

COOK JOURNAL

The Onam Sadhya Guide

The system behind the feast

THE COOK JOURNAL

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A Note Before You Begin

My own Sadhya table ran to about eighteen dishes, one morning, one cook, five to six hours, help on the chopping and washing but not the cooking itself. That's the real shape of an Onam Sadhya — not a list of recipes, a production problem.

This guide exists because I kept relearning that problem every year: how much coconut to buy when prices spike during the festival season, what order to cook in so nothing goes cold, which dishes are safe to make ahead and which aren't. This year, I wrote it down.

Not everything here was made from scratch, and that's not a shortcut — it's a decision. A few things are bought on purpose, because six hours has a ceiling. What's homemade is homemade because it needed to be.

I hope this helps you build your own version of this feast — not by following it exactly, but by understanding why it holds together.



PART ONE

The Production System

Before anything gets cooked, it gets planned. This is that plan.

The Coconut System

Sadhya is one of the few feasts built almost entirely around vegetables, and every festive season brings the same question: has the price gone up again, and is it actually cheaper to order than to cook? But a Sadhya isn't one task, it's many — each dish needs its own prep, its own calculation. And running underneath every single one of them, no matter which version you're making — traditional pineapple puliserry or mango — is coconut.

The answer isn't a recipe trick. It's sequencing: grate once, cook everything that shares a coconut treatment while it's still fresh, and let what's left over decide the next dish — instead of the recipe book deciding it for you. That's genuinely how this Sadhya got made.

The table on the next page didn't exist the day this Sadhya got made. It was built afterward, so the math only had to be done once — not redone, under pressure, every year after.



The Batch Table

All measurements based on 1 cup = 200g.

BATCH 1 — COCONUT + CUMIN + GREEN CHILLI

Parippu Curry	¼ cup
Pulissery	½ cup
Aviyal	¾ cup
Erissery	½ cup
Kalan	1 cup
Total	3 cups

BATCH 2 — COCONUT + CUMIN ONLY

Pineapple Pachadi	½ cup
Total	½ cup

BATCH 3 — COCONUT + GREEN CHILLIES ONLY

Beetroot Kichadi	3 tbsp
Cucumber Kichadi	¼ cup
Total	~0.44 cups

BATCH 4 — GRATED COCONUT

Cabbage Thoran	⅓ cup
Erissery	½ cup
Total	~0.83 cups

BATCH 5 — COCONUT MILK

Olan	200ml + 120ml
Vada Kootu Curry	200ml + 180ml

Thick + thin, per dish.

TOTALS — FOR GROCERY SHOPPING

Grated / paste coconut (Batches 1–4)	~4¾ cups
Coconut milk, thick + thin (Batch 5)	700 ml
Whole coconuts to buy	~3 medium

The "~3 coconuts" figure is a shopping compass, not an exact conversion — coconut size varies, so treat it as a starting point rather than a guarantee.

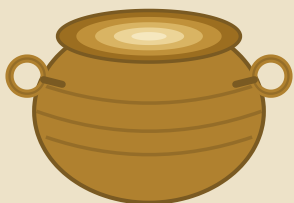


What the Batching Actually Buys You

Skip the table on the previous page, and three things go wrong.

- 1 You redo the coconut math every year. Instead of a known amount per dish, you're back to guessing from scratch — same recipes, same festival, same work, again.
- 2 Your eyeballing has nothing to check against. Topping up coconut as you cook only works if you know roughly how much each dish actually needs. Without the table, "enough" is a guess, not a check.
- 3 And the waste-minimization stops being on purpose. The whole point was buying less coconut without skipping a dish. Without real numbers, you either over-buy to be safe, or run short mid-cook. Either way, the plan stops being a plan.

The table fixes all three. It's not a nice extra — it's the only reason this system works twice, not just once.



What Order, and Why

Unlike serving order, there's no strict order to cooking a Sadhya. Some households start days early — pickles, chips, whatever keeps — some make the whole thing a single family activity on the day itself. What actually decides the order isn't tradition. It's what you have: how many burners, how much time, how many hands.

If you're doing it in a day, here's the logic that held this table together. Start with what needs the longest, least-attended simmer — parippu curry went on first, giving room to prep everything else while it cooked. What's safest and best made close to serving goes in the middle stretch — the coconut milk and curd dishes: olan, pulissery, both kichadis, pachadi, kootu curry. And what actually gets better with a little rest gets that rest on purpose — kichadi chilled, kootu curry given time so the vadas soak up the gravy.

Once the pressure cooker frees up, erissery and kalan go on — these wait their turn deliberately, since one pressure cooker has to serve more than one dish.

The final stretch is the accompaniments — rasam, moru, payasam, papadam. Papadam goes dead last, no exceptions: it's the one thing here that only gets worse the longer it waits.

None of this is about doing it the "right" way. It's about matching each dish to what you actually have — time, equipment, hands — not cooking in whatever order a recipe book lists them.

THE DECIDING QUESTION

Pick a dish

Long, unattended simmer?

→ yes: cook first

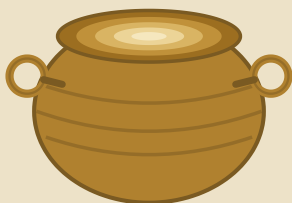
Coconut milk or curd based?

→ yes: cook mid-to-late

Better after a rest?

→ yes: rest it on purpose

Otherwise — cook whenever fits



PART TWO

The Coconut Mechanism

One ingredient, three completely different jobs. Here's how to tell which one you're dealing with.

One Ingredient, Three Jobs

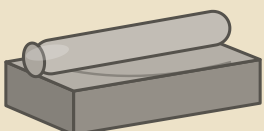
Coconut shows up in almost every dish here — but it's not doing the same job each time. Once you know which job it's doing, you know exactly how to treat it.

Dry and grated, it's just texture. No liquid involved, nothing to protect. The only thing to watch is moisture — add it late enough that the dish doesn't turn wet.

Ground into a paste, cooked with curd, it's there to add body. Aviyal and Kalan both work this way. The curd is the part that can't take heat here — not the coconut paste. Stir the curd in at the end, off the heat.

Pressed into milk, it behaves differently again. This is Olan and Vada Kootu Curry. The thin milk goes in early and does the actual cooking. The thick milk goes in last, off the heat — it really can't take boiling.

Once you know this, you stop needing to remember three separate rules. Just ask: what form is the coconut in right now, and what's it actually doing in this dish?

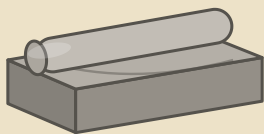


The Three Jobs, Side by Side

	<i>Thoran</i> DRY	<i>Aviyal & Kalan</i> PASTE + CURD	<i>Olan & Vada Kootu</i> <i>Curry</i> COCONUT MILK
WHAT COCONUT IS HERE	Dry, grated	A ground paste, cooked into the base	An emulsion — thin milk cooks, thick milk finishes
THE RISK	Extra moisture, turns the dish wet	The curd curdles if it boils — coconut paste itself is stable	Boiling breaks the milk's own emulsion, fat separates
THE RULE	Add coconut late, keep it dry	Cook the paste in fully, add curd last, off heat	Add thick milk last, off heat or lowest flame
WHAT COOKS THE DISH INSTEAD	The vegetable's own moisture	The paste and vegetables, cooked through before curd goes in	Thin coconut milk, added early — it's the actual cooking liquid

NOTE

Pulissery and both Kichadis belong in the "paste + curd" family too (curd-based, same no-boil rule).



The One Thing Most Cooks Get Slightly Wrong

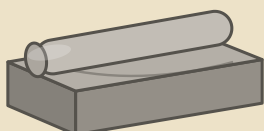
"Don't let it boil" isn't quite right — and that's why it still goes wrong sometimes.

Coconut milk stays creamy because of a kind of balance between fat and water. That balance breaks down with heat — and it happens before the pot even looks like it's boiling. So by the time you see bubbles everywhere, it's already too late.

Here's what to actually watch for: small bubbles at the edge of the pan, steam rising steadily, but the middle still calm. That's your moment to turn the heat down — not once the whole pot is rolling.

One more thing, specific to this table: pineapple puliserry and pineapple pachadi are a bit trickier, because pineapple is acidic, and acid can cause the same problem as heat. With these two, turn the heat down a little earlier than you would for olan or kalan.

None of this needs to be complicated. It's really just one fact, showing up again and again: coconut milk holds together — and now you know what to look for right before it doesn't.



PART THREE

The Dishes

Everything up to here has been about the system. What follows is what it's for.

Parippu Curry

The first spoonful of the sadhya — softened moong dal, ground coconut, and a slick of warm ghee over rice.



 TIME
15–20 minutes

 SERVES
6

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

1 cup yellow moong dal
2½ cups water
¼ tsp turmeric powder
Salt, to taste

COCONUT PASTE

¾ cup grated coconut
2 green chillies
½ tsp cumin seeds

TEMPERING

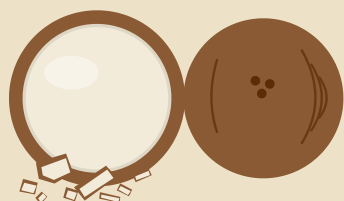
2 tbsp coconut oil
1 tsp mustard seeds
2 dried red chillies
2 shallots, sliced
1 sprig curry leaves

PREPARATION

- 1 Dry-roast the moong dal over medium heat until golden and fragrant, 4–5 minutes — this deepens its flavour.
- 2 Rinse, then pressure-cook with water and turmeric until soft, 3–4 whistles. Mash lightly.
- 3 Grind the coconut, green chillies and cumin to a smooth paste with a little water.
- 4 Stir the paste into the dal, season with salt, and simmer 5 minutes until it comes together.
- 5 Heat coconut oil; splutter mustard seeds, then add red chillies, shallots and curry leaves until golden.
- 6 Pour the tempering over the curry. Serve hot over rice with a spoon of ghee.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Made first, alongside *aviyal* and *thoran* — see the batching table on page 2.



Sambar

The one main on this table with no coconut in it at all.



 TIME
30–40 minutes

 SERVES
5

INGREDIENTS

MAIN SAMBAR BASE

300g sambar-cut vegetables
½ cup (100g) toor dal
1 medium tomato
1 tsp ginger-garlic paste
1 green chilli
6 shallots

SPICES & LIQUIDS

½ tsp turmeric powder
1 tsp salt
2 tbsp coriander powder
1.5 tbsp chilli powders (Kashmiri & regular)
1 tsp jaggery
1 tsp hing
10g tamarind pulp
4.5 cups water

TEMPERING

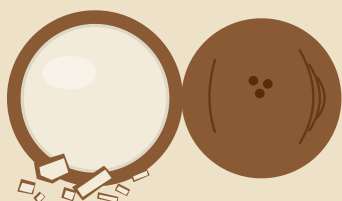
2 tsp coconut oil
½ tsp mustard seeds
¼ tsp fenugreek seeds
2 dry red chillies
2 sprigs curry leaves
Coriander leaves

PREPARATION

- 1 Wash toor dal. Pressure-cook with 1.5 cups water and ¼ tsp turmeric, 2 whistles.
- 2 Soak tamarind in 3 cups warm water, squeeze and strain.
- 3 Heat 1 tsp coconut oil; add fenugreek, shallots, green chilli — sauté until translucent.
- 4 Add tamarind water, remaining turmeric and hing. Bring to a boil.
- 5 Add vegetables, coriander powder and chilli powders. Pressure-cook 2 whistles.
- 6 Add cooked dal, jaggery and chopped tomato. Simmer, then add coriander leaves.
- 7 Temper mustard seeds, dry red chillies and curry leaves in the remaining oil; pour over.
- 8 Add the final hing and stir gently.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Made once *parippu curry* frees a burner — see p.4.



Pineapple Puliserry

Coconut and curd together — two things that can't take a hard boil, not one.



 TIME
25–30 minutes

 SERVES
6–8

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

400g pineapple, diced
2 green chillies
1½ cups water
½ tsp pepper powder
½ tsp chilli powder
½ tsp sugar
1¼ tsp salt
150ml curd
1 sprig curry leaves

COCONUT PASTE

½ cup grated coconut
¼ tsp cumin
¼ tsp turmeric powder

TEMPERING

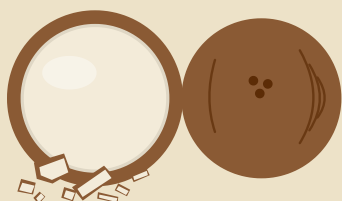
1 tbsp coconut oil
½ tsp mustard seeds
2 dry red chillies
1 sprig curry leaves

PREPARATION

- 1 Cook the pineapple with green chillies, chilli powder, curry leaves, salt, turmeric and water until soft.
- 2 Grind the coconut and cumin to a smooth paste.
- 3 Add the paste to the pineapple and simmer gently a few minutes.
- 4 Lower the flame completely. Stir in beaten curd, sugar and remaining turmeric — do not let it boil.
- 5 Temper mustard seeds, dry red chillies and curry leaves in coconut oil; pour over.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Ease the heat down earlier than you would for *olan* or *kalan* — the pineapple's acidity is doing some of the work already.



Rasam & Sambaram

Neither needs coconut — just tamarind, pepper and time.



 TIME
15–25 minutes

 SERVES
5

INGREDIENTS

RASAM

10g tamarind
700ml water (split)
1 tsp pepper powder
1 tsp ginger-garlic paste
1½ tbsp coconut oil
½ tsp mustard seeds
⅛ tsp fenugreek seeds
2 dry red chillies
2 tsp coriander powder
½ tsp chilli powder
¼ tsp turmeric
1 small tomato
1 sprig curry leaves
½ tsp hing
1 tsp salt
Coriander leaves

SAMBARAM

150ml curd
150ml water
¼ tsp ginger paste
3–4 curry leaves, chopped
¼ tsp salt

PREPARATION

RASAM

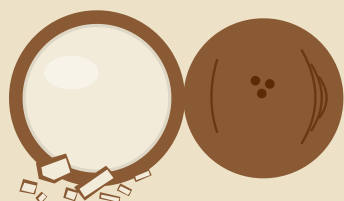
- 1 Soak tamarind in 200ml hot water and extract the pulp.
- 2 Heat oil; temper mustard, fenugreek, dry chillies and curry leaves.
- 3 Add ginger-garlic paste and sauté 1–2 min.
- 4 Add coriander, chilli and turmeric powders; sauté briefly.
- 5 Add tamarind water, pepper, salt, tomato and the remaining water.
- 6 Simmer 5–6 min.
- 7 Add hing and coriander leaves just before turning off the heat.

SAMBARAM

- 1 Beat the curd smooth.
- 2 Whisk in the water.
- 3 Stir in ginger paste, curry leaves and salt.
- 4 Chill before serving.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Comes together in the final stretch, right before serving — see p.4.



Aviyal

Coconut ground into the vegetables, curd stirred in last — the paste itself never has to worry about heat.



 TIME
25–30 minutes

 SERVES
4–6

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

300g aviyal vegetable mix
1 cup water
3 tbsp curd
1 tsp salt
1 tbsp oil

COCONUT PASTE

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup (150g) grated coconut
1 tsp cumin seeds
4 green chillies

SPICES

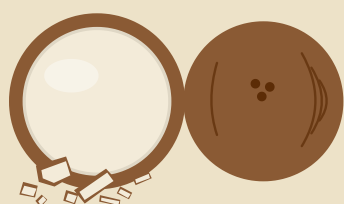
1 tsp Kashmiri chilli powder
1 tsp chilli powder
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp turmeric powder
1 sprig curry leaves
 $\frac{3}{4}$ tbsp coconut oil

PREPARATION

- 1 Cook the vegetable mix with salt, water, turmeric and both chilli powders until just tender.
- 2 Grind the coconut, cumin and green chillies to a coarse paste.
- 3 Add the paste to the vegetables and simmer 2–3 minutes.
- 4 Remove from heat and stir in the curd.
- 5 Temper curry leaves in coconut oil and pour over.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

One of Batch 1's five dishes — see the batch table on p.2.



Cabbage Thoran

Dry, grated, added late — the only job here is staying dry.



 TIME
15–20 minutes

 SERVES
5–6

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

3 cups cabbage, finely shredded
1/3 cup grated coconut
2 green chillies
1/2 tsp salt
1/4 tsp turmeric powder

TEMPERING

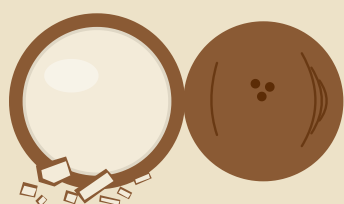
1/2 tbsp coconut oil
1/2 tsp mustard seeds
1 1/2 tsp split urad dal
2 dry red chillies
2 sprigs curry leaves

PREPARATION

- 1 Heat oil; temper mustard seeds, urad dal, dry chillies and curry leaves until the dal is golden.
- 2 Add the cabbage, salt, turmeric and green chillies.
- 3 Stir-fry 2–3 minutes.
- 4 Add the grated coconut, cover, and cook on low 2–3 minutes until just tender.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Grated coconut only, Batch 4 — see p.2.



Erissery

The one dish that uses coconut twice — ground into the base, then roasted separately as a finishing garnish.



 TIME
20–25 minutes

 SERVES
3–4

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

300g pumpkin, diced
½ tsp pepper powder
1 tsp salt
¾ cup water
2 green chillies, split

COCONUT PASTE

½ cup grated coconut
¾ tsp cumin seeds
½ tsp garlic paste

TEMPERING & GARNISH

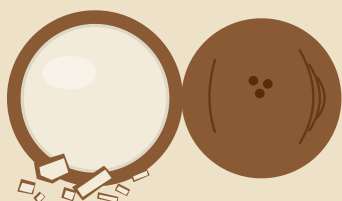
1 tbsp coconut oil
½ cup (100g) grated coconut
½ tsp mustard seeds
½ tsp cumin seeds
1 green chilli
2 dry red chillies
1 sprig curry leaves

PREPARATION

- 1 Pressure-cook the pumpkin with pepper, salt and water, 2 whistles.
- 2 Grind ½ cup coconut, ¾ tsp cumin, garlic paste and 1 green chilli to a paste; add to the pumpkin.
- 3 Heat oil and roast the remaining ½ cup coconut until golden brown.
- 4 Add mustard seeds, the remaining cumin, the other green chilli, dry chillies and curry leaves; sauté.
- 5 Pour the tempering over the erissery and stir.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Spans both Batch 1 and Batch 4 — the only recipe in the guide that does.



Olan

Thin coconut milk does the cooking, thick milk only shows up at the very end.



 TIME
20–25 minutes

 SERVES
4–5

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

⅓ cup (65g) red cowpea
300g ash gourd, diced
3 green chillies, slit
200ml thin coconut milk
100ml thick coconut milk
1 sprig curry leaves
½ tsp salt
200ml water

GARNISH

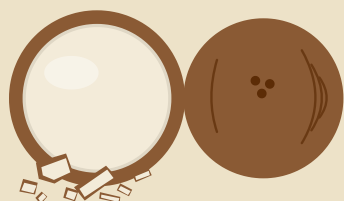
¾ tbsp coconut oil

PREPARATION

- 1** Pressure-cook the cowpea, ash gourd, green chillies, salt and water, 2–3 whistles.
- 2** Add the thin coconut milk and simmer.
- 3** Add salt to taste and the curry leaves.
- 4** Add the thick coconut milk and coconut oil. Heat gently 1–2 minutes without boiling.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Batch 5 — the one dish in this guide built on real coconut milk, not paste.



Kalan

Same paste-and-curd logic as aviyal, just a thicker, more sour result.



 TIME
20–25 minutes

 SERVES
4–5

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

150g yam
1 small raw plantain
300ml curd
1 tsp salt
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup water
2 green chillies
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp ghee, split
1 sprig curry leaves

COCONUT PASTE

1 cup (200g) grated coconut
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp cumin seeds

TEMPERING

1 tbsp coconut oil
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp mustard seeds
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp fenugreek seeds
3 dry red chillies
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp ghee

SPICES

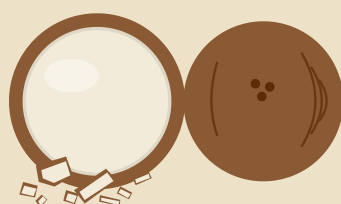
$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp turmeric
 $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp chilli powder
1 tsp pepper powder

PREPARATION

- 1 Pressure-cook the yam, plantain, turmeric, chilli, pepper, salt and water, 2–3 whistles.
- 2 Grind the coconut, cumin and green chillies to a smooth paste; add and simmer 2–3 minutes.
- 3 Add the beaten curd. Heat gently — do not boil.
- 4 Temper mustard seeds, fenugreek, dry chillies and curry leaves in oil and ghee; pour over.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Cooked once the pressure cooker frees up — see p.4.



Vada Kootu Curry

Coconut milk again, but this one gets rested on purpose — the vadas need the time to soak it up.



 TIME
20–25 minutes

 SERVES
3–4

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

2 medium potatoes, diced
1 medium onion, chopped
2 store-bought urad dal vada
150ml thin coconut milk
200ml thick coconut milk
¾ tbsp coconut oil

SPICES

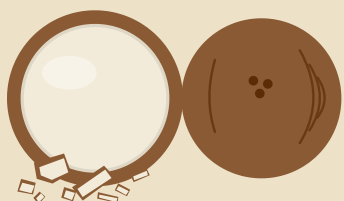
¼ tsp turmeric
¼ tsp pepper powder
½ tsp chilli powder
1 tsp coriander powder
½ tsp garam masala
Salt, to taste

PREPARATION

- 1 Heat oil and sauté the onions until light brown.
- 2 Add the potatoes and sauté until tender.
- 3 Add turmeric, pepper, chilli and coriander powders; fry 1 minute.
- 4 Add the thin coconut milk and simmer 3 minutes.
- 5 Add vada pieces, garam masala and thick coconut milk. Heat gently 1–2 minutes without boiling.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Batch 5. Don't rush the rest — that's not an optional step, it's the point.



Pineapple Pachadi

Coconut and cumin only, no chilli in the paste — the mildest batch in the table.



 TIME
20–25 minutes

 SERVES
3–4

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

200g pineapple, chopped
¾ cup water
¼ cup sugar
½ tsp salt
2 green chillies
¼ tsp turmeric powder

COCONUT PASTE

½ cup grated coconut
½ tsp cumin seeds

TEMPERING

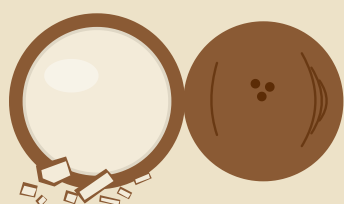
1 tsp oil
½ tsp mustard seeds
2 dry red chillies
1 sprig curry leaves

PREPARATION

- 1 Cook the pineapple with water, turmeric and salt until soft.
- 2 Grind the coconut, cumin and green chillies to a smooth paste.
- 3 Add the paste and sugar to the pineapple; cook 1–2 minutes on low.
- 4 Temper mustard seeds, dry chillies and curry leaves in oil; pour over.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Batch 2, the smallest batch of the five.



Beetroot Kichadi

Coconut and green chilli, nothing else — the colour does all the work here.



 TIME
20–25 minutes

 SERVES
3–4

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

200g beetroot, grated
200ml curd
Salt, to taste

COCONUT PASTE

3 tbsp grated coconut
2 green chillies

TEMPERING

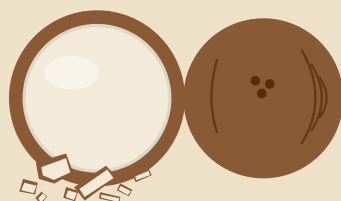
½ tsp mustard seeds
1 sprig curry leaves
2 dry red chillies
1 tsp oil

PREPARATION

- 1 Cook the grated beetroot with a pinch of salt until soft.
- 2 Grind the coconut and green chillies to a fine paste; add to the beetroot.
- 3 Whisk the curd smooth and stir in gently.
- 4 Temper mustard seeds, dry chillies and curry leaves in oil; pour over just before serving.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Batch 3 — see p.2 for the exact quantity.



Cucumber Kichadi

Same batch as beetroot kichadi, same paste, different vegetable entirely.



TIME

15 minutes



SERVES

2–3

INGREDIENTS

MAIN

200g cucumber, diced
3 tbsp curd
½ tsp salt
¼ cup water

COCONUT PASTE

¼ cup grated coconut
2 green chillies
Pinch of cumin seeds

TEMPERING

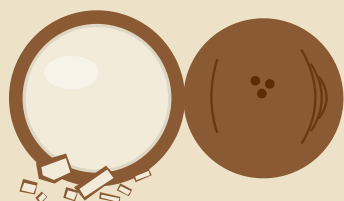
¾ tbsp coconut oil
½ tsp mustard seeds
2 dry red chillies
1 sprig curry leaves

PREPARATION

- 1 Cook the cucumber with salt and water, covered, until soft.
- 2 Grind the coconut, green chillies and cumin to a smooth paste.
- 3 Remove the cucumber from heat and stir in the curd until smooth.
- 4 Temper mustard seeds, dry chillies and curry leaves in oil; pour over and stir gently.

FROM THE PRODUCTION PLAN

Batch 3, alongside beetroot kichadi — see the exact quantity on p.2.



Bought, On Purpose

Not everything on this table needs to come from scratch. Some things are worth the six hours of cooking they'd cost you. These aren't.

Puli Inji

A good jar does the job, and the time saved is worth more than proving a point.

Ada Pradhaman & Palada Payasam

Bought, ready-made. Two payasams is already generous for one table; these two didn't need to be homemade to earn their place.

Semiya Payasam

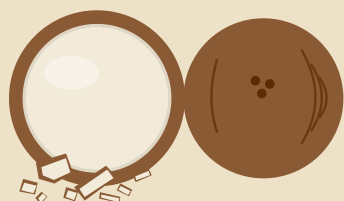
The one payasam actually made at home, and it didn't need much: boil milk, stir in a payasam mix, cook for the time on the packet. Not from scratch, but not store-bought either — the middle option, and often the right one.

Mango Pickle, Banana Chips, Sharkara Upperi

The ones most households buy without a second thought, homemade or not. If you're the kind of cook who starts prepping a few days early and wants everything by hand, these are worth the extra time. If you're not, buying them isn't a shortcut — it's just a different choice, and just as valid.

Boli

Same logic. Homemade if you have the time and the inclination; store-bought if you don't. Either way, it belongs on the table.



Before You Serve It

The Note at the start of this guide made one real promise: not to hand you a script to follow exactly, but to explain why my own table held together — the coconut, the order, the heat.

If you've made it here, you've got more than a set of recipes. You know why parippu curry goes on first and papadam goes on last. You know what a coconut is actually doing in a dish before you add it. You know the difference between a guess and a check.

That's the part that travels. My own table was one version of a Sadhya — yours might use different vegetables, a different ratio, dishes this guide never covered. The system underneath doesn't change. Grate once. Cook what shares a treatment. Let what's left over decide the next dish. Watch the edges of the pot, not the center.

Make it your own. That was always the point.

— *The Cook Journal*

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The Onam Sadhya Guide
One morning, one cook, eighteen dishes.