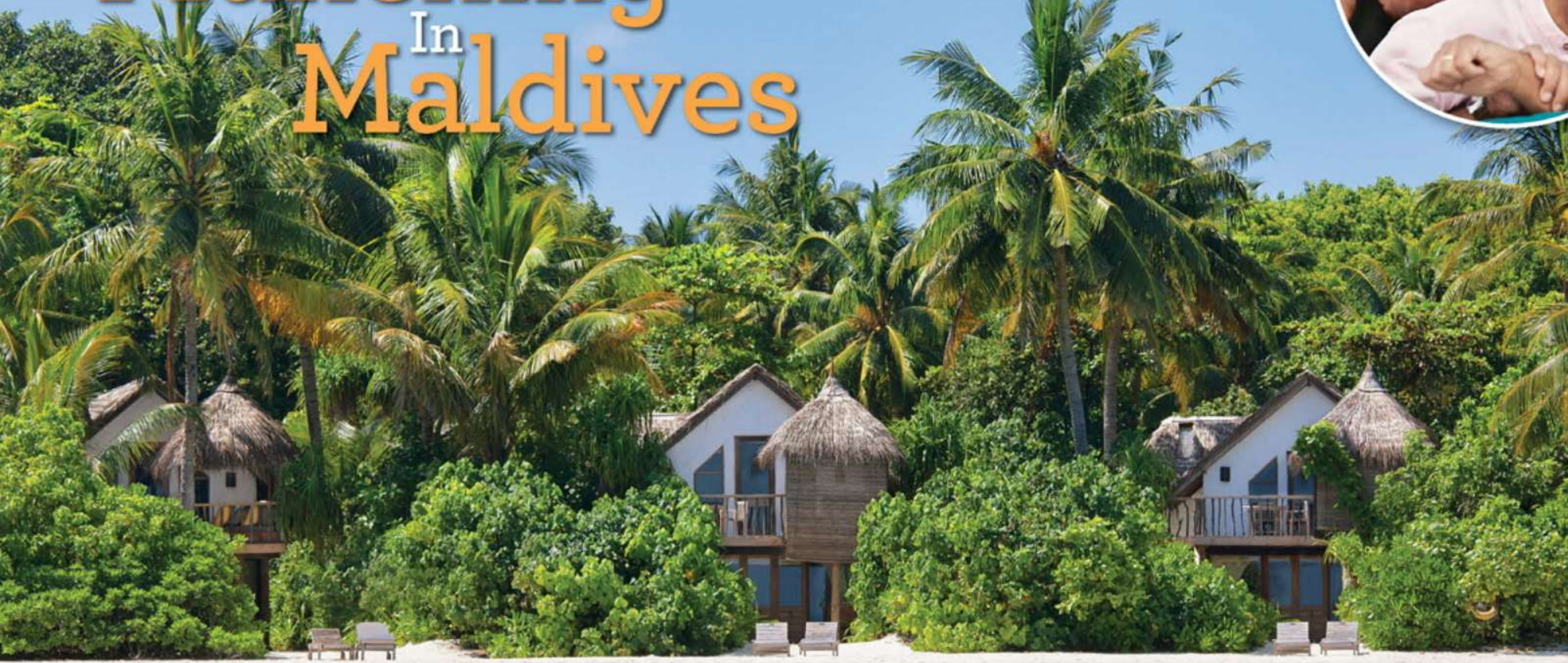


Island Food Munching In Maldives



An eclectic spice tradition combined with the freshest seafood makes the virtually unpublished Maldivian cuisine a hidden treasure waiting to be sampled

Text: Fareeda Kanga



Inc calculable underwater reefs, turquoise lagoons and powdery white beaches as far as the eye can see. Welcome to the Maldives or Dhivehi Raaje (The Island Kingdom) as this tropical paradise is referred to in local parlance.

Truly one of the last unspoilt retreats, I find travelling to the Maldives an experience unlike any other! Whilst tourists throng the uber cool 5-star resorts not many are adventurous enough to sample the local cuisine, preferring to stick to the tried-and-tested resort food of *Fish & Chips* or a *filet mignon*.

A grand tradition

To my surprise, I discovered that Maldivian cuisine is just like the topography of the country – vibrant and bursting with flavour.

Key elements in the local diet (like any island country) are fish and coconut. These are staples and form the backbone of most recipes. Tuna, Wahoo, lobster, prawns no dearth of crustaceans and firm-fleshed fish are on offer, daily, at the local markets.



A slew of snorkelling opportunities await the guest at the reef

The idyllic villas at Soneva Fushi built on environmentally sound principles



Kashikeyo Kan'dhi (Screw Pine Pudding)

Ingredients

100 g local screw pine, cut in thin slices, soaked for 2 hours in cold water
50 g Basmati rice, pureed
150 g castor sugar
50 ml coconut cream
200 ml coconut milk
50 ml jasmine water
1 ltr water
few ramp leaves

Method

Screw pine should be washed, blended. Bring water, jasmine water, ramp leaf and screw pine to boil. Crush the softened screw pine with a ladle. Combine coconut milk with rice until free from lumps. Add rice mixture and sugar to the boiling water and let it thicken. Add coconut cream and remove from heat. Serve cold.



handcrafted villa or on the beach dining on local delicacies.

Under the tutelage of Chef Sobah, the resort has a strong Maldivian lineage as this native islander and winner of Best Chef in The Maldives curates forgotten recipes and creates dishes using local spices and ingredients.

ABC's of Maldivian food

Maldivian food is served with rice sometimes steamed or drenched with coconut milk and *farata* which basically comprises of a soft dough of *maida* and *dalda*, with a pinch of sugar and salt. The dough is fried and served like a calorie-laden *roti*!

If this decadent accompaniment doesn't float your boat then opt for a *rashi (roti)* or

Because of the proximity to India and Sri Lanka, dishes are spicy and similar to our curries and *roti/farata*. Sadly tourists who visit are rarely treated to some of these culinary gems. Luckily a handful of resorts do serve a smattering of these dishes and I am determined to cull them out.

First stop the eco-friendly paradise in Baa Atoll, Soneva Fushi.

Founders Eva and Sonu Shivdasani were really the pioneers of sustainable tourism when they fell in love with this tropical paradise in 1995 and decided to create the first 'castaway' resort in the Maldives, pioneering a trend for back-to-nature luxury holidays.

The minute you step on the island it's a 'no shoes, no news' philosophy where days are spent in barefoot bliss in your



Green Job Fish Curry with Fenfolhi Noodles, Fried Chilli and Fresh Lime

Ingredients
• 800 g Green Job fish • 200 g red onion
• 150 g fresh garlic • 20 g dry red chilli • 50 g tomato paste • 50 g tomato • 30 g cumin seeds • 30 g turmeric powder • 30 g green chilli • 39 g coriander seeds • 50 g fresh root vegetable ginger • 20 g curry leaves • 10 g fine salt • 100 g fish curry powder • 20 ml vegetable oil • 100 ml coconut milk • 50 ml fresh water

Method

Grind dry red chillies, coriander seeds, cumin seeds, ginger, garlic, and turmeric powder with water to make a fine paste. Wash well and drain the water from the fish. Rub the slices of the fish with some salt and a pinch of turmeric powder and keep aside for 5 minutes. Heat the oil in a wok and sauté the onions till they turn golden brown. Add the paste and the chopped tomatoes. Sauté slightly. Now add tamarind paste and coconut milk, water to it and bring it to a boil. Add the fish, green chillies and salt.

Dry Chicken Rolled in Roshhi

Ingredients

500 g chicken (boneless)
20 ml cooking oil
200 g fresh red onion
100 g root vegetable ginger
150 g garlic cloves
20 g fresh curry leaves
10 g chilli
5 g cardamom seeds
20 g chilli powder
150 g curry paste
200 ml coconut milk
200 ml water
10 g fine salt

Method

Heat the oil, sauté the onions, garlic, ginger, curry leaves. Add the chilli powder, while stirring, and then add the curry powder/paste and 1/2 cup water and cook on low heat, stirring frequently. When this curry paste starts bubbling, add the chicken pieces and toss until all chicken pieces are well coated. Add salt, cardamom seeds, thin coconut cream/milk and the remaining water and cook on low heat, stirring occasionally. When the chicken is cooked, add the thick coconut cream/milk and simmer for about a minute. Assemble by placing a tbsp of mixture in a *roti* or *naan*. Roll and cut in three pieces. You can place the assembled roll in a pan with a few drops of oil to give it a golden colour.



Mas Roshhi

Ingredients

For fish stuffing
1 tin tuna
1 onion
1 cup chopped curry leaf
1 full fresh coconut, grated
juice of 1 lemon
1 Maldivian green chilli
salt and pepper to taste
1 garlic pod, chopped
For flour dough
1 cup grated coconut
2 cups flour
150 ml water
salt to taste

Method

Take a bowl, and add all the ingredients except tuna, mix well. Then add tuna and keep aside. Take a separate bowl and add flour, coconut and salt mixed with water. When nicely mixed to make dough, knead well. Make equal-sized balls (size of a lime), rest for 1/2 hour, and make flat rounds. Using a rolling pin, place 1 tsp of fish mixture on the middle, cover from all sides to make fish-stuffed balls. Flatten the fish balls 1 cm thick, grill on a medium-heated griddle or on a pan. Serve hot.

Mas-Huni (Tuna salad)

Ingredients

150 g tuna
1 cup freshly grated coconut
1 onion, finely chopped
3-4 tsp lemon juice
1 green chilli, finely chopped
1/2 salt or according to taste

Method

Mix onion, chilli, lemon juice and salt in a bowl. Add coconut and mix thoroughly. Drain oil from tuna, mix well.

Folhi (Maldivian Crepes)

Ingredients

• 1 tin condensed milk • 6 eggs
• 5 ml vanilla

Method

Beat all ingredients together. Heat the pan, prepare like a crêpe and serve.



Mas Gulha (Fish Ball)

Ingredients

1 tin tuna
150 g onion, chopped
5 g garlic, chopped
1 sprig curry leaf, chopped
juice of 1 lemon
2 cups grated fresh coconut
1/2 green chilli, chopped
turmeric powder, for colour
2 cups flour
salt and black pepper to taste

Method

Mix tuna, onion, curry leaf, lemon juice, chilli, garlic, some turmeric, salt and black pepper, 1 cup fresh coconut in a bowl. Mix flour, remaining coconut, salt and little water in another bowl to make a dough, knead well. Make equal-sized balls (size of a lime), then make flat rounds using your hand, place 1 tsp of fish mixture in the middle, cover from all sides to make fish-stuffed balls. Then heat the oil, and deep-fry at 180° C around 7 minutes or until golden.



Sobah, Executive Chef, Abdulla Sobah, Soneva Fushi, Maldives

Maldivian Breadfruit Curry with Fried Farata



Ingredients

• 500 g fresh breadfruit • 200 g red onion
• 50 ml lime juice • 75 g fresh ginger
• 400 ml coconut milk • 100 g turmeric powder • 20 g curry leaves • 100 ml water

Method

Mash the steamed breadfruit to a pulp and leave aside. Heat ghee, add 1/4 of the chopped onion, ginger and curry leaves. Stir-fry till the onions turn golden brown. Remove and transfer to a plate. Mix the remaining onion, chilli, salt and lemon juice until the juices from the onion flow into the mixture. Add the breadfruit pulp and mix thoroughly again. Pour the thick coconut milk and turmeric powder. Bring to a boil on low heat. Once the curry begins to boil add the fried onion mixture. Remove from heat and serve with rice or farata.

Local Knowledge

Religious preferences are responsible for dietary dos and don'ts. Maldives being a Muslim country, pork and pork products are a strict no-no although high-end resorts have special licenses for serving the same, but locals never touch this meat. An amalgamation of Indian, Sri Lankan, Arabic and Oriental influences this country, which comprises of 1192 islands with more sea than land. Hence fish dominates. Tuna (*Kandu Mas*) is the most popular and in the Maldives Skip Jack Tuna, either fresh or dried, is served, cut into thick pieces in a curry or crumbled and added in salads, too. Don't miss trying some popular Maldivian finger foods such as *gulha*, *kavaabu*, etc. that can be served as a cocktail snack or at tea time. These are very similar to our *farsans* and resemble *bhajias* and *samosas*.

Menu Decoder

All fish is referred to as *mas*. Tuna, which is the most popular fish, is called *Kandu Mas*. Curry dishes on the menu are called *riha* and *chappatis* are known as *roshi*. Some other common dishes include:
Mas Huni – shredded smoked fish with grated coconuts and onions, the most common Maldivian breakfast
Fihunu Mas – barbecued fish basted with chilli
Bambukeyu Hiti – breadfruit curry
Snacks called *hechhika*, almost invariably fish-based and deep-fried, can be found in any Maldivian restaurant. Look out for these snacky items on a Maldivian menu.
Bajjya – pastry stuffed with fish, coconut and onions
Gulha – pastry balls stuffed with smoked fish
Keemia – deep-fried fish rolls
Kufhi Borikaba – spicy fish cake
Mas Roshhi – *Mas Huni* wrapped in *roshi* bread and baked
Theilui Mas – fried fish with chilli and garlic



Chef Ravi and Chef Faisal of Soneva Fushi

try the very interesting Maldivian crêpes called *Fenfolhi Noodles*. These are pancakes or crêpes made out of flour, coconut milk and egg. What's unique is they are cut into strips like noodles and used to mop up gravies or curries.

Vegetarians are surprisingly well catered to with drumstick curries, breadfruit vegetable preparations and banana flower *sambal* to name a few. A delicious salad called *Coppifitnu Satani* made from a local lettuce called Copy Leaf lettuce with onion, lemon juice, Maldivian chilli (tiny, green monsters!) and of course the ubiquitous coconut is a gourmet treat.

Como Maalifushi's Chef Taylor Shearman provides an 'ingredient decoder' to Maldivian food

Besides tuna and coconut, Maldivian food relies on a unique variety of chillies and curry leaves.

The ideal fish for making *Reef Fish Soup* (a Maldivian dish) are: Groupers, Wahoo, Rainbow Runner, Ramba Leaf (*naanaa fish*): The leaves are dark green in colour and have a sweet fragrance. The rigid leaf is used to flavor sweet and savoury dishes; Curry leaf (*bikani dhi fish*): The curry leaf comes from a small tree of the citrus family, which is native to Southwest Asia. The leaves are similar in shape to the bay leaf

but are smaller and thinner and olive green in colour (when fresh). The herb is a vital ingredient in flavouring curry powders and pastes and other savoury dishes; Maldivian Chilli (*Githeymorus*): This is a ball-shaped, wrinkled pepper. It is a very hot pepper, similar to a Scotch Bonnet chilli; Breadfruit (*ban'buoyo*): This fruit was the principal staple food in many areas of the country. Although it is called breadfruit, this it not really classified as a fruit, but as a vegetable; Coconut (*kanishi*): The fruit of the palm tree. This is commonly grown in the Maldives. The fruit grows in clusters of 10 to 20 or more. In order to use the coconut, the fibrous outer husk is removed and the inner shell broken. The flesh of the coconut is then grated and is used in preparation of sweet and savoury dishes.

Here I decided to curate a sample menu from my experience with the cuisine using ingredients available (or suitable substitutes) in India with recipes just for you.

Menu for four servings

Dry Chicken in Roshhi
Green Job Fish
Bambukeyu Harisa (Breadfruit Curry)
Muranga Theeli Kiru Garu Dhina (Drumstick Vegetable)
Kashikeyo Kan' Dhi (Screw Pine Pudding)