

PENANG MONTHLY

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FEATURE
THE FOREST'S
TABLE: REVIVING
INDIGENOUS
KNOWLEDGE
FOR MALAYSIA'S
FOOD FUTURE

FEATURE
KEBEBE: NOT
YOUR AVERAGE
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FEATURE
A PENANG POTPOURRI:
HOW INDIAN
FOOD BECAME
EVERYONE'S FOOD

THE DEEP MEANING IN COOKING AND EATING



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- 1 Supply Penangites with information about significant issues in order to promote public participation;
- 2 Encourage discussion about various aspects of Penang's fate and fortune;
- 3 Profile Penang personalities who have contributed, sometimes in very unassuming but critical ways, to the reputation and wellbeing of the state;
- 4 Put the spotlight on ordinary Penangites who otherwise go unnoticed, but who nevertheless define the culture of the state in essential ways;
- 5 Highlight the importance of Penang as a generator of culture, education, industry and cosmopolitan values;
- 6 Emphasise present trends in the arts, industry, politics and economics which affect the immediate future of the state and country; and
- 7 Offer reliable socioeconomic data for the benefit of decision makers in government and the private sector.

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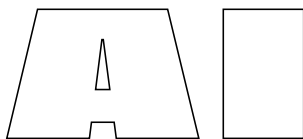
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Cooking is one of the
most interesting and
worthwhile things
we humans do.”

— MICHAEL POLLAN
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EATING WITH SENSES MINGLING

BY OOI KEE BENG

NOTHING PROVIDES MORE inspiration for coinage of terms than our five senses. We fashion fundamental words to describe the wide range of information that flows from without onto our body and brain.

For example, I am told that the sense of Touch relies on our Skin being subjected to the following notions: Pressure, Temperature, Pain (tissue damage), Itch and Vibration.

Sight, in turn, is the naked Human Eye's response to Light Waves, and we thus have the spectrum of named colours lying between infrared and ultraviolet. We term them primarily as Red, Yellow and Blue, and we appreciate the secondary colours they give rise to as green, orange and purple.

Ears, meanwhile, respond to Vibrations, and this has qualities such as pitch or loudness, or some specific quality in it we often call timbre. Out of these, we have manufactured language and music.

Airborne chemical stimuli affect the Human Nose. Breaking smell stimuli down is quite a difficult task. One good try lists these as: fragrant, woody/resinous, fruity (non-citrus), chemical, minty/peppermint, sweet, popcorn, lemon, pungent and decayed.

Twinning the ability to Smell is the ability to Taste. Tasting is done by the Tongue and its buds, and unlike Smell, some liquid is needed for taste to emanate; our saliva is the default liquid for that. Taste is often broken down into the following notions: Sweet, Salty, Sour, Bitter and Umami (savory).

When it comes to food and our ability to accept and enjoy it or to reject and discard it, humans actually rely on both Tongue and Nose to decide. Thus, airborne chemicals and dissolved chemicals come together to afford vital information for deciding whether some mouthful is good nourishment and offers enjoyment, or whether it is poison and should be avoided.

Then comes the subjective input. As similar beings, why is it that different humans—not to mention different societies—prefer starkly different dishes? But although taste preferences vary a lot, there are more or less tastes within communities that are common enough to identify them as a collective.

Obviously, there is such a thing as getting used to things. Once you or your community get familiarised to some taste, some colour, some smell, you build up not only a nostalgic bond to it, you also identify with it. Your group adopts it as an identity marker, and you build a discourse around it, to include some and to exclude others. Sustained stimuli inspire sciences and songs, and even prose and poetry to afford them a special cultural status. Once just a notion, they become denotations and carry integral meaning for a group.

Just as a deep bond between two persons builds on common experiences retold as common memory, communities rely on common cultural rituals and learned discourses to perpetuate their supposed uniqueness.

Our senses play a most central role in that very fundamental process of generating a sense of belonging and common purpose. Over time, a group picks certain colours and patterns to define it. In fact, one could wonder if a group can be said to exist at all before such decisions had evolved. They may favour the look of this dress or that pattern to weave togetherness with. Then, they may prefer certain sounds to define them too. From that appear favoured musical rhythms, popular songs and common language.

Where the sense of smell is concerned, I am sure the mating game is inspired by which odour, which stench, which fume is most attracting to the opposite sex.

But then, food and drink—or more specifically, the preparation, provision and consuming of food and drink—may be the elements that take the place of honour in generating a sense of common culture, common resolve and common humanity. Imbibing food and drink happens all day, as a rule, and therefore, these cannot but be the most prominent pillars of identity.

Food as identity marker is not something to be taken lightly. When you take away the food of my people, you take away my cultural identity. When I defend my culture, I defend what food I eat. This is more immediate a cultural experience than my flag or my music.

It is second only to language, to my need to use the language I am most familiar with. My mother tongue and my mother's milk appear to be the most intimate connections we have to the world.

I would end with the caveat that we bite, eat and imbibe most gratifyingly not only with our smell and tastes, but with all senses simultaneously, along with whatever experiential biases we have picked up along the way. How would we otherwise explain that tastes are acquired and acquirable, and that food dishes also suffer fashion trends, and rise and fall in popularity?





THE MAKING OF THE MALAY CUISINE

BY MUHAMMAD
AMIRUL NAIM ROSMI

“

*Rather than bitter medicine,
I hope you get nourished by delicious food.”*

—Ji Yeong to the Great Dowager,
Bon Appetit Your Majesty! (Netflix, 2025)

THESE WORDS LEFT an impression on me. In the series, Ji Yeong, the palace chef’s dishes are more than culinary creations—they are acts of care and offerings of memory. In another scene, Ji Yeong’s cooking evokes in the Great Dowager memories of her mother’s dishes from childhood—it reminded me that food is deeply personal and sentimental. It carries stories, belonging and identity.

I am a Malay from Balik Pulau. We are sometimes assumed to be the same as the Malays of Tanjong (George Town), the Jawi Peranakans or the Indian Muslims. In truth, our identities differ; this is no more evident than in what we eat. Just as dialects vary depending on geography, so too does the food we eat and how we prepare it. Each ingredient, each method of preparation carries traces of history and place. These subtle variations, which might be imperceptible to outsiders, distinguish our meals, our taste preferences and ultimately, our identity.



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THE MALAY PALATE

Humans generally experience five basic tastes—sweet, salty, sour, bitter and umami. Beyond these, each cuisine observes additional dimensions, such as temperature, aroma and texture.

Food anthropologist Khir Rahman identifies 12 taste categories in the Malay palate: *masin* (salty, e.g. salted fish), *kelat* (astringent), *lemak* (rich and creamy), *mamek* (a “dish gone wrong”), *manis* (sweet), *maung* (uncooked/raw taste), *pahit* (bitter), *payau* (brackish/slightly salty), *pedar* (numbing/intense), *pedas* (spicy), *tawar* (plain) and *masam* (sour). Every dish is an interplay of these flavours. A single bite can reveal a harmony of contrasts: the richness of coconut milk balanced with the heat of chillies, the sweetness of caramelised onions against the sharpness of tamarind, the umami of dried fish with the freshness of herbs.

There is not much we can glean about the history of the cuisine from ancient records, but food references do appear in Malay literature. In *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, for example, the mention of the word “*gulai*” tells us that this dish has been long cherished within Malay society. In *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* too, Raja Bersiong, a Kedahan king, reportedly enjoyed *gulai* mixed with human blood after accidentally tasting it once.

Traditional Malay society consisted of two main strata: the palace—the *raja* (king)

and the nobility—and the common people. In port cities like Melaka, palace cuisine was exposed to a large variety of spices and ingredients brought in by traders. The palace also received produce from villagers as a show of respect and loyalty to the Sultan.

In Malay culture, food holds deep significance. Among the common folk, *kenduri*—communal feasts—serve as expressions of gratitude and kinship. These practices illustrate that food is not just sustenance, but also a symbol of ritual, identity and community. Taste in Malay cuisine is not merely a sensory experience; it is knowledge, memory and a reflection of social and environmental relationships.

According to Muhamad Arif Ahmad in *Bicara Tentang Adat dan Tradisi*, the Malay meal structure mirrors palace traditions originating from Sultan Muhammad Syah of Melaka’s reign (1388–1444CE): dishes are served on a *talam* (large platter) with rice in individual plates and arranged for four. Main dishes, soups, appetisers and desserts are enjoyed simultaneously.

Being a seafaring people well connected to the wider world, Malay gastronomy reflects openness and adaptability. Foreign spices and culinary influences were readily accepted and integrated into local cuisine, resulting in the incorporation of Indian, Middle Eastern, Thai, Minangkabau, Bugis, Javanese and Jawi Peranakan elements.

TRADITIONAL INGREDIENTS AND FOOD PRACTICES

Traditional Malay cooks source ingredients from around the home—fresh leaves, herbs such as lemongrass and fragrant roots like turmeric are foraged, and fish is caught from nearby rivers or the sea. Today, these are widely available in wet markets.

Rural Malays and the Orang Asal prefer to cook with fresh ingredients over the use of pre-mixed curry powders and artificial flavouring. According to Wazir Jahan Karim, an esteemed Malaysian anthropologist, Southeast Asian cuisine is distinguished from South Asian and Central Asian cuisines by the extensive use of fresh herbs and vibrant colours.

Rice is the foundation of Malay meals. In Perlis, it is said that “if you haven’t eaten rice, you haven’t eaten”. Accompanying rice are wet dishes (*berkuah*): *gulai*, *kari*, *masak lemak* (made rich with coconut milk) or *masak asam* (light sour stews); dry dishes: fried, roasted, grilled or *serunding* (spiced meat floss); fresh and flavourful accompaniments: sambal, *ulam* or *kerabu* (herb and vegetable salads); and occasionally, pickles.

Other traditional Malay rice-based dishes are nasi lemak, *nasi lemuni* (rice flavoured with the Lemuni plant) and *nasi ulam* (rice with mixed herbs).



3



5

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread)
Vibrance on a plate! A modern interpretation of the *ulam* and sambal spread with Javanese dishes. (Photo credit: Sheryl Teoh)
2. Spread at a Jawi Peranakan restaurant. From L to R: *Nasi tomato*, fish curry, prawn and vegetable fritters with peanut sauce, *nasi lemuni* and beef *rendang*.
3. *Daun kesum* or *daun laksa*, commonly used in *laksa* and *asam pedas*. (Photo credit: Tan Yew Ming)
4. A comforting and creamy classic, *masak lemak pucuk ubi kayu*, is cassava shoots simmered in rich coconut milk, enhanced by fresh shrimp and a generous kick of chillies. (Photo credit: Tan Yew Ming)
5. *Nasi tomato* and its common sides showcase the spicy legacy of Straits Muslim influence. This rich, fragrant rice, spiced with cinnamon, cardamom and star anise, is a favourite during festive seasons. (Photo credit: Sheryl Teoh)
6. *Sambal taun kulit lembu* is a culinary signature of the Javanese community in Selangor. Known for its generous use of chillies, the classic protein used is often beef skin, though it can be substituted with cockles, beef lung or anchovies. The rich flavour is built on essential ingredients like belacan and coconut milk. (Photo credit: Nona)



4



6

REGIONAL INFLUENCES

MINANGKABAU

A key characteristic of Minangkabau cuisine is the use of thick coconut milk with beef or buffalo meat and local vegetables. The flavour of these dishes is dominated by the intense spiciness of bird's eye chillies. *Masak lemak*, a popular method of cooking in Malay cuisine, is derived from the Minangkabaus. You can typically find these in Negeri Sembilan—interestingly, there is even a district in the state called Pedas, which literally means “spicy”.

JAVANESE

Javanese culinary traditions are particularly evident in Johor and Selangor. The cuisine reflects a deep agrarian heritage, shaped by centuries of rice cultivation in central Java. Because of its location along the coast and river deltas, the region enjoys abundant resources from the sea, which supports the livelihoods of the population, and from agriculture.

Relying heavily on fresh ingredients, Javanese-influenced dishes are typically moderately spicy. The cuisine emphasises the use of chillies, roots and fresh herbs, which have become characteristic of rural Southeast Asian cooking. *Ayam percik* serves as a prime example of this culinary style.

In Selangor, Javanese-inspired dishes include *nasi ambeng* (recognised as the traditional dish of Selangor, it is a *nasi campur*-style sharing platter), *nasi keluban* (a variation of *nasi kerabu*), *pecal* (salad of mixed boiled vegetables with peanut sauce), *sambal taun kulit lembu* (cow skin soup) and *lemper* (glutinous rice filled with spiced chicken floss).

BUGIS

The Bugis played a significant role in the history of Peninsular Malaysia, especially in Johor and Sabah. Renowned for their expertise in warfare, they were integral in many conflicts involving various Malay kingdoms.

In Johor, one of the most famous Bugis dishes is *burasak*, also known as *buras* or *burasa*. Brought to Malaysia by Bugis traders from Sulawesi, this traditional dish consists of rice partially cooked with coconut milk, then wrapped in banana leaves and boiled until fully cooked. It is then typically eaten with spicy dishes like *rendang* or chicken curry. While similar to *lontong*, *burasak* has a richer flavour due to the use of coconut milk. *Burasak* was a staple provision for Bugis sailors on long voyages because it could be stored for extended periods.

In general, Bugis cuisine closely resembles that of other ethnic groups, yet it retains unique characteristics that sets it apart from the broader Malay culinary landscape.

THAI MUSLIM

In the northern states of Malaysia, Thai influence is seen in dishes like *ikan tiga rasa* and *gulai daging lembu* (beef curry, similar to Thai massaman curry). Preparation involves grinding dried spices (coriander, cumin, cloves, cardamom, black pepper), mashing fresh chillies, ginger, garlic and shallots into a paste, then stir-frying meat with the paste before simmering in coconut milk, taking care to balance sour, sweet and salty flavours.

INDIAN, JAWI PERANAKAN AND STRAITS MUSLIM

Where does the depth of spice in Malay food originate from? It comes from a long tradition of trade routes and, most significantly, the migration of Indian communities to the peninsula. This influence deepened in the early 20th century with the influx of Indian immigrants brought over by the British.

Wazir Jahan Karim introduced the helpful umbrella term “Straits Muslims” to include the diverse ethnic and hybrid communities from Central Asia, India, Sri Lanka and Europe who were fundamentally involved in the spice, textile and commodity trade in the region. In Penang, the most recognisable Straits Muslim groups are the Jawi Peranakans and the Mamaks (Tamil Muslims).

The influence of South Indian cooking in Malay cuisine is particularly evident in the use of ingredients and techniques. Common vegetables include okra and purple eggplant, while tempering—frying spices like brown mustard, fenugreek and curry leaves in oil to infuse the entire dish with a deeper flavour—is a characteristic technique used in Indian (and later, Malay) cooking. From the Mamak community, we got *nasi kandar*—no other type of eatery unites people of all ethnic backgrounds the way a Mamak does.

Jawi Peranakans, the descendants of Indian and Arab spice traders, are an important community here, and contributed to the fusion cuisine characterised by the decadent mix of fresh Malay herbs with punchy Indian and Southeast Asian spices.

Malay cuisine is a reflection of community, history and living culture. These centuries-old traditions continue to flourish in modern kitchens, at home and during communal feasts. More importantly, Malay kitchens remain open to external influences, absorbing, adapting and innovating new flavours, techniques and dishes without compromising its core identity.

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WHY I STILL COOK WHEN IT IS SO EASY NOT TO

BY SHERYL TEOH

COOKING IS ONE of the most interesting and worthwhile things we humans do, writes Michael Pollan, a food journalist I have come to deeply respect. It is pure serendipity that I stumbled upon this in the introduction to his book, *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*, just as I had been pondering about how much time and effort I put into cooking on a weekly basis—time and energy that, many have argued, could be channelled into activities that might better serve me: rest, a side hustle, entertainment, a more exciting social life...

And yet, each weekend, I spend hours making food. You see, once you get down to it, you quickly realise that cooking is a lot more than just stirring a pot next to a stove. First, you plan. You do an audit of what you have in your refrigerator and you write up a list of ingredients you need from the grocery store. Then, you physically go to the grocery store, resist from grabbing things you don't need (chips, ice cream, it's always something ultra-processed that I crave) and you cook. After that, the part I have a love/hate relationship with, is cleaning up—the mountain of dishes and cooking pots and utensils, scrubbing the stove until it's squeaky clean, wiping down the backsplash, vacuuming and finally mopping.

I will admit that I often wonder why I subject myself to this extensive labour when I could easily eat out. In Penang, food is everywhere—cheap, delicious, convenient, fast. Why spend hours chopping, stirring and cleaning when I could get a perfectly good meal for under RM10 outside? Why lug home bags of onions and greens, fish and meat that would have to be used up quickly before they spoil, and spend my precious free time doing something that makes little economic sense? I contemplate this as I chop, stir and clean—already, unknowingly to myself at the time, cooking offers me this mental space to daydream and reflect; space that would otherwise be taken up watching television, scrolling through social media or be mentally stimulated in some other way.

What fascinates me about cooking is that, much like how I like to operate, it sits at the meeting point of science and feeling. “To learn to cook is to put yourself on intimate terms with the laws of physics and chemistry, as well as the facts of biology and microbiology,” Pollan writes. You learn how food is made delicious

with the Maillard reaction; how, by emulsification, you can combine two liquids that don't normally mix, like oil and vinegar, into rich sauces like mayonnaise or Hollandaise sauce, or instead of adding cream to pasta, heat and vigorously tossing pasta in the starchy water it was cooked in, plus oil, will achieve a creamy sauce that is light and delicate. You learn how to control the activities of bacteria to produce delightful results like sourdough bread, kimchi or sauerkraut.

But to cook well—to cook good food, the kind that has a soul—requires a certain *je ne sais quoi* that science alone cannot teach. It asks for instinct, patience and passion; the ability to adjust and improvise, to sense when the seasoning is too bold, or the flame too low, to feel that thin film of sliminess on meat that indicates it has just begun to spoil, and to change course. A machine can probably follow recipes better, but only a human (albeit a skilled one) can feel when it tastes just right or, when it's wrong, fix mistakes—a sauce that has split, a stew that's too acidic, a chilli pepper that's too hot.

You find out things about the natural world a modern, urban dweller wouldn't otherwise be inclined to think about: how the mineral-rich volcanic soil and sunny climate of Italy produces the best-tasting tomatoes, why freshly pounded spice mixes taste superior to powder mixes or even machine-blended spice mixes, how much baking depends on something as seemingly irrelevant and hard to control as the humidity levels in the air.

Beyond transformation—anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss referred to cooking as the human transformation of nature (raw) into culture (cooked)—I think cooking is also as much about connections; it connects us (the cook) to nature, to other humans, to a place.





NO BEAST IS A COOK

The idea that cooking is uniquely human is not new, but Harvard anthropologist and primatologist Richard Wrangham further argued that it was the discovery of cooking—not tool making or language or storytelling—that set us apart from other animals. What has now come to be known as the cooking hypothesis posits that mastery of fire and eating cooked food was a pivotal factor in human evolution. Cooking made raw food more calorie-dense and digestible, and reduced the time and effort required for chewing (apes spend around four to six hours of their waking time chewing), allowing the human body to invest more energy and resources into brain development instead of maintaining a large gut necessary to digest raw food.

Moreover, cooking food gave us the occasion to gather around the fire to socialise, bond and share food. “Before cooking, we ate more like chimpanzees, everyone for themselves. After the advent of cooking, we assembled around the fire and shared the labour,” writes Wrangham.

Many food historians have noted that structured mealtimes organised people into a community with shared identities, emotional bonds and cultural traditions. You see this still, everywhere in Penang. Eating has always been an activity many prefer to do communally, as a family, as friends, even as strangers.

Sharing food is one of the simplest ways by which humans express connection; it is also quintessentially Malaysian. Every culture, in its own way, turns eating into ritual—from feasts and potlucks to the offering of tea and snacks to a guest. That instinct—to share what we’ve cooked, to pull up a chair—feels like an echo of that first circle around the fire. Meals mark both significant and insignificant life events. To share food is to signal peace, fellowship, trust and belonging.

This is another thing I have devoted much thought to, most vividly while my eyes tear and my fingers smart from pounding chillies to make sambal for a nasi lemak party—the way I am emotionally resistant to buying a meal instead of making it.

When I have the time and capacity, I almost always prefer to cook for someone—the act of cooking feels like offering a piece of myself. There is something about making food for others and then partaking in it together that feels more intimate, and makes the experience more valuable. Cooking demands presence and thoughtfulness; it asks you to think of another person’s comfort, their favourite flavours, the small ways they like things done, their food restrictions, their culture. One of my favourite activities to do with friends is to cook together; repetitive and time-consuming tasks such as peeling vegetables or waiting for dough to rise are made fun. Time speeds up and labour is made easy when it is accompanied by interesting conversations and good company.

In a way, I too cook for myself as a form of self-care. It reminds me that I have agency over how I am nourished. I can fine-tune my nutritional needs, my tastes and preferences, what I’m craving at the moment; it carries the quiet satisfaction of having cared for myself. Cooking becomes a conversation with myself: What do you need today? What will make you feel good and cared for? It is a small, steady act of love, “for is there any practice less selfish, any labour less alienated, any time less wasted, than preparing something delicious and nourishing for people you love?” asks Pollan.



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THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US AND WHAT WE EAT

Cooking also keeps us in conversation with nature—a conversation modern life has nearly silenced. When you cook, you cannot help but notice that food isn't anonymous: a chunk of pork shoulder isn't just unidentifiable meat in a bowl of noodles. You see its sinews, connective tissues and fat marbles as you cut through it; it is part of an animal, shaped by its life and diet. When you gut a fish and have to throw out its undesirable parts, suddenly that waste triggers a modicum of guilt. Should I save the stomach to make *perut ikan*, a Nyonya delicacy made with preserved fish stomach? The bones, heads and trimmings I keep to make fish broth, made sweet with vegetable scraps like the skin of onions, coriander roots, carrot tops.

Even the simplest vegetables vary in taste depending on its growing conditions—the minerals in the soil, how much sunlight or rain it gets, whether the soil it was grown in is well draining. To cook is to recognise that food has origins and its own quirks—

that it comes from somewhere, from someone, from something once alive.

That awareness is what industrial food processes erase. When everything comes in sealed packets, uniform and standardised, we stop noticing the irregularities that once taught us about the world.

Outsourcing cooking to industries also comes at a cost to our health. "Corporations cook very differently from how people do, which is why we call what they do 'food processing'," writes Pollan. "They tend to use much more sugar, fat and salt than people cooking for people do; they also deploy novel chemical ingredients seldom found in pantries in order to make their food last longer and look fresher than it really is."

I see the trade-off most keenly in artisan versus commercial breads. Commercial breads come most commonly in the form of sliced bread. It differs from traditional bread in how soft it is and in its shelf life. While sliced bread is cheap, convenient and uniform, the industrial process that

makes sliced bread soft and long-lasting also strips it of flavour, nutrition and texture. Filled with preservatives, stabilisers, emulsifiers and refined flour to extend its shelf life, give it a forced softness and ensure uniformity, it offers little of the rich taste or nutrition that defines real bread. Artisan loaves, made from slow fermentation, develop subtle sour, nutty or earthy notes with a crisp, caramelised crust that mass-produced bread simply lacks.

In chasing convenience and economic efficiency (specialisation), we have traded self-sufficiency for dependence. For most of human history, people grew, harvested and processed their own food. They understood how grain became rice, and, in turn, how rice became flour, noodles or wine. Fermentation, brewing, cheesemaking all used to be done within households. Today, these acts feel exotic—hobbies for the overly earnest or indulgences for those with too much time on their hands.

A TASTE OF OTHER LIVES

I have decided that I learn best about another culture through their food; certainly through eating it, but more importantly, through cooking it. Recipes, after all, are stories disguised as instructions: they tell you how a people learned to live with their land, how they turned necessity into flavour, what adaptations they have made to accommodate external influences.

Cooking across cultures, you understand history and taste migration—how techniques and ideas travel, how new ingredients are adapted into a culture's taste preferences. You also learn to differentiate flavour profiles that are distinct, and that form the base of a cuisine: for Chinese dishes, it is the flavour of soy sauce, oyster sauce and sesame oil; the addition of fish sauce or fermented seafood products make a dish taste Southeast Asian; *gochujang* and *gochugaru* are essential ingredients in Korean cuisine; chilli peppers, cumin, oregano and cilantro give dishes an unmistakable Mexican flair.

When making Indian curries, you learn to build flavour layer by layer, starting with an onion, garlic and ginger base, then blooming spices in hot oil. Tomatoes or lime juice bring acidity, while yogurt, cream or coconut milk add body and richness. You learn that Indian cuisine, like many others, places an importance on food as medicine—turmeric is anti-inflammatory, antiseptic and a digestive aid, and cumin is a warming spice that ignites the body's "Agni" (digestive fire).

Even the cooking tools and vessels each cuisine uses tell you a lot. Claypots, bamboo steamers, stone mortars, cast-iron woks—these allow each culture to achieve the kind of flavours, textures and mouthfeel they desire and treasure. They shape the



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atmosphere of kitchens: the sounds, the vibrations, the smells...

That is what I mean when I say cooking connects us to a place. I am perfectly happy going to a mamak for dosa, but once in a while, I feel the urge to make it myself. And it is not because I think I can do it better, but because I want to understand the process—what has been done to make it taste that way, what it says about where it comes from.

A QUIET REBELLION

Despite everything I have said, it is not lost on me that specialisation *has* improved livelihoods and uplifted countless lives. Industrialisation has fed more people, freed us from the relentless work of subsistence and allowed women to step out of the kitchen to pursue careers and dreams fulfilling to them. Few of us would want to return to the days when daily survival depended on grinding grain or making butter out of milk. The division of labour has allowed people to devote more time to learning, creating and doing important

things to further humanity. Convenience, in most ways, is a kind of progress; but progress always comes with forgetting. In freeing ourselves from the labour of making, we have also freed ourselves from important lessons. This is evident in the way we treat our environment, the inhabitants of our world and our bodies.

So, perhaps my stubborn insistence on giving up so much of my valuable time and energy to cooking is a quiet rebellion—against a world that increasingly puts value solely on an individual's economic output; against a world that sees productivity as only what makes money; against a growing disconnect between people and nature.

I would be lying if I say this isn't sometimes a struggle, especially with a full-time job and responsibilities and commitments, but as Camus put it, "one must imagine Sisyphus happy." Imagine me happy as I flit around the kitchen, music in the background, hands sticky with marinade or dough or blood—you wouldn't be wrong.



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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page) Making picnic sandwiches with Gabriella, our Italian Airbnb hostess in Sant'Agata sui Due Golfi near Sorrento, South Italy.

2. A nasi lemak party always means stinging hands, but the resultant sambal is worth the effort and pain. Clockwise from top: Fried anchovies, boiled eggs and fresh *ulam*, fried sardines, sambal, winged bean and green mango salad, coconut milk rice. Centre: Chicken curry.

3. Making tagliatelle from scratch. A clothes rack is used as a makeshift pasta drying rack.

4. When I travel, I like to visit local markets and peruse fresh local products to see what people living there eat and cook. And on longer trips, when it's possible, I buy local ingredients and try to make something I've seen on menus. Here, Hanoians were selling fresh vegetables and eggs by the road.

5 & 6. The fresh produce market at Piazza Campo de' Fiori in Rome.

7. A fruit stall in Mercado de Triana in Seville, Spain.

8. Having always preferred to make guacamole in a mortar and pestle since I have one in my kitchen, I was pleasantly surprised to find out a few years ago that this is also how Mexicans traditionally did it—in a *molcajete*.

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THE FOREST'S TABLE

REVIVING INDIGENOUS
KNOWLEDGE FOR
MALAYSIA'S FOOD FUTURE

BY LIANI MK

WHENEVER MY FAMILY visits each other or returns from our *kampung* in Kuching, Sarawak, you can be assured that there will always be packed heirloom rice to last for months, and various vegetable varieties harvested from our gardens. Favourite picks are often plump, yellow *terung Dayak*, pandan leaves and fresh midin ferns—these ingredients are what connects us to home.

Malaysia is home to one of the world's richest rainforests, with an estimated 15,000 plant species. Out of these are more than 520 edible plant species, according to researcher, Rachel Thomas Tharmabalan, and 300 of these are indigenous to the country. Many of us grew up eating edible plants of some sort, whether in the form of steamed *ulam* or with our *nasi campur*.

Rachel's research reveals that wild edible plants sustain over a billion people worldwide, and are far richer in vitamins and minerals than most commercially farmed vegetables. Studies show they can combat both malnutrition and obesity, which underscores the need to restore these micronutrient-rich traditional plants to modern diets.

Yet, people now eat from an increasingly narrow plate. Fast food chains replace foraging grounds; imported spinach and broccoli crowd out native greens once common on every table. Studies show that wild or under-utilised leafy vegetables, such as *Amaranthus* and *Centella* varieties, can have much higher levels of calcium and other minerals compared with common cultivated vegetables. Wild edible plants such as *pucuk ubi* (cassava shoots) and *Diplazium esculentum*, known here as *sne-goh* (fiddlehead fern), consumed by Semai communities in Malaysia show higher mineral concentrations compared with select market produce.

Researchers argue that so-called “forgotten foods”, or traditional and under-utilised crops, could diversify national diets and reduce reliance on imports; yet, they remain largely absent from Malaysia's mainstream agricultural policies.

“Despite being one of the most megadiverse countries in the world, Malaysia faces a triple burden of malnutrition, and has the highest obesity rate in Asia,” says Rachel in an interview from the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay.

She adds, “Research has shown that wild edible plants (WEPs) are rich in vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and fibre, and have the potential to combat non-communicable diseases, which is also increasing in prevalence here.” Yet, knowledge of these plants is disappearing.

Our food systems trace back to the traditional knowledge systems of Malaysia's indigenous peoples, whose knowledge of WEPs offers lessons about the future of food and wisdom of our land.

EDIBLE KNOWLEDGE

“The Orang Asli are considered to be the gatekeepers of this traditional knowledge.” For years, Rachel worked with Semai community members, one of the largest Orang Asli communities in Peninsular Malaysia, to trace how their relationship with wild plants forms the backbone of a food system deeply tied to the forest. Her research bridges ecology, culture and food justice, and reveals how environmental loss is inseparable from the erosion of cultural memory.

To Semai community members, food is sustenance as well as connection. In Perak's forest-fringed settlements, women gather *pucuk ubi*, *paku pakis* (wild ferns) and *pegaga* (centella leaves), which are considered to be healing as much as they are nourishing. Studies from Sabah and Sarawak show similar dynamics among Dusun and Iban communities, where wild vegetables like *tuhau* (*Etlingera coccinea* or wild ginger), *ensabi* (bitter mustard greens) and midin hold both nutritional and symbolic value.

“Elderly women are the main knowledge holders of indigenous food systems,” Rachel explains. “They are often called ‘repositories of traditional ethnomedical knowledge’... because there is a traditional division of labour, where women are responsible for gathering plant species and ensuring their children have sufficient food, making them more knowledgeable in this area than men.”

Knowledge of edible and medicinal plants is passed down through daily practice. Mothers teach daughters how to identify leaves by scent and touch, while fathers show sons when to harvest bamboo shoots.

But this system of oral, experiential learning is at risk. In addition to environmental changes, she says that youths are increasingly disconnected from indigenous knowledge. “They are often taught that their knowledge is irrelevant in the ‘outside world’.”



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THE POLITICS OF TASTE

In Malaysia, food modernisation also reflects class and racial hierarchies, where *ulam* and forest herbs, which were once everyday fare, are often relegated to “ethnic” curiosities on urban menus.

Scholars and activists like Vandana Shiva and Aili Mari Tripp noted such erasures as part of what has been described by sociologist Zilkia Janer as a wider “coloniality of modern taste”. That is, where the concept of food and tastes have been shaped by colonial, capitalist and racialised structures and practices. In effect, Western agricultural ideals and monocrop systems define what counts as modern or desirable food.

This politics of taste is ultimately about power; who gets to decide what is valuable to eat, who owns the access to knowledge of foods and whose knowledge is recognised in shaping the nation's palate.

FROM FOREST TO FOOD SECURITY

Across Malaysia, diets have shifted with industrialisation and convenience. Ultra-processed foods and imported vegetables now dominate the market, replacing traditional greens once gathered from the forest or home gardens.

Wild edible plants, however, continue to remain in indigenous cuisine. They grow freely in degraded soils, along riverbanks and at forest edges, and require no fertiliser or pesticide. Adapted to Malaysia's volatile weather, they provide nutrition even under changing climate conditions. "Ecologically, they are resilient and adapt well to extreme weather conditions," Rachel says.

In Semai communities, species such as *sayur manis* (*Sauropus androgynus*), *rebung* (bamboo shoots), *paku pakis*, durian *kampung*, *petai* and *tongkat ali* (Malaysian ginseng) are staples. Each is used in different ways: *petai* can be roasted over fire during communal meals, *rebung* cooked with chilli, *pegaga* blended into a cooling drink. Many also serve as remedies for fever, hypertension and skin infections, which shows how indigenous diets embody both nutrition and medicine.



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Similar observations were made in the Philippines and Indonesia, where forest-edge foraging remains crucial for micronutrient security among rural and indigenous households. In spite of this, Malaysia's dietary guidelines give little attention to indigenous and under-utilised plant food.

"Wild edible plants can be considered to deliver on the trifecta of social, economic and conservation development as it addresses poverty, hunger and health,



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aligning with the Sustainable Developmental Goals (SDGs 1, 2, 3, 8 and 15)," says Rachel. "They improve livelihoods, reduce malnutrition and promote biodiversity conservation. Preserving these culturally rooted plants also protects the heritage and identity of the Orang Asli."

A RETURN TO THE TABLE

In the recent decade, in Penang and elsewhere, community gardens have started to revive some of this knowledge, whether intentional or not. In many ways, this growing urban interest in edible plants mirrors an older instinct: to grow what sustains, to share what heals. However, one must be careful not to romanticise indigenous food systems. These traditions are not static, and have always adapted through exchange and migration. The focus is instead on ensuring indigenous communities lead in defining what continuity looks like.

That continuity depends on land rights and intergenerational learning. Without secure access to land, there is no foraging, no forest, no food. Preserving these plants then becomes an act of protecting a relationship between people, plants and the ecosystems that feed us all. As Malaysia imagines its food future from city rooftops to rainforest edges, perhaps the way forward lies not in invention, but in remembrance.

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover page)
From top right: Pegaga, petai belalang, water mimosa, cha om, pucuk janggus.
2. Paku pakis.
- 3 & 4. Petai belalang.
5. Pucuk daun geli-geli.
6. Fresh peppercorns, young jackfruit, long beans, wild bittergourd, lemongrass and banana stem.

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THE SOUTHERN CHINESE FLAVOURS THAT BUILT PENANG'S PALATE

BY SHERYL TEOH

I COME FROM a family of cooks. My grandparents on my father's side, as well as my aunts, were hawkers. They sold *char hor fun* from a stall at Swee Kong *kopitiam* in Pulau Tikus, now rebranded as Keat Hoe. By the time I was born, most of them had retired from hawking, but one of my aunts remained a prolific homecook. Every Sunday for more than two decades, more than 10 of us would gather at her tiny apartment for dinner without fail. If I had friends over, they would come with me to my aunt's house; likewise, my cousins had brought romantic partners, colleagues and even bosses to dine there, cramped together around two—sometimes three—tables.

As a child, I spent a lot of time in this aunt's house, and most of that time, in her kitchen. While my other aunts and cousins played mahjong in the background, I would sit at the kitchen table, annoying her with requests to help her cook. To pacify me, she would set me to task on removing bean sprout husks or breaking the ends off green beans and removing the stringy veins that run down the sides.

Raised on a cocktail of international cooking shows like Jamie Oliver's *The Naked Chef* and *Nigella Bites*, I always found it fascinating how differently my aunt cooked—with a large wok and ladle—and how loud: the clang of metal on metal, the roar of a gas flame, the rhythmic toss of a wok. At times, she would lay old newspaper on the floor, set a mortar and pestle over it and start pounding away. This usually meant we'd be having fried fish and nasi lemak or *bang kuang char* (stir fried jicama with cuttlefish) for dinner.

My father's family is Hokkien and Cantonese, so apart from Malaysian-ised Chinese and Nyonya food—*asam belai* (spicy, sour fish soup), *kiam hu kut gulai* (salted fish bone curry), nasi lemak)—my aunt made mostly Cantonese and Fujianese food. This means lots of light, clear soups, and steamed, braised and stir-fried dishes.

There is a particular dish she made that supposedly originated from Longyan, Fujian—my grandfather's place of birth—that I had never tasted anywhere else outside of her kitchen. I could never find anything similar on Google either. We call it "*pang teh*" at home; which "*pang*" and which "*teh*" that is, I have no clue about. To make the dish, white radish, chunks of pork and leeks are braised in a light, sweet, soy sauce soup base until the pork is fork-tender and the leeks are so soft, they almost disintegrate.

I have not tasted this dish since her passing; she was the only one of my father's siblings who successfully learned it from my grandfather.

It had never occurred to me then that the Chinese food I had been eating, and that everyone around me had been eating, is food from a specific part of China—and an adapted and hybridised one at that. Before discovering the flavours of Sichuan food in the US while I was living there, I had not known the flavours of *mala* (numbing spiciness); and the thought of lamb meat in Chinese food just felt odd and unfamiliar. But later on, looking at the history of Chinese migration to Southeast Asia, it made sense that the kind of Chinese food we have here is the cuisine of southern China. That should have been obvious; of course they brought to their new home the food of their villages, what their mothers made and their weather grew.

SOUTHERN CHINESE COOKING MADE MALAYSIAN

Southern Chinese cooking has its own logic, one shaped by the land it came from. Unlike the harsh, frigid north where numbing spices, hot oil and bold flavours dominate, the south is warm, humid and fertile with rice, vegetables and seafood. In the south, freshness and lightness matter. Dishes are often cooked quickly with high heat to preserve taste, colour and texture. The wok—thin, responsive, capable of intense fire—became the core tool of this preference.

The most prized flavour in southern Chinese, especially Cantonese, cooking is the “*wok hei*”, literally the breath of the wok. This elusive flavour is the complex, smoky, slightly charred aroma that comes from stir-frying food over extremely high heat in a seasoned wok. What sets good *char hor fun* or *char koay teow* apart from the mediocre is good *wok hei*—a flavour outsiders such as tourists or non-ethnic Chinese might not be trained to automatically pick up.

The migrants who came to Penang in the late 18th and 19th centuries, mostly Hokkiens, Hakkas, Teochews and Cantonese, brought these preferences and techniques with them: the taste for clean, balanced flavours; the fondness for quick stir-fries and light soups; the reliance on rice, noodles, fermented ingredients like soy sauce, and dried seafood like dried shrimp and salted fish. Once here and confronted with a wide array of fresh, fragrant tropical herbs and spices, these were also incorporated into local Malaysian Chinese dishes.

Southern Chinese cooking traditionally uses little to no chilli, yet Penang’s Chinese food today is unimaginable without it. *Belacan* has become a staple ingredient in most Malaysian Chinese households. Galangal, lemongrass, turmeric and curry leaves, Penang’s Chinese cooks absorbed what the land offered and what their neighbours shared from their home gardens.

Malaysian Chinese learned to pound sambal, sauté *rempah* until it “breaks” and many, like my father, cannot enjoy anything



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without an accompanying dish of cut bird’s eye chillies and minced garlic soaked in soy sauce. *Hokkien mee*, with its layered sweetness from prawn shells and pork bones simmered into stock, or *char koay teow*, with its glisten of caramelised soy and smoky *wok hei* are southern Chinese cooking principles inflected by the addition of chillies for a distinctive and addictive Southeast Asian twist.

It also comes as no surprise that the proliferation of Chinese food in Malaysia was not spread by high-class Chinese restaurants the way other cuisines, such as French or Italian, were, but by hawkers peddling their fares among labourers. This is why Malaysian Chinese hawker dishes evolved to be simple, affordable and resource-efficient, built around inexpensive ingredients and quick, practical cooking methods suited to feeding working-class communities.

Traditional and unadulterated Chinese foods are best preserved in Malaysia during religious festivals and banquets. Food offerings for prayers are often dishes more faithful



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to mainland Chinese cuisine, such as roast pig or duck, steamed fish, rice cakes (*nian gao*) and *lo hon zhai*, a vegetarian dish.

To evoke a sense of luxury and occasion, formal Chinese banquets in Malaysia closely follow the structure of their mainland counterparts. The meal typically unfolds over eight courses, beginning with a cold appetiser platter before moving on to a premium double-boiled soup course—with shark’s fin, historically, signalling prestige. This is usually followed by a steamed whole fish, a poultry dish such as roast duck or chicken, and another seafood or meat course. A vegetable dish then offers a brief interlude of lightness (“cooling” in traditional Chinese medicine terms), before the banquet rounds off with noodles or rice—birthday



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noodles or lotus leaf rice are common—and, finally, dessert.

Even the way we eat reflects our unique adaptation to this part of the world. While chopsticks are still commonly used, and are the preferred utensils when eating noodle-based dishes or congee, most Malaysian Chinese eat rice with a spoon and fork—a norm that would puzzle many mainland Chinese. Interestingly, in more traditional settings—Chinese festivals or at a high-end Chinese restaurant—chopsticks and ceramic Chinese spoons are used instead. My own family likes to use chopsticks at home when we are “feeling fancy”.

My aunt never spoke about preserving tradition. She simply cooked what she liked to eat and wanted to share with us. Yet, hers was the same instinct that framed Chinese food culture in Penang—an instinct guided by memory, adaptation and ingenuity.

CAPTIONS

1. Braised dishes, such as this braised duck dish, are typical of Southern Chinese cuisine.
2. Cantonese-style claypot rice flavoured with salted fish.
3. My family eats *bang kuang char* with sambal wrapped in lettuce.
4. *Ang ku kuey*, rice cakes and *huat kuey* are common offerings at altars.
5. Hokkien cuisine favours stir fries in dark soy sauce.
6. *Lo hon zhai* made with red fermented bean curd.
7. Roast pig and steamed *mi ku* buns are also quintessential at altars.



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TRACING THE TASTE OF THAILAND IN PENANG'S KITCHENS

BY
TAN YEW MING

GEOGRAPHICALLY AND CULTURALLY, northern Malaysia and southern Thailand share a porous border. The Thai provinces of Satun and Songkhla touch Kedah and Perlis, while Pattani, Yala and Narathiwat connect to Kelantan and Terengganu. This closeness made exchanges in language, religion and food inevitable.

The Kedah Siamese, in particular, became key carriers of Thai food culture into Penang. Over centuries, Thai and Malaysian cuisines absorbed influences from China, India and Indonesia, producing a spectrum of flavours both familiar and distinct. Penang's proximity to Kedah and the long history of cross-border marriages and trade brought Thai culinary traditions southward, introducing the intense, spicy-sour palate that still defines much of northern Malaysian food today.

Before the arrival of chilli peppers—introduced by the Portuguese in the 16th century from the Americas—Southeast Asian heat came from black and white pepper, Javanese long pepper and different ginger varieties. The later introduction of coriander, cumin and other spices by Indian and Arab merchants transformed regional cooking. During the Ayutthaya period (1351 to 1767), Thai royal cuisine elevated food into an art form—harmonising colour, shape, aroma and flavour. Dishes like green, red and yellow curries grew increasingly refined, as did elaborate desserts made from Portuguese techniques, such as *foi thong* (egg yolk threads). Retired palace cooks later brought these sophisticated methods to the wider public, influencing not only Thai cuisine but, by extension, northern Malaysian cooking as well.

THE TASTE OF THE NORTH

Thai food's influence in northern Malaysia goes far beyond the introduction of *som tam* (green papaya salad), green curry, *tom yam goong*, *pad thai* or *pad kra pao*. It has shaped local palates, cooking techniques and popularised the use of certain ingredients. Thai cuisine is noted for how well it balances the five key taste profiles—sour, spicy, salty, sweet and bitter. Lime juice and tamarind bring acidity; bird's eye chillies deliver searing heat. Herbs like lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, galangal, turmeric, coriander, basil and mint add fragrance and a subtle bitterness, while fish sauce and shrimp paste provide the essential umami base. Coconut milk smoothenes and enriches, tempering spiciness with allaying creaminess.

As Thai food spread southwards, its principles blended seamlessly with Chinese and Malay traditions, inspiring hybrid dishes that became common in Penang, like Siam *laksa* and *nasi ulam*. The Malay habit of eating *ulam* with sambal is mirrored in Thai dining, where foraged herbs are paired with an array of chilli dips for a refreshing, aromatic meal.

Malaysians of Thai descent too have their own unique take on local cuisine. Joanne Phang, whose mother was born in Nakhon Si Thammarat, recalls that her mother's version of *asam belai* soup includes the unusual addition of morning glory. This echoes the use of morning glory in *gaeng som*, a light, spicy-sour Thai soup noted for its similarity to Malaysian *asam pedas* or *asam belai*. Her mother also used to make *pung pla*, a Thai fermented sauce made from fish innards, which is eaten in *khao yam* (Thai herb rice)—this flavour pairing again parallels that of *budu* in *nasi kerabu*.



A CHILDHOOD STEEPED IN THAI FLAVOURS

I grew up in a large, boisterous family in Air Itam, 20 of us all under one roof. On my father's side, we are Hakkas from Jieyang, while my mother's family is Teochew from Shantou. Despite our Chinese roots, the dominant influence in our home cooking was unmistakably Thai. Our decidedly un-Chinese way of eating probably stemmed from the fact that my grandmother was a Medanese Nyonya raised in Thailand, and I also had several Thai-born aunts from Nakhon Si Thammarat and Bangkok, who had married into the family and assumed the role of cooking for the family.

In our household, the kitchen belonged to the women—and they were fiercely passionate and skilled cooks. Our daily meals were a chorus of Thai flavours: tangy, spicy, sweet and made rich with coconut milk. Green curry (*gaeng keow wan*—translated as sweet green curry), yellow curry (*gaeng gati*), sour fish soup (*gaeng som*), chilli shrimp dip (*nam prik kapi*) and *khao yam* were a common sight on our dining table. These dishes were the taste of my home.

In the 70s, Thai ingredients were not as widely available in Penang as they are now. My aunt would travel several times a year back to Nakhon Si Thammarat, each time returning with precious cargo—curry pastes handmade by her neighbour, chilli sauces and Thai *belacan*. She even brought back mango and pomelo saplings, which she planted in our garden in Air Itam, alongside herbs like lemongrass and kaffir lime.

During festivals, the family would gather for elaborate feasts showcasing a medley of Thai, Nyonya and Hakka dishes. The highlight for me was always stuffed chicken wings—deboned, filled with finely minced fish

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) *Khao yam*.
2. The ingredients that are to be pounded to make green curry paste.
3. We eat green curry with raw beansprouts and an assortment of fresh herbs.
4. Salaman curry.
5. Stuffed chicken wings.
6. Thai *hor mok*.
7. Thai pea eggplant.
8. *Tahi minyak kelapa*.
9. *Nam prik ong* in the centre is a tomato-based chilli dip.
10. *Nam prik kapi* is a Thai sambal eaten with an assortment of raw vegetables. Add fried fish and sticky rice and you get a simple, delicious meal.



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marinated in yellow curry paste and thinly sliced herbs like wild betel leaf and kaffir lime leaves, then steamed till half-cooked and deep-fried to golden perfection.

Green curry and *nam prik kapi* remain the flavours most etched in my memory. Years later, after starting my own family, I found myself cooking these same dishes for family and friends—and eventually, after the pandemic, I turned that passion into a private dining venture focused on Thai and Southeast Asian flavours.

When I prepare green curry, I still follow my family's way of doing it. Our green curry has the lighter consistency of a *gulai*, rather than the more popular, thicker curry consistency that Thai restaurants here serve. We then add bone-in chicken chunks, Thai green eggplant, Thai pea eggplant (*makhuea phuang*) and winter melon to it. When pounding the chilli paste, I like to also add to it a handful of deep-green leaves, like the leaves of bird's eye chilli or *manicai*, for colour and to impart a mellow sweetness. It is eaten with raw beansprouts, long beans and *khanom jeen* (fermented Thai rice noodles).

A Nyonya herself, my grandmother loved *nasi ulam*, although she is fond of making the Thai version, *khao yam*. Finely sliced herbs, toasted coconut (*kerisik*), dried shrimp, fish flakes and bits of mango are tossed together, seasoned with *budu*, *belacan* or fish sauce—a dish as fragrant as it is nourishing.

PRESERVING THE OLD WAYS

Running a private kitchen deepened my appreciation for Southeast Asia's shared culinary heritage. In 2024, I travelled to Koh Samui to study under an experienced, traditional Thai cook. From her, I learned that southern Thai food culture shares close ties with northern Malay cuisine, and can be traced to Indonesia and even the Persians on the spice route.

There, I learned to pound all kinds of curry pastes with a mortar and pestle, and learned to taste and adjust seasonings at each stage, just as our grandmothers did before recipes were written down. She taught me to taste each new ingredient before it was pounded into the mixture to gauge how much to add—the same ingredient can taste different; more bitter, sweeter, more sour, more vibrant or subdued depending on all kinds of factors. That's why, she said, cooks of the old days never followed recipes. They trusted their tongues instead—tasting, adjusting and tasting again until everything felt right and balanced.

I learned that when making curries with coconut milk, the coconut milk needs to be cooked until it

“breaks”—in Malay, this is called *pecah minyak*—before the *rempah* is added to it, so that it is more fragrant. I also learned that in the early days, Malays would ferment leftover coconut milk and then cook it until it separated into oil and a dark paste to make *tahi minyak kelapa*. This can then be added to *kuih* or curries, such as Salaman curry, for a deeper, more complex flavour. These traditional ways of cooking are slowly disappearing from home kitchens; they are time consuming to make, and many of these are now commercially produced and sold at supermarkets.

Hor mok, Thai-style *otak-otak*, is another dish I learned to make there. Our northern Malaysian version, like Thai *hor mok*, is infused in a yellow curry base, and made fragrant with wild betel leaves, kaffir lime leaves and coconut milk, though unlike *hor mok*, we add eggs to our *otak-otak*. It is then wrapped in banana leaves and steamed. The steaming reveals the Chinese influence in how we prepare this dish in Penang. In Thailand, *hor mok* is grilled over charcoal, producing a smoky, more intense version of this shared delicacy.

A SHARED TABLE

Food has always been another language spoken in Penang—a way of remembering who we are and how we came to be. The Thai touch that runs through our cooking is more than just a matter of spice; it's a reminder that culture is fluid, generous and alive. It tells of families crossing borders, of women stirring pots in kitchens filled with laughter, of old recipes passed from grandmother to daughter and granddaughter.

That, to me, is the flavour of home.



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10

THE MURTABAK

TECHNIQUES, TRADITIONS AND REGIONAL VARIATIONS

BY ONG JIN TEONG

RECENTLY, I ORDERED *murtabak* at an Indian Muslim restaurant in Pulau Tikus, one not known for its *murtabak*. I just wanted to try it out. Unfortunately, it was a disappointment. This experience prompted me to start my research after going through a mental post-mortem of *this murtabak*.

I have fond memories of our family enjoying our meals at the Hameediyah restaurant in my school days, eating *nasi kandar* and *murtabak*, and occasionally their *mee goreng* and *pasembor*. Hameediyah (operating since 1907) and Merah (now closed) were two well-known *nasi kandar* restaurants along Campbell Street. Our family often ordered *murtabaks* to take away to be consumed at home or to gift our uncles and cousins in KL and Singapore. In the old days, *murtabaks* were wrapped with banana leaves and the pickled onions were packed in a traditional paper bag.

I have also been observing its preparation during my travels around Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and even in London. The recipe for the *murtabak* in my first book^[1] came from my *jee kor* (second aunt), who first prepared it when I was a student in London in the 1970s. I do not know where she learnt to do it, and I did not master the art of flipping the dough to stretch the pastry. Later, my nephew, Roger, explained to me how the flipping was done. He used to practice holding and flipping the “pastry” using “good morning towels”.^[2]



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THE PENANG MURTABAK STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

Penang *murtabak* is very elaborately prepared when compared to that from other parts of Southeast Asia. My findings are based on its traditional preparation at Hameediyah and the now-defunct Merah restaurants. I am also including an additional step to account for the minor variation of A. Ghaffoor Martabak Original.

Dough Preparation: Mix *maida* or refined flour with water, egg, condensed milk and ghee or oil to form a dough. Similar to making *roti canai*, knead until elastic. Leave it to rest for several hours. Then, flip the dough and stretch it into a paper-thin sheet. Fold the four sides of this sheet towards the centre to form a square. *Roti canai* from Malaysia and Singapore may feature fillings like eggs, onions, sardines, minced meat and cheese, but remain thinner than *murtabaks*.

Ingredients for Filling: Prepare the *murtabak* filling by mixing spiced meat-and-onion with egg, a key ingredient for all varieties. The spiced meat-onion mixture consists of minced meat (mutton or chicken), diced onions, ground spices (meat curry powder plus turmeric and chilli powder), herbs (mint and coriander leaves) and aromatics (shallots, garlic and ginger). Heat a teaspoon of oil in a wok over medium heat. Sauté the finely chopped shallots, garlic and ginger until fragrant and translucent. Add the ground meat and mixed spices along with a tablespoon of water. Fry until cooked.

To prepare uncooked *murtabak* filling, whisk together the eggs (it acts as a binder) and fold in the spiced meat.

Layering and Folding: Precise layering and folding give Penang's *murtabak* a crisp texture. There are five distinct layers in this *murtabak*. Use the *roti canai* base and *murtabak* filling to form a three-layer "sandwich" by adding the meat on the griddle (spread it to achieve the size of the base). Ghee is traditionally used for frying, though margarine or vegetable oil are now common as ghee is more expensive.



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Place the base on top, then pour the same amount of filling over it. Once the bottom layer is cooked, flip it to cook the other side on low heat. This forms the "sandwich". Then, wrap everything in a stretched dough envelope. Griddle fry the *murtabak* on low-heat until crispy. You have the option to coat one or both sides with beaten egg and re-fry until crispy. The egg wash can be thin or thick like an omelette. This step is unique to Penang's A. Ghaffoor Martabak Original. Traditionally, the *murtabak* is cut into halves, then crosswise into strips, and served with pickled onions, chillies and curry.

REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

Good *murtabak* balances egg, meat and vegetables. In Malaysia and Singapore, onions are the predominant vegetable, while in parts of Indonesia, potato, leek, spring onions, sweet corn and cabbage are also used. The Penang A. Ghaffoor Martabak differs slightly where its filling is applied only on one side of the *roti canai* base, resulting in a rectangular four-layer sandwich. They also apply a thin coat of egg wash before refrying.^[3]

The three-layer *murtabak* without a *roti canai* base is the more common variant in KL, Johor, Singapore and Indonesia. This variant bypasses the *roti canai* base, giving rise to a three-layered *murtabak*. In Singapore, premium *murtabaks* may include an

additional egg layer on one or both sides. In KL and some parts of Indonesia, some use chopped meat from curry dishes as filling, skipping pre-cooked mixtures.

The Acehnese *murtabak* is a simple three-layered sandwich built on a square or rectangular *roti canai* base with two thicker layers of filling on both sides. The difference is that they omit the outer dough envelope wrap, and hence, it is more omelette-like in texture. Some recipes do not have meat filling, but interestingly, use prawns instead.

The Kelantan *Murtabak Raja* was famous because it was originally a palace delicacy, crafted exclusively for the Kelantan sultanate. When ordering *murtabak* here, you have three options: the basic, the mid-range and the Raja. Basic is having the filling placed in the dough envelope and frying until crispy. The mid-range adds another thin elastic dough over the basic *murtabak*. The filling is added then wrapped in an envelope again and fried until crispy. As for the Raja, beaten egg is spread over the centre of yet another thin elastic dough and the intermediate state *murtabak* is placed on top. The beaten egg is then poured over the *murtabak* and wrapped again for the third time. It is fried on both sides until crispy. As the *Murtabak Raja* has a total of five layers and is quite thick, it has to be turned on its edges to cook the four sides.^[4]

The Pahang Mengkasar *Murtabak* is named after the village of Pekan. The recipe was reportedly passed down from the Sultan of Pahang's kitchen. Again, they have the basic option (similar to the Penang *murtabak*, but is rectangular in shape). Then, there is the special option where the basic is refried with a mixture of beaten eggs and chopped spring onions on both sides. On the downside, the outer dough layer is not as crispy. There is the "super" beef and chicken, where the two meats are wrapped up into another envelope and fried. If this version is further fried with a generous amount of beaten egg and spring onions on both sides, it becomes the "luxurious super special" option. As the layers and fillings increase, so does the price—reflecting its status as a premium offering.^[5]



4

MODERN MURTABAK ADAPTATIONS

Murtabak fillings now range from cheese to seafood to plant-based mixtures, yet the essence of folded layers remains intact. You can add cheese to the Mengkasar *Murtabak* filling. Before serving, cheese is drizzled over the *murtabak*. Other inventive chefs add expensive seafood like lobster and crab, transforming *murtabak* from a street food to amuse-bouche.

In KL, I stumbled upon *murtabak roti jala* and *murtabak Maggi*. *Murtabak roti jala* is wrapped with lacy *roti jala*. *Murtabak Maggi* contains instant noodles fried with egg, onions and the meat of your choice as the filling.^[6]

I've spotted innovative *murtabak* wrappings on the internet too. One recipe from Indonesia uses store-bought *popiah* skin. Recently, I used filo pastry sheets, which can also be used as an alternative to prepare *murtabak*. I suggest using more than one layer of filo or *popiah* skins to wrap *murtabak* fillings. There is not much that can go disastrously wrong with the wrapping because once you can manage to get the *murtabak* into the pan, it all looks much better once fried. In my case, there were more than enough volunteers consuming the end product, even if it may not look quite right!



5

CAPTIONS

1. Vendor griddling *murtabak* (square shaped).
2. Spiced meat-onion mixture.
3. *Martabak Aceh*.
4. Turkish *kol boregi* with meat and cheese fillings.
5. The disappointing *murtabak* I had from the Pulau Tikus mamak stall.
6. Tallying orders on a slate board at Hameediyah Restaurant.

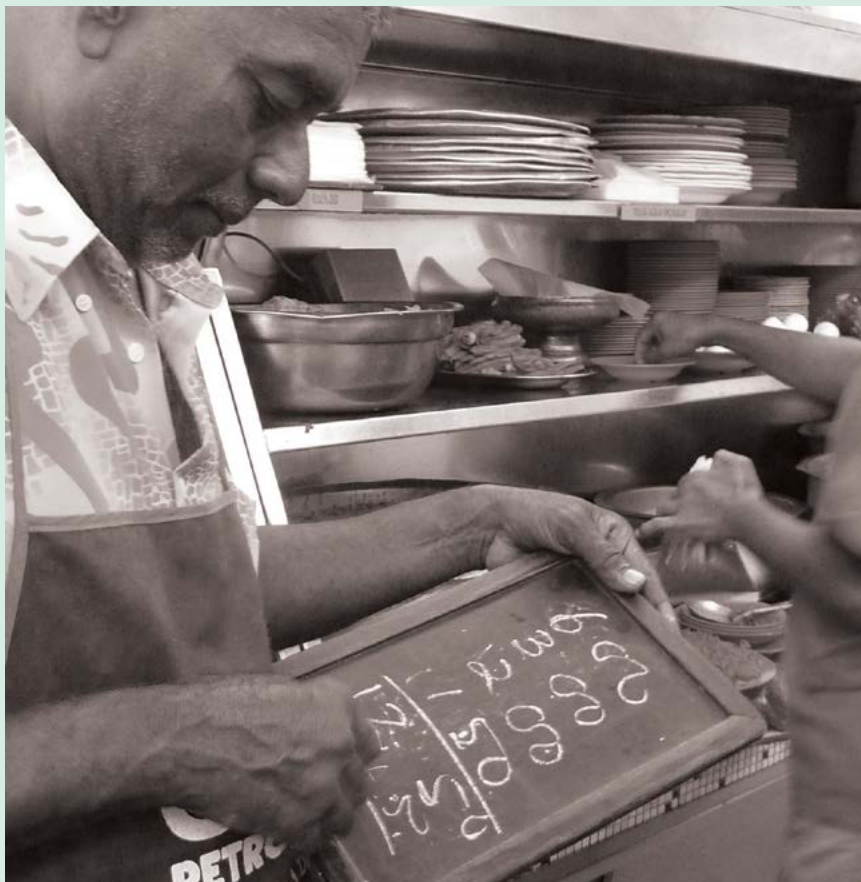
FOOTNOTES

1. Penang Heritage Food: Yesterday's Recipes for Today's Cook.
2. The "good morning towels" are small white towels about 25cm by 60cm with "Good morning" printed in red on them. They are inexpensive and were commonly used in my younger days in Malaya and Singapore.
3. I did ask the owner, Nizal, if the the meat and egg are applied on both sides of the *roti* when cooking/frying. He said, "No, only one side. The effect of multi-layer meats/*roti* is achieved because we folded the *murtabak* on the griddle, after it is cooked."
4. Watch: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vwZD_m18_ds
5. Watch: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1nt7vNiXcCE>
6. <https://www.malaymail.com/news/eat/drink/2015/06/28/our-top-5-favourite-murtabak-stalls-from-the-ramadan-bazaars/922913>



DR. ONG JIN TEONG

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EASY MURTABAK

A SIMPLIFIED HOME RECIPE

YIELDS	PREP TIME	COOK TIME
2 <i>murtabaks</i>	10 minutes	15 minutes



INGREDIENTS

MURTABAK FILLING

2 sheets of frozen *roti canai*/paratha (straight from the freezer)
 2 large eggs
 2 medium onions, diced (approx. 150g)
 100g leftover meat or chicken (from curry, finely chopped)
 3 tablespoons leftover curry
 <1 teaspoon cooking oil (per *murtabak*)

OPTIONAL PICKLED ONIONS

(A CLASSIC MURTABAK ACCOMPANIMENT)

1 medium onion (approx. 75g), thinly sliced
 Vinegar
 Sugar (to taste)

INSTRUCTIONS

PHASE 1: PREPARATION

MAKE OPTIONAL PICKLED ONIONS

If serving with pickled onions, thinly slice a medium onion (75g) and combine it with enough vinegar to cover it, adding a pinch of sugar. Set aside.

PREPARE FILLING MIXTURE

In a bowl, thoroughly beat two eggs. Add diced onions, chopped curry meat and three tablespoons of curry sauce. Mix until well combined.

PRO TIP

If you prefer cooked onions, you can sauté the diced onions, chopped meat and curry sauce together until heated through. Be sure to let this mixture cool completely before adding the beaten egg.

PHASE 2: COOKING THE MURTABAK

The key to this method is working quickly while the *roti canai* is hot and puffed.

I. HEAT THE PAN

Heat a non-stick pan over medium heat and add approximately 1/2 teaspoon of cooking oil.

II. COOK ROTI CANAI

Place the frozen dough into the heated pan.

III. PARTIALLY COOK AND FLATTEN

Flip the *roti canai* after about one minute. It should appear darker and slightly translucent. Gently press the dough using a spatula to cook evenly. After approximately two minutes, check the underside. If it's browning too quickly, turn the heat down slightly. Flip the *roti canai* again.

IV. CUT THE POUCH (CRUCIAL STEP)

When the *roti canai* begins to puff up, turn the heat off. Cut a line starting from one edge, running to the centre, and then continuing to the opposite edge with scissors. Make a second cut diagonally across the first (creating a cross or access point).

V. CREATE THE POCKET

Gently and carefully peel the top layer, creating an open pocket while keeping the bottom layer fully intact. This is the step that requires the most dexterity.

VI. FILL AND SEAL

Pour exactly half of your egg and meat mixture onto the open top. Spread the mixture uniformly across the top, ensuring it reaches the edges.

VII. FRY AND CRISP

Turn the stove heat back on low. After about two minutes, use the ladle to gently flip the *murtabak*. Continue frying until both sides are golden-brown and crispy, and the filling is cooked through and firm.

VIII. SERVE

Repeat the entire process for the second *roti canai* using the remaining filling mixture.



DRIED FISH

1

A LUXURY BORN OF NECESSITY

BY
TEIOH
NUAN NING

BEFORE WE HAD refrigerators and food preservatives, we dried food—fish, especially. This tradition still endures. After fishermen pull up their trawling nets and haul away the best of the catch, the day's rejects languish in murky pools of fish guts and seawater. Here, any fish too small, damaged or unappetising to sell—anchovies, usually—remains. Waste not, want not, reasoned the fishermen. This mix of fishes—which would include excess catch during bountiful days—would be heavily salted to draw out all moisture, then sun-dried for weeks till dehydrated and crisp. They might then be fed to livestock, crushed and used as bait, eaten as a snack or incorporated into cooking. Either way, they would not go to waste.

Ikan bulu ayam, *gelama tengkerong* and *ikan gelama tiga gigi* are fish species usually dried because they are too bony to be worth cooking. Salt, which gives dried fish its distinctive flavour, is used in abundance for its antibacterial properties. For the sake of variety, these fish are also powdered, made into fish paste, stock or *keropok* (crackers).

A SIGN OF TOUGH TIMES

Dried fish—also known as salted fish, *ikan masin*, *ham yu* or *karuvadu* in local languages—came from humble origins. In the past, tough times were marked by frugal meals consisting of only congee and dried fish. It was eaten for subsistence, not enjoyment, and almost never coveted in times of prosperity. Today, it has become a staple in

Malaysian kitchens, and has even woven its way into fine dining establishments.

Across generations and communities, salted and dried seafood became embedded in our way of life. What began as a way to keep food from spoiling became a way to cook and flavour dishes. This is personalised to each culture; dried fish is prepared, incorporated and spiced in different ways to complement different cuisines.

The Cantonese *ham yu*, for example, is a whole fish placed mouth-open and face-down in a bucket of salt so all moisture flows directly out of the fish's gape. Some methods of dried fish require the fish to be first soaked in brine; others, like *ham yu*, aren't, and are only gutted and washed.

MODERN REIMAGININGS

The culture of dried fish may have its roots in survival, but the human penchant for imagination and creativity has evolved it into a gastronomic pleasure of its own. Pickled *perut ikan merah* is the core ingredient in a beloved style of Peranakan curry. Shrimp used to make *cincalok* is rarely dried; they begin their saltwater soak before the fishing boats have even docked. A variety of sauces and condiments, including *budu*, are made from fermenting fresh anchovies. In agrarian communities where rivers provide an abundance of freshwater fish, *ikan pekasam* is produced by fermenting said fish in toasted rice.

The meals we cook and crave do more than taste good; they also serve to communicate the circumstances of our people's existence, how they came to be and the struggles they endured.

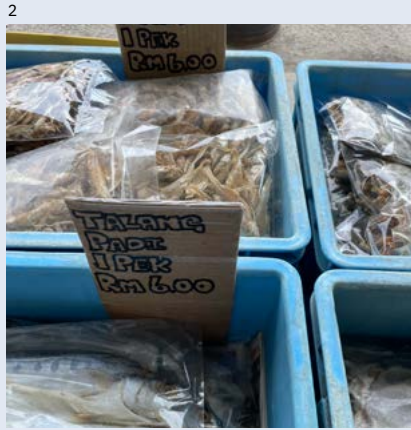
Even as we no longer need the process of dried seafood to provide us with sustenance with the invention of freezers and iceboxes, the consumption of dried fish remains pleasurable and delicious to the modern palate.

It is why places like Pulau Pangkor—which has perfected the art form and skill—continue to draw tourists in droves, attracted by the allure of high quality dried fish. Pangkor's dried fish promises to be authentic, i.e. free of preservatives or chemicals to artificially speed up production and cheap tricks like oven-drying.

In Terengganu, the dried seafood industry would export all over Asia, and thus grew into a mainstay of its coastal economy.

STRAIGHT TO YOUR PLATE

Chances are, you consume more dried fish than you think. Most fish stocks—including the iconic Japanese *dashi*—can be and is made from dried fish. Thanks to its remarkably rich flavour—intensified by salt and time—dried fish has become the grounding taste that threads through some of our most beloved dishes: dried fish bones are



fried to serve as a base for Nyonya curry; deep-fried *ikan bulu ayam* is popular in nasi lemak; dried fermented shrimp is ground into chilli peppers to make sambal *belacan*; an assortment of *ham yu* adorns Cantonese-style claypot rice, and so on and so forth.

As a general rule of thumb, larger fish bones are used for smell and aromatics, while the flesh is for frying and snacking on; smaller fish, like sardines and anchovies, can be prepared and eaten any which way—bones included.

Recipes for dried seafood are usually forgiving. While more experienced cooks can be picky about what type of dried fish to use in which dish, for most people, most species of dried fish are hardly distinguishable from each other—all promise intense, robust flavour. You can make most dishes with whatever dried seafood you happen to have, which is, of course, what we have done for much of human history.

To trace the history of dried fish is to glimpse the soul of Malaysian cuisine: inventive, adaptive, born of necessity and hardship. This practice, which once spoke of survival, now speaks of identity.

CAPTIONS

1. Photo credit: Soonmok Kwon on Unsplash.

2 & 3. The different varieties of salted fish on display at a little sundry shop.

4. Dried stingray.

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A PENANG POTPOURRI

HOW INDIAN FOOD BECAME EVERYONE'S FOOD

BY IYLIA DE SILVA

WALKING THROUGH GEORGE TOWN'S Little India, one smells a medley scent of cardamom, cumin, cinnamon and curry leaves. Steam rises from aluminium pots, *roti* is slapped against hot griddles and *teh tarik* is poured in long arcs between tin mugs. Orders are called out in Tamil, Malay or English, a reminder that Indian food in Penang is not a niche cuisine, but one of the island's main fare.

Every plate of Indian dish on this island carries traces of old journeys: ships crossing the Bay of Bengal, labour contracts signed in colonial offices, moneylenders setting up shop on narrow streets... Indian food in Penang reveals the history of those who brought it over and the openness of the people in its new home.



FOUNDATIONS AND FLAVOURS: SOUTH AND NORTH INDIAN ROOTS

Indian connections with the Malay Peninsula long predate the founding of George Town. South Indian traders are believed to have sailed these waters for centuries, but Penang's tangible Indian presence took form after 1786, when the island was established as a British free port. The new settlement drew migrants from across the Indian subcontinent: Tamils, Malayalees, Telugus, Punjabis and Gujaratis, among others.

Tamil Hindus, widely referred to in colonial records as "Chulias", formed one of the earliest and largest groups. Many worked as dock labourers, moneychangers, clerks and small traders. Whereas Tamil Muslims, now commonly called "Mamaks", arrived as sailors and food hawkers; Malayalee Muslims from the Malabar coast settled near what became Kampung Malabar; Nattukottai Chettiers came in as financiers; Sikhs and North Indian Muslims served in the police and security forces, and some later moved into trade. Together, these communities made Indian food visible in the daily life of the port: spice depots, tea shops, sweet-makers, vegetarian meals for temple-goers and curry rice for workers.

Chulia Street remains an artery of this history, connecting to the lively grid of today's Little India around King Street, Queen Street and Market Street, where gold shops, saree boutiques and curry houses fill restored shophouses.

Each region of origin left its flavour print. South Indian migrants brought rice-based meals, coconut, tamarind, lentils and the habit of eating with the hand. North Indians added wheat breads, ghee-rich and yoghurt-based gravies, tandoori ovens and paneer. Over time, these strands wove into a Penang-specific vocabulary rather than remaining neatly separate.

The banana-leaf meal remains the clearest expression of South Indian dining philosophy. A banana leaf stands in for a plate, with hot rice in the centre and an arrangement of vegetables, pickles, dal and gravies on the side. The practice is practical—the leaf is biodegradable and adds aroma to the food served on top of it. Folding the leaf inward at the end of the meal signals contentment and gratitude. On ordinary days, one might add fried bitter melon, okra *peratal* or a dry-spiced chicken or mutton dish; on auspicious days linked to temple observances, the spread turns fully vegetarian.

Its composition also reflects age-old Ayurvedic principles still observed in South Indian cooking, where "hot" foods such as curries and fried vegetables are balanced with "cooling" elements like yogurt, *rasam* or buttermilk to maintain harmony in the body.

Many restaurants in Penang continue this tradition through thali-style banana-

leaf sets—individual trays lined with small bowls of curries, vegetables, chutneys and sweets. A serving of *rasam*, the peppery-sour soup from Tamil Nadu, believed to aid digestion, usually completes the set.

Mornings across Penang echo with this heritage. Temple and home recipes slip into a shared urban breakfast culture; dosa, idli and *vadai* are served with coconut chutney and sambar and washed down with *teh*. This practice is not limited to the Indian community; office workers, students and tourists of all races and ethnicities partake in this.

While South Indian flavours dominate numerically, classic restaurants such as Kashmir and Gems have long offered Penangites a taste of the North—tandoori chicken, meat marinated in spiced yogurt and roasted in a tandoor (clay oven), served with naan and creamy staples like butter chicken, all in elegant, family-friendly settings.

Sardaarji Flavours of Punjab is now recognised with a MICHELIN Bib Gourmand for its robust Punjabi dishes—fish *amritsari*, palak paneer, butter chicken and biryani—signalling how Punjabi cuisine has become part of Penang's mainstream offerings rather than an exotic add-on.

Sri Lankan flavours now add another layer to this landscape. Kandy Sri Lankan Restaurant & Bar in George Town serves *kottu roti*, *lamprais*, hoppers and curries marked by roasted spice and black pepper, broadening Penang's South Asian palate.

CULTURAL LAYERS, LOCAL BLENDS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

Penang's Indian food story is, at its core, a story of contact. Few dishes exist in isolation; many are the result of Indian cooks working within a Malay-Chinese environment and responding to shared ingredients and customers looking for a specific taste profile.

Nasi kandar is the clearest example. In the early 20th century, Indian Muslim hawkers walked the streets balancing a wooden pole, known as the *kandar*, with containers of rice and curry hanging from both ends, which were served to port workers and labourers. Hameediyah, established in 1907 and widely recognised as Malaysia's oldest *nasi kandar* brand, still anchors Campbell Street with trays of spiced meats and vegetables, and the essential *kuah ban-jir*—a deliberate flooding of mixed gravies over rice.

Meanwhile, Penang's "Indian *rojak*", or *pasembur*, layers shredded cucumber, jicama, bean sprouts, prawn fritters, tofu, boiled egg and other fried items under a sweet-spicy, peanut-y sauce. Its exact origin is debated, but its current form reflects Indian Muslim hawkers reworking Malay *rojak* and Chinese fritters into something distinctly Penang.

Mee goreng mamak tells a similar tale: yellow noodles stir-fried using Chinese technique over high heat in a wok, with chilli paste, tomatoes, potatoes, tofu, cuttlefish and spices (See *Penang Monthly*, October 2022).

These dishes are adaptable to the many different religions and rituals in Penang. Hindu-run eateries omit beef; Tamil-Muslim outlets maintain halal standards; while many households go vegetarian on specific festival days. During Thaipusam, volunteers and temple committees distribute free vegetarian meals as *anna dana* (the giving of food). During Deepavali and Hari Raya, Indian families prepare elaborate spreads for relatives and neighbours. The act of feeding is moral as much as commercial; generosity is built into the cuisine.



CONTEMPORARY INDIAN DINING

Over the past decade, a new wave of restaurateurs has pushed Penang's Indian food beyond the old binaries of budget comfort food versus special-occasion buffets. Rather than discarding tradition, they are refining and reinterpreting it—giving it sharper presentation and new relevance.

Tea Kadai, founded in 2018 on Queen Street, is one such example. It reimagines the old tea stall in a modern café setting, serving masala chai, *vadai*, *bhaji*, *pani puri* and other snacks to a young, mixed crowd. Its tables sit right by the road, close enough for passing cars to feel like part of the ambience.

Meanwhile, Fire by Shankar takes a fine-dining approach, pairing bold Tamil-inspired flavours with refined plating and wood-fire cooking. Toddy is served in wine glasses, and the result is an elevated experience that still feels rooted in South Indian tradition.

D'Sakra, on China Street in George Town, offers a different kind of indulgence. The space leans toward palace-like elegance, fancy, but not overdone, where familiar Indian dishes are given a modern, graceful presentation.



At the more social end of the spectrum, Rockafellers Kitchen & Bar merges Indian flavours with a modern bar sensibility. Its menu includes an Indian-inspired spicy lamb pizza served alongside kebabs, naans and other grilled dishes. The place draws a mixed crowd looking for atmosphere as much as flavour. Likewise, Bombay Kitchen & Bar on Beach Street adds cocktails and small plates to classic tandoori fare, bridging restaurant and lounge culture.

The island's mamaks—long the go-to for late-night suppers—continue to serve those seeking something quick, affordable and familiar. *Roti canai*, *teh tarik*, *maggi goreng* and simple snacks remain staples of this social dining culture.

While newer venues experiment with ambience and fusion menus, mamaks keep the experience grounded in accessibility and ease.

SHARED TABLES

Indian food in Penang has long crossed ethnic lines. Chinese families gather for banana-leaf meals on weekends, Malay youths unwind at mamak stalls over *roti canai* and football, and tourists wander through Little India to sample dosa or biryani.

In Penang, food influences coexist easily, reflecting the place's larger story: adaptation without loss. Indian cuisine here remains both everyday comfort and cultural continuity, uniting people through flavours that have travelled far yet are homely.

CAPTIONS

1. Crab curry. (Photo credit: @aguyfrompenang)
2. *Nasi kandar* is a celebrated Indian Muslim dish that is enjoyed by all races. (Photo credit: @aguyfrompenang)
3. *Podi idli*, *masala dosa* and onion rava.



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KEBEBE

NOT YOUR AVERAGE FRUIT SALAD



BY ONG KE SHIN

1

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER with *kebebe* was unremarkable.

The item was packed in a small, fogged plastic container and displayed in an obscure corner of Lenggong's Ramadan market, overshadowed by rows of bright, colourful *kuih*. The ingredients looked suspiciously coleslaw-like, that obligatory cold side dish that I had never liked. I passed by the stall without much thought.

A year later, I returned to Lenggong for *kebebe*. This time drawn by curiosity and a wave of social media buzz about one of Malaysia's Intangible Cultural Heritage foods.^[1] That decision led me on a small expedition; from the bustling local markets, to a community kitchen and the wilderness of Sungai Perak.

ORIGINS OF KEBEBE

Kebebe is a culinary heritage of the Malay-Pattani communities of Lenggong, Hulu Perak, and is believed to have existed for over a century.^[2] To trace its roots, I

spoke with a local historian, Mohd Razali Ahmad, fondly known as Pak Su. As it turned out, the dish was born from practicality and ingenuity.

Pak Su explained: "Those days, when there was a *kenduri* (Malay communal feast), we had to prepare a lot of *kerisik* (toasted coconut paste) by pounding it with *lesung kayu* (wooden mortar). After that, the *lesung* would be coated in oil. Rather than wash and waste it, the women would throw in bits of fruit and pound them together with the leftover *kerisik*. They would add a hint of *belacan*." The result was brilliant, and everyone got something to nibble on during the feast.

The name itself, he added, came from *membebel*—the Malay word for chattering. "When women gather for *gotong-royong kenduri* (communal feast preparation), they work and they *membebel*," he laughed, imitating a gossip gesture with a cupped hand. *Kebebe*, then, wasn't just a name, it echoed the joy and noise of communal cooking.

FRUITS OF THE FOREST

Previous research suggests that the main ingredients for *kebebe* are fruits like *buah kelempung* (also known as *buah kelumpang*) from both backyard gardens and wild forests. However, these are becoming harder to find. Eager to learn more, I followed Hasni Abdullah, a seasoned forager and wild vegetable vendor at Lenggong market.

Our journey began on his pickup truck, bouncing along a narrow, muddy road, past rubber estates, durian orchards and endless stretches of oil palm. We eventually reached the banks of Sungai Perak, where his small sampan waited. We loaded our gear and set off, gliding across the calm waters towards an island in the middle of the river. Upon reaching the slick riverbank, I was greeted by *kelempung* trees.

The fruits grow directly from the trunk, hanging like clustered beads in hues of purple, brown and yellowish-green, each colour marking its stage of ripeness. I aimed my camera on the largest fruit, but Pak Cik Hasni stopped me. "Not that," he pointed. The young, firm fruits, he explained, are best for *kebebe*. Mature fruit are often too soft and may house tiny insects, making the *kebebe* soggy and less enjoyable.

As we journeyed back, I asked if he always had to travel this far to source the fruit. "My *opah* (grandmother) used to gather these fruits near a stream behind their house," he recalled. "Now those places are gone, so I have to go further." He explained that *kelempung* was not just food, it was also medicine. In the old days, elders used to make *kebebe* to ease fever and restore strength. Then, with a wistful smile, he added: "Today, it's easier to just go to the clinic."

"BUYING" FRUITS:

A WEB OF EXCHANGE

Done with my expedition, I was eager to find other fruits used in *kebebe*. I called Achik, the leader of Dapur Warisan Kampung Luat^[3] and told her I was ready to follow the group to forage. She paused and asked: "*Nak ambil dari mana? Kita beli je...*"^[4] That caught me off guard. I had imagined another foraging scene.

However, when I arrived at the community kitchen, I discovered that "buying" meant something else entirely. Most of the fruits weren't store bought or sourced from commercial farms, they were gathered from neighbours' gardens. Kak Zulhanah explained that no one backyard could provide all that was needed. Sourcing meant reaching out across the village, *jambu batu* (guava) from one household, *putik nangka* (young jackfruit) from another and *jantung pisang* (banana blossoms) from yet another.

The trick lies in reading the offerings of neighbours' garden well and asking for the produce. It felt like a kind of social map-



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CAPTIONS

1. In the past, *kebebe* was traditionally served on banana flower bracts at *kenduris*. It is convenient, eco-friendly and visually appealing.
2. At his foraging ground, Pak Cik Hasni stands beneath the wide canopy of a *kelempung* tree, with *buah kelempung* in hand.
3. Replica of *kebebe* (top left) displayed with other traditional dishes at Galeri Lenggon Geopark.
4. *Buah kelempung* at Pak Cik Hasni's stall at Lenggon Market, along with the vegetables he had gathered from his backyard or the forest.
5. Islets of middle Sungai Perak. Untouched by humans, *kelempung* trees grow wild.
6. An assortment of ingredients for *kebebe* arranged on *nyiru*: guavas, *bunga jantung of pisang abu*, mangoes, pineapple, *putik nangka* (young jackfruit), and wild fruits like *buah cedung* and *buah ara sungai*, with chillies, salt, sugar and *belacan* for flavour.

ping at the community level. The pricing was fluid, sometimes even set by the buyer. Payment could be in cash, food or favours. It wasn't simply a monetary transaction, but exchange grounded in relationships and everyday ethics that sustain village life.

MAKING KEBEBE

Every village in Lenggong has its own version of traditional *kebebe*. The variations, I hypothesise, are tied to its geography and accessibility. The offerings in the vicinity often determines what ends up in the *lesung*.

In Kampung Sekolah, more than 10 types of fruits are used. In contrast, in Kampung Beng, a more remote inland village, the locals prepare a simpler mix with just four or five fruits. They use *jambu kampung* (a smaller, rough-textured guava) instead of *jambu beli* (refers to the hybrid guava in this context), and omit pineapple and sugar entirely. The result is a more *kelat* (astringent) version of *kebebe*. Meanwhile, in Kampung Luat, where *buah kelempung* is scarce, *buah cedung* or *buah ara sungai* often take its place.



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However, common rules are shared across the villages in *kebebe*-making.

- *Jantung pisang* is mandatory, but only from the *pisang awak* or *pisang abu* variant to avoid bitterness.
- The ingredients must be pounded sequentially, following their hardness: tough ones like young jackfruit are added first; soft, juicy ones such as pineapple are added last to attain the desired coarse texture.
- *Lesung kayu* (wooden pestle and mortar) are strongly preferred; *lesung besi* (metal mortars) react with the fruit's acidity and darken the *kebebe*.
- The use of blenders is strictly prohibited as they destroy essential texture unique to *kebebe*.

The making of *kebebe* had once faded with the rise of catering services, which no longer required manual pounding for *kerisik* or *gotong-royong kenduri*. Today, the spirit lives on in a different, more performative form.

At Dapur Warisan Kampung Luat, Kak Zulhanah and Kak Anisah have turned *kebebe* making into a cooking demonstra-

CAPTIONS

7. *Buah ara sungai*, a wild river fig that thrives along riverbanks, can also be used in *kebebe*.

8. Participants try their hand at making *kebebe*.

9. A cluster of *buah kelempung* growing out from the trunk.



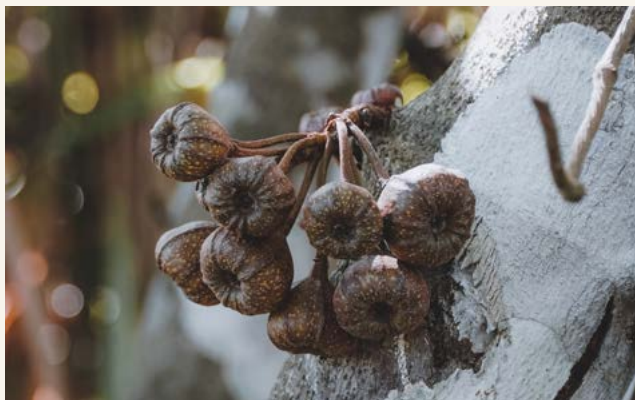
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tion. First, the fruits are washed and cut into smaller pieces. Then, they are added into the *lesung* one by one, pounded in sequence until they become a coarse mix. A pinch of salt, a sprinkle of sugar and chilli are added, by instinct more than measure. Yet, what appears effortless is, in practice, guided by memory, experience and the senses.

I watched as participants passed the pestle from one to another, each taking a turn. The steady thump of the *lesung* set the rhythm as laughter and friendly chatter rose to join in. "That's it!" I realised. That's how *kebebe* got its name.

When I finally tasted *kebebe*, every memory I had of coleslaw was erased. Each spoonful was a burst of flavour; sweet, sour and fruity, harmonising unexpectedly through the salty punch of *belacan*. It can whet the appetite or act as a palate cleanser.

Kebebe mirrors the landscape, with the making of it echoing the soundscape of people at work. As for what counts as "authentic", I believe that the very idea of *kebebe* is inherently subjective, alive and constantly shaped and reshaped^[5] by the people of Lenggong, the land they inhabit, and their ever-evolving palates. *Kebebe* is never meant to be savoured alone. It's a dish best shared over laughter and *memebel*.



9

FOOTNOTES

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3. Dapur Warisan Kampung Luat is a community kitchen run by a group of women (aged 60–80), offering traditional food demonstrations and selling their products under the brand "Lenggong Delicious".
4. Translation: "Where do you want to take them from? We just buy them..."

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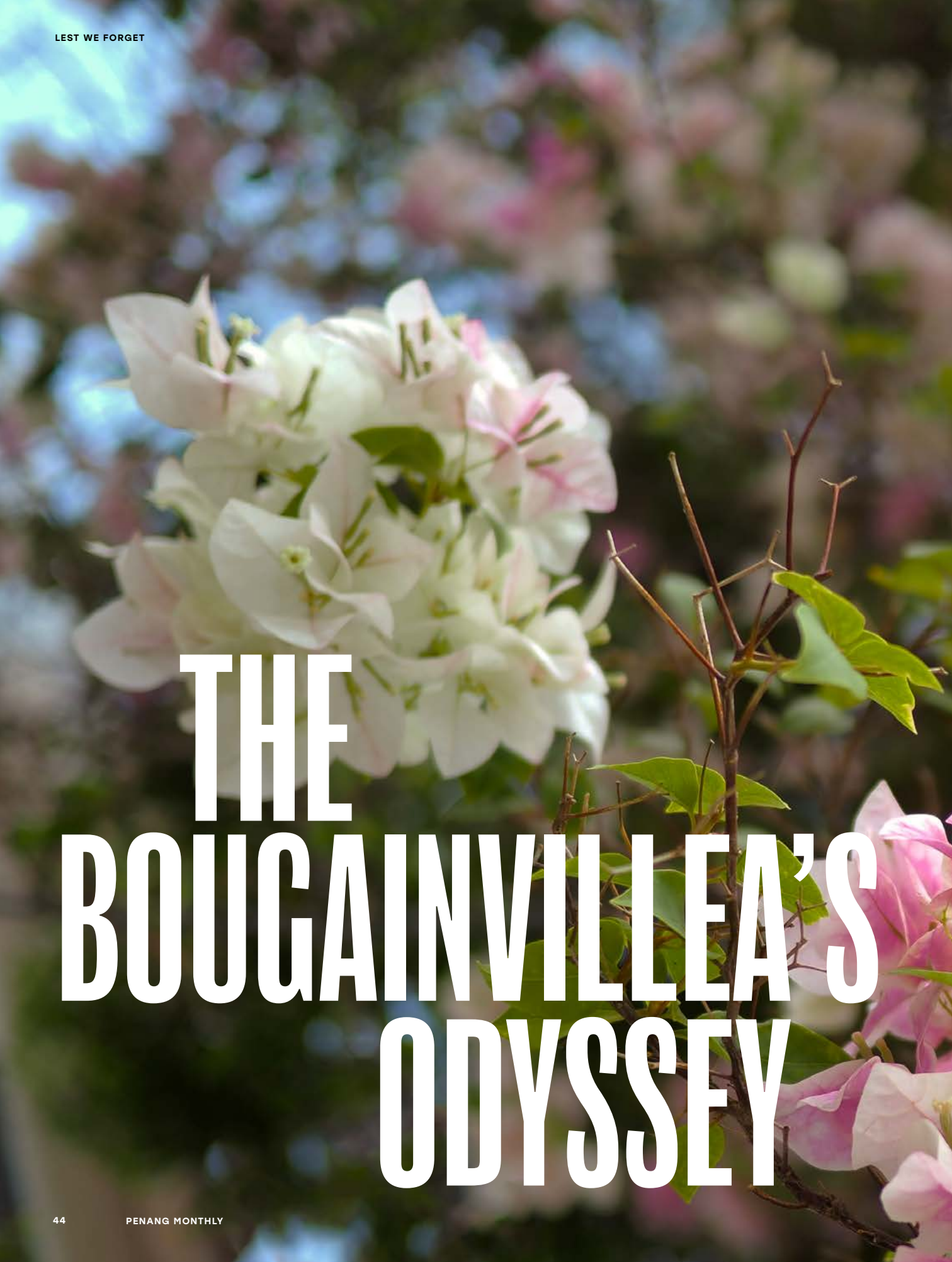
DR. ONG KE SHIN is a biologist-turned geographer who finds joy in experimenting with food and cherishing the diverse wildlife that rhythmically visits her home garden.



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THE BOUGAINVILLEA'S ODYSSEY

A FEW DAYS AGO, I came across a stunning sight in Kampung Kolam: three varieties of bougainvillea vines tumbling in a riot of colours over a neem tree. The spectacle was breathtaking—even if the poor host tree is slowly being smothered by these vibrant invaders.

The bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea glabra*) is a common ornamental shrub found throughout Malaysia. Though native to the Americas, it has taken root across the tropics, including in every state in Malaysia, thanks to its hardy nature. What most people think are its colourful petals are actually papery bracts—modified leaves that surround the plant’s tiny white flowers. This tissue-like texture explains its Malay name: *bunga kertas* (literal translation: “paper flower”).

The scene reminded me of the remarkable story behind this now-ubiquitous plant.

A TALE OF SCIENCE AND ROMANCE ACROSS THE SEAS

BY EUGENE QUAH

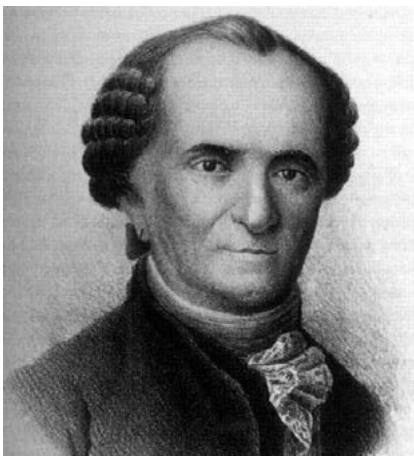


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THE WOMAN WHO SAILED AS A MAN

In 1766, France launched its first circumnavigation of the globe. The expedition, consisting of the frigate *La Boudeuse* (The Sulky Woman) and the store ship *L'Étoile* (The Star), set sail from Nantes on 15 November. Leading the voyage was Admiral Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, who had been tasked with collecting plants and animals of potential value to France and its colonies.

Among the crew was naturalist Philibert Commerçon, a friend of Voltaire and correspondent of Carl Linnaeus. With him was his personal assistant, a young man named Jean. Unknown to the Admiral and crew, “Jean” was actually Jeanne Baret—Commerçon’s lover, “a country girl and amateur botanist with a wide knowledge of medicinal plants”. To bypass the French Navy’s ban on women aboard ships, Baret “bound her breasts in tight strips of linen [and] wore baggy clothes” to disguise her gender.



3

DISCOVERY IN BRAZIL

In June 1767, *L'Étoile* reached Rio de Janeiro, where it met up with *La Boudeuse*. The expedition stayed from 13 to 25 June. As Commerçon was incapacitated by a recurring leg ulcer, Baret—during one of many occasions throughout the trip—“assumed the role of chief botanist”.

It was here, in the jungles of Brazil, that “a flamboyant scrambling plant was collected” by her while still disguised as Monsieur Jean Baret. According to the Admiral’s official account, her ruse was only discovered in April the following year, when observant Tahitians saw through her disguise. The Admiral confined Baret to her cabin for the next stage of the journey after the discovery.



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The couple was eventually put ashore in Mauritius, where they stayed for three years. Admiral Bougainville would later praise Baret’s strength and courage in his book about the expedition, *A Voyage Around the World*. He noted that she had followed her lover in “all his botanical walks, amidst the snows and frozen mountains of the Straits of Magellan, and had even on such troublesome excursions carried provisions, arms, and herbals.”

Commerçon died in Mauritius, leaving Baret in difficult financial circumstances. She later married a French officer, Jean Dubernat, and returned to France in 1774—becoming the first woman known to have circumnavigated the globe. The vine she collected in Rio would later be named “Bougainvillea” after the Admiral. The name was first recorded in 1789, when Antoine Laurent de Jussieu published it in *Genera plantarum*, noting simply: “Named after M. de Bougainville, leader of Commerçon’s expedition.”

EASTWARD THROUGH EMPIRE

From Europe, the bougainvillea spread through colonial trade routes to India, Southeast Asia, and eventually to the Malay Peninsula and Borneo. The first specimens “were not brought alive to Europe before 1800 and first flowered in Paris about 1830”. The botanist, Richard Eric Holttum, who served as Director of the Penang and Singapore Botanical Gardens from 1922, traced their eastward journey: it “was some ten years later that they first flowered in England, and their travels to the Eastern tropics perhaps began about this time”.

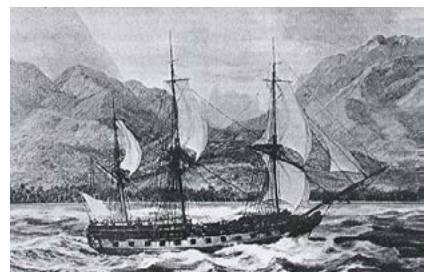
In his authoritative *Gardening in the Tropics*, Holttum observed that “among flowering shrubs, Bougainvilleas probably take first place” in terms of popularity. As an expert on the flora of the Malay Archipelago, he identified three main varieties that gardeners would encounter. The first is the *Bougainvillea glabra* variety—the perpetual bloomers that flower year-round in Malaysia’s climate, making them ideal for tropical gardens.

The second, *Bougainvillea spectabilis* and its hybrids, are seasonal varieties that only flower in response to a dry season, which explains why they were “unlikely” to have been “much grown here” in our consistently humid climate.

The third variety is the enigmatically named “Mrs. Butt”, after Mrs. R.V. Butts who discovered a striking sport in her Trinidad garden in 1910. This variety, which does particularly well in Penang, is sometimes called “lateritia” on account of its brick-red or laterite colour. It travelled from Trinidad via Florida and Kew Gardens before reaching Singapore in 1923. Though seasonal like the *spectabilis*, clever gardeners discovered this variety could be coaxed into flowering when grown in pots—a technique still used by enthusiasts today.

Mrs. Butt’s journey—from a Caribbean garden to Penang via America and England—perfectly illustrates how bougainvillea varieties spread across the globe through networks of botanical enthusiasts and colonial gardens.

The perpetual flowering *Bougainvillea glabra*, now the most common variety around the country, “was not known in cultivation until about 1860 and probably did not reach Malaysia before 1870”, according to Holttum’s research.



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TAKING ROOT IN MALAYA

In January 1879, the explorer Isabella Bird reported seeing bougainvilleas while staying at the Stadthaus (now known as Stadthuys) in Melaka: “... a Dutch garden, and a gallery under the tiled veranda runs all round... Bougainvillea, and other trailers of gorgeous colours, climb over everything, and make the night heavy with their odors.”

In early February 1888, Mrs. Florence Caddy, a geographer and naturalist aboard the Duke of Sutherland’s yacht, *Sans Peur*, reported seeing bougainvilleas in Singapore during their three-day port call.

By 1892, according to reports from the Botanical Gardens, specimens of bougainvillea were already being grown there. They could have been introduced in Penang earlier, for an 1889 report on the “vegetation of Malaya”, remarked that gardeners in the Straits Settlements “confine their attention to a few common and easily grown species... *Bougainvillaea glabra*, *Plumieria acutifolia*, and the same *Clerodendrons* meet one with tiresome monotony on every side, and nothing else”.

PAPER FLOWERS FOR A PAPER CITY

There are over 300 recognised varieties of bougainvillea. Its global appeal is reflected in its adoption as the official flower of Xiamen in China’s Fujian Province and as the national flower of Grenada.

Closer to home, when Ipoh—capital of Perak, a state in Malaysia—was granted city status on 27 May 1988, it adopted the bougainvillea as its official flower, and styled itself Bandaraya Bunga Kertas, or Bougainvillea City. The moniker, however, never quite caught on.

Today, as we admire the vibrant bougainvillea cascading over garden walls and trees throughout Malaysia, we can appreciate not only its beauty, but also its remarkable history—a flower discovered by a pioneering woman botanist disguised as a man, and named after the admiral who showed her and her lover compassion, now flourishing in gardens around the world.



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CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) There are over 300 varieties of bougainvillea; the plant’s arching thorny branches bear heart-shaped leaves and masses of papery bracts in white, pink, orange, purple and burgundy.
2. Jeanne Baret (27 July 1740–5 August 1807) was a French explorer, naturalist and botanist who is recognised as the first woman to have completed a voyage of circumnavigation of the globe. #upscaled Source: Public Domain
3. Philibert Commerçon (18 November 1727–14 March 1773), Jeanne Baret’s lover, was a French naturalist on Admiral Louis Antoine de Bougainville’s voyage of circumnavigation in 1766–1769. The bougainvillea was named in his honour.
4. Admiral Louis Antoine de Bougainville (12 November 1729–31 August 1811) was a French military officer and explorer.
5. *Boudeuse* was a 32-gun, 12-pounder-armed sailing frigate, which Philibert Commerçon was on during Admiral Louis Antoine de Bougainville’s expedition. Jeanne Baret disguised herself as a man named Jean (John), and acted as Commerçon’s assistant during the trip until their deception was uncovered by Bougainville.
6. A stunning sight in Kampung Kolam: three varieties of bougainvillea vines tumbling in a riot of colours over a neem tree.
7. Due to its distinctive papery bracts, the bougainvillea is also known as *bunga kertas* in Malay (paper flower).
8. A variety of double-flowered bougainvillea.
9. What most people think are colourful petals are actually papery bracts—modified leaves that surround the plant’s tiny white flowers.

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THE ECHO THAT SPLITS TWO WORLDS

BY NUR SYUHADA BINTI MOHD SURAHBIL

WINNER OF THE *PENANG MONTHLY*
SHORT STORY PRIZE 2025

This short story is the winning entry in Penang Monthly's Short Story Prize held in conjunction with George Town Literary Festival 2025. It is produced in its entirety.

THEY SAY THE hill no longer echoes. Not since the last eclipse.

But Aira still hears it—soft, low, like a drum being struck underwater. It comes in the early hours, when the world forgets to breathe. When the air grows thick with mist, and the trees on Penang Hill lean in just a little too close. The sound doesn't make sense—not on any instrument, not by any science—but she knows it in her bones. It isn't music. It's memory.

And it always begins with the same rhythm.

Thud.

...Six seconds.

Thud.

No one else seems to hear it. Not the tourists queuing for the cable car, not the morning hikers. They go about their day in blissful ignorance, snapping photos and sipping coffee on the viewing deck, unaware of what this hill once kept hidden, of what it still does.

The hill has been reclaimed—by maps, by travel bloggers, by weekend joggers. Where once the jungle encroached without apology, now there are stairs carved into the stone. Railings. Snack stalls. Even a gift shop. Progress, they call it.

But Aira knows better.

She remembers what the hill took.

Seven years ago, her brother, Farid, vanished somewhere near the summit. He was nineteen, fresh out of school, full of wild ideas and wilder obsessions. He'd been talking for weeks about strange sounds he heard at night—drums, he said, coming from the trees. She hadn't taken him seriously. Who would? He was always a storyteller.

"I think it's a signal," he told her once, sitting cross-legged on the floor of their shared room, eyes bright with something like awe. "Like an old ritual. It only comes once in a while—always near the end of Ramadan."

She'd laughed at him. Told him to stop watching too many horror documentaries. He'd grinned and let it drop, but she noticed how he kept scribbling in that battered notebook of his. Sketches. Maps. Dates. She remembered how he asked strange questions—about old prisons, about colonial myths, about Pulau Jerejak.

And then one night, on the eve of the blood moon, he went up the hill. He never came back.

They searched for days. Police dogs. Volunteers. Helicopters. His rucksack was found near the railing at the upper station, torn at one strap. His phone was smashed. No blood. No body. The forest offered nothing.

Just silence.

Eventually, people stopped asking questions. The headlines faded. The family mourned in quiet, dignified grief. His name was whispered like a bruise—there, but untouchable. Aira, sixteen at the time, held her grief like a stone in her throat. She didn't cry at the funeral. She didn't speak much at all for months. The world had simply gone cold.

She grew up with that coldness.

While her friends talked about music and makeup, Aira sat at the back of the class, researching missing person cases, printing articles about Penang folklore, and making notes that no one else saw. Her silence deepened into focus. She stopped celebrating Eid. Stopped going to the hill with family. Her mother worried, but Aira could never explain that she wasn't losing herself—she was just trying to find him.

And seven years later, she found something.



It came by accident, like all dangerous things do. She'd been helping to sort old records at the university archives—work-study credit for her degree in Southeast Asian history. Among the study ledgers and government reports, she found a slim, cracked leather book wrapped in brown paper.

The title, barely legible:

The Jiwa Echo—Unrecorded Oral Myths from Northern Malaya, 1949.

Her heart stuttered.

Inside was a collection of odd fragments—field notes, folktales, half-translated interviews. One entry, barely a page long, was titled “*Bukit Genderang*”—The Drum Hill.

It described an ancient rhythm. A thumping sound that only came once every seven years, at the height of the lunar eclipse, and only to those marked by longing. The drumbeat, it said, came not from the earth or sky, but from between—between places, between times.

And it linked two sites: Bukit Bendera. And Pulau Jerejak.

The margin of the page bore faint pencil marks.

A name, half-erased.

Farid H.

Her mouth went dry.

The next few hours blurred. She scanned every page. Found sketches—two crescent landforms. A jagged line between them, labelled *Pintu Terlarang*. The Forbidden Gate. One note warned: *The sound is a call. Do not answer unless willing to leave behind what anchors you.*

That night, she stayed up replaying old

recordings on her laptop—field recordings she'd taken from her solo visit to Penang Hill two months before. Wind. Owls. Insects. And then, in one file, buried beneath static:

Thud.

...Six seconds.

Thud.

It wasn't an imagination. It wasn't an echo.

It was a pattern.

Aira stared at the ceiling as dawn broke. She hadn't cried in years. But now, her eyes burned. Farid had been right. And she was going back up the hill.

Aira prepared in silence. She told no one. Not her lecturers, not her course-mates, not even her mother. Something in her heart told her this had to be hers alone. She packed only what was necessary: water, a torch, a compass that no longer pointed north, the tattered notebook Farid had left behind, and the leather-bound myth that had confirmed everything.

The night of the lunar eclipse arrived with unsettling quiet. The city buzzed faintly in the background, but the hill was unusually still. No birds. No wind. Even the leaves seemed to hang heavier, as if bracing for something. Aira stood at the base of the old trail just past midnight, looking up at the curve of Bukit Bendera under the reddish haze of the moon.

She didn't take the cable car. That felt like cheating. She wanted to climb the same way Farid had. Her feet moved instinctively, the familiar terrain of childhood treks now dark and transformed. The air grew denser the higher she went. Fog coiled between tree trunks like watchful serpents. Every

step was a memory—of hands held, jokes shared, the rustle of leaves, and her brother's voice always a few paces ahead.

Halfway up, she paused at a small clearing where the view of the mainland should have been clear. But there were no city lights. No stars. Only a dull, silver mist pressed against the edges of the hill. Her phone buzzed once, then died in her palm. The compass spun aimlessly. Still, she climbed.

She passed the warning sign near the old military path. *Do Not Enter After Dark*. The gate was broken, rusted open. Vines had crawled over it like veins. She stepped through, feeling a sudden shift in the air, as if something ancient had just taken notice of her.

Then came the sound.

It began low, like a heartbeat she'd forgotten was hers. The first drumbeat landed deep in her chest, vibrating through her bones rather than her ears. Six seconds later, another. Then another. Each one more solid, more insistent. She wasn't afraid. She was awake—more fully than she had been in years.

At the summit, the world changed.

Where there should have been a viewing platform and railings, there was only rock. A narrow slope she didn't recognise now dipped downward into a ravine she knew didn't exist on any map. At the bottom, black water pooled, smooth as glass, and in it shone a perfect reflection of the moon—red, watchful, and impossibly close.

Across the water, through the mist, the island waited. But not as she remembered it.

There were no jet skis, no resorts, no painted signboards welcoming tourists. This was Pulau Jerejak as it had once been: raw, overgrown, almost prehistoric. As its centre, half-observed by trees, stood the crumbling facade of a colonial building—what remained of the prison and rehabilitation centre, now abandoned and erased from history books.

A skiff approached the shore—small, wooden, carved with patterns that looked like tribal symbols worn smooth by time. There was no ferryman. It simply stopped at her feet, waiting.

Aira didn't hesitate. She stepped in.

The skiff moved soundlessly, gliding across the water like a dream. The mist around her curled into shapes—faces half-seen, voices half-heard. Her breath fogged in the still air, and every part of her felt suspended, as though the universe itself were holding its breath.

She thought of Farid. Not just the boy who vanished, but the brother who had carried her when she twisted her ankle in Year Six. The one who had defended her in front of Baba during their worst fight. The one who wrote her letters during his camp trips, always doodling stars in the margins.

He had been more than her brother. He had been the person who made the world feel safe.

And now, she was sailing towards the last piece he had ever seen. When the skiff touched shore, the sensation was like slipping into a forgotten memory.

The island felt alive.

The trees here bent differently. The air was heavier, tinged with the scent of salt and iron. Vines wrapped around stone pillars as if trying to pull them underground. The building loomed ahead, its window dark, but she could feel it watching her. Listening.

She stepped onto the old path. The gravel was soft underfoot, blanketed with years of moss. As she neared the main block, she passed rusted gates, shattered lamps, and a sign that still read *Jerejak Rehabilitation Centre*—only now, the letters bled into one another as if trying to erase themselves.

Inside, the silence was suffocating.

Cells lined both sides of the corridor, their doors slightly ajar. Some were empty. Others weren't. Figures sat hunched in the corners, faces hidden in shadow. One woman rocked a cloth bundle in her arms, whispering a lullaby to something that didn't breathe. A man in the next cell traced symbols into the wall with trembling fingers, lips moving silently.

Aira didn't speak. She didn't need to. The air held stories too loud for words.

She reached a wide courtyard where the moonlight pooled like silver oil. There, in the centre, stood a single figure.

He turned. "Hi," Farid said.

Her chest collapsed.

He looked exactly the same—hoodie, trainers, even the same bracelet she used to tug on as a child. Seven years had passed, but time hadn't touched him.

She walked towards him, not trusting her voice. "You came," he said softly.

"I looked for you," she replied. "I never stopped." "I know."

The silence between them was thick with unsaid things.

Farid smiled, but it was tinged with sadness. "You shouldn't have crossed. This place doesn't let go easily."

She reached out. He didn't flinch, but he didn't lean into the touch either. "You're not... alive?"

He shook his head. "Not exactly. Not in the way you remember. This place is between things. Between the past and the future. Between memory and forgetting."

"You were stuck?"

"No," he said. "I chose to stay." She stared at him. "Why?"

"Because someone had to keep the gate closed."

Before she could reply, the drum sounded again—louder this time, closer. The ground beneath them trembled faintly.

It's nearly time," he said.

Aira's breath hitched. "Then come with me."

"I can't."

She stepped forward, eyes burning. "You can."

He looked at her—really looked. "You remember me. That's what brought me back, even for this moment. But the island doesn't just trap the lost. It traps those who let go."

He pulled the bracelet from his wrist. "Take this," he said. "Walk back while the path's still open. Don't look back. And never forget."

She took it, fingers trembling. "I love you, Farid." He nodded. "I know."

And just like that, he faded—not vanishing, but slipping out of the moment, as if he had never truly been there.

Aira clutched the bracelet to her chest. And the island exhaled.

She awoke just before dawn, lying at the edge of the old summit clearing. Dew clung to her hair. Her fingers were curled tightly around Farid's bracelet. The sky was a soft indigo, streaked with silver, and far below, the city of Penang began to stir.

Everything was exactly as it had been—trees, stones, broken railings—but something inside her had shifted.

For the first time in seven years, the silence in her chest no longer rang hollow.

She climbed down the hill slowly, every step heavier with the realisation that she had truly said goodbye. This was not closure in the neat, polished sense that people wished for. It was something older. Rougher. But it was enough.

The world, of course, didn't notice.

Lecturers marked her absent, not knowing where she'd been. Her mother scolded her gently, grateful only that she was safe. Friends assumed she'd needed a break. Aira didn't explain. She returned to her classes. Handed in her assignments. Graduated.

But she was no longer the girl who waited in silence.

She began to speak. Softly at first—small comments in tutorials, quiet observations in group work. Her lecturers noticed. Her peers noticed. One professor asked her to present on her final year thesis: "Myths as Memory: Unspoken Histories in Malaysian Folklore."

She included Bukit Bendera. She mentioned Jerejak. But only just.

The truth, she had learned, was not always for sharing. Some things were meant to be remembered, not retold.

She became a researcher. Then a lecturer. Eventually, a curator. And though she travelled widely—Thailand, Java, even parts of Eastern Europe—her work always brought her home to Penang.

She returned to the hill once every

seven years, on the eve of the eclipse, though she no longer searched. She simply stood at the summit, bracelet in hand, and listened.

Sometimes she heard the drum. Sometimes she didn't.

But it didn't matter. She remembered. That was what kept the gate closed.

Over the years, she wrote papers. Published small works in journals that few outside academia read. One particular paper—anonously contributed—contained a detailed sketch of the island's original shape, before modern development erased its scars. The drawing matched one from that forgotten leather-bound book she once found in university storage. She never found the book again. As if it had served its purpose and disappeared.

Eventually, she donated a small collection to the State Museum near Air Itam: a bracelet made of blackened thread and a page bearing a hand-drawn map of two crescent landforms facing one another.

She wrote nothing about its origin.

The plaque beneath it simply read:

Donated by Aira Rafidah Hassan, historian.

Visitors rarely paid it much attention. It sat in a quiet corner, next to older relics from the colonial era. Children passed it on their way to brighter exhibits. But sometimes—just sometimes—someone would pause, stare at the sketch, and feel something stir.

Something they couldn't name.

And if they stood there long enough, in that quiet corner where the museum lights flickered slightly and the air always felt a little too still—they might hear it.

Thud.

...Six seconds.

Thud.

Artwork generated by AI.



NUR SYUHADA is a Malaysian student and writer focusing on folklore and the heavy memory held by places like Penang Hill. Her work often explores emotional undercurrents and the narratives captured by silence. Writing in both Malay and English, she tries to capture these difficult, untold histories.

REVISITING CHALLENGES IN CONSERVING GEORGE TOWN'S HERITAGE BUILDINGS

BY NICOLE CHANG

IMPLEMENTING CONSERVATION standards and monitoring mechanisms to conserve George Town's heritage buildings remain complex, even after 17 years since its UNESCO inscription in 2008.

The main documents guiding conservation in Penang are the 2016 Special Area Plan (SAP), the National Heritage Act 2005 and the Penang State Heritage Enactment 2011, which provide federal and state protections. The City Council of Penang Island (MBPP) established the Technical Review Panel (TRP) to review development proposals for heritage sites, while George Town World Heritage Incorporated (GTWHI) offers free technical advice on restoration, adaptive reuse and conservation techniques.

"Managing a heritage town with diverse stakeholders, owners, tenants, residents and businesses is challenging. We must balance community needs and international standards, which requires

ongoing negotiation," says Ang Ming Chee, GTWHI's General Manager. She inquires whether conservation standards rooted in Western philosophies are always suitable for Penang's multi-ethnic context.

Yet, a more pressing concern is the actual understanding and enforcement of the conservation frameworks. "No one reads the Conservation Management Plan (CMP) as formulated in the SAP," remarks veteran conservation architect Laurence Loh. Although awareness of heritage values has grown, it has not consistently translated into practitioners' technical competence or effective enforcement.

"Everyone knows how to perform quality control for modern materials, but not traditional materials," Laurence adds. Benchmarking UNESCO Bangkok's Competence Framework for Cultural Heritage Management^[1]—which outlines competencies across four levels of personnel: (1) skilled worker, (2) middle manager/technical specialist, (3) senior manager and (4) executive, who collectively drive effective heritage management—Laurence questions the technical competencies of our regulating officers, practitioners and supporting professionals in performing the regulation, planning, execution, monitoring and assessment of conservation works at sites.

Non-compliance may occur without close site supervision and monitoring, such as incorrect/unsuitable material used, or wrong/incompatible construction techniques and processes that violate the authority-approved CMP. "This technical oversight allows deviations from approved plans to go unnoticed. Nobody knows if the right lime mixture is used or if cement was wrongly applied," warns Laurence. "Problems are often only discovered post-construction, when it's too late to rectify, leading to unnecessary reconstruction and waste of resources."

Rosaini Hassan, Town Planner at the Penang Heritage Commissioner Office, explains that monitoring is indeed challenging. "Contractors may work on



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non-working days or in hidden sections inside the building. Unauthorised work is hard to detect during scheduled site visits. Unplanned spot checks may be more effective." She adds that "local residents within the neighbourhood play an important role as guardians to report violations."

PENANG'S HISTORIC URBAN LANDSCAPE (HUL)

Laurence stresses the importance of UNESCO's HUL approach as a holistic framework aimed at realigning local conservation efforts with broader urban sustainability objectives. "We need to move beyond individual conservation projects and consider the entire historic city as a cohesive entity." HUL encompasses a broader urban context beyond preserving monuments/historic centres, covering natural features, built fabric (historic and modern), infrastructure, spatial organisation, land use, visual relationships and intangible cultural values. It seeks to balance heritage conservation with social, cultural and economic needs, embracing community participation, cultural diversity and adaptive change. It advocates transformation for sustainability while safeguarding historic cities' identity and integrity.^[2]

Without the SAP's legal protection, many significant historic buildings and streetscapes outside the inscribed zone remain vulnerable. Clement Liang, President of the Penang Heritage Trust (PHT) highlights that the Art Deco private houses along Chow Thye Road and the historical landmark of Rex Cinema are currently facing demolition to make way for new development. Clement raises concern over "tokenistic" conservation, where only superficial historical façades or surface elements are preserved to satisfy regulations without genuinely safeguarding the heri-



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FOOTNOTES

1. UNESCO (2021). Competence Framework for Cultural Heritage Management: A Guide to the Essential Skills and Knowledge for Heritage Practitioners.
2. UNESCO. (2011). Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape. Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

CAPTIONS

1. A row of restored storage rooms inside Fort Cornwallis, a project by George Town Conservation and Development Corporation (GTCDC), partnered with Penang Chief Minister Incorporated (CMI) and Think City, with technical support from Aga Khan Trust for Culture (AKTC).
2. Traditional breathable materials typically used in heritage buildings include clay bricks, lime mortar, lime plaster, patterned clay-based ceramic tiles and terracotta tiles.
3. George Town's architectural heritage.
4. Clement Liang, the current PHT president.
5. Laurence Loh presenting "Regional Conservation Principles: Values-Based Approach" to practitioners who participated in a five-day heritage conservation workshop organised by Think City in May 2025.



NICOLE CHANG has just completed her PhD programme at the Department of Development Planning and Management, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia.



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tage values. He cited cases like preserving an old building amid a large modern structure, building fake replicas after illegal demolitions, erecting high-rises behind low-rise heritage shophouses and making extensive renovations. These actions clearly contradict HUL principles.

Clement and Khoo Suet Leng from the Department of Development Planning and Management at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) acknowledge that conservation costs often discourage property owners from engaging in appropriate restoration. Many opt for cost-saving measures that bypass using heritage-compatible materials or skip engaging qualified experts.

Recognising the need for long-term sustainability, Laurence and Khoo call for active youth engagement in heritage conservation. Besides enhancing professional competencies, Laurence underscores the importance of imparting heritage literacy at the school level. Khoo asserts, "Youths are our leaders-to-be. We need to capture their interest, nurture greater appreciation and encourage active participation in heritage conservation to develop future custodians of our heritage." She adds that resilience in adapting to or responding to changes is indeed essential. "Heritage buildings were de facto constructed as green structures with traditional breathable materials and air wells for ventilation. Given the urgent need to tackle contemporary climate change, even more innovative solutions are required, possibly supported by modern technologies."

The work at Fort Cornwallis, carried out by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture team and Think City's Master Builder team (led by Francesco Siravo and Giovanni Santo), demonstrates that a methodical, interdisciplinary approach to architectural conservation can achieve high standards of authenticity (See *Penang Monthly*, July 2024). By respecting the original construction logic and environment context, adopting evidence-based documentation of interventions, applying mindful restoration using traditional materials while integrating environmentally friendly solutions (e.g. plastering using hydraulic mortars and breathable paints; breathable waterproof surface treatment using recycled oils from local food courts), the on-site interventions not only maintain the structural, but also the cultural integrity of Fort Cornwallis.

Ultimately, Penang's future historic urban character depends on a transition towards holistic conservation practices that extend beyond superficial measures; recognising heritage not merely as preserved artefacts, but as living spaces, cultures and communities is vital. This relies on effective communication, collaboration and collective endeavours among all stakeholder groups involved, and across generations.

THE WAN LI SHIPWRECK

BY CAROLYN KHOR

ITS LAST 300KG OF HISTORY



CAROLYN KHOR is a former ministerial press secretary, a former United Nations volunteer and an independent researcher/writer.

AT BEN RONGEN and Joan Cheong's private home gallery in Sungai Ara, rows of blue-and-white porcelain line the walls. It is not quite a China house, but something more evocative; entering it is as if one were stepping into the Wan Li itself, the shipwreck discovered in 2002 off the coast of Terengganu. The ship is referred to as the "Wan Li shipwreck" because the porcelain it carried was made during the reign of Emperor Wan Li.

In the space Rongen has curated over two decades, part studio and part archive, ceramic shards from the Wan Li shipwreck are arranged like relics. Some have been made into jewellery and others set onto small sculptural pieces. The rest remain untouched, displayed just as they were when they were lifted off the seabed.

These are the final remnants of the Wan Li shipwreck, a Portuguese vessel that sank roughly six nautical miles (about 10km) off Tanjung Jara in the early 1600s. The site was discovered when fishermen began finding fragments of pottery in their

trawl nets. Of the original four tonnes of ceramics recovered during excavation, only about 300kg remain.

A LEGACY OF THE MARITIME SILK ROAD

Long before steamships or satellites, the Maritime Silk Road linked China, South-east Asia, India, Arabia and Europe. Along these ocean routes, ceramics, spices, glassware and textiles crossed borders and belief systems, shaping one of the earliest forms of global trade.

Dutch documentarian and filmmaker Ben Rongen explains that the Wan Li shipwreck was part of this vast network of exchange. Built in Goa, refitted in Macau and crewed by Portuguese sailors, the ship carried blue-and-white porcelain from Jingdezhen, bound for markets as far away as Portugal. The iconic blue designs on these ceramics were created using cobalt oxide imported from Persia, making each piece a product of truly global trade. Persian cobalt would travel overland to China, where craftsmen in Jingdezhen applied it to porcelain destined for European markets.

Ming blue-and-white porcelain was among the most coveted luxuries in 17th century Europe—it graced royal courts and wealthy households. Known as "white gold", a single shipment could be worth a fortune. This export ware was also known as Kraak porcelain, a name possibly derived from the Portuguese *carraca* (a large trading ship) or the Dutch *kraak* (merchant ship or "crack"), referring either to the vessels that transported it or to the crackled glaze found on some pieces.

The early 1600s marked fierce competition between Portuguese and Dutch trading powers in Asian waters. The Dutch East India Company was aggressively challenging Portuguese control of lucrative trade routes. The Wan Li fell victim to this rivalry, sunk by Dutch forces in the South China Sea before it could complete its journey. Their cargoes now form what historians call the Treasures of the Nanhai, that tell of early globalisation, stretching from the early Song dynasty to the colonial age.

Marine archaeologist, Sten Sjöstrand, who led several major underwater excavations in Malaysian waters, recovered cargo from nine shipwrecks and one submarine. Beyond the Wan Li (AD 1625), other shipwrecks have been found in the South China Sea, including the Tanjung Simpang (AD 960 - 1127), Turiang (AD 1370), Nanyang (AD 1380), Longquan (AD 1400), Royal Nanhai (AD 1460), Xuande (AD 1540), Singtai (AD 1550) and Desaru (AD 1830).

Further south, the Dutch submarine, *HNLMS O16*, sunk in 1941 during World War II near Tioman Island, off the southeast coast of Pahang, also in the South China Sea, is now preserved as a UNESCO

war grave. These wrecks trace nearly a millennium of navigation, commerce and cultural exchange in these waters.

Finding the exact site proved challenging. Fishermen had hauled fragments of porcelain in their trawl nets, but could not pinpoint where along their two-hour routes they had dredged them up. “They didn’t know whether they scooped up the ceramic in the first five minutes of towing the net or the last five minutes of a two-hour trawl. So, it’s a huge area to search,” Rongen says.

Working with Sjöstrand, the team divided the seabed into 10km² blocks and used side-scan sonar to survey the area. “It scans the bottom and will actually show a shipwreck if there is one. But this particular wreck... they went over it twice and didn’t recognise it because there was no wood,” he explains.

When the Wan Li site was finally confirmed, the team found a seabed littered with shattered porcelain, much of it damaged by decades of fishing activity.

“They didn’t know there was a wreck there. They just went through them, and the nets smashed everything.” By the time archaeologists arrived, about 80% of the cargo had already been destroyed. “All the wood had already rotted away and had been pulverised by trawler nets. The ship was gone. What was left was only a pile of ceramic on the ocean floor,” he says.

FROM FILMMAKER TO CUSTODIAN

Rongen’s own connection to the sea began almost by accident. In 2002, while filming a documentary for the History Channel about shipwreck archaeology, he joined Sjöstrand’s excavation team in Terengganu. What started as a filming assignment brought about a complete career change.

“I was making a documentary of the Wan Li shipwreck at that time. For me, that was super exciting. I had to learn to dive because

CAPTIONS

1. Cheong working with Ming dynasty ceramic fragments on a sculptural form.
2. An assortment of Ming shards turned into wearable jewellery.
3. Rongen showing a piece of Ming dynasty ceramic plate that is painted with cobalt blue ink from Persia.



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I filmed underwater as well. After that, I sold my company in KL and joined Nanhai Marine Archaeology.”

For three years, Rongen worked on the excavation, spending four months each season diving to depths of 40m. Divers can stay on the seabed for only half an hour before beginning a slow 55-minute ascent, decompressing in stages.

The work was painstaking, “like land archaeology, but underwater,” he says. Each artefact was measured, mapped and lifted in baskets to the surface for documentation. Beyond the thousands of ceramic pieces, divers discovered coins, brass candleholders and remnants of wooden planks from the ship’s structure. After the excavation ended, Rongen purchased over 4,000kg of broken porcelain pieces, including shards deemed unsellable to collectors or museums.

Together with his wife, Cheong, they began incorporating them into jewellery and sculptural art. Their concept, which they call “rebirth of heritage” or “cultural rebirth”, gives these broken pieces new

life. Each piece of porcelain, once part of a 400-year-old Ming dynasty cargo, is now reimagined as jewellery, such as pendants, rings and earrings, connecting the past with the present.

However, the supply is running out. Cheong, who is also an artist and a fashion designer, estimates that only 300kg of fragments remain. “Our products, when we sell one, we lose one. Very soon we’ll say goodbye to history,” she says.

In a quiet corner of COEX@Kilang Besi, a lifestyle enclave at Hin Bus Depot in George Town, fragments of the past are displayed under soft lights. This gallery has become, in Cheong’s words, “the platform for our finale”.

When this last 300kg is sold, this tangible connection to a ship that sailed four centuries ago will be lost. Thankfully, the Taiwan Museum of History recently acquired the last batch of intact pieces, preserving part of Wan Li’s story for future generations.



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OF PRIVATE ARCHIVES AND PUBLIC HISTORIES

BY IVAN GABRIEL



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IF PRIVATE COLLECTIONS govern our knowledge of the past, what histories are amplified and which remain obscured when they are exhibited publicly?

Bingley Sim and Ima Norbinsha's "Now and Then 2", presented by Galeri Puteh, addresses this poser through a lens of critical inquiry. By juxtaposing historical works from the RuMa Collection ("Then") with new creations by the same artists ("Now"), the exhibition produces a temporal dialogue that situates continuity, rupture and reflexive self-examination within artistic practice. The "Now" works, whether

direct responses or conceptually complementary pieces, coexist alongside their predecessors without imposing linearity or teleology. Through this framework, the exhibition positions private stewardship as a form of critical and ethical practice, emphasising the responsibilities inherent in mediating knowledge and preserving cultural memory.

Collecting is inherently selective and consequential. Private collections do more than amass objects; they exercise deliberate historical mediation, determining which works endure, which artistic trajectories remain visible, and which narratives enter public discourse. In Malaysia, formative contemporary art, produced roughly between the 1980s and late 1990s, emerged under conditions of institutional precarity. Sparse gallery networks, limited public acquisition and cautious state patronage meant that experimental, politically engaged or conceptually ambitious works circulated predominantly through marginal networks. Collectors such as Bingley and Ima assume a critical archival role, safeguarding the material traces of these trajectories and ensuring their survival. Exhibiting these works publicly converts private stewardship into an intellectual and historiographic intervention, offering audiences a lens through which to apprehend seminal works while reflecting critically on their ongoing relevance.

Art historian T. K. Sabapathy noted that the study of Malaysian and regional art is often shaped by discontinuous documentation and uneven institutional archives. Within such conditions, private collections assume a crucial custodial function, helping to preserve material that might otherwise remain inaccessible or unrecorded, and providing resources through which critical historiography can be undertaken. In this context, private collections shape the terms through which history is accessed and understood. Collectors steward evidence whose preservation or concealment directly shapes historical narratives. In contexts of limited institutional infrastructure and uneven archival practices, these collections safeguard experimental and politically sensitive works while generating opportunities for critical public engagement.

This relational activation also prompts critical spectatorship, prompting engagement with historical works alongside contemporary reinterpretations, helping us see that history is a living, contested process rather than pre-given. Placing works from different time periods side-by-side encourages aesthetic, conceptual and socio-political evaluation. We can then observe how art has evolved, while ensuring earlier works are respected for their inherent value, not just as precursors.



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IN CONVERSATION WITH BINGLEY SIM

To better understand the motivations of a collector, I spoke with Bingley Sim about the methodologies that underpin his collecting practice.

Ivan Gabriel (IG):

I'm always fascinated by how collectors begin their journey. Before we examine the story behind your impressive collection, could you share what initially sparked your interest in contemporary Malaysian art, and the experience of acquiring your first significant piece?

Bingley Sim (BS):

My journey into art collecting began rather unexpectedly. I remember booking my first painting, an abstract work by Chong Choon Woon entitled *Modern Shanghai* (2005), on 4 April 2005 at Town House Gallery. Initially, as an investment banker, I viewed art as another asset class to diversify my portfolio. However, in 2008, my perspective shifted, and I began to appreciate art for its intrinsic value and the narratives it encapsulates.

My collection focuses on contemporary local art. I am drawn to works that possess a certain soul, that can communicate with me and provide joy through contemplation. These "desired themes" are central to my collection. Additionally, I find myself increasingly captivated by provocative artworks, pieces that challenge norms and are distinctly cutting-edge.

IG: So, how do you balance showcasing Malaysian and regional artists within your collection?

BS: The balance really depends on the theme or subject of the exhibition. Since regional artworks make up less than 5% of my collection, most of the works I acquire and showcase are works by local artists. My aim is to highlight the richness and diversity of Malaysian art.

IG: Reflecting on your collection, are there any particular artworks or artists that have had a significant personal impact on you?

BS: Absolutely. Initially, my collection primarily focused on works that aligned with my "desired themes". However, as I delved deeper into collecting, I began to develop a strong inclination toward pieces that challenge societal norms and push the envelope in terms of creativity and message. I find myself particularly drawn to works that possess an element of surprise or provocation, pieces that compel viewers to stop and reflect.

For example, my collection includes a striking piece by Paiman, a mixed-media installation featuring a small coffin, which serves as a commentary on mortality and societal issues. Another is an innovative work by Buden, which includes a custom-made film projector that uses live maggots. The maggots' movement creates dynamic silhouettes projected onto a screen, prompting viewers to reflect on themes of decay and the cycle of life.

IG: Speaking of artists, engagement with them seems crucial to your collecting practice. How do you interact with the artists whose works you collect?

BS: I do make it a point to stay deeply connected to the grassroots level of the art world, attending numerous exhibitions and frequenting galleries. Graduate shows, in particular, are a great source of discovery for me. I diligently track the progress of many up-and-coming artists, observing their evolving careers, conceptual developments and personal growth.

For me, collecting contemporary art involves more than just acquiring pieces; it is about building relationships and understanding the artist's journey. It is essential to be attuned to each artist's trajectory, encompassing their career milestones, creative ideologies and life attitudes. I focus on their determination and ability to overcome challenges and achieve their artistic goals. This approach ensures that my collection



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CAPTIONS

Photos courtesy of Galeri Puteh Art Management and the RuMa Collection.

1. Stephen Menon
Adam & Eve Series: Safety Matches
Only "Adam" is shown here.
Screenprint on paper
76cm x 52cm
2015

2. Jalaini Abu Hassan
Petai Obama
Acrylic, bitumen and fabric
collage on canvas
182.8cm x 152.4cm
2012

3. Edroger C. Rosili
The Greatest View At The Similarities in Features Between the Pinnacles of Two Different Nation (Revisited)
Pulp clay, steel pole and custom banner
439cm x 335cm
2016

4. Anisa Abdullah
Durian III
Paper collage on canvas
15.5cm x 21.5cm
2025

5. Lina Tan
A promise that we made
Acrylic on canvas
91.4cm x 91.4cm
2025

6. Anisa Abdullah
Durian II
Paper collage on canvas
15.5cm x 21.5cm
2025

7. Khairudin Zainuddin
Uncertainty In The Gray Area
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas
275cm x 183cm
2016

8. Samsudin Wahab
Wayang Ulat (Video installation)
LED, Wood, Mealworm and Glass Lens
Variable dimensions
2018

not only reflects diverse artistic expressions, but also supports and encourages the growth of talented individuals within the contemporary art scene. Collecting art is, for me, an ongoing journey that requires a commitment to nurturing and understanding the creative minds behind the work.

IG: Considering the extensive and diverse nature of your collection, it is evident that building and maintaining such a collection involves navigating numerous challenges. Could you elaborate on some of the obstacles you've faced and how you've managed to overcome them?

BS: The main challenges are financial constraints and finding sufficient space for the collection. I continuously seek to ensure that my collection can grow and be appropriately housed.

IG: What do you think "Now and Then 2" shows about Malaysian contemporary art?

BS: It highlights both the richness of our artistic history and the gaps in its documentation. Many important works from the early 2000s circulated through small networks, and private collections often become the custodians of this history. By pairing older works with contemporary ones, the exhibition makes visible the development of ideas and practices, showing that history isn't fixed, it's always being reconsidered and interpreted.

I hope audiences see the relationships between works, noticing both continuities and divergences. Each pairing is like a small conversation that encourages viewers to think about strategy, concept and ethics over time.

IG: Is there a part of the collection that holds special meaning for you?

BS: Definitely, the Moleskine sketchbooks. They've grown to over 20 volumes and document not just the artworks themselves, but the relationships and moments shared with artists. From Hamir Soib's *The Super Clown 09* in 2009 to Haslin Ismail's *Queen Termite* in 2020, these sketches capture conversations, ideas and memories. They're a personal record of my journey as a collector, and they reflect the relational core of the RuMa Collection.

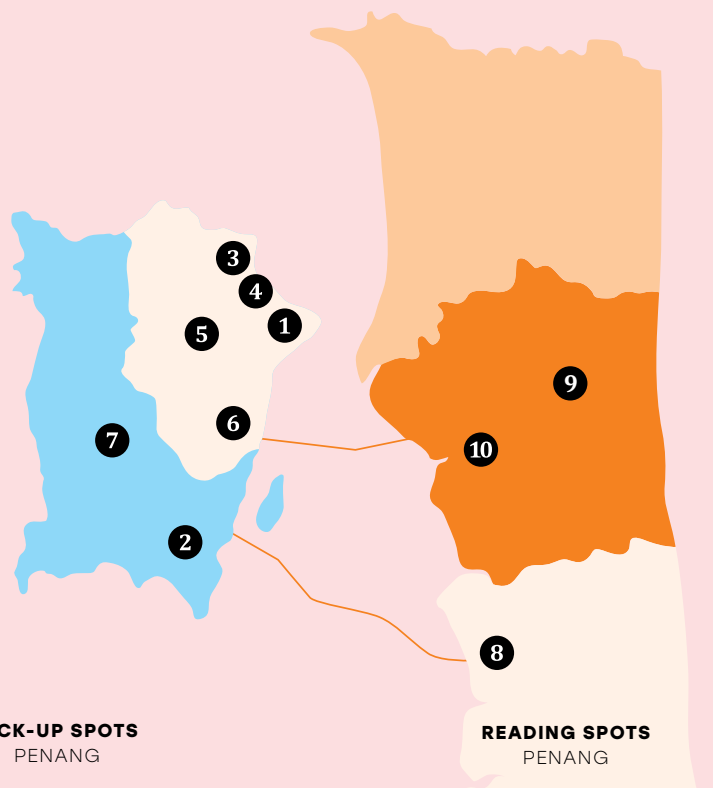


IVAN GABRIEL is a curator with a curatorial approach committed to making art accessible to diverse audiences. He views each showcase as a chance for inadvertent education, using art as a powerful platform to initiate conversations about contemporary issues, provoking audiences to think and reflect.

REFERENCES

1. Flores, Patrick D. *Past Peripheral: Curation in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: NUS Museum and University of the Philippines Press, 2008.
2. Sabapathy, T. K. *Writing the Modern: Selected Texts on Art & Art History in Singapore, Malaysia & Southeast Asia, 1973–2015*. Edited by Ahmad Mashadi. Singapore: Singapore Art Museum, 2018.

HERE'S WHERE YOU CAN FIND PENANG MONTHLY



PICK-UP SPOTS KL/SELANGOR

○	Kuala Lumpur
Hubba Hubba Mont Kiara	
The Godown Arts Centre	
○	Petaling Jaya
Temu House	
Yin's Sourdough Bakery and Café	
○	Subang Jaya
Sunway University	
(Students Study Area)	

PICK-UP SPOTS PENANG

1	George Town
Areca Books	
Book Island @ COEX	
Infinity 8	
Black Kettle	
BookXcess Gurney Paragon	
ChinaHouse	
Cheong Fatt Tze Mansion	
(Blue Mansion)	
Gerakbudaya Bookshop	
@ Hikayat	
Gurney Plaza	
(Information Counter)	
Hin Bus Depot Art Centre	
Huey & Wah Café	
Le Petit Four Patisserie	
More by Arang Coffee	
Penang Institute	
Penang Island City Council	
(Komtar Level 3)	
Pusat Harmoni	
(Harmonico)—Reception	
Ren I Tang Heritage Inn	
Sin Seh Kai Artisan Bakery	
Tourist Information Centre	
32 Mansion	
2	Bayan Lepas
Arang Coffee	
InvestPenang	
Penang Development	
Corporation (PDC)	
Penang Skills	
Development Centre (PSDC)	
Urban Republic	

3	Tanjung Bungal
Gusto Café	
Straits Mini Mart	
Tenby International School	
Yin's WholeFood Manufactory	
(Lembah Permai)	
4	Tanjung Tokong
Blue Reef Straits Quay	
5	Air Itam
Coffee Elements	
Penang Hill—Lower Station	
6	Gelugor
E-Gate (Security Desk	
located at the building's	
middle span)	
Penang Youth	
Development Corporation	
(PYDC)	
Universiti Sains Malaysia,	
Hamzah Sendut Library 1	
(Main Entrance Foyer)	
8	Batu Kawan
IKEA Batu Kawan	
9	Bukit Mertajam
Seberang Perai City Council	
10	Juru
AUTO CITY	
Shop-In D'Park	

READING SPOTS PENANG

1	George Town
Bricklin Café Bar	
Consumers' Association	
of Penang	
Forward College	
G Hotel	
Kim Haus	
Komichi Tea House	
Mugshot Café	
Narrow Marrow	
Penang Public Library	
USM Library	
Wheeler's Café	
4	Tanjung Tokong
Leo Books	
7	Balik Pulau
Botanica Mansion	
Nada Natural Farming	
8	Batu Kawan
Peninsula College	

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