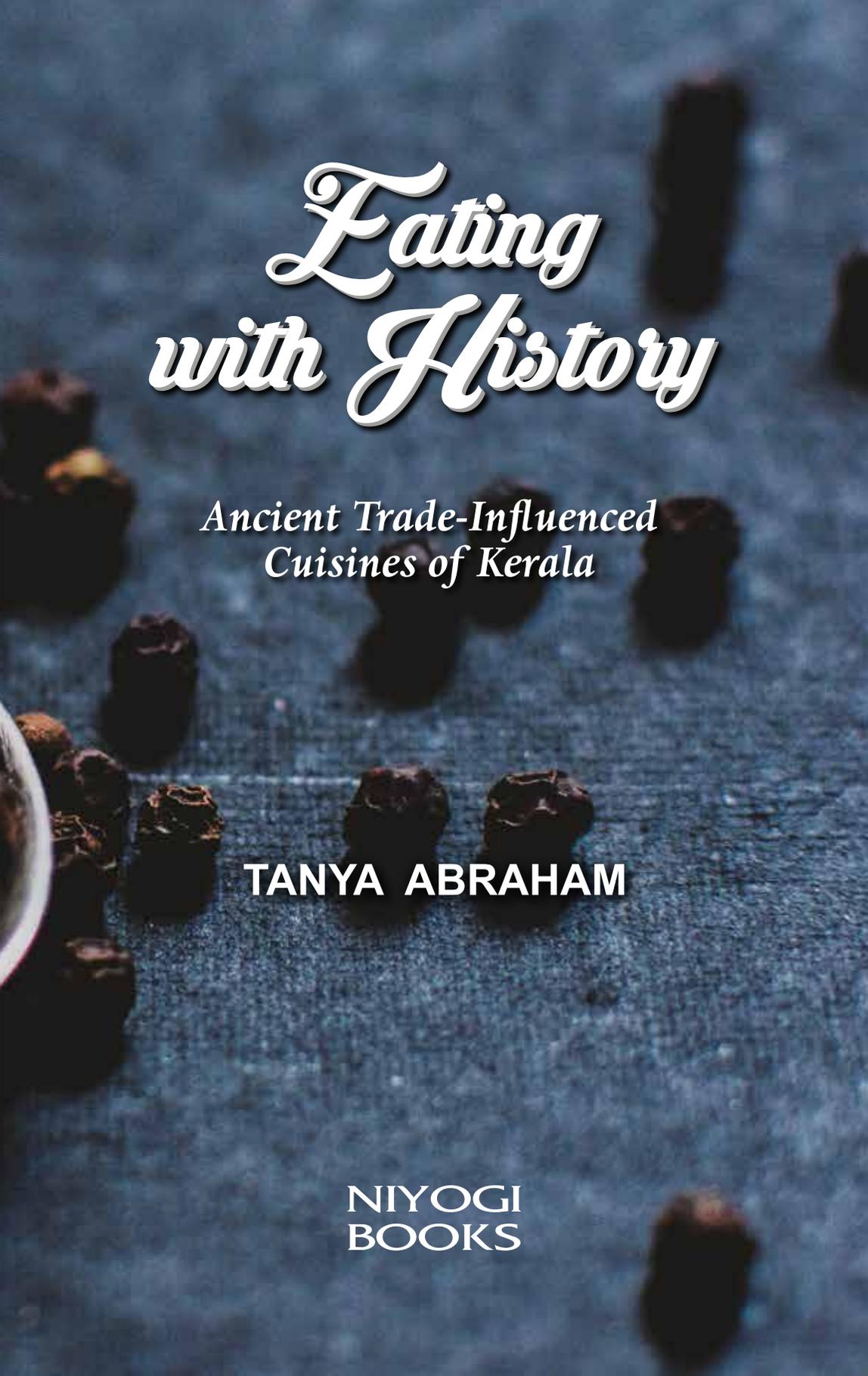


*Eating
with History*







Eating with History

*Ancient Trade-Influenced
Cuisines of Kerala*

TANYA ABRAHAM

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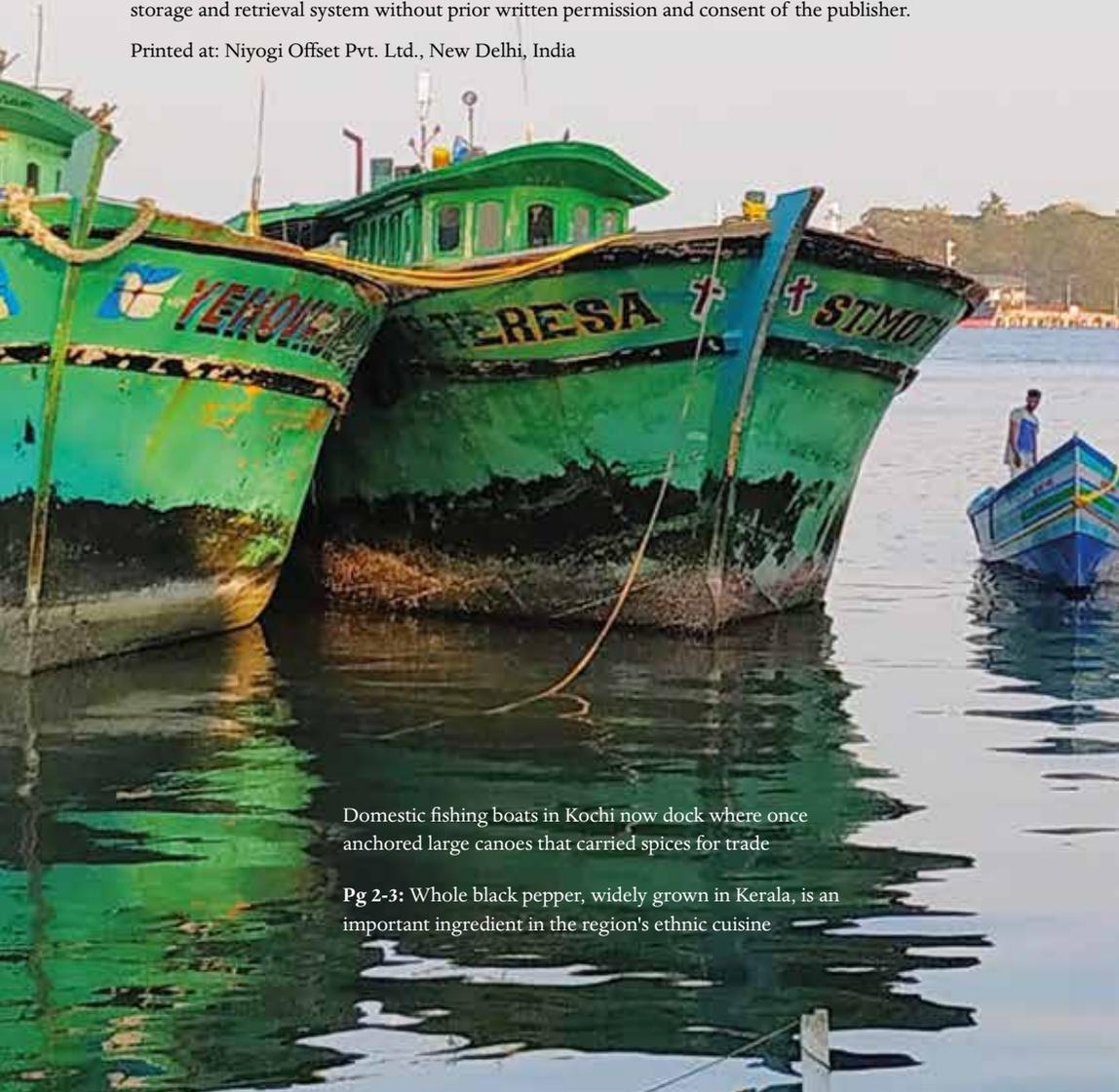
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Domestic fishing boats in Kochi now dock where once anchored large canoes that carried spices for trade

Pg 2-3: Whole black pepper, widely grown in Kerala, is an important ingredient in the region's ethnic cuisine

In memory of my grandmother,
Annie Burleigh Kurishingal.
To my mother, for soul food



To keep the home alive,
at its core, remained
my grandmother's
kitchen. Homemade
rose cookies were
an integral part of
the traditional food
produced in this kitchen



CONTENTS

Foreword ~ 09

Preface ~ 11

Ammama's Kusinchya ~ 13

Kerala and Food ~ 19

Way to the Table: The Recipes

Vegetables ~ 51

Breads, Rice and Appams with Chutneys ~ 61

Meats and Fish ~ 81

Sweets and Desserts ~ 163

Squashes and Wines (with a dash of spice) ~ 193

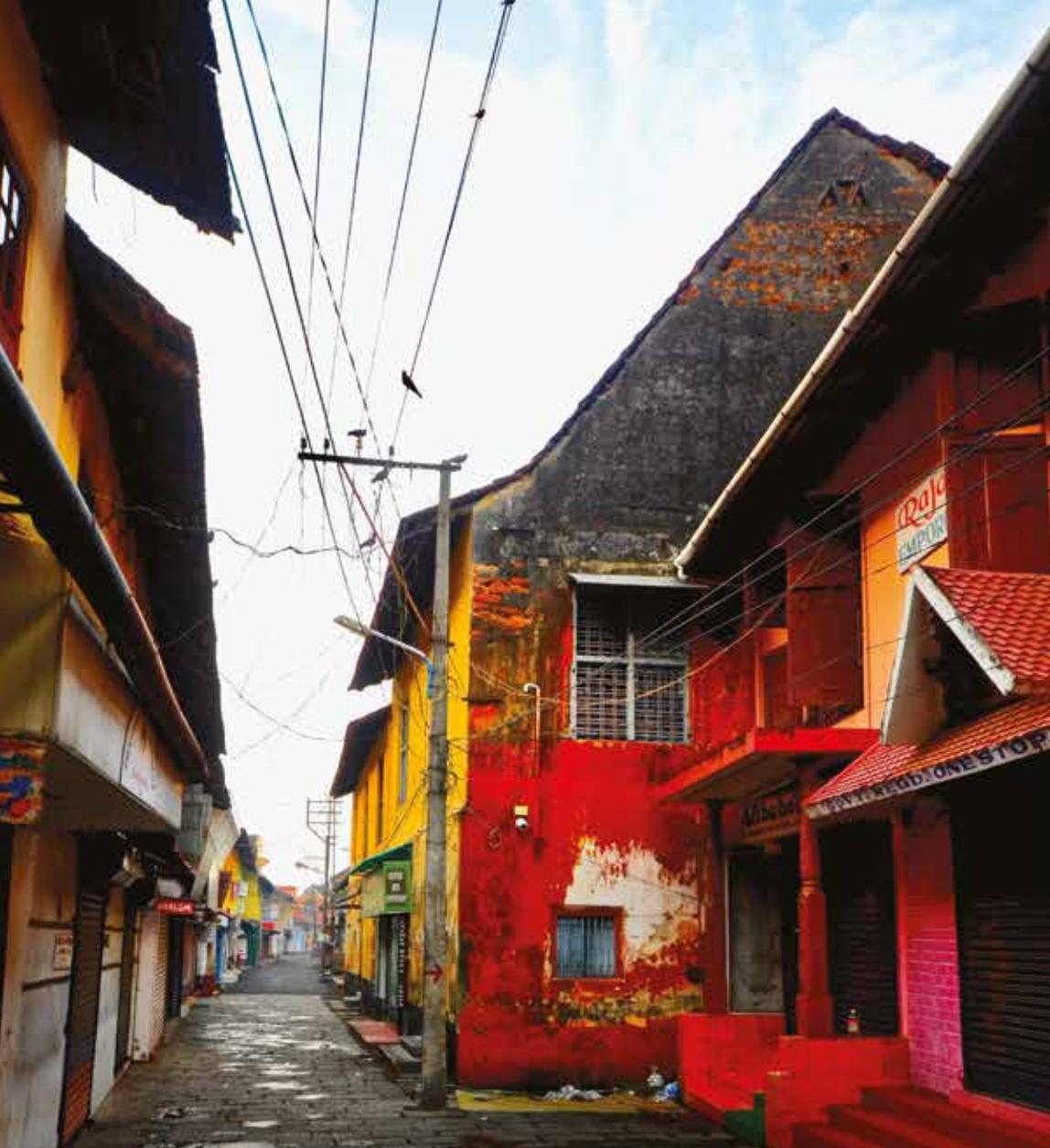
Timeline ~ 199

Glossary of Spices ~ 199

Traditional Cooking Tools (in Kerala Kitchens) ~ 200

Table of Measures ~ 201

Acknowledgements ~ 203



The food trail is extensive. There are numerous recipes in each community in Kerala. These communities, influenced by foreign trade, drew their uniqueness from the marrying of flavours through cultures. Bazaar Road in Mattancherry, the Jew Town, housed godowns for spice trade. Many of the ancient buildings and communities still exist

FOREWORD

It gives me immense pleasure to write a few words on Tanya Abraham's *Eating with History: Ancient Trade-Influenced Cuisines of Kerala*. This book is an invaluable compendium of a variety of food recipes that evolved out of Kerala's kitchen, thanks to the creative and nuanced cross-cultural interactions that happened through the channels of trade. By analysing the historical contexts within which different communities (like the Jews, Syrian Christians, Muslims, Anglo-Indians etc.,) and their consumption culture appeared in Kerala, Tanya Abraham has provided scholars with new ways of understanding the unique but varied and rich food culture of Kerala. The initial part of the work—historically contextualising the webs of cultural connectivities of Kerala—provides a useful introduction to the understanding of the ways how its various threads of culinary culture got evolved and got mixed with various elements of foreign food culture, always creating new textures, tastes and flavours in the process of local adaptations. The range of the book is of such sweep and vastness that it conveys a nuanced and layered understanding of the wide variety of historical processes with which different parallel food traditions evolved among Christians, Jews, Muslims and Anglo-Indians, evidently suggesting a certain amount of exclusiveness among them on food matters despite sharing the same space and same living conditions. The author shows that it happens mainly because of the creative meanings that each community gives to the food ingredients, which eventually is made to evolve as its marker of identity. The recipes of most of the food items of various communities of Kerala are also given in meticulous detail, which in



Meen pollichathu cooked with the fresh catch of the day in Syrian Christian style, exudes one of the many unique flavours of Kerala

turn serve as a rich guide for every household to prepare and taste the best food of the land. I am delighted to say that this easy-to-read book is valuable and well written, with a refreshing sense of excitement at the vast range of knowledge packed in the recipes of every kind of regional food and dish that Kerala is famous for. It is a valuable treasure for the students and researchers of Indian food culture and an easy reference book for every household that treasures and wants to prepare and taste the best food from the past. As there is no authentic work so far on the historical contextualisation of the eating traditions of various communities of Kerala and their recipes, this is a long overdue publication. I eagerly look forward to its publication and subsequent availability in the larger world of food lovers, academicians, and readers keen to learn the history and the process of cultural evolution in Kerala.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dr. Pius Malekandathil". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a horizontal line.

Dr Pius Malekandathil

Professor

Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

PREFACE

This book is in honour of the creativity and work of the many women in kitchens across Kerala, for cherishing the recipes passed down generations and bringing heart to homes. In my three years of study, it was understood that these communities, influenced by foreign trade in Kerala, drew their uniqueness from the marrying of flavours through cultures. It is assumed that in an otherwise predominantly vegetarian region, a variety of meats, fish and other seafood rose to become dominant foods at a later stage, carried to life from outside influences. The food trail is extensive, and I believe I may have only skimmed the surface of the food trove of these communities. There are numerous recipes in each community, each conjured up by women in families across Kerala; it was not however possible to document all of them. Yet, the journey has been rewarding in multifarious ways: to all those who spent time with me explaining the nuances of their kitchen fare, all the while collecting recipes from relatives and friends, and for the hospitality that brought to the conversations flavours new, thank you.



Between stone jars of
pickles, the smell of
firewood and burning
coal...stood my
grandmother

AMMAMA'S KUSINCHYA

I grew up in a small town in Kerala, in a big *tarawad*¹ that housed not only our large family but also the town happenings. It was a wondrous home, which has, for generations, been the backbone of our family; like a melting pot of various condiments that provided a variety of flavours to those who lived in it. There was politics and the freedom movement. There were rooms, which housed nationalists and businessmen, foreign visitors and missionaries. It remained an open house, with a family, which decreased in size as members left for business or higher education, and increased as distant relatives visited and stayed for months. There were so many people at a given time that it never seemed a home to one single family alone. Instead it housed an eclectic energy that came from the lives of the many who walked in and out its doors. To keep the home alive, at its core, remained my grandmother's kitchen. We called it *kusinchya*², a Portuguese derivative of the word 'kitchen', and it was from ammama's³ *kusinchya* that the main artery ran to nourish the soul of the household. Between stone jars of pickles, the smell of firewood and burning coal, and the chatter of servants stood my grandmother in her customary *chatta* and *mundu*⁴, the traditional attire prescribed to Kerala Catholic women. What started as virgin white every morning yellowed as the hours in the kitchen clocked by, the smell of masala clinging generously to the cotton of her clothing. There was so much cooking all at once that it was strange that never was a recipe book ever visible with her, except a copy of the first edition of Mrs Beaton's cookbook, gifted to her by an English acquaintance, which was once in a



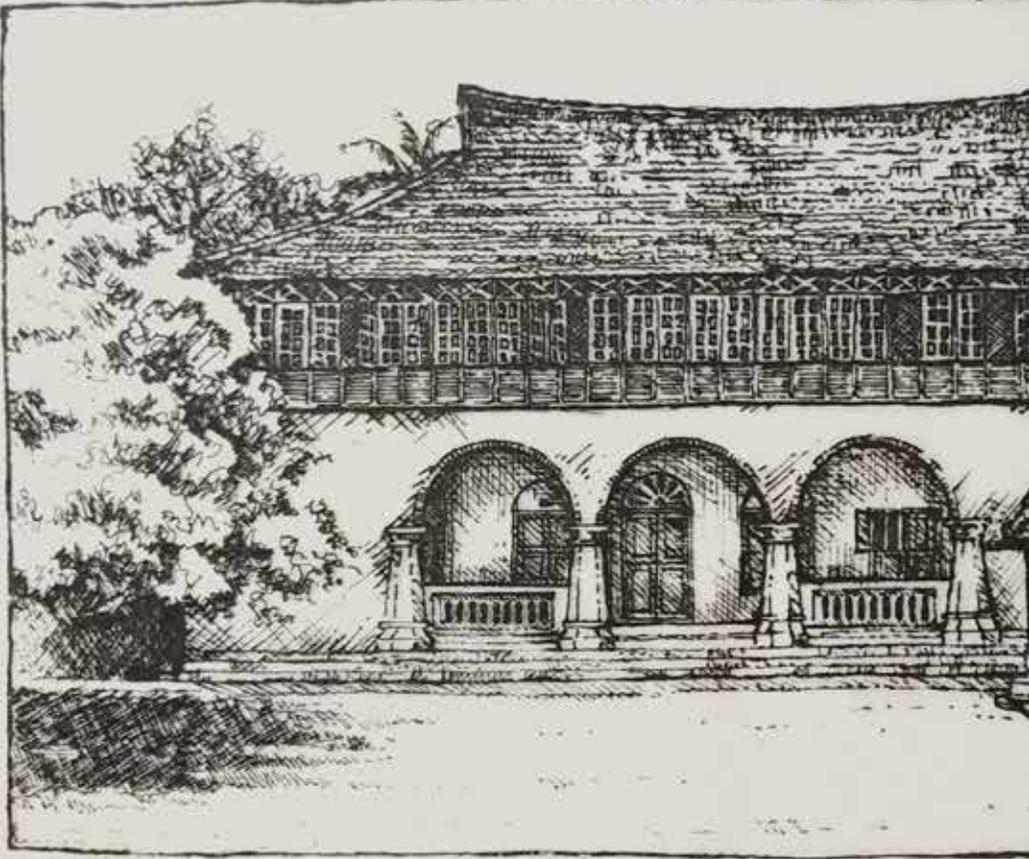
Lawns were decorated with fairy lights during parties. A shamiana was set up in the backyard to serve as the temporary kitchen of the Kurishingal tarawad

while read through. And she never followed anyone's cooking instructions either. She had an uncanny knack of producing flavours even before the pot was on the fire. Throwing in ingredients from her well-stocked kitchen, everyday saw an exciting array of dishes at the *unnumuri*⁵, the dining room that sat on either side of the courtyard of the two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old house. I used to often wonder if her entourage of servants was ever a sufficient hand to support her in fulfilling the needs of the family. Whilst one wanted a fiery fish curry with rice for lunch, the other preferred pork and chicken, with vegetables to accompany. Her husband and the head of the household, my grandfather whom I fondly remember, had a simple palate who preferred dishes less spiced, and was often satisfied with a bowl of clear soup or *kanji* and fish roe curry. Between him, her unmarried brothers-in-law, four sons, their wives and a battalion of grandchildren, Mrs Annie Burleigh, as she was known outside the family, had a grand task to fulfill every day. Whenever I stopped by the *kusinchya* to satisfy my curious young mind, she would, over a steaming vessel, narrate stories of how as a young bride she cooked for my great-grandfather (her



Over steaming vessels, grandmother narrated stories of how as a young bride she cooked for my great-grandfather—her father-in-law

father-in-law) whom she revered greatly, a stalling figure in town during British reign. And how recipes for sandwiches and pies were conjured up as foreign visitors met with him at the *tarawad* gardens. When few Keralites used handcrafted wooden trays with lace tray cloth, she had them specially made to display culinary culture. She trained her kin to be courteous and relish foods from other lands, which were first introduced from the ships that docked at Cochin Harbour. Later, she would make her own version of corned beef and smoked ham, which began to be customarily served with a punch made from local arrack. On her travels she would bring home with her recipes that would soon be the highlight of an evening family gathering. Ammama had an uncanny knack to accentuate anything and everything to do with food—she never for once allowed recipes or ideas slip away. Instead, she would build upon them and present them in a manner, which brought her much applaud and praise. To make eating an occasion, she often reminded us of the importance of wise dining. It was she who taught me to use cutlery and chew my food slowly to allow the flavours to coat my tongue. Her skills never cease[d] to amaze me, like when she formed cutlets



Drawing of the Kurishingal Tarawad, year 2012, by artist and a member of the household, Priti Vadakkath

with one palm, throwing them in hot fat in a continuous rhythm whilst stirring curry with the other, simultaneously monitoring the cooking for at least forty people at any given time.

When Christmas drew near, everything changed in the *kusinchya*, including the ingredients on the shelves. Pork was salted, fresh fruit preserved in sugar syrup. Halwa, cakes, and wines from varied fruits were churned out incessantly, wrapped in decorative paper and sent cycling to neighbouring homes. These were homes, which used to send us gifts of festivity, during Jewish festivals or Bakr-id, for example. Fort Cochin's wondrous amalgamation of cultures brought to our doorstep foods from various backgrounds, recipes of generations that were prepared by the ladies of households. Each one stood evidently different from the other, as flavours shifted dramatically, and their arrival was always looked forward to in great earnest. Two days after the grand family Christmas celebration at