



# KAMPONG BOY

FLAVOUR IS MY  
HOMETOWN

SASHI CHELIAH





**KAMPONG**  
**BOY** *FLAVOUR IS MY  
HOMETOWN*

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**THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO  
MY FAMILY AND LOVE ONES**

# Sashi

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When I was growing up as a kampong kid in Hillview Estate in Singapore, life was tough. I was the eldest of seven children, and my family lived in a small apartment. We could not afford many facilities or luxuries. My parents were not well educated and had to slog for long hours to provide the basic amenities for me and my siblings. They struggled to make ends meet, and had no choice but to leave me and three of my siblings to be cared for by our aunts; the other siblings were cared for by our grandmother.

My aunts were not married at that time, and only knew how to shower us with their love by cooking our favourite food. Even though I was only a toddler, I can remember that my aunties would work a night shift and then come back home to prepare lunch for us, even though they were tired. I was always clinging on to them and watching them cook. I think that's when I started to love food, and since then I have always experimented with cooking. My aunties didn't know how to teach us academically, but they shared their cooking knowledge with us.

Years passed and I became a young teenager. My mum had a café and I was spending a lot of time helping her out after school. Don't get too excited - I was not allowed to be in the kitchen. I only served customers their orders, as my mum was worried that I would end up as a cook rather than getting a white collared job. She wanted us to excel in life and always reminded us that life is not a bed of roses.

Then I started to spend less time with family and lots more with the wrong company, and began to miss school. At that time, I was lucky to have great teachers at Swiss Cottage Secondary School. Hubert Yohannan was my history teacher, and he saw the drastic changes in me. He introduced me to the outdoor club and activities such as rock climbing and camping kept me busy in a good way, and eventually led me to join the Police Force.

When I was 18, I was also lucky enough to meet my other half, Rabicca Vijayan. We met at a barbeque and it was love at first sight. My camping skills played a vital role, but I absolutely swept her off her feet with my BBQ chicken wings - I have to thank my classmate Justin for his recipe!



I was never academically smart and did not continue my studies. I became lost in life and forgot all about my passion for cooking. Then it was time for me to complete my National Service, which was compulsory for all males in Singapore. I was adamant that I wanted to join the Army to be a commando, but my dreams were shattered when I was enlisted in the Police Force. Rabicca and my family were very supportive and encouraging about my joining the Police Force, and it turned out that I loved it. After working in the riot squad, I became part of the Special Tactics and Rescue Unit (STAR) team. That was one of the best moments in my life, as this was a very prestigious and highly regarded job in Singapore. Only a handful of police officers are able to get this job, and I was one of them.

Life sailed along smoothly for a decade till my sweetheart, who was my wife by then, wanted to migrate to Australia as she liked the lifestyle there. I was not in favour at all, but for my family's sake I was willing to give up my job and start afresh.

We came to Australia in 2012 and I was unemployed for three months. I picked up cooking again as I was bored and had started missing my hometown food. And because eating out was expensive, I cooked almost every day and my passion was rekindled. Even after getting a job in the Department for Correctional Services, I made it a point to cook for my family because my kids enjoyed my cooking.

Our circle of friends widened and we had more gatherings. Many praised my cooking and my wife encouraged me to apply for Masterchef. It took me three years to believe in myself, and I finally did apply in 2017 - the rest is history.

Now I am taking a very exciting next step in my life, as I bring a new angle to my passion for food and cooking, with a focus on the food of my ancestral home.





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# INTRODUCTION

Why is street food so important in Singapore, and how has it evolved around the culture of Singaporeans?

Singapore's food has a heritage as diverse as its people. You can see it in the neighbourhood coffee shops, the hawker centres, food courts and restaurants. In fact, Singapore's food has come to define Singapore's culture, offering the best of Indian, Chinese and Malay cooking, which all come together as one uniquely Singaporean cuisine.

Each dish in Singapore has a unique story to tell about Singaporean culture and history.

During 1819, many immigrants from different countries such as China, Indonesia, India, Europe and the Middle East flocked into Singapore, bringing with them distinct languages and cuisines. This can be observed in the dishes of modern-day Singapore such as Fish Head Curry, Hainanese Chicken Rice, Hokkien Mee, Laksa, and many more.

In this book, I will explain how each dish has incorporated the merging of different cultures to become a unique Singaporean dish. The recipes cover a wide demographic spectrum, as food in Singapore is so cheap and widely available, and has become such an important part of so many lives that many Singaporeans live by the creed "I live to eat".

Singapore is a country that cherishes food. It is a great place to experiment with ingredients and styles, to upgrade traditional recipes into modern creations. And just as we have grown into our still-evolving national identity, when it comes to food, changes keep us true to our roots.



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# NOTES TO THE HOME COOK

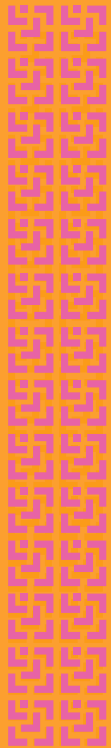
- The specialty ingredients should be available in most local Asian speciality food stores, and many can even be found in the Asian section of major supermarkets. Where possible, alternatives have been suggested, and a glossary has been provided with further information about some of the more unusual ingredients.
- If you do not have a dough hook attachment for your mixer, you can knead by hand. And if you don't have a fan-forced oven, you may need to increase the temperature and cooking time slightly.
- It is recommended that you read a recipe right through before planning to make a dish, as many of the recipes in this book have a number of stages, some of which require a number of hours or even overnight.





# LIM KOPI

HANGS OUT  
FOR BREAKFAST



*Lim Kopi* traditionally means to drink coffee, but it has evolved to become synonymous with asking someone out for a drink, or a chat. Now the words are used in Singapore to mean *chill out and relax*.

\$5

\$1.2

\$2.50







4 cups bread flour  
1 whole egg  
40 g salted butter  
1 tablespoon condensed  
milk  
180 ml water  
additional 50 g unsalted  
butter, for rubbing  
extra oil or butter, to cook

# ROTI CANAI

*Roti Canai* is a soft and crispy layered flatbread that is made by frying stretched dough flavoured with ghee. It is usually eaten for breakfast, but you can have it anytime of the day. *Roti Canai* is often served with Fish Curry or Dhalcha (lentil and lamb curry). Many Singaporeans or Malaysians think *Roti Canai* does not exist in India, but it actually originated in Southern India, where it is called Roti Prata. Indian migrants brought this dish over to Malaya, and it is now known as *Roti Canai* in Malaysia, while it is still called Roti Prata in Singapore. Roti Prata is a favourite dish among Singaporeans and making a homemade Roti Prata is not as difficult as many thinks. It is a fun experience of kneading and flipping or rolling the dough. Not so many cooks can flip, so I will be sharing how to roll out your dough instead, and still enjoy the great taste.

Using a stand mixer, mix all the ingredients together then knead for 10 minutes with the hook attachment. Rest the dough for 10 minutes and knead for another 5 minutes.

Divide the dough into 10 equal portions. Form into balls and generously apply butter to the outside of each ball. Cover and rest the dough overnight in the fridge.

Roll out each ball until you can almost see through the dough. Hold each side of the dough and spread out a little, then fold the ends inwards and overlap at the centre. Stretch again, then turn it and stretch the other way. Now, form it into a small circular lump of dough. Rest for 10 minutes, then lightly press it out until it forms a 10-12 cm disc.

Heat a flat pan over medium heat, add a little oil or butter, and cook each roti for 3-4 minutes on each side until golden brown. When each one is cooked, remove it from heat and squeeze gently to fluff it up.

**Serve** with sambar (p.139) or a curry.

200 g short grain rice,  
soaked in water for 4  
hours  
½ cup grated fresh  
coconut (see note)  
½ teaspoon sugar  
½ teaspoon salt  
¼ teaspoon baking soda  
½ cup water

**To serve**

grated fresh coconut  
sugar

## APPAM

*Appam* is a circular pancake with a thick, spongy centre and lacy brown edges. It is made from a fermented batter of rice and coconut milk, and traditionally cooked on a well-seasoned clay dish with a curved bottom. It is a common food in Singapore, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where it is eaten most frequently for breakfast.

Blend the rice and coconut into a smooth batter. Place 2 tablespoons of the batter with ½ cup of water into a pan. Mix well and cook over a medium heat until it thickens.

Allow the cooked batter to cool then mix it well with the remaining batter. Cover and allow the batter to ferment for at least 8 hours.

When the batter has fermented, add sugar, salt, baking soda and ½ cup water. Mix well to a pourable consistency.

Pour a ladle full of batter onto an appam pan (see note) and swirl the batter to ensure it spreads around the pan; most of the batter will gather in the middle. Cover the pan and cook for 2-3 minutes, until the batter is cooked in the middle.

**Serve** with Coconut Vegetable Stew (p.150), or with grated fresh coconut and sugar.

**Notes:**

- An appam pan is like a miniature wok. If you don't have one, you can use any pan with a bit of depth, such as a frypan. Although the shape will not be the same – it will be flat all over, more like a pancake – the flavours and texture will not change.
- Grated fresh coconut is available in the frozen section of most Indian shops. If you can't find it, use desiccated coconut soaked in water for at least 20 minutes.





# GLOSSARY







**agar powder (agar agar):** A natural vegetable gelatine counterpart. You can find it in the baking section at most major supermarkets. You could use gelatine if you cannot find agar powder, but the texture will be a bit softer than the nice, firm texture of agar powder.

**attap seeds – palm seeds:** *You can find these in major cities. They give a unique flavour to the dish.*

**bean sprouts – mung bean sprouts:** *Sold in most Asian food stores and in many supermarkets.*

**belachan – shrimp paste:** *A paste made from prawns. If you required toasted belachan,*

Without using any oil, fry the thin slices of *dry shrimp paste* until they are brown and the pungent smell is released. When ready, it should break like a crisp biscuit and the inside should not be soft.

**candlenuts:** *Hard, oily nuts used to flavour and thicken curries. You can usually find them in the freezer or in packets in Asian supermarkets, but if you can't find them, use macadamia nuts.*

**chye sim:** Not the same as choy sum, but if you cannot find it, you can substitute choy sum or any other leafy greens.

**coconut:** *Fresh grated coconut is available in the frozen section in most Indian shops. If you can't get it, use desiccated coconut soaked in water for at least 20 minutes.*

**curry leaves:** *Use fresh if you can obtain them. 1 stem has about 15-20 leaves. If you cannot find fresh curry leaves, use the same number of dried leaves.*

**galangal:** *Looks similar to fresh ginger, but has a stronger flavour.*

**ginger juice:** You can buy this in some supermarkets or in specialty shops. If you are unable to find it, grate fresh ginger and press through a sieve.

**grenadine:** A non-alcoholic syrup with a tart, sweet flavour and deep red in colour.

**Indian tea dust:** Easily available in Indian shops, but if you can't get it, try a supermarket. You could use loose leaves of a strong tea, but you will not get the concentrated flavour that tea dust gives, or the dark concentrated colour.

**kang kong - water spinach:** If you cannot get it, you can use Chinese broccoli, broccolini or any other leafy greens.

**kecap manis/ketchup manis:** A sweet soy sauce, readily available in supermarkets.

**ketchup:** This is just tomato sauce as it is known in Australia.

**ketupat:** Compressed rice cakes.

**lady's fingers:** Another name for okra.

**pandan extract (pandan flavouring):** Available in most Asian shops. It comes as a green liquid.

**pandan leaves:** The leaves themselves are not edible, but the flavour is obtained from them and used in many dishes. If they are cooked in a dish, you discard the pandan leaves before serving.

**peanuts, roasted ground:** Dry roast peanuts, then grind them coarsely; this should be a powder, not a paste.

**rock sugar:** Chinese rock sugar is lumps of white sugar crystals. For each sugar crystal you could substitute 1 tablespoon of white granulated sugar.

**sambar powder:** A coarse textured spice powder, prepared by grinding various basic Indian spices. If you are in a hurry, you can buy a ready-made version.

**shallots:** In some parts of Australia, the word “shallots” is used to mean spring onions. Here it refers to the small brown onions often found near the garlic in supermarkets.

**spring onions:** Sometimes called shallots in some parts of Australia, but not to be confused with the small onions.

**tamarind juice:** If you cannot buy this, dilute tamarind paste, one part tamarind to two parts water.

**tauco/tau cheo:** A fermented soybean paste.





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# SAVOUR THE FLAVOUR OF SINGAPORE IN THE COMFORT OF YOUR HOME!

Chef and restaurateur **Sashi Cheliah** goes back deep into his childhood, sharing recipes he enjoyed having as a kid in Singapore. This cookbook is packed with classic dishes that you will enjoy cooking with your love ones.

*"Food is about sharing and spending time together, you don't have to spend a lot of money or time to enjoy deliciously cooked meals and bond at dinner time."*



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