



.. ANASUYA MENON

It is lunch time and the unmistakable smell of *mathi* being fried is conspicuously missing outside the eateries in Kochi.

This year has been one of the worst for sardine lovers in Kerala, as the fish has almost disappeared from the markets. What is available has been imported from Oman. Known as *mathi* and *chaala*, sardine is cheap, tasty and nutritious. Considered “the poor man’s fish”, the price for a kilo is now hovering at around ₹400, when it is usually less than ₹100.

Traditionally, this is the season of the sardine. With the ban on trawling, pelagic fishes such as sardine, mackerel and anchovy found more in the shallow waters are usually caught by the fishermen. This year, sardine shoals have migrated to cooler waters up north.

The Indian oil sardine is an enigmatic fish, says Dr E M Abdussamad, Principal Scientist, Pelagic Fisheries Division, at the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI). “If you look at the history of the sardine, it has always been prone to such fluctuations. In the 1940s, the sardines

Why the Malayali’s favourite fish is in troubled waters

The enigmatic SARDINE

COOL AND COMFY

La Niña is a phenomenon that describes cooler than normal ocean surface temperatures. The conditions that cause La Niña recur every few years and can persist for as long as two years.



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The El Nino phenomenon that warms the waters of our seas has a direct impact on the sardine. Accord-

ing to the findings from the CMFRI’s Fish Ageing Laboratory, sardines that survived the El Nino effect were stunted and laid fewer eggs. A sardine lays up to one lakh eggs at a time, but, during the El Nino, either the numbers were very low or the fish didn’t lay eggs at all. “This impacted Kerala the most, as it’s one of the most consumed fish here – one third of the fish caught in Kerala is the sardine,” Abdussamad says.

Fish from Oman

Recently, the CMFRI released *The Enigmatic Indian Oil Sardine*, a book that touches upon the history, biological aspects and studies conducted on the fish. “Studies have been on for

years but the information was not consolidated.” The book, which was compiled by a team of scientists, took five years to complete.

Faraz Javeed, Director of Abad Fisheries, says there was no question of unavailability of sardine in the past. “It was available every day, all through the year. Especially during the monsoons, the tasty ‘*neychaala*’ (sardine rich in oil) was plenty.” This year, his company is importing sar-

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LITTLE BIG FISH

The lowest yield of sardine in Kerala was in 1994: 1,500 tonnes following a long El-Nino period.

The highest yield was in 2012: 3,99,800 tonnes. In 2018, it went down to 77,000 tonnes.

There are two kinds of sardines now found along the Indian coast – longer ones with little hard spines called *mullenchaala* and the only one called *neychaala*.

dine from Oman. While it is the same species, it is from a different stock and the taste may not match up to the Malayali’s expectations. .

Apart from its taste, the sardine is celebrated for its health benefits. Rich in Omega 3 fatty acids, vitamins such as D, A and B12, and low on mercury levels, it is believed to be good for the skin and hair. “*Mathi* was made every day at home, as it was cheap, tasty and considered healthy,” says Vincy Peter, who has been pickling sardines and selling for

All-time favourite The sardine is one of the most favoured fish in Kerala • GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCKPHOTO

the past six months. A quarter kilo jar has been priced at ₹160. “The best way to cook sardines is to make a fiery *mulakitta vatticha* curry (gravy with red chillies), which goes well with rice,” she says. However, there is nothing that beats the taste of a fried sardine, she adds.

Towards southern Kerala, the sardine is cooked and stir-fried with grated coconut, like a *thoran*, and makes for a delicious side dish. Ramu Butler, consultant chef and executive chef at B@Bay, says this fish lends itself to much creative interpretation. He suggests a sardine mash with apple cider vinegar and salt. Or Bloody Mary Sardines, where the flesh is crushed with a dash of tomato ketchup, Tabasco and Worcestershire sauces and lemon juice. “This would be a perfect spread on hot brown toast and makes for a great party snack.” Another of his favourites is the sardine omelette, which goes well with Provencal and Zinfandel wine.