
CURRY WITHOUT THE HURRY

The deliciously complex flavours – and Slow Food ethos – of Peranakan cuisine had **SUDI PIGOTT** smitten when she visited Singapore. Now the centuries-old fusion fare looks set to be the next big thing in British dining

Olak-olak, what a heady treat. Little bamboo-leaf-wrapped parcels containing belachan (fermented shrimp paste) crab, lemongrass, tamarind, chilli and much more, mingled with the beguiling smoke of chargrilling. The taste transports me straight back to the bustle and tropical heat of Singapore's Airport Road Hawker's Market, where I first sampled the intriguing, complex blend of flavours that characterise Peranakan, also known as Nyonya, food.

Fast-forward a fortnight and I'm sharing platters of definitive olak-olak, plus popiah basah (chilli paste, jicama, shredded mooli and carrot in spring-roll wrappers), plus loh kei bak – house-made rolls wrapped in tofu skins and filled with chicken, yam and five-spice powder – at a pop-up supper club in a cool, open-plan apartment in Hackney.

The revival of interest in Peranakan cuisine that so seduced me in Singapore is a trend emerging in the UK, too, with cookery classes, restaurant specials, supper clubs and even supermarket cookery kits demonstrating its growing appeal.

Nyonya cuisine seems likely to make an impact as our appetite grows for more in-depth knowledge of South-east Asian food and its more obscure specialities. Undoubtedly, such fascination is fuelled by our insatiable hunger for travel, real or merely "armchair", tuning our palates to

be ever more curious and adventurous.

Peranakan/Nyonya refers to the descendants of Chinese merchants, who intermarried with women living along the Malacca Straits back in the 16th century and developed a highly distinctive blend of Malay and regional Chinese cuisine, using Chinese cooking techniques such as braising and stir-frying, melded with indigenous ingredients such as galangal, tamarind, turmeric, coconut milk and lemongrass. The result is a cuisine that is intensely rich, gutsy and accented with tangy, pungent and sour flavours.

Peranakan culture is currently having a renaissance among Singaporeans, who are now appreciating and championing their culinary past. What makes Peranakan food so fascinating and different is that it exemplifies the tenets of Slow Food. Peranakan recipes do require time-consuming preparation, especially with much grinding of rempahs, or spice pastes, typically made from fresh and dried chillies, garlic, shallots, candlenut, fermented shrimp paste and lemon grass. At a class on nyonya cookery in an outdoor kitchen I attended in Singapore, given by Ruqxana Vasanwala of the cookery school, Cooking Magic, I learnt that proficiency in the even and patient pounding of rempahs in a pestle and mortar was once seen as a prerequisite for an even-tempered



Nonyan wife.

At True Blue in Singapore, linked to the Peranakan museum, the owner Benjamin Seah's mother runs the kitchen, and diners eat Peranakan classics such as banana blossom salad with cucumber, rendang, steamed tapioca balls with optional durian fruit (a funky taste very challenging to Western palates) served on traditional lime-green and pink-peony tableware.

A significant sign of the times is the Singapore newcomer Candlenut, which opened six months ago. Malcolm Lee cooks a modernist take on the dishes of his Peranakan grandmother, using contemporary culinary techniques. It's where *Restaurant Magazine* and a posse of trend-setting international chefs, including David Thompson of Nahm, in town for the Asia's 50 Best Restaurants Awards, chose to dine. The name Candlenut refers to a tree found across Malaysia used as a thickening agent in sambals, the chilli and kalamansi lime relish, like an Asian ketchup, that is the cornerstone accompaniment to every meal.

Lee's signature dish is ayam buah keluak, a classic updated. The curious buah keluak, or black nut, sometimes referred to as Asia's truffle, is the size of a brazil nut and contained within a rugby ball-sized outer husk. They are poisonous when first picked. They must be boiled, buried in ash for 40 days, then thoroughly soaked for three days to soften the shell. Cracked open, their contents are combined with sugar, salt and a secret mix of spices, which Lee refuses to divulge, pounded in a pestle and mortar, then pushed back into the shell and served in a memorable mole-like sauce made with a rempah (spice mix) and tamarind water. The taste is deeply earthy and fragrant. Contrary to its traditional serving with pork ribs, Lee makes the dish with 120-day aged, grain-fed beef short-rib cooked sous-vide for 48 hours.

The UK-based Malaysian chef Norman Musa laments that ayam buah keluak cannot be brought to London. Yet this doesn't hold him back from being a trailblazer for Peranakan cuisine in the UK. Musa runs the fast-casual Ning (named after the note in Gamelan music) restaurant in Manchester, where he offers Peranakan specials on the menu and runs cooking classes (book well ahead for his October Peranakan masterclass at ningcatering.com). In London, he holds a monthly supper club (check edibleexperiences.com for dates) besides creating Nyonyan dishes such as multi-

spiced chicken kapitan for Ekachai restaurant in Liverpool Street, and is doing demos at many food festivals this summer and regular hands-on cookery classes at Leiths cookery school during May and June.

To make it easier for those not close to the essential fresh ingredients readily available in Soho's Chinatown, Musa has created his own range of spices and pastes made in Malaysia, including the hard-to-find ginger lily, whose fascinating sweet-perfumed flavour is quite unlike conventional ginger or galangal and gives Musa's extraordinary salmon fish-head curry a flavour quite unlike anything I've ever tasted.

For Mother's Day, Musa trialled a rather different afternoon tea at Ning, which instantly sold out. It was based around Nyonya kuih, cakes enriched with coconut milk including serimuka (steamed glutinous rice with striking lime-green pandan custard), onde onde buah melaka rice balls with pandan, glutinous rice flour and melted palm sugar filling, and bingka ubi kaya (baked pudding made of tapioca and topped with kaya, an utterly moreish "jam" of coconut milk, egg and sugar).

As the Singapore-raised food writer and author of *Food Lover's Guide to London* Jenny Linford observes: "We're really just scratching the surface in appreciating how varied and sophisticated South-eastern Asian cuisine can be. It's always good to open up our palates to new possibilities.

"Now that front-of-mouth dishes with more pronounced notes of acidity and umami are becoming better appreciated, I'd love to see more Peranakan cuisine in the UK."

Shu Han, of the charming blog "Mummy I can Cook" (a treasure-trove of Peranakan recipes - she sells her own sambal tumis online), is fervently convinced that the appetite for Nonyan food is growing, as is fellow Peranakan designer/blogger Jason Ng, who blogs on "Feast to the World". Together they run occasional pop-up supper clubs at the Hawker House night market in Bethnal Green, London.

The London street-food hawker Sambal Shiok is ahead of the curve with Malaysian Burgers, a clever, enticing offer mixing in the British craze for burger-bun comfort with ingredients typical of Nyonya cooking. Brioche buns are filled with satay or Aberdeen beef rendang, cooked with 10 spices and served with sweet pickled cucumber, red onion, mayo and sambal belachan. Queues duly form at Street Food Union's Rupert Street market in central London on Fridays/Saturdays, plus Harringay market on Sundays.



Meanwhile, Norman Musa has done workshops for Waitrose product developers and is now working with another supermarket. He's keeping details tantalisingly under wraps presently. Clare Bartlett, Waitrose's cook's ingredients product developer, confirms that "Shoppers at Waitrose are always keen to seek out the latest food trends, and Malay is certainly getting a lot of attention at the moment. It really delivers on flavour." Its range now includes a rendang meal kit plus laksa paste, which Bartlett says "customers have really embraced".

Nicola Lando, of Sous Chef (soufchef.co.uk), a fantastic online resource of more specialist equipment and ingredients, is forecasting a craving for lesser-known South-east Asian cuisines, including Nonyan, too. Only this past week, it has added sambals, tamarind paste, glutinous rice flour and tapioca pearls to its range, which is bought by chefs as well as intrepid home cooks.

It all takes me back to dining with a Singaporean local, Thomas Ng, in the downtown Joo Chiat/Gulong district, a Peranakan preserve, where we shared a feast including ayam kuloak chicken and fish-head assam curry, redolent with the sour tang of tamarind and perfume of ginger lily. "This is damn shiok," I said, slipping into Singlish. Shiok translates as conveying strong pleasure or tingling of the taste buds – a phrase we're likely to hear a lot more often. ●

Malaysian
ginger lily
gives a
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tasted



*Posh spice:
Norman
Musa
of Ning
restaurant,
Manchester.
Far left:
his chicken
kapitan* **PHIL
TRAGEN/UNP**



