

Strands of Gold

MUTTA MALA, FROM PORTUGAL TO KOZHIKODE

Text & Photograph by AYSHA TANYA



Translated from Malayalam, mutta mala, means garlands of egg. The longer the unbroken noodle-like strands are, the more the culinary prowess of the Moplah cook who made them.

A trip to the Malabar would be incomplete without *mutta mala*, the delicate dessert that is among the high points of Moplah cuisine. Like the community that enjoys the dish, *mutta mala* bears traces of a long journey across the oceans.

The Moplahs are India's oldest Muslim community, descendants of Arab traders who visited Kerala in the seventh century. Several of these merchants married local women and settled in the region, giving birth to a community with strong Middle Eastern influences. The Moplahs are known for their love of music, dancing, and for their culinary traditions. Rich, spicy, and flavourful, Moplah fare has imbibed elements from the Portuguese, Dutch, and English—colonisers that monopolised the spice trade in the region between the 15th and 18th centuries.

That is apparent when you trace the history of *mutta mala*, which is made by cooking beaten egg yolks in noodle-like strands in a vat of boiling sugar syrup. It is a Moplah speciality and is often served during Eid celebrations, or at weddings to impress the groom's family. Light and sticky but not overly sweet, the dessert has

a texture similar to string hoppers (or *idiyappams*, as they're known in Malayalam).

Mutta mala bears an uncanny resemblance to a dish called *fios de ovos*, which traces its origins to the medieval monasteries of Portugal. In the 14th and 15th centuries, monks and nuns would frequently launder the clothes of the village folk. At that time, egg whites were used to starch dresses and shirts. The yolks that remained were used to make *fios de ovos*, also called angel hair in Portuguese. As Portuguese explorers travelled the world, the dish went with them. Versions of the dessert can now be found in Thailand, Brazil, Japan, and of course, the Malabar Coast.

To sample *mutta mala* at its finest, visit Zain's (Convent Cross Road) in Kozhikode (Calicut). The local icon is run by Zainabi and her husband Noor Mohamed. The restaurant is known for its lacy *appams*, mutton *ishtew*, peppery Moplah biryani, and divine *mutta mala*. At Zain's, the strands of gold are served with egg whites that have been steamed with cardamom to form soft, pillowy strips—the perfect finale to a ghee-enriched Moplah meal. ■