



Feasting days

In Mysore, the focus is on vegetables and sweets

By Savita Iyer-Ahrestani
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Flavorful garlic *idlis* — the steamed rice cakes that are the staple of a South Indian breakfast and have become ubiquitous both in India and overseas — the size of quarter plates. Tomato rice drenched in ghee (clarified butter) and liberally garnished with fistfuls of almonds and cashew nuts. Thick, white rice pudding, known as *payasam*, studded with tapioca pearls.

These are just a few of the vegetarian delicacies from the glory days of the **Kingdom of Mysore** in southern India. (I lived in this region of India for two wonderful years not too long ago.) They are the kinds of dishes that require a multitude of ingredients and many hours of preparation; they are the dishes of grand occasions like birthdays, naming ceremonies, and major Hindu festivals, involving both the **royal family of Mysore** and their loyal subjects.

During those occasions, rice dishes — including the fragrant *chitranna*, or lemon-flavored rice garnished with flavorful curry leaves and roasted peanuts — were *de rigueur*. Chunky lentil and vegetable soups were generously poured over mounds of white rice, which in turn were softened with generous mounds of butter. All manner of vegetables — carrots, potatoes, beans, and okra — were presented in a variety of ways and flavored with coconut and red and green chiles. Chutneys (bitter melon, tomato, and pineapple, to name a few) as well as pickles (mango, berry, and root) were always on hand, as were assortments of crispy savories made from pounded lentils and studded with cumin and mustard seeds. There were also treats like the “elephant leg vadas” — giant, onion-laced flour puffs fried to a crunchy crispness.

But more than anything else, the sweets took center stage. Thick, rich slabs of Mysore’s signature **Mysore paak**, a sweet made of chickpea flour, sugar, and butter. Goopy *jalebis*, or fried, golden spirals soaked in sugar syrup. And the one-of-a-kind *cherotti*, a crispy flour pancake that would soften into blissful sweetness as cupfuls of warm almond milk were poured over it.

Mysore — located three hours south by road from India’s technology capital, Bangalore — is in many ways still a traditional city. It’s a quiet place where stately homes line shady boulevards, where old ladies sit quietly on street corners twirling flowers of all hues into garlands, and where people still have a deep-rooted respect for the royal family that ruled them for centuries.

Although Mysore is rapidly becoming a hub for business, its biggest attraction is still the **Mysore Palace**, a massive building spread over several acres that combines several architectural styles and features numerous



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The royal palace at Mysore.

temples and shrines on its premises.

Every year in October, during the Hindu festival of **Dussera**, thousands of lights illuminate the palace, enhancing its architectural beauty. Members of the royal family — the women decked in heirloom jewelry and shimmering saris made from the soft-as-butter Mysore crepe silk — gather together for the maharaja's ceremonial *darbar*, or court, while eager crowds on the street admire the parade of royal elephants.

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Many of the dishes that were made at the Mysore Palace (some of which are replicated during the Dussera festival) have become a part of the traditional cuisine of Karnataka state (although they are far less rich, of course). But many are no longer made at all, because they are too complex and costly to put together. The royal family of Mysore is scattered around the country, and the cooks of yore — successive generations trained exclusively in the art of palace vegetarian cuisine — no longer are living.

Today in Mysore, Pizza Hut and Domino's are springing up on many street corners. Many people favor pasta over rice, and figure-conscious women avoid sweets of any kind and eat salad for lunch. But the Mysore Palace still stands untouched as a testament to its royal past, and as a reminder of the kind of vegetarian feasts that will soon be found only in history books.

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