

KERALA | UMMI ABDULLA

Her recipes keep coming

The doyenne of Malabar Mappila cuisine doesn't stop innovating, even when on a hospital bed

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Malabar Mappila food expert and cookbook author Umami Abdulla is planning her menu for the afternoon as we speak over the phone. At her home in Kozhikode, Umami is expecting guests for lunch and she goes for simple traditional fare. "Plain rice and *kallummakayi* [mussels] *pulincurry* with a side of *mathi* [sardines] prepared with dried gooseberry and pepper it is!" she says.

The *pulincurry*, Umami explains, is a staple on the eve of weddings in Thikkodi, a small village near Koyilandi in Kozhikode, where she hails from. "I am not sure if the practice of serving this curry still remains; it most probably does not, but I wanted to revive the memory of its taste."

At 89, Umami does not cook any more, but instructs her helper. There is always



K. RAGESH

Kitchen wise

When cooking a Malabari dish, do not substitute fennel with cumin. The flavour profile is different



a recipe on Umami's mind. "I try out a new recipe every week," she says. "Even when I was recovering from surgery in hospital some years ago, I thought of a recipe for a pickle. My mother had advised me to say some prayers, but after the prayers, the recipe popped up. The recipes keep coming."

For Umami, who has been chronicling the dishes of Kerala's Malabar Muslim community, known as Mappilas, for the past 40 years, cooking goes beyond its obvious scope. "It can even influence one's personality. For me, it soothes my frayed nerves. Whenever something bothers me, I cook," she says.

Umami's first cookbook, *Malabar*

Muslim Cookery, was published in 1981 by Orient Longman, where her late husband, writer and film producer V. Abdulla, worked. Umami credits her culinary prowess to her husband. "He was a great host; we would always have visitors over and it was he who taught me how to plan a menu according to the profile of the guest."

She has authored six books till date, the most recent one being *A Kitchen Full of Stories* (2018), conceptualised and brought out by her granddaughter Nazaneen Jalaludheen. Umami has also taken classes on Mappila cuisine and continues to serve as a consultant for five-star hotels in Kerala.

Much of her first book's contents was inspired by Umami's maternal grandmother, from whom she imbibed the essence of cooking. "Ummamma [grandmother] couldn't tell the exact measurements of ingredients. So I adopted a trial-and-error method. I would also talk to the women who came to help in her kitchen, each of whom was a repository of knowledge," says Umami, who enjoys watching cooking videos on social media.

Her YouTube channel, *Umami's Corner*, is not active any more as she needs help uploading videos. But the matriarch continues to engage with fans through her Instagram handle @ummi.abdulla.