Culinary route to Vietnamese heritage

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‘Cha Gio’ among the flavours recreated at food festival held in Puducherry

Place fresh coriander and mint atop the crispy fried prawn and crab meat spring roll and wrap it in lettuce. Dip this in ‘nuoc cham’ (sour and spicy dipping sauce) and take a bite. This is how Cha Gio (pronounced Chaiyo) has to be eaten.

These instructions are reserved only for non-Puducherrians. This golden brown crispy rice paper roll stuffed with meat or vegetables has been one of the favourite Vietnamese food for people who grew up in this coastal town. It is said that Cha Gio was sold on the streets of Puducherry during the French colonial rule. Tracing this culinary link between Puducherry and Vietnam, as part of Pondicherry Heritage Festival, Le Dupleix and The Promenade are hosting the ‘Vietnamese Food Festival.’

Secrets revealed

One of the few descendants of the families from Vietnam who settled down in this coastal town 50 years ago, volunteered to share the culinary secrets. A woman in her late 60s, preferring anonymity, carefully chose the ingredients, picked up coffee beans, coffee filter and bought fish sauce from Vietnam and taught the chefs in Le Dupleix and The Promenade to get the distinctive flavour of each Vietnamese dish on the menu for the festival.

Ruth Sequeira, Manager-Communications at HiDesign Private Limited, said that she has been part of the People for Pondicherry Heritage for two years now. “Shubham Biswas of INTACH was researching the link of Puducherry with Indochina. It was during this time, we thought of bringing the popular Vietnamese food back to Puducherry. We customised the menu retaining seafood, which is popular in Puducherry, and cancelled out pork,” she said.

Chef Satish Rajasekaran, Executive Chef at both the above mentioned restaurants, informed that Vietnam and Puducherry had close trade relations during the French regime. Earlier, Vietnamese food was available everywhere in Puducherry. There are very few restaurants that serve this food now.
“With this festival, we are looking to recreate the flavours of Vietnam in Puducherry. Le Dupleix and The Promenade have a wide range of Creole and French cuisines on the menu, but we felt it was important to pay homage to Puducherry’s sometimes forgotten Vietnamese heritage, through out food,” he said.

At the Vietnamese Food Festival, you can choose from 'chicken noodle soup' (perfectly flavoured chicken broth, rice stick noodles, bean sprouts, coriander leaves) and 'hot and sour soup with prawns and pineapple (popular South Vietnamese soup with balance of sweet, hot and sour flavours). In salad and roots, there is green papaya salad for vegetarians and Bun Bo Xao (Vietnamese cold beef and rice noodle spiced with chilli, fresh herbs and crushed peanuts or Cha gio (fried prawn and crab meat spring roll).

For the main course, there is Banh Xeo (Vietnamese crepes filled with prawns and mushrooms, eaten rolled in lettuce and fresh herbs), Grilled Lemongrass Chicked Satays (boneless chicken thighs marinated with lemongrass, shallots, chilli and garlic), Fish Braised in Sweet Soy Sauce (sauce of caramelized sugar, soy sauce, fish sauce, black pepper and garlicpowdered over braised fish fillet) and Fried Fish with Lemongrass (lemongrass cooked with garlic and fresh chillies compliments the freshly pan-fried fish fillet). There is a dessert and do not miss Che Thai (Vietnamese sweet beverage) and coffee made from a special Vietnamese coffee filter.