

A TRIBUTE TO CULINARY TRADITIONS

An author and prolific independent writer, Bengaluru-based Kaveri Ponnappa published *The Vanishing Kodavas*, an extensive cultural study of the Kodava people, in 2013. She wrote her first article on Coorg food in 1988. In 2012, Kaveri started writing her blog *The Coorg Table* (www.kaveriponnappa.com). The blog explores the rich food traditions of Coorg in their cultural context and documents many disappearing recipes and cooking techniques. She speaks to **Ruth Dsouza Prabhu** on how she would like to record some of these food traditions before they disappear or change beyond recognition



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What kickstarted your foray into the world of food?

I have been cooking and collecting recipes and cookbooks since my teens. Even as a very young child, taste mattered a lot. A particular dish does so much more than just taste good—it connects you to the land, the seasons; it evokes deep emotions and stamps your mind with memories that turn up in the most unexpected ways. I also love the history of food as well and so writing about it came quite naturally.

What is the story of The Coorg Table?

It is a tribute to the talented women of Coorg, most of whom are, and always have been, exceptional home cooks. Cooking these traditional dishes connects me with entire generations of women that I have never seen or known, whose thoughts and ideas still survive in the recipes that I follow, or improvise upon. The food stories are very personal memories of watching

my grandmother and mother-in-law cook. But in many ways, they are also universal, and it is wonderful that so many readers from different parts of the country, as well as Coorg, write to me to say that my posts bring back floods of their own memories of the food and cooking of an older generation.

There is so much history to all the food that graces our table. How do you work on your research?

A lot of my material is drawn from my own personal experiences. I am fortunate to have had an extraordinarily talented grandmother and mother-in-law, both well known in Coorg for their culinary skills. They were my links to an earlier generation and way of life. I was able to observe and learn from them. In addition, while I was researching my book, I travelled a lot across the villages in Coorg, where I was always offered a meal. I enjoy talking to people, and you learn a great deal this way. I learnt much about ingredients and techniques that we have stopped using in our modern kitchens.

A historical anecdote I love is about black pepper. It's fascinating that in Coorg, we used to refer to black pepper, which grows locally, as kartha paun meaning black gold, which is what it was called in medieval Europe, since it was as valuable as gold. Although there are no written records, it makes you wonder how long we may have been trading in pepper, since the coast of Malabar is just a very short distance away from Coorg.

Is there such a thing as authenticity of recipes, considering every household has its own interpretation of classics?

There are certain ingredients and techniques, ways of cooking a dish that have evolved out of the history and way of life of a people, their relationship

with a particular landscape. Over the generations, this gets stamped on the food that they cook and eat. There are certain ways in which ingredients come together to capture a set of flavours that you recognise immediately. For me, this is authenticity. Of course, every family has its own way of cooking the same dish, which is a variation on a theme. But you should be able to recognize it. You might interpret a dish, but if you change the theme altogether, I think it becomes something different and it's no longer authentic.

Your favourite food-related memory?

There was a time when wild mushrooms were so abundant in Coorg, they came in by the basketful. To me, they are one of nature's most perfect offerings, earth-scented, exquisitely flavoured. I remember baskets and baskets of them lying all over my grandmother's smoke-blackened kitchen, waiting to be cleaned, their heady aroma all over the room. It's impossible to describe the excitement of seeing all those muddy white heads, breathing in their scent, and knowing that there would be akki ottis and kumme curry (mushroom curry) for dinner. **f**

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