

Food for Thought: Singapore's Soul Food

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

TO WITNESS the preparation of chicken braised with tamarind and Indonesian black nuts is to understand why Peranakan cuisine, Singapore's comfort food, is on the wane in kitchens here. Only after several days of soaking, cleaning, extracting and mixing is the dish, the favorite holiday recipe of the Straits Chinese, ready to serve up.

"Peranakan food is dying out," says Ms. [Vivian] Lian, food consultant for The Blue Ginger Restaurant, a Singapore chain of eateries. "Modern women don't have the time to cook this way at home. They like the Cantonese way of cooking: just throw everything into a wok." Ms. Lian, a retired teacher whose son is one of the partners in Blue Ginger, found cooks who knew nothing about its history and arduous preparation, and trained them. "Peranakan people are very fastidious about their food and very set in their ways. People don't want to change their recipes and I don't want to spend a lot of time arguing in the kitchen. My son said to me that if you get a Peranakan cook you'll be fighting with her all the time."

It's not unusual for Peranakan dishes to require boiling, steaming, grilling and frying in quick succession -- an intensity of labor that reflects the heightened domesticity of a people who absorbed the foods and customs of two distinct societies. Peranakan culture, which dates to the 16th-century heyday of the Sultanate of Malacca, resulted from the union of Hokkien-speaking immigrants from China and local Malay women. Peranakan men, known as babas, and their wives, known as nonyas, took up residence across Malaysia and Indonesia, but most distinctly in Singapore. From the early 19th century they often acted as compradores for the British, mediating deals among the colonists, the Malays and the newly arrived Chinese immigrants.

FULL TEXT

TO WITNESS the preparation of chicken braised with tamarind and Indonesian black nuts is to understand why Peranakan cuisine, Singapore's comfort food, is on the wane in kitchens here. Only after several days of soaking, cleaning, extracting and mixing is the dish, the favorite holiday recipe of the Straits Chinese, ready to serve up.

The vital ingredient, rather sinister-looking black nuts the size and shape of apricots, are repeatedly scrubbed for dirt and sand. The grit is the result of a several-week burial that allows the nuts to ferment slightly, making them edible.

A tiny opening is sawed in the rock-hard nuts and the dark pulp is withdrawn. The contents of three nuts are blended and returned to one of the shells, which is then cooked in a curry sauce. Rich and oily on the tongue, the paste has the slightly acrid tones of very dark chocolate.

The actual cooking time for ayam buah keluak, as the chicken dish is known, is fairly short, just an hour or so of braising, leaving plenty of time for the dedicated chef to prepare the other dozen or so equally complicated dishes that might make up a Peranakan meal.

Modernity -- busy lives and the small, enclosed kitchens that are typical in public-housing estates -- has driven Peranakan food out of the home and into restaurants. But if you taste its rich flavors, you'll know why Vivian Lian is trying to ensure it stays around for many generations to come.

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Peranakans spoke a patois of Malay and Hokkien with a smattering of English and Hindi. Most followed Chinese religious customs, mixing Taoism, Confucianism and Buddhism, and lived in houses that were often an opulent mix of local, colonial and Chinese architectural forms known as Chinese rococo.

Peranakans turned domestic life into high art. Men expected women to be rigorous in their cooking and housekeeping. Nonyas would pay close attention to the kitchen skills of any prospective daughter-in-law, even eavesdropping on the grinding of the paste to ensure they were adept with a mortar and pestle.

As Singapore has grown more culturally homogenous and national identity has diluted dialect and clan, traces of Peranakan culture have faded. The government tore down most Peranakan homes in its rush to development. What survived, though, is a cuisine that was at the heart of their fused world, a blend of Malay ingredients and Chinese essences that is much more than the sum of its parts. Peranakan food includes pork, which Muslim Malays do not eat, and a range of Chinese tastes including five-spice powder, and soy and oyster sauces. Soups tend toward Chinese styles, with fish and pork balls, while the curries and stews are distinctly Malay.

Peranakan dishes are often available in the hawker centers that are ubiquitous across Singapore. But in the past decade, an increasing number of restaurants have emerged to cater to the nostalgia for one of the original fusion cuisines, serving what Ms. Lian calls "true-blue Peranakan food," based on old family recipes scrupulously kept secret. Jumbles of Thai herbs, Moroccan spices, Mexican salsas and Asian techniques have become almost clichés of fusion food as chefs around the globe compete to throw together the most disparate ingredients and cooking styles. But there is something refreshingly genuine and unpretentious about Peranakan food, which accounts for its widespread appeal in Singapore.

At Ivins, a cheap and cheerful chain of four Peranakan restaurants, the ayam buah keluak is densely flavored and hot enough to bring a tingle to your scalp. Laksa -- noodles and seafood in a turmeric-coloured soup -- is thick and luxuriant, tempting you into the sort of over-enthusiastic slurping that leaves your clothes covered in indelible yellow spots. All around the crowded, steamy restaurant, families eat with deep concentration and audible sighs suggesting that even though they may no longer cook Peranakan food themselves, it remains the country's soul food.

Mr. Templer is a writer based in Berkeley, California.

Recommended:

The Blue Ginger Restaurant, named after the ingredient also known as galangal, is in a restored shop house on Tanjong Pagar Road. The restaurant is decorated with cheerful paintings of Peranakan life by the artist Martin Loh. Dishes range from S\$4.50 (\$2.60) for soups to S\$22.80 (\$13.25) for dishes of whole fish. Recommended dishes: ayam buah keluak, ngo heong (rolls of minced pork and prawns), otak otak (fish cakes) and durian chendol (durian and red beans). Expect to pay upwards of S\$25 (\$14.50) a person. Addresses: 97 Tanjong Pagar Road (Tel: 222-3928), and 260 Orchard Road, No.05-02C The Hereen (Tel: 835-3928). Both are open daily from 11:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. and 6:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Reservations recommended for evenings and weekends.

Ivins has four outlets and is a good family restaurant with an extensive menu in Malay but no explanations of the dishes. However, the staff will patiently translate and offer suggestions on the specialities of the day. Expect to pay around S\$15 (\$8.70) a person. Ivins has non-spicy dishes for children. Addresses: 19/21 Binjai Park, Bukit Timah (Tel: 468-3060), and at 396 Alexandra Road, No.02-03 BP Tower, Podium Block (Tel: 276-3721). Reservations recommended on weekends.

-- R.T.

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