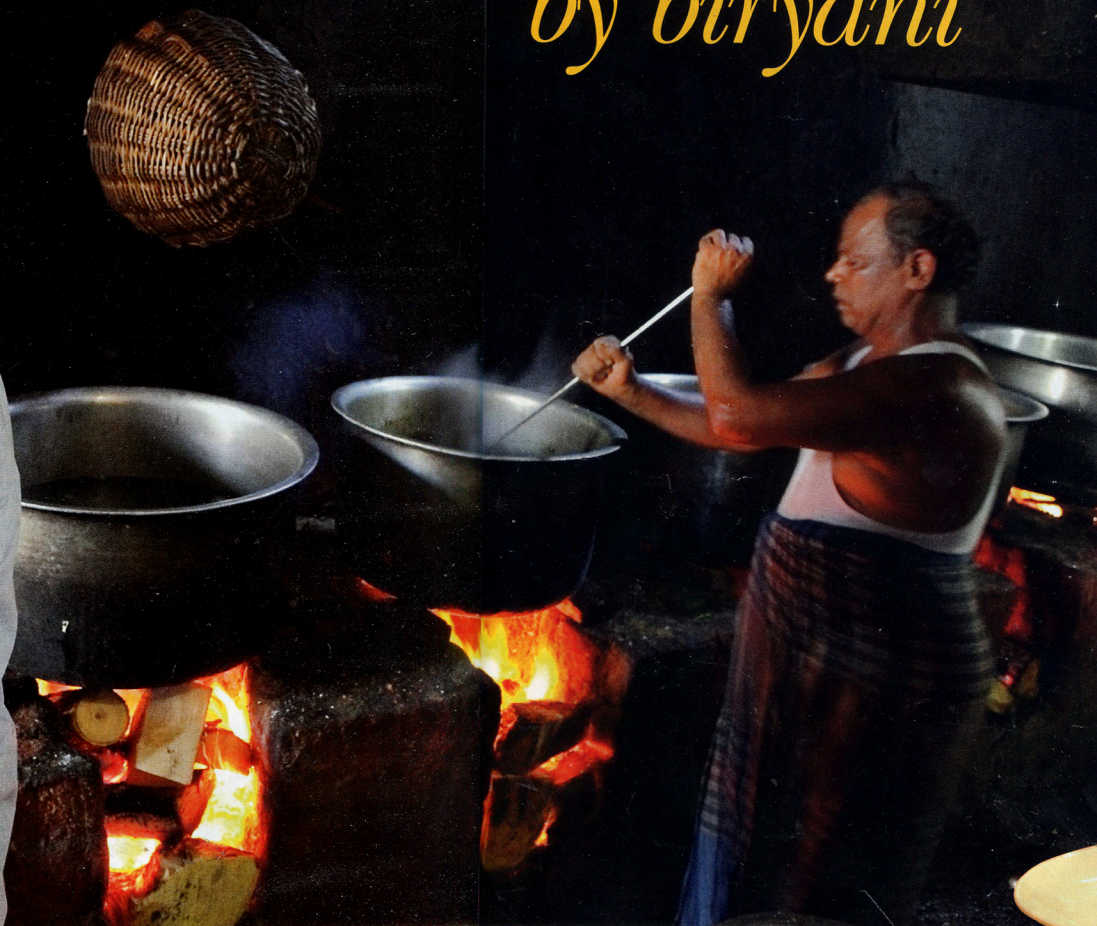


MADURAI

BOWLED OVER by biryani



Prabhakar, the proprietor of Dindigul's famous Ponram Biriyani Hotel, poses next to his popular creation



You've probably tasted it many times, but never quite like this. Take a journey to Dindigul, near Madurai, which has earned itself the moniker of Biryani City and dig into some sinful soul food.

BY ANITA RAO KASHI

PICS: SENTHIL KUMARAN

"SEE? NO OIL!" This was followed seconds after a spoonful of biryani was dramatically dunked into a transparent glass full of water. I was startled and transfixed in equal parts. Startled because it was totally unexpected and transfixed because it is a surreal sight to watch grains of biryani making their way through water. As the grains and spices slowly sank to the bottom, the surface of the water was surprisingly clear and the expected film of grease failed to appear. A triumphant look, mixed with pride, swept across Prabhakar's face, the visual equivalent of 'I told you so'. As demos went, it was certainly fascinating. The test, Prabhakar painstakingly explained, proved that only quality ingredients were used and the biryani was slow-cooked to allow the grains to completely absorb everything—ghee, spices and flavours of the meat. I could only nod in stupefaction, partly in acquiescence and partly because I was so blissfully overdoing on the most glorious biryani.

But Prabhakar was not done yet. He carefully laid a large, fresh banana



That's a lot of biryani!
On a typical day, Ponram Biriyani Hotel dishes out 500-750 portions of biryani, with mutton biryani being the most popular. It uses 150 kg rice, 120 kg mutton, 15 kg ghee, 1 kg each of cardamom, cinnamon, ginger, garlic and 1/2 kg cloves to produce its lip-smacking signature biryani

but sells out within minutes. And it was not difficult to see why. Unlike the biryanis of the North, South Indian biryanis tend to have a more robust flavour. So too with this. It was mild brown in colour and slightly spicy, but not so much as to be overwhelming. The rice (called *jeera samba*, a kind of aromatic small grain rice grown in Tamil Nadu) was packed with flavour and the meat, mutton in this case, was tender, falling off the bones and melting on the tongue. Both are cooked in a special kind of ghee that Prabhakar sources locally and monitors strictly for quality. And despite the ghee, there was none of the heaviness that one would expect. A fact that came home to me as I tucked in gleefully, enjoying the meal.

Meanwhile, Prabhakar tried to entice me to try some of the other non-vegetarian dishes popular at the restaurant such as mutton fry, chicken curry, *keema* (minced lamb) fry, which I did. On their own, they were good, but they didn't quite measure up to the biryani. For vegetarians, the eatery dishes up a Tamilian thali with rasam, sambhar, vegetables and curries, and which my companion assured me was quite tasty and fulfilling. I took his word for it; it seemed almost too criminal to dilute the taste of the biryani with anything else right now.



leaf on the table and then proceeded to drop some biryani on it. The grains plopped on the leaf with a dull sound, separate and all of them uniformly glistening brown in colour. "The grains stay separate only if it is slow-cooked and the method is correct," he explained. He should know. A third generation restaurateur belonging to Dindigul's Ponram Biriyani Hotel brand, Prabhakar grew up learning to make it at his father and grandfather's knees at the restaurant started by the latter almost four decades ago. He continues to follow the recipe which belonged to his grandmother and is a zealously guarded secret.

So popular is the dish that

Ponram has opened many branches in town and a couple of other places, but never too far away. "I need to be able to go and check from time to time; quality is everything," he said. In fact, Prabhakar's family is among a handful that has helped Dindigul, an otherwise nondescript town 60 km north of Madurai, attain the moniker of Biryani City, where people travel from nearby towns just for some taste of some sinful biryani.

Predictably, the recipes are age-old. The methods are old too: the biryani is cooked over firewood and red hot coals are heaped on top, such that there is heat from both sides. Each batch takes almost three hours,