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FOOD

North Chennai street food and Thai desserts, check out these post-lockdown cooking projects



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A growing tribe of cooks have been experimenting with their creative side during the lockdown, focussing on both the deliciousness of the meal inside and the clever packaging outside

Plastic guilt is what keeps me at the stove these days. Alarmed by the menacing, growing pile of plastic containers that arrive with every food delivery, I have been consciously cutting back on ordering in.

Fortunately, a small but growing tribe of home cooks and restaurateurs are finding eco-friendly alternatives: biodegradable containers and brown paper bags. And, best of all, banana leaves are seeing a revival as traditional packed lunches like *pothichoru* and *kizhi parottas* get trendy again.

Thara Local

There is a jaunty air of festivity wrapped around this delivery as it comes in a cloth bag reminiscent of traditional wedding giveaways. “We put a lot of hard work into the packaging,” says Chef Vijayakumar Manikandan, who along with his partner Chef Navin Prasad recently launched Thara Local.



A “post lockdown project,” the brand attempts to capture the bright flavours and cheery energy of street food with their short, but thoughtfully curated menu. Of course, pushing up this style of quick, cheap and tasty cooking is a popular trope; every year we see a rash of ‘street inspired’ food festivals.



Thara Local’s advantage is timing. With COVID-19, more people are choosing to dine in. If your last roadside *kothu parotta* was in March (before 2020 began to unravel), it is likely you are missing the bustle and joy of quick meals on crowded pavements.

The menu is an appetising map of Chennai’s iconic dishes: Kasimedu fish fry, Triplicane *kaima* roast mutton, Chintadripet *melagu* prawn and of course, a range of biryani, which include Kodambakkam *kaima* choru.

“I am basically a North Madras guy,” says Chef Vijayakumar, adding that he grew up between Perambur and Kolathur. The menu is influenced by the flavours of his early years. “The masalas are fresh ground and powerful, and the food is simple and straight forward with a focus on fresh ingredients,” he says. Local farms supply short grain *seeraga samba* rice, gingelly and coconut oils.

The food, which arrives wrapped in banana leaves and twine, is tasty and reassuringly familiar, minus the inevitable greasiness of street cooking. The chicken curry is packed in a charming reusable tin, reminiscent of a picnic lunch. “We have designed it so an auto driver can also order and eat comfortably from his vehicle,” says Chef Vijayakumar.

To keep things interesting the brand promises weekly specials, starting with a Broadway inspired menu, featuring atho, chaat and – of course – bun-butter-jam.

Call Chef Vijayakumar on 9962158570

Rubies in a box

The past six months have inspired a lot of young, first-time entrepreneurs to start home businesses. Many of these have been students who used lockdown to earn pocket money by baking cakes. Zumla Ofhran decided she wanted to do something different.

“I was on a break, waiting for college to restart and did not have much to do,” says the student, who is back in class from this week. Inspired by her family’s annual trips to Bangkok to visit an aunt, she decided to start making the popular Thai dessert of water chestnuts in coconut milk.



“I got recipes off the internet and kept experimenting till I got it right,” she says. The signature red tint of the water chestnuts in this refreshing summer dessert is often supplied by food colouring. However – to her credit – Zumla made an effort to find a natural alternative. “I do it with beetroot since that seems like a healthier option,” she says.

Now that she has restarted college, Rubies in a box will be a weekend kitchen. “I don’t want to stop,” says Zumla. “To be honest, the past year has been hard. So many things did not work out. This clicked. It has given me a chance to meet so many people. It has bettered my communication skills. I did not expect to learn so much.”

Order from Zumla via Rubies in a box on Instagram

This weekly column tracks the city’s shifting culinary landscape. Heard of a new food venture? Tell me: shonali.m@thehindu.co.in



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