

eat like a local **MADURAI**

Fondly called the food capital of Tamil Nadu, the temple city of Madurai welcomes visitors with its varied cuisine – from Chettinad specialities to Ceylon parathas

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Madurai has been a city of commerce, with trade relations extending to the Romans and Greeks. Arab merchants and Sufi saints also made their way to the city to trade with the Pandya kings since 900 AD. Closer to home, the local Chettiar community traded extensively with Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), Singapore and Malaysia. Moreover, silk weavers and merchants from Saurashtra in Gujarat have made Madurai home for several centuries now.

Today, Madurai's food is a happy union of all these influences but mainly that of Chettinad cuisine, which is known for its fiery flavours. The Chettinad story is seen in the rice-based snacks like *paniyaram* (savoury snack, shallow fried in a special mould) and *idiyappam* (string hoppers), varieties of *kuzhambu* (spicy stew) and a wide repertoire of meat dishes, from chicken and mutton to crab and rabbit. *Kothu parotta* — a flaky paratha that is spiced and minced on a hot griddle — is the culinary legacy of Sri Lanka but is commonly found in Madurai in various avatars that include veggies, eggs and meat.

The Madurai biryani is spicier than the more famous Hyderabadi and Lucknowi versions. The Muslims are believed to have brought it in, along with Madurai's most popular roadside

beverage — the *jigarthanda*. Literally meaning 'heart cooler', it is a tall glass of sarsaparilla syrup (locally known as *nammari*), almond jelly (also called *badam pisin*), sugar, milk and ice cream, with a garnish of almonds and pistas.

Madurai is inordinately fond of fried snacks, with shops proudly carrying names like 'Tamizhaga Ennai Palagaram' (Tamil Nadu Oil Snacks). And desserts are considered incomplete unless they come dripping with ghee, such as the gooey Thirunelveli halwa at Prema Vilas Lala Sweet Shop.

What characterises Madurai's cuisine is the abundant use of freshly ground masalas. The most common ingredients used in cooking are red chilli, fresh coconut, garlic, tamarind, fenugreek and curry leaves. Star anise, *kalpasi* (a lichen, also known as *dagad phool*) and Marathi *moggu* are used primarily in gravies, along with bay leaves, cinnamon, fennel seeds, black pepper and poppy seeds in varying proportions. In a nod to the sweltering heat of the region, salted and sun-dried vegetables and meats (known as *vatthal*) are also used.

Madurai takes its sobriquet of 'thoonga nagaram' (the city that never sleeps) very seriously. Well into midnight, street stalls resound with the clangs of *kothu parotta* being chopped up and special Madurai biryani being ladled out by the plateful for the thronging locals and tourists alike.



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EASY MENU FOR 4

- * Kothu parotta
- * Kaara kuzhambu
- * Vendakkai poriyal
- * Madurai vegetable biryani
- * Jigarthanda

Kothu parotta

Serves 2 ■ 20 minutes + resting

■ EASY ■

A popular roadside snack, this recipe can be made using leftover parathas. You can experiment with both vegetarian and non-vegetarian options.

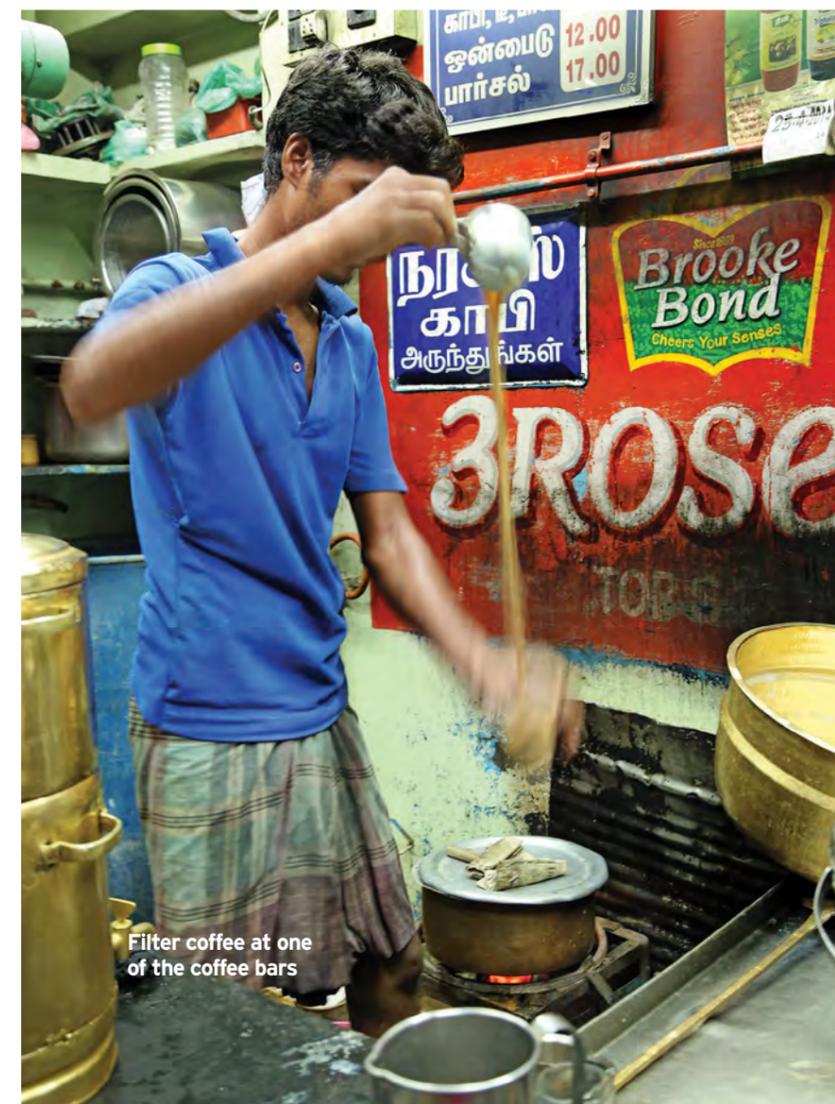
maida 1 cup
milk 1/2 cup
salt to taste
oil 2 tsp + extra for frying
curry leaves a few
onions 2, finely chopped
tomato 1, finely chopped
green chillies 2, finely chopped
mixed vegetables (carrot, cabbage, beans) 1 cup, finely chopped
chilli powder 1 tsp
coriander powder 1 tsp
fennel (saunf) powder 1/2 tsp
coriander leaves a handful, for garnish

■ In a bowl, mix refined flour, salt and milk. Knead well. Add a little water if required. Make a stiff dough and keep it aside for 30 minutes.

■ Heat the tawa. Meanwhile, take a small ball of dough, roll it out to form a thin *parotta* and apply a layer of oil. Cook on the tawa until both the sides are done. Repeat with the remaining dough and chop the *parottas* into small pieces.



Kothu parotta being made on a griddle



Filter coffee at one of the coffee bars



A lady weaving a garland with malligaipoo (jasmine)



Vendakkai poriyal

Nannari syrup is a heat-buster used in making beverages



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

■ The Meenakshi temple is at the heart of Madurai, with the main streets spreading out as concentric squares around it. Most of the important shopping and eating joints are in the temple area.

■ Madurai is known for its food from the 'mess', local eateries serving home-cooked, non-vegetarian food. This tradition is believed to have started with the influx of a large number of people from neighbouring towns and villages during festival times at the Meenakshi temple.

■ Rice is present at every meal in Madurai, either as plain white rice, or flavoured rice such as lemon rice, *puliyodharai*, tomato rice and biryani, or in the form of idli, dosa, *paniyaram*, *appam* or *idiyappam*. The favoured rice, even while preparing biryani, is the local Ponni, and not Basmati.

GETTING THERE

Madurai airport is at a distance of 13 km from the city centre and is connected by road from all areas of the city. There are domestic flights to Madurai from all major cities in India. One can also opt to travel by train, as Madurai is connected to all major cities and towns across India. The railway station is one of the busiest in the country and has computerised reservation counters. If you live not too far away, travelling by bus is another option. From Madurai Integrated Bus Terminus (MIBT) many buses to locations all over south India operate round the clock. From Arapalayam bus stand, buses to places of western Tamil Nadu like Theni, Coimbatore, Tirupur, Erode, Salem operate and Periyar bus stand is where only city buses and private buses to major cities operate.

- Heat oil in the tawa again. Add curry leaves, onions, green chillies and sauté for 3-4 minutes.
- Add chilli, coriander and fennel powders, and mix well. Add the tomatoes and cook for 5 minutes.
- Add the mixed vegetables, cover with a lid and simmer until the vegetables are cooked.
- Then tip in the chopped *parotta* and cook for 3-4 minutes.
- Remove from the *tawa* and garnish with coriander leaves.

Kaara kuzhambu

Serves 2 ■ 30 minutes ■ EASY ✓

This spicy stew is prepared by cooking the vegetables in tamarind extract, and spiked with a special blend of spice powder. Serve it with rice and vegetable poriyal or kootu.

- sesame oil 2 tsp
- mustard seeds 1 tsp
- Marathi moggu 2 (if not available, you can substitute this with capers)
- star anise 2
- mace 1
- curry leaves a few
- red chillies 2 dried
- onions 10-12 small, chopped
- garlic 10 cloves, chopped
- chilli powder 2 tsp
- coriander powder 1 tsp
- cumin powder 1/2 tsp
- black pepper powder 1 tsp
- fennel powder 1/2 tsp
- tomatoes 2, chopped
- tamarind extract 100 ml (if using readymade paste, use 1 tbsp)
- drumsticks 1, peeled and cut in 5cm sticks (optional)
- brinjal 1, cut into cubes (optional)
- salt to taste
- coconut milk 2 tbsp
- salt 1/2 tsp + extra to taste
- coriander leaves a handful

- Heat oil in a shallow frying pan and add mustard seeds, Marathi *moggu*, star anise, mace, curry leaves and red chillies and allow them to crackle.
- Add onions and garlic, and fry until golden brown in colour.

- Add chilli, coriander, cumin, black pepper and fennel powders. Sauté well until the raw smell goes off.
- Add tomatoes and tamarind extract and stir. Add 1 1/2 cups of water and salt. If adding the vegetables, add it during this stage. Cover and cook for 20-25 minutes over a low flame.
- Stir in coconut milk and switch off the flame. Season to taste.
- Garnish with coriander leaves and serve with hot steamed rice.

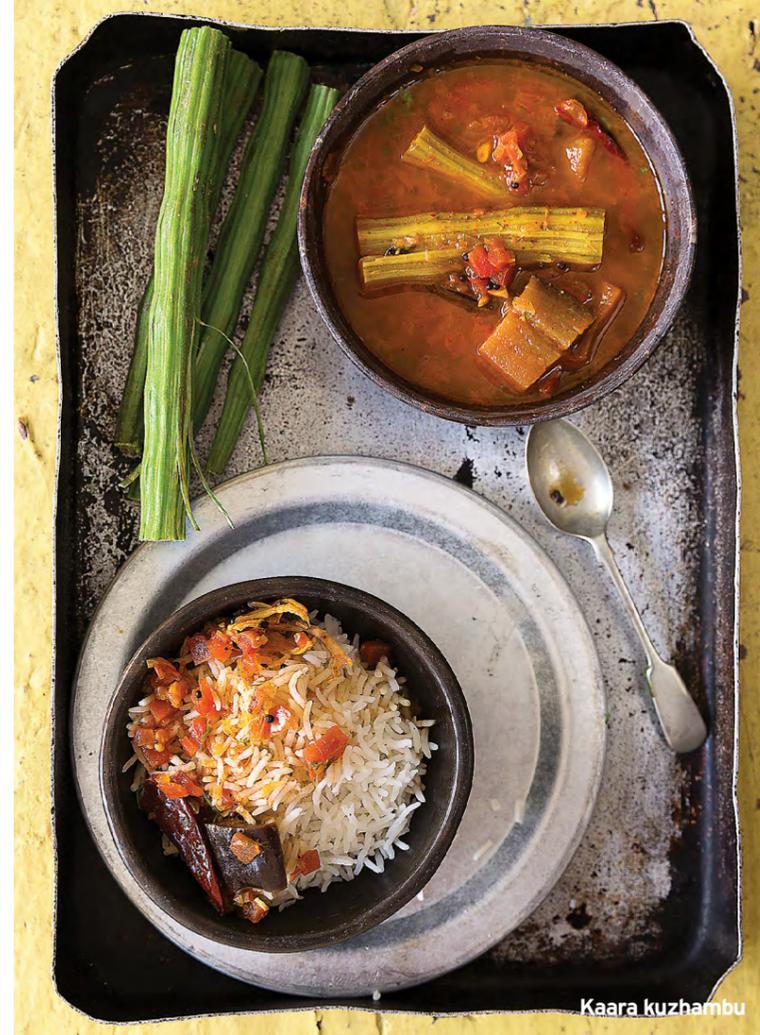
Vendakkai poriyal

Serves 2 ■ 20 minutes ■ EASY ✓

This stir-fry recipe made with okra is very easy to prepare. Wipe the okra completely dry before cooking to prevent the dish from getting sticky. If it does get sticky, don't panic – it will be fine after a few minutes of stirring over a low flame.

- oil 1 tsp
- mustard seeds 1/2 tsp
- urad dal 1/2 tsp
- red chilli 1 dry
- garlic 2-3 cloves, finely chopped
- curry leaves a few
- green chilli 1, finely chopped
- onion 5-6, chopped
- okra 1 cup, thinly sliced in rounds
- turmeric powder a pinch
- chilli powder 1 tsp
- cumin powder 1/2 tsp
- salt 1/2 tsp + extra to taste
- tomato 1, chopped
- coconut 1 tbsp, grated
- coriander leaves 1 tbsp, finely chopped

- Heat oil in a pan. Add mustard seeds, urad dal, red chilli, garlic, curry leaves and green chilli. Allow them to crackle.
- Add onion and then sauté until light brown. Add okra, turmeric, chilli and cumin powders, and salt.
- Cook on low heat, making sure it does not turn sticky. Then add the tomato and mix well.
- Finish with grated coconut and chopped coriander leaves, before serving.



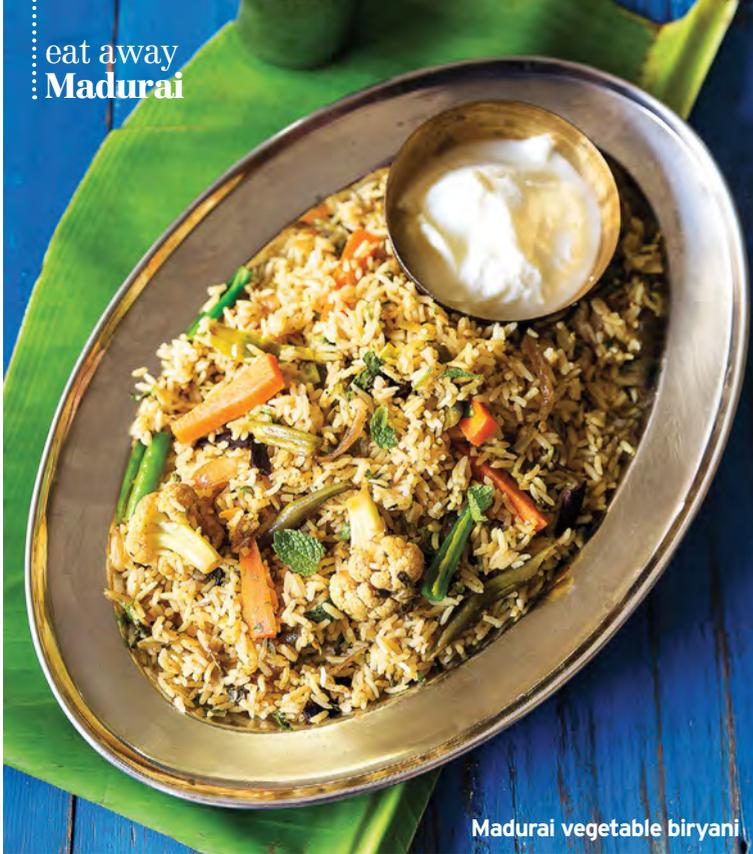
Kaara kuzhambu



Jigarthanda



The marriage of Meenakshi and Shiva, presided by Vishnu is the leitmotif in the temples



Madurai vegetable biryani

MINI GUIDE TO MADURAI

EAT

■ **Madurai Idli Shop** is a mandatory pit stop for visitors, with idlis that are said to be as soft as Madurai's famous *malligaipoo* (jasmine). Definitely try their onion uttapam, topped generously with a dollop of butter or ghee and small shallots. Ignore the sambar and focus on the four varieties of chutney served on the plantain leaf.

■ Drop in at the no-frills **Amma Mess** at Thallakulam for a meaty feast; try the chicken dosa, prawn biryani and mutton *kola* (fried mutton balls).

■ Beat the heat with bovonto, the local grape cola, or *nannari* sherbet, both available at all roadside stalls.

■ At the end of the day, wash it all down with a glass of Jil Jil Jigarthanda at the 'Famous Jigarthanda' shop on East Marray Street.

SLEEP

■ **Heritage Madurai** (heritagemadurai.com) once housed the prestigious Madurai Club, designed by Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa. The extension, overseen by Bawa's disciple Vinod Jayasinghe, preserves the original architectural flavour, which includes rough granite floors, and pillars and lush open spaces.

■ Get away from the crowds at **The Gateway by Taj** (thegatewayhotels.com). Set on Pasmalai hill on the outskirts of Madurai, it offers great views of the city.

DO

■ Explore local street food, including soft rice, millet *idiyappam* with coconut milk, and *paruthi paal* (a drink made with cotton seed, jaggery and ginger) with **Foodies Day Out** (foodiesdayout.com).

■ Visit the sprawling **Thirumalai Nayakkar Mahal**, the 17th century palace of the emperor of the Nayak dynasty.

■ Shop for soft cotton Sungudi saris, made with local tie-and-dye techniques, at **Rangachari Cloth Store** on South Masi Street.

Madurai vegetable biryani

Serves 8 ■ 30 minutes

■ EASY ▽

This biryani features a host of spices that make it aromatic and flavoursome. Jeeraga Sambha or Ponni, a popular south Indian rice variety is used to make this dish.

rice 1 kg
oil 4 tsp
bay leaves 2
cinnamon 2
cardamom 2
cloves 2
star anise 2
marathi moggu 2
green chillies 5, slit
onions 9 small, 3 sliced and 6 chopped
ginger-garlic paste 3 tsp
chilli powder 1 tsp
coriander powder 2 tsp
garam masala 1 tsp
French beans 1 cup, chopped
carrot 1 cup, chopped
cauliflower 1 cup, chopped
curd 1/2 cup
lemon 1 tbsp, juiced
mint a few leaves, chopped
coriander a few leaves, chopped
turmeric powder 1 tsp
salt to taste

■ Soak the rice for 30 minutes.

■ Heat oil in a pan. Add bay leaves, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, star anise, Marathi *moggu* and green chilli and sauté until fragrant.

■ Add the sliced and chopped onions, and sauté until golden brown.

■ Add ginger-garlic paste, chilli, coriander and garam masala powders, and sauté for 2-3 minutes.

■ Add all the vegetables, curd, lemon juice, mint and coriander leaves, and turmeric, and mix well.

■ Add 1 1/2 liters of water to this and bring it to a boil.

■ Strain the rice and mix it in. Place the vessel on a hot tawa. Cook for 15 minutes covered with a lid. Check for doneness. Sprinkle with coriander and mint leaves before serving.

Jigarthanda

Serves 2 ■ 5 minutes + soaking

■ EASY ▽

The badam pisin, or almond gum, in jigarthanda is what separates it from its northern cousin, the falooda, which uses vermicelli. While falooda is scooped up and eaten, jigarthanda is stirred and drunk.

badam pisin (almond tree gum) 1/4 cup (you can substitute it with 2 tsp of *subza beej*)

vanilla ice cream 2 scoops

whole milk 3 cups

sugar 1/4 cup + extra to taste

sarsaparilla (nannari) syrup 2 tsp

rose essence 1 tsp

pistachios 2 tbsps, sliced

■ Soak badam *pisin* in double the amount of water over night. (Once it soaks, the quantity will be doubled and it will have a jelly-like consistency). Or if you are using *subza beej*, soak them in water for 15 minutes, then drain and use as required.

■ Boil milk in a saucepan over medium heat and simmer. Allow milk to thicken and reduce to half the quantity. Add sugar and let it become a thick liquid. Switch off the flame and let it cool.

■ In a tall serving glass, add half the quantity of the badam *pisin*. To this, add 3/4 cup of the reduced milk.

■ Add a big scoop of vanilla ice cream on top, followed by a spoonful of nannari syrup and rose essence.

■ Garnish with pistachios and serve immediately.