

# Ignore celeb chefs' paneer recipes and read this old cookbook if you want to learn Mappila cuisine

'Malabar Muslim Cookery', published first in 1981, is still cherished, especially by NRIs wanting to recreate a taste of home.

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*In this edition of our monthly column on community cookbooks, we look at Malabar Muslim Cookery by Ummi Abdulla, first published by Orient Longman in 1981. You can read the previous column [here](#).*

The [Mappilas are a community of Muslims](#) on the Malabar coast of Kerala. Concentrated in the northern towns of Kannur, Calicut and Thalassery, from Kasaragod to Thrissur, they trace their origins to trade with West Asia. Kerala's location on the coast, and its history as an ancient global trading post, left the region exposed to influences from all over the world.

It is no accident that the country's first synagogue, church and mosque were all built in Kerala. As Arab traders arrived in Kerala to find the black gold of the spice trade, their culture, cuisine and customs merged with locals through intermarriage. The Mappilas share a language and a love of coconut with the rest of the state, but their cuisine remains distinctive on several counts.

## Ancient, multi-cultural

Calicut's wildly famous restaurants offer a first taste of this cuisine, serving assortments of seafood, the singular Thalassery biriyani, and a mind-boggling range of stuffed, steamed and deep-fried breads. Arikadukka or stuffed mussels, fresh oysters, and sweet-fleshed shrimp abound here. But the depths of Mappila food can only be experienced in a Mappila home, at which a regular day will feature ari pathiris (delicate rice-breads) and fiery muttakakkam (egg roast), prawn puttu and mutton stew, biriyani, neichoru (a simple ghee rice), and the much-loved red fish curry.

Celebrations in a Mappila home – especially weddings – involve exquisite, extravagant feasts. Meat plays a central role, as does egg. The mutta-mala, a laborious and intricate noodle-like necklace, is made with an astonishing volume of egg yolks. The yolk is dripped through a wooden spoon with a bamboo ladle at one end, and coconut shell with a hole in the centre at the other and requires both stamina and dexterity. A fragrant and layered fish biriyani made with masalas ground fresh at home is a complete meal on its own. During the holy month of Ramzan, the daily fast is broken with dates, followed by a spread of pathiris, meat, chicken, and always, chai.

Mappila cuisine was first brought to outside attention through the work of Ummi Abdulla, whose anthology of cookbooks spans several decades and a YouTube channel. She is now 83 years old and lives in Calicut. Her granddaughter Nazaneen Jalaludheen, recently put together a limited-edition coffee-table cookbook documenting Ummi's culinary journey, which features several classic recipes from her repertoire. But we looked back at an early edition of Ummi Abdulla's work, titled *Malabar Muslim Cookery*, first published by Orient Longman in 1981.

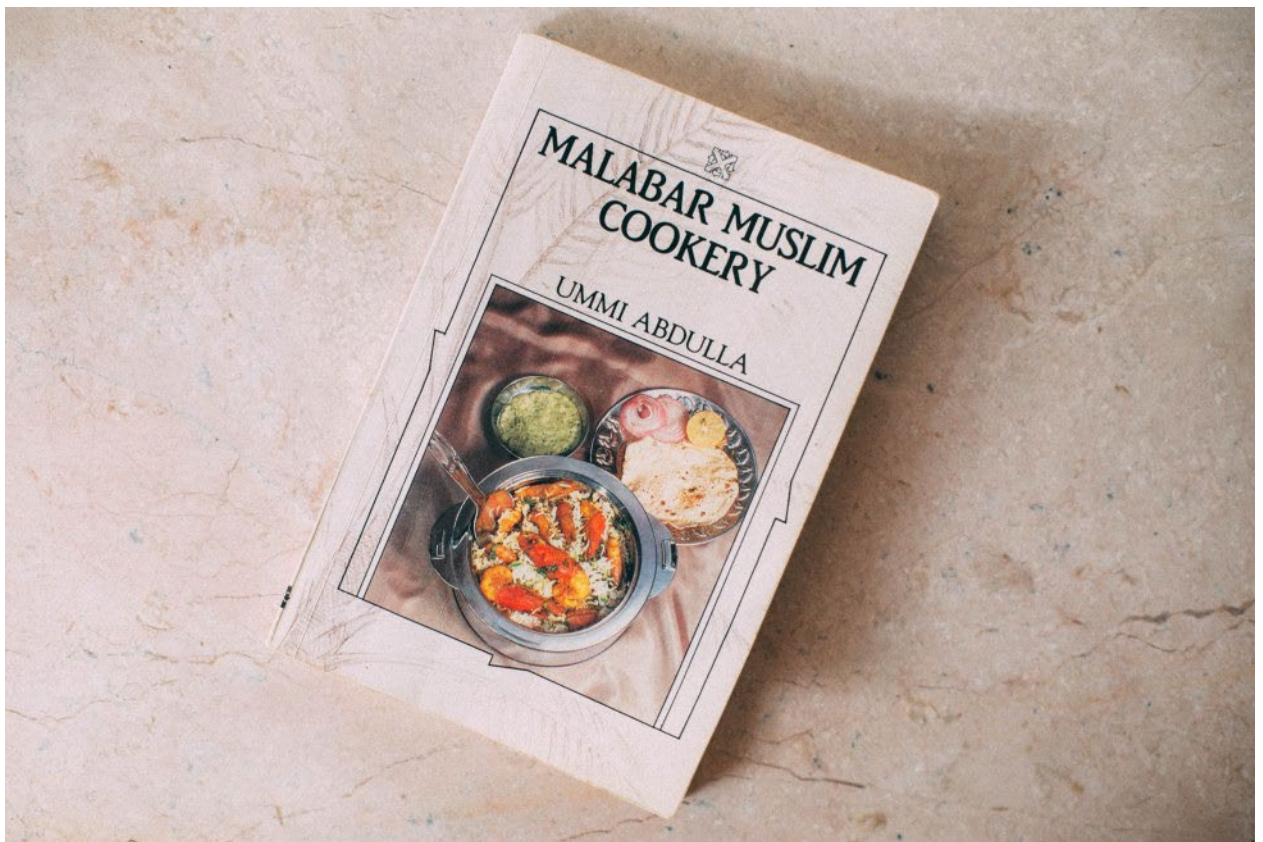


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## Diverse cuisine

*Malabar Muslim Cookery*, there is no denying, is a charming name for a cookbook. The tome of recipes has been a constant companion for two generations of expat Mappilas trying to conjure the taste of their home with its honeyed sunlight and lush greenery through a Mappila meal.

The basics of Mappila cuisine are simple and there are of course, elaborate, complex dishes that rely heavily on technique. But the food cooked every day is an exercise in using the same handful of ingredients in various permutations to create dishes that taste completely different from each other. Red chilli paste, turmeric powder, ginger, curry leaves and, of course, that other staple of every Kerala kitchen – coconut oil, are used generously.

The cookbook begins with a series of equations as the epigraph:

Cooking = kitchen + hungry family

Serving = art + hungry family

Cookbook = writing + kitchen + testing + hungry family

And it is dedicated to the common factor.

This sets the tone for the rest of the book which, though lacking pictures, is dotted with illustrations by Anant Kulkarni. Some of these illustrations are purely decorative but others are meant to instruct the cook in certain techniques. The recipe for mutta maala, for example, has four medium-sized illustrations, with step-by-step instructions below them to help the cook navigate the sticky waters of this complicated egg delicacy.



Photo credit: Anisha Rachel Oommen & Aysha Tanya

Disappointingly however, the book does not mention how many people each recipe will feed, and it seems that it is not intended for a particularly large hungry family. Of the 143 recipes in the book, most have English translations of the name, some of which are delightfully evocative such as Rice Curls (Kuzhalappam), Sugared Eggs (Mutta Seer) and Banana Cotton Buds (Unnakkayi).

A cookbook is a window into the predilections and habits of a particular community, and it is extremely telling that in *Malabar Muslim Cookery*, the vegetable section is half the size of the sweet section, and about the same size as the egg section.

Sadia Hashim, who lives in Singapore with her husband and two sons, recommends the cookbook wholeheartedly. “I think it’s a fantastic starter cookbook. The recipes are really simple and they work. I make a mutton curry from it fairly regularly. It also comes out every Ramadan when I need different kanji recipes and simple snack ideas.”

The first recipe I try from the book is Vendekka Mulakittathu or Hot Lady’s Finger Curry, a name that is entirely too saucy for this humble dish. Okra is cooked in a tamarind, tomato, onion gravy, and the resulting dish is easy, mildly spiced, yet flavourful.

The recipe for Chemeen Porichathu or Fried Prawns is a keeper – there is the added step of double cooking the prawns, but counter-intuitively, this doesn’t dry out the prawns, as you might expect. With a heaping of boiled rice and yogurt, this could be a lunch that makes a hungry family very happy.

## Chemeen Porichathu (Fried Prawns)

### Ingredients

200 g shelled prawns  
3 tsp chilli powder  
4 cloves garlic  
4 cm piece cinnamon  
2 cloves  
½ tsp turmeric powder  
½ tsp aniseed  
Salt to taste  
Oil for frying

### Method

Clean and wash the prawns with a little salt. Grind all the ingredients with salt. Cook the prawns with ground ingredients in a little water till the prawns are cooked and the water absorbed.

Heat the oil in a kadai. Add the prawns and fry till the prawns are crisp.