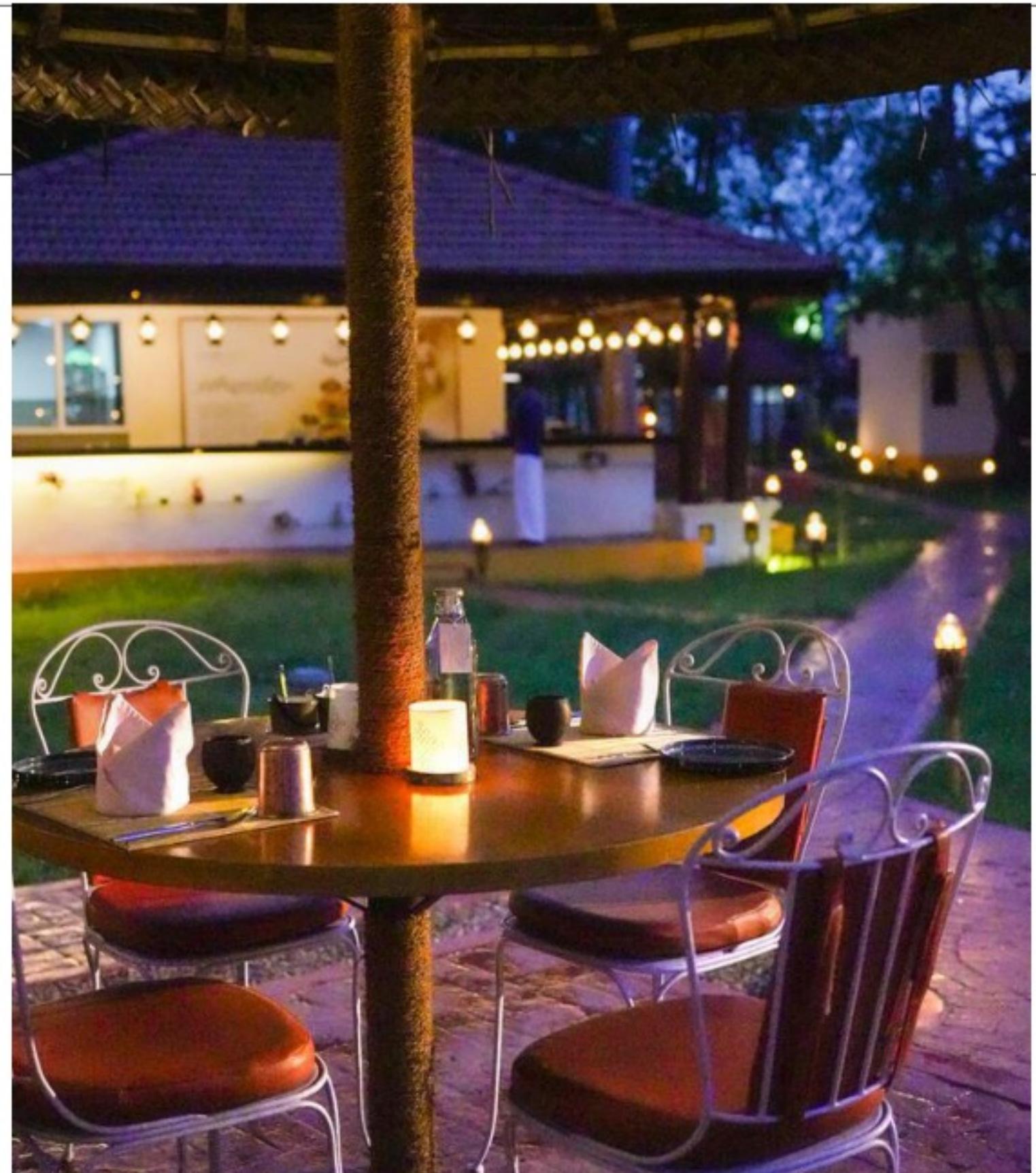


A taste of literature

(Clockwise from right) Mutton rice; a view of the restaurant at Mantra Koodam; and a vegetarian starter. SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



Sangam on my plate

According to Sangam texts, ancient Tamilakam was imagined as five ecological landscapes. How do these terrains taste when they are plated today?

Sneha Thomas

The time was the Sangam era. The people of ancient Tamilakam ate what the land offered. As centuries passed, trade routes opened, and foreign flavours tiptoed into the pantry, ancient traditions slipped out the back door, making space for pillow-y idlis and fiery Chettinad gravies.

Curious to discover what his ancestors feasted on, Harish Venkatasubramaniam, resort manager, Mantra Koodam by CGH Earth in Kumbakonam, turned to the verses of Sangam literature, the oldest surviving body of South Indian text. With Chef Maruthavanan Kumarasamy translating those findings into edible stories, Aatrupaduthal was born. Set beside the river, this dinner experience takes guests on a culinary journey across the five landscapes of Sangam-era Tamilakam. "When I joined CGH

Earth, I was tasked with defining Tamil cuisine," says Harish. Penned in old Tamil, the Sangam verses demanded scholarly help for Harish to crack their culinary clues. "It took me more than a year to understand that *aambi* means mushroom, and *kurumpuzhil* refers to quail," he says.

According to Sangam texts, ancient Tamilakam, which included present-day Tamil Nadu, parts of Kerala and Karnataka, was imagined as five ecological landscapes. Kurinji meant the mountains; Mullai the forests; Marutham, the agricultural plains; Neithal, the coastlines; and Palai the arid stretches. For Harish, it was non-negotiable that each of these terrains find representation on the plate.

"Food wasn't the central theme in Sangam literature but love and war were," Harish explains. "So we had to read between the lines,

pick up on mentions of dishes, textures, cooking styles, or what the meal tasted like to develop our dishes."

They ruled out later imports like chilli and tomato, and leaned on ingredients that were native, like gooseberry, pepper, ginger, shallots, and tamarind. "That's why we say it's reimagined," Harish adds, reflecting on the impossibility of recreating exact recipes.

The meal starts with a lemon-pepper salad from Kurinji, made with groundnuts, bottle gourd, and coconut. The mutton liver starter on the meat menu comes with a unique foxtail millet masala. The combination of mushroom, yam, and seeraga samba rice is comforting.

The Mullai region offers adai served with horse gram and garlic sauce. For meat eaters, there was a smoky charcoal-grilled mutton dish, followed by a country chicken curry where the meat is marinated and cooked in a garlic-fennel gravy.



Marutham, introduces a vegetarian starter of stone-grilled country vegetables with liquorice. The dal-and-rice pancake, shallow-fried and served with butter jaggery mix, feels more like a dessert masquerading as a starter. Later, a mutton and seeraga samba rice dish arrives, cooked like a one-pot meal. The seafood menu leans heavily on Neithal. There is squid grilled with local spices, mackerel seasoned in the style of the Thondinagara Neithal women, and tiger prawns stone-grilled with lemon and ginger. Main courses include murrel fish cooked with seeraga samba rice, anchovies in a coconut-based gravy, and angel prawns in a bold pepper-cumin sauce.

Palai might contribute the least to the menu but leaves the biggest impression. The sesame-flavoured quail, fried in ghee, stands out as the star of the course. Following closely is a tender mutton curry.

Desserts draw their gentle sweetness from jaggery and liquorice. Whether in kodo millet milk halwa, or the foxtail millet payasam, each calls back an era before refined sugar entered the kitchen.

Aatrupaduthal at Mantra Koodam, CGH Earth, Kumbakonam, is open from 7.30pm to 9.30pm. For reservations, call 7530083613.