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## Community

## Ottawa Star Print Edition

### Tantalizing & Tasty: Cuisine of Kerala — God’s Own Country

June 23, 2014



by Ms. Raju Banerjee

The India Canada Friendship Circle’s (ICFC) June 8th sold out session on food tourism in Kerala, a state in South India, with the talented Joe Thottungal, Chef and Owner of Coconut Lagoon Restaurant, was an event not to be missed for foodies, gourmards, and connoisseurs in pursuit of tasty and exotic flavours.

Joe laid out an array of exotic spices along with many that are used everyday in Kerala kitchens and pointed out a common misconception that “spicy food” means “hot food” unsuitable to some delicate palates.

Spices are used to enhance natural flavours and to bring out the complexities of many ingredients. He highlighted how using different techniques can change the taste, colour, flavour and strength of a spice; for example, tamarind when smoked has a completely different taste and flavour than when unsmoked. Joe explained that mace, the outer shell of nutmeg, imparts an altogether different aroma than the nut itself and that black pepper, at the various stages of drying, changes its color from green to red to black with unique potency and smell at every stage!

Since Kerala means the “land of the coconut”, it was natural for Joe to artfully demonstrate how to buy a good coconut and crack it open! In fact, it is this very meaning of “Kerala” coupled with its beautiful backwaters and lagoons that inspired him to name his Ottawa restaurant, located at 853 St. Laurent Boulevard, “Coconut Lagoon”.

ICFC members learned of Joe’s challenges in rising amongst the entrepreneurial ranks and how his Indian advisors encouraged him to specialize in authentic Indian rather than western cuisine. This advice went far in shaping Joe’s 20-plus year career, spanning India, Saudi Arabia and now Canada, as he worked amongst the world’s best chefs. One of his initial challenges was how to raise awareness of the regional differences in Indian cuisine and, with the success of Coconut Lagoon, he created a niche for Kerala and South Indian cuisine in Ottawa.

There was more in store for the ICFC crowd as Joe came with freshly prepared authentic Kerala snacks: Shrimp ‘pancakes’, samosas, potato and cheese fritters and Kerala tea infused with cardamom. Everyone, including Mr. Mauril Belanger, Member Parliament for Ottawa-Vanier, and Mr. Joe Daniel, Member of Parliament for Don Valley East (Toronto), enjoyed a taste of God’s Own Country – Kerala right here in Ottawa!

Joe emphasized that it’s Kerala’s unique combination of geography, climate and diverse cultures that makes its cuisine so special. He insisted that there is nothing that compares to leisurely drifting along the backwaters of Kerala in a handmade houseboat enjoying the tranquility of the unspoiled countryside while dining on freshly caught giant prawns prepared for you by your own on-board chef. True to his word, Joe led a group of Canadians on a very successful 15 day culinary expedition to Kerala in March 2014.

ICFC’s next event on September 21st will feature Suneet Tuli, CEO, of DataWind, which is widely known for its “Akash” – an Android-based tablet, dubbed as the world’s most affordable tablet.



## World



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