

## Book Review

### If Food be the Music of Culture...

**Essie Sassoon, Bala Menon, and Kenny Salem. *Spice & Kosher: Exotic Cuisine of the Cochin Jews*. (Toronto: Tamarind Tree Books, 2013). xi + 207 pages. ISBN 978-0-9919157-0-5.**

*Reviewed by Nathan Katz*

Food is nutrition, food is pleasure, food is culture, food is social relatedness, food is religion. Just as food is more than what one eats, this cookbook is more than just recipes. Much more.

Of course, there are recipes, wonderful recipes well organized in sections on breakfast foods, fish, poultry, Yemenite dumplings, pastels of Spanish origin, beef and lamb, mutton, rice dishes, breads, vegetables, chutneys, pickles, homemade wine – fresh and fermented, plantains, savories, the Cochin variant of the Passover *charoset*, and sweets. The recipes translate well for the western kitchen, blending the fabulous spices of Kerala with readily available supermarket items. At each step, the authors inform their western readers about a specific food: for example, a *dosha* is translated as a *buntz*. Some recipes are relatively simple preparations, but most are authentically complex and time-consuming. All of the ones we have tried are delicious, wafting us back to the Jew Town tables of the Cohens, Salems, Koders and Halleguas. For those familiar with Cochin Jewish cooking, this book is culinary nostalgia; for those yet to discover this cuisine's delight, it is an exploration into the "exotic" (as the subtitle promises).

This book is more than a cookbook, though. The reader is introduced to not just the foods of Kerala, but also the history of the Cochin Jews, and the rudiments of observing *kashrut* in South India. As one meanders from recipe to recipe, there are tantalizing excursions into Kerala festivals like Onam, Cochin Passover practices, the resettlement of Cochinim (as they are known in Israel) after making *aliyah*, a history of the spice trade, and the scientific names and descriptions of the ingredients. For example, the authors are not content to list tapioca as an ingredient and leave it at that, but they discuss the role of tapioca in Kerala culture. They add further flavor to it by including some of the songs that were sung by Cochin Jewish women as they prepared their meals. In short, in this book, as in actual life, food is the entrance to culture, and especially to the people who bear that culture.

Skilled ethnography pervades the book; Cochin's colorful personalities frequently come to life. With a flip of the page, one jumps from Cochin to Haifa to an Israeli moshav and to Toronto, meeting irrepressible Cochinim at every turn. Their vibrant mini-portraits are a testimony to the authors' rigorous methodology, as well as their unprecedented access to the people and their kitchens.

The background sections are well researched. The authors obviously respect and enjoy engaging scholars who have written about their community. The appended bibliography would do my graduate students proud for judiciously selecting from among scholarly and popular books, journal articles, newspapers, primary documents, web sites, and encyclopedias.

In short, this is an altogether outstanding book. Specialists in Indian Jewry in particular, as well as chefs looking for a new flavor, will benefit from it; and everyone in general will enjoy reading it.

I must add a disclaimer. I am fortunate to count Kenny Salem first as an informant and as a friend ever since my wife and I lived in Jew Town, 1986-7. (The book mentions that we were there from Rosh Hashanah until Chanukah, but actually we were there through Shavuot.) Bala Menon has been an engaging e-penpal for decades, and I know Essie Sassoon slightly. I very much like all three of them. I feel confident that I would have enjoyed this book every bit as much had I never met any of them.