

Udupi – Where Food Is Religion



Culinary tourism, one of the most popular niches in the tourism industry involves the pursuit of unique and memorable eating and drinking experiences. This makes sense, given recent consumer focus on healthy organic eating, food pedigrees and the fact that all travelers may not go city-hopping or shopping but will eat. Cooking shows feature regularly on the travel channels as do travel shows in food channels.



The world-renowned Udupi cuisine, an integral component of South Indian food derives its name from Udupi (or Udipi) in the Dakshin Kannada district of Karnataka on the southwest coast of India. Udupi is a land of breathtaking natural beauty sandwiched between the Western Ghats mountains and the Arabian Sea and a history of over 1,500 years leaving imprints in ancient architectural marvels and temples. The multi-lingual residents live harmoniously on the fertile land blessed with copious rainfall making it ideal for farming.

Udupi's elaborate and ceremonial cuisine, attracting one and all is a class in geography, topography, history and culinary skills rolled in one. It is a delicacy, making it simple, but a fine art using fresh locally available ingredients as leaves, grains, beans, vegetables and fruits. In Udupi food is religion dissolving political, ethnic, and linguistic barriers. The Udupi cuisine dates to the 13th century in the Ashta mathas founded by saint Madhvacharya. The wide variety and range of dishes adheres strictly to the Vedic tradition of Indian vegetarian cuisine with onions, garlic, meat, fish and alcohol prohibited. The tradition of chaturmasa vrata (four monsoon months) imposing restrictions on certain ingredients may have led to the cuisine's innovation as also occasions, individual tastes and affluence.



A full, traditional meal is eaten from a banana leaf on the ground, bare hand, with dishes served in a particular sequence, on a specific spot. Everyone begins and ends the meal by revoking the name of Govinda (Lord Vishnu) and no one can leave midway. The mildly spiced, non-oily, low-calorie food is easily digestible and akin to home-cooked food. Moreover, with the ingredients being capable of blending to several permutations, monotony never sets in. Pumpkin and gourds are the main ingredients in the stew like sambar while even raw banana skin is added in upkari (curry). Coconut is used extensively in chutneys, ajadinas (dry curries) and kosambri (salad). Mango, pineapple, jackfruit and grapes are used in pickles, halwa (desserts) and the sour rasam. Leaves as valli colocasia, turmeric, curry, coriander and brahmi are used.

Udupi has taken itself globally on its food. In olden days, restaurants run by cooks trained at the local temple were family ownerships among kith and kin. With popularity others entered the business and while claiming to retain authenticity incorporated vegetarian delicacies from other Indian cuisines – adapting to changing times, economic and social structure. Mangalorean and Konkanifood have derived much from Udupi cuisine despite including meat and seafood preparations in onion and garlic.



The immensely popular Mitra Samaja restaurant on Car Street, Udupi till date serves the most authentic Udupi cuisine. Pioneered as a family business of the orthodox Shivalli Brahmin community, the fare here is a ritual guided by cleanliness, purity and worthy of being served to the temple priests. The restaurant has evolved an unparallel business model for the fast food trade, uncompromising on taste.

Their system of serving from the kitchen to a congregation of about sixty heads by around ten people, within an hour is mind-boggling leaving no one waiting for long or turned away. Instead all leave satisfied, with a wholesome, meal and a relatively full wallet. Wastage is discouraged by monitoring quantity. Hygiene is never an issue despite a labour-intensive kitchen.

The most famous dish here is the golibaje (flour and spice dumplings fried in coconut oil). The popular 3 feet family masala dosa (rice pancake with potato filling) originating in Udupi is served with fiery coconut

chutney, gooey pumpkin halwa and freshly brewed coffee. The restaurant has retained its standards to this day and once you eat here you will never forget!

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