meld and the drumstick to cook.
7. Carefully add the cleaned dried fish pieces to the simmering curry. Cook for another 5-7 minutes, or until the fish is tender and the curry has thickened slightly. Be careful not to overcook the dried fish, as it can become rubbery.
8. Taste and adjust salt as needed, remembering the dried fish already contributes salinity.
9. Serve hot with steamed rice or millet porridge.

2. Thinai Sadam with Paruppu Masiyal (Foxtail Millet with Simple Lentil Mash)

This recipe highlights the importance of millets and a simple, nutritious lentil preparation, characteristic of an early, wholesome diet.

Yields: 4 servings **Prep time:** 15 minutes **Cook time:** 25 minutes

Ingredients:

For the Thinai Sadam (Foxtail Millet):

- 1 cup foxtail millet (thinai)
- 2 cups water
- 1/2 teaspoon salt

For the Paruppu Masiyal (Lentil Mash):

- 1/2 cup toor dal (split pigeon peas)
- 2 cups water
- 1/4 teaspoon turmeric powder
- 1 small onion, roughly chopped (optional)
- 1 small tomato, roughly chopped (optional)
- 1 sprig curry leaves
- 1/2 teaspoon mustard seeds
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin seeds
- 1 small piece dried red chili (for mild flavor, remove before serving if preferred)
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil or ghee
- Salt to taste

Instructions:

1. **Prepare the Thinai Sadam:** Rinse the foxtail millet thoroughly under cold water until the water runs clear. In a pot, combine the rinsed millet, 2 cups of water, and salt. Bring to a boil, then reduce heat to low, cover, and simmer for 15-20 minutes, or until all the water is absorbed and the millet is tender and fluffy. Let it rest for 5 minutes before fluffing with a fork.
2. **Prepare the Paruppu Masiyal:** Rinse the toor dal thoroughly. In a pressure cooker or a heavy-bottomed pot, combine the rinsed dal, 2 cups of water, and turmeric powder. If using, add the chopped onion and tomato.
3. **Pressure Cooker Method:** Cook for 3-4 whistles, then let the pressure release naturally.
4. **Pot Method:** Bring to a boil, then reduce heat, cover, and simmer for 20-25 minutes, or until the dal is very soft and mushy. Add more hot water if needed during cooking.
5. Once cooked, mash the dal well with the back of a spoon or a potato masher until smooth. Season with salt.
6. **Temper the Lentil Mash:** In a small pan, heat sesame oil or ghee over medium heat. Add mustard seeds. Once they splutter, add cumin seeds, curry leaves, and the dried red chili. Sauté for a few seconds until fragrant.
7. Pour the tempering over the mashed dal. Mix well.
8. Serve the hot Thinai Sadam with the Paruppu Masiyal. A drizzle of ghee over the dal is optional but recommended for flavor.
