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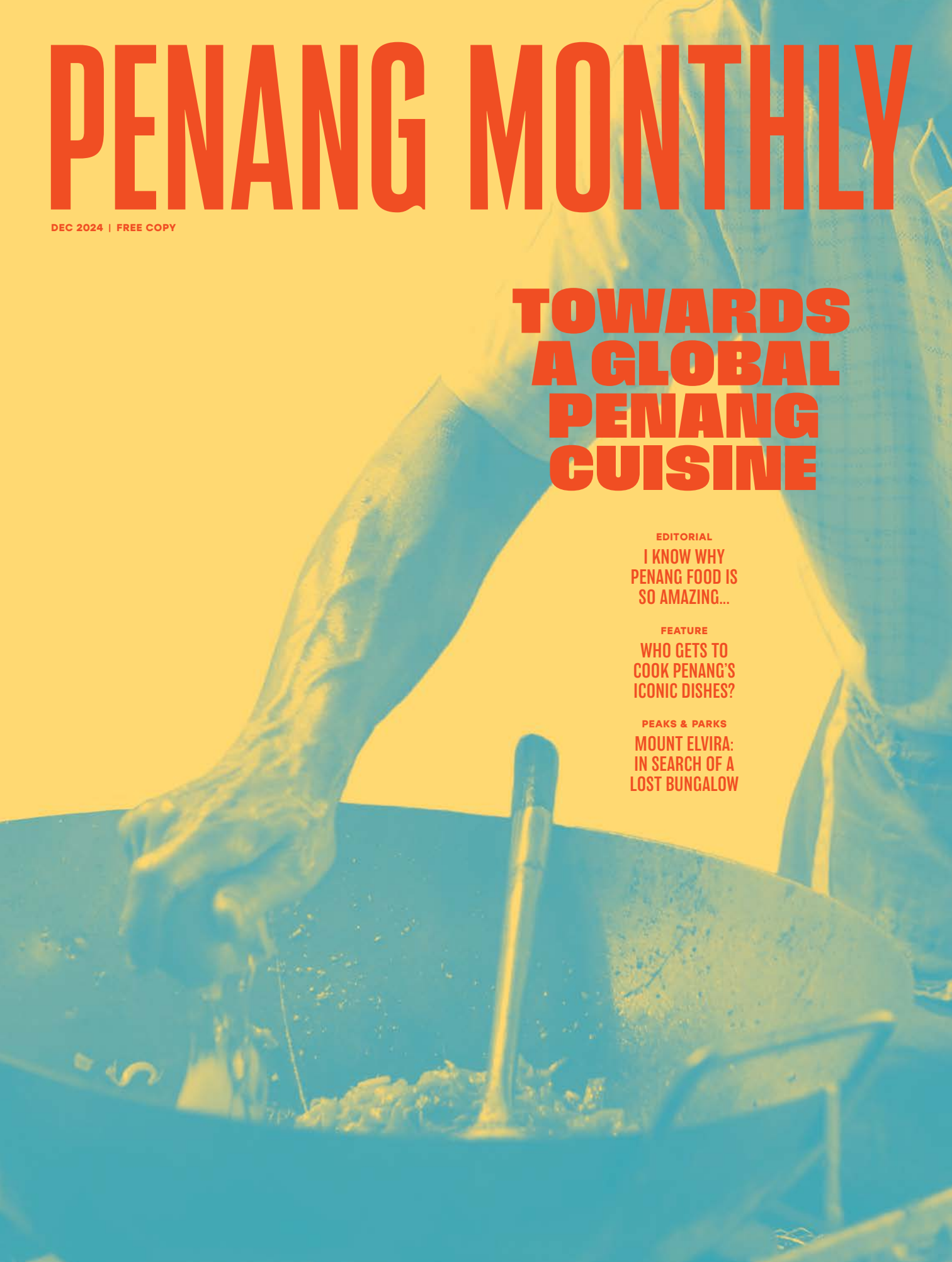

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THE FOOD ISSUE

NEXT MONTH ON PENANG MONTHLY

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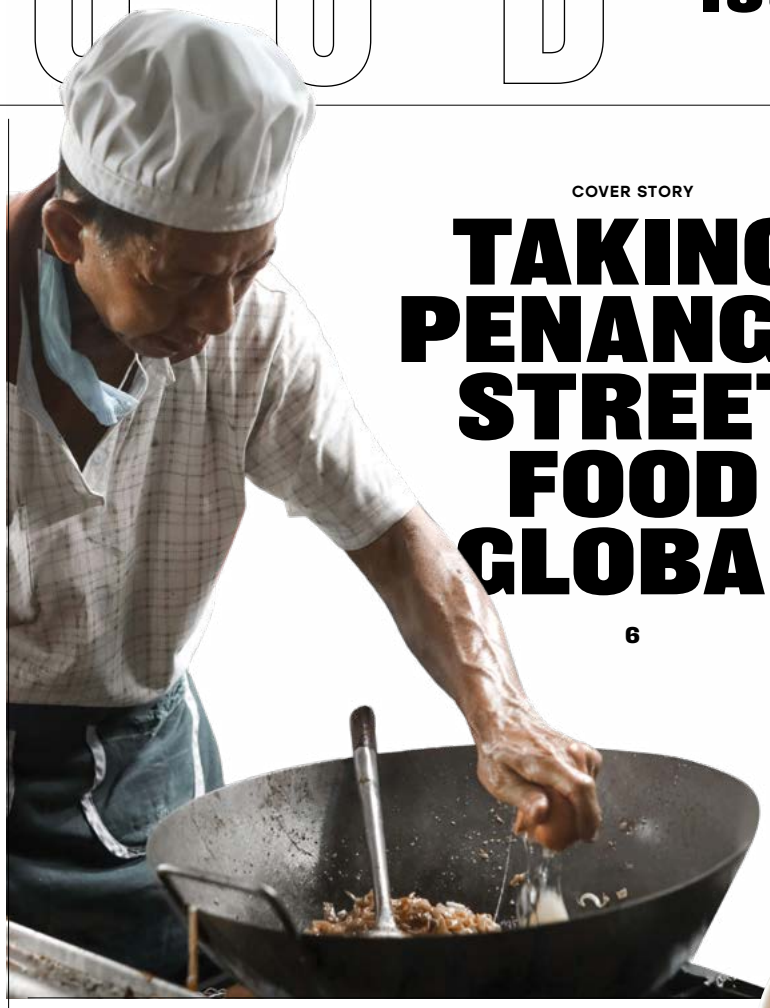

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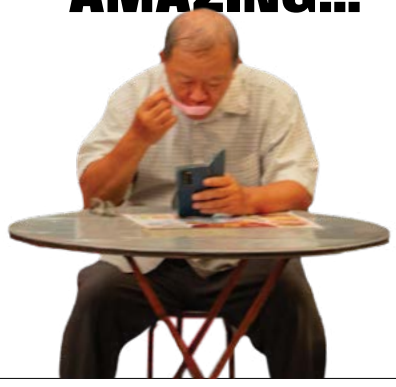

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>
> –SHERYL TEOH
> IN "TAKING PENANG'S STREET FOOD GLOBAL"

PENANG MONTHLY

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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;
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I KNOW WHY PENANG FOOD IS SO AMAZING...

BY OOI KEE BENG

BORN WITHOUT ANY spoon of any metal in my mouth, food was a matter of having enough to dispel any passing pang of hunger.

Often, it was the drink—plain water or coffee—and not the food that helped. It did not matter how.

In any case, lucky were we who were—and are—born and raised in Penang. That food could lack flavour and taste was not an idea we needed to consider very often, be it home-cooked, street-bought or canteen-served.

The nutritional content of what we ate was not something we cared much about. Looking back, well-spiced carbohydrates was what we took most of the time. That must be because Penang people relied on what the port took in. Life was hard, but work could be found. We had to be "innovative", to use a 21st-century term.

But for most of us, we had to be "resilient", again using a contemporary word. And to be resilient meant that we didn't mind getting by on the bare minimum in nutrition, but we needed our food to be tasty, spicy and flavourful.

LIVING ON SPICES

That was the deal. Low nutrition was fine, but whatever we ate or drank had to taste good.

I suspect that to be the dynamic that guaranteed the high tastiness of all that made a "Penang dish".

While much of the population in Penang may have been poor, staying poor required something paradisical to keep us going. We were resilient because there was always a lovely meal between periods of hard work to look forward to.

And to be resilient over time, that became the uncompromising value of the people of Penang. Our food must be exceptional. And this high demand from the consumers of Penang was what taught the supply side—the hawker, the Nasi Rendang guy, the Nasi Lemak cook, and the maker of the hybrid cuisines—that his customers, however poor they may be, do not tolerate bad cooking. The right to a good meal is the human right of the Penangite.

> **"The right to a good meal is the human right of the Penangite."**

Our island identity depends on this. Our human dignity depends on this. And our daily civility thrives on this. In fact, what precious information would we disseminate among ourselves if not to tell our closest relatives or newest friends where they can go to get "the best" Char Koay Teow, Mee Goreng, Satay Daging or Cendol? Penang being a small place, it is also a human right to not have to travel far to experience "the best" of anything on offer, and so such places became abundant and ubiquitous.

Therefore, when international judges of food establishments—be this Michelin or Zagat or Tripadvisor—enter the fray and start ranking Penang dishes and restaurants, we see it as an intrusion. Who are they to tell us what's best here on our own streets?

Was it not us, we people of Penang, who organically and through natural selection (well, social natural selection), skilled by poverty, who developed an urban mechanism that could evolve into countless dishes fit for kings, affordable for paupers, acceptable to all communities?

Can tongues used to silver spoons taste the historical human depths (of anguish and hope, and resilience and elation) from which Penang dishes sprang? Probably not.

How Penang food will evolve as its port workers become factory workers, and Penang's young know less about the threats of hunger and thirst than they do about dishes being "too carb-heavy" and drinks being too sweet, remains to be seen.

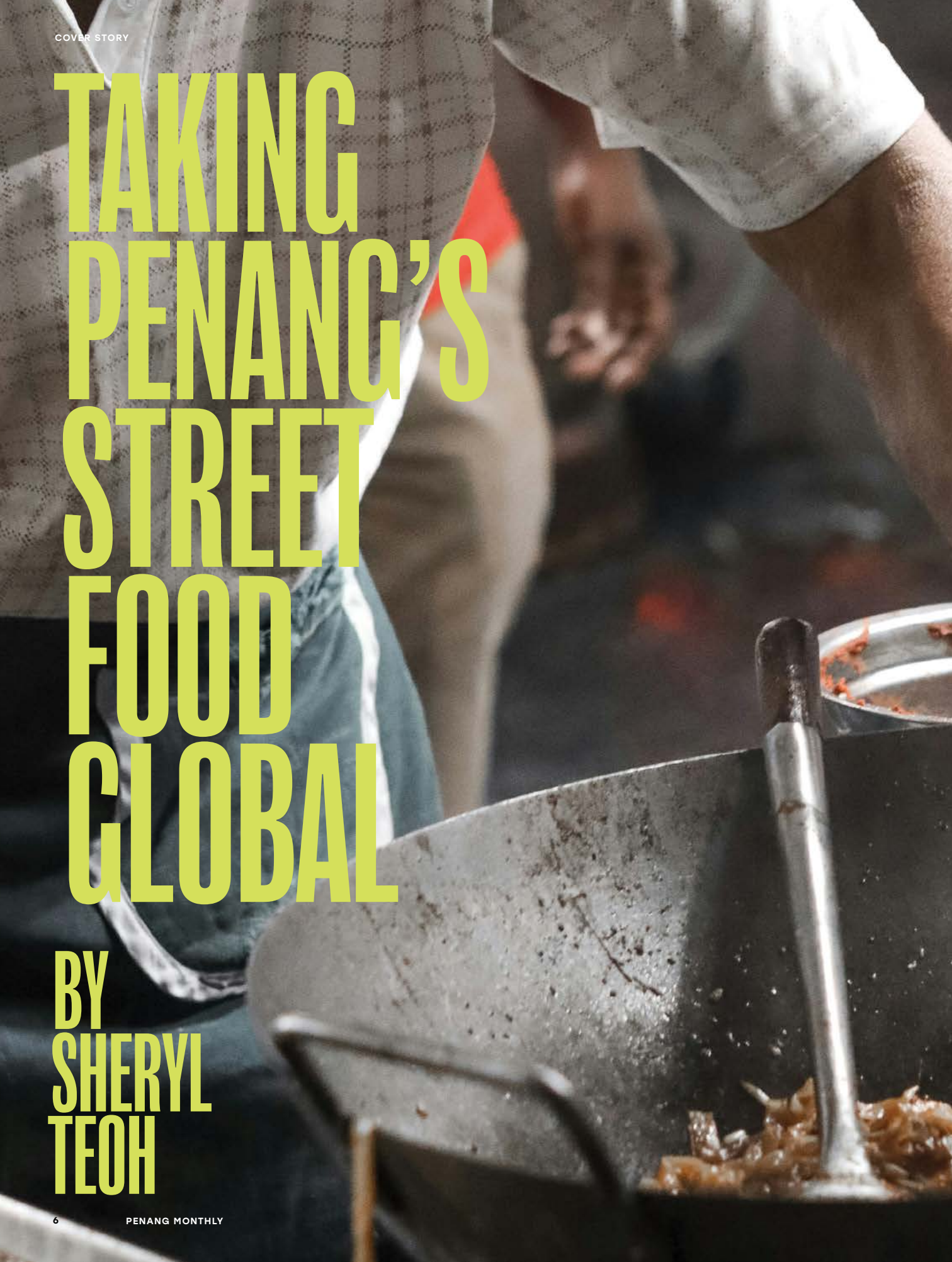
All things change, even Penang food. But the driver of change in this case is sociological. It comes from within Penang society itself. As the standards on the demand side drop, the need for high standards on the supply side also drop.

The less we have to suffer, the less we need to innovate. This is true for cuisines, culture or creativity. Resilience is a virtue born of sustained suffering. Amazingly good things can come out of it.

Photo Credit: Fam Kai Cong

TAKING PENANG'S STREET FOOD GLOBAL

BY SHERYL TEOH



IN 2016, a chicken rice stall in Singapore was awarded a Michelin star. This, and a stall selling pork noodles, are the first two hawker stalls ever to receive Michelin stars. Prior to these instances, it had long been assumed that these coveted stars are awarded only to swanky fine-dining establishments serving haute cuisine, far out of reach of the likes of street food hawkers. After all, the Michelin Guide was started by two Frenchmen—Édouard and André Michelin—and the French are notorious for being snobby and elitist when it comes to food (though not without good reason).

At first glance, automobiles and the restaurant industry might not seem to have much in common at all—except for the fact that they had both come into existence around the same point of time in history. The first automobile was patented by Karl Benz in 1886, and around the same time, Auguste Escoffier, the Father of Modern Cuisine, revolutionised the culinary industry.

Escoffier, whom the French press hailed the *roi des cuisiniers et cuisinier des rois* (the King of Chefs and Chef of Kings), was credited for inventing some 5,000 recipes, modernising traditional French cooking methods and developing the kitchen brigade system to manage kitchen staff—before this, kitchen crews functioned more or less like a crew of unruly pirates. Instead of *liberté, égalité, fraternité,* Escoffier's formula for a well-functioning, organised kitchen staff was: *propreté* (cleanliness), *discipline et silence*. With Swiss hotelier, César Ritz (of the Ritz Carlton), he had also pioneered the concept of having a fine dining restaurant in a hotel.

In 1900, though France was a pioneer in the automobile industry, it was still a fledgling one; there were then fewer than 3,000 cars on its roads. A guide that included maps and information on where to find gas stations and tyre-changing services was compiled for French motorists by the tyre-manufacturing company, Michelin. To increase demand for cars (and hence, car tyres) and encourage drivers to use their cars more, the guide also listed restaurants and hotels along popular routes in France. Within a decade, the Michelin Guide had become so popular that it was distributed throughout Europe. In 1926, it began awarding Michelin star ratings to restaurants deemed a "fine dining establishment".

Now, fine dining, understood as the act of indulging in refined, gastronomic experiences, was not a French invention—as much as they might like to pretend it is. It had long been practised in one form or another in many cultures—lavish communal feasts among aristocrats and the elite symbolised status and cultural refinement. However, modern fine dining establishments did originate from France, with Parisian restaurants like Trois Frères and La Grande Taverne de Londres touted as the first of their kind. La Grande Taverne de Londres was also said to have first introduced the key elements associated with fine dining: a refined ambience, knowledgeable staff, a curated wine selection and top-tier culinary skills, along with strict dining etiquettes expected of their customers.

Prior to the French Revolution (1789-1799), less than 50 of these restaurants existed. After that, with the monarch deposed and the regime crushed, chefs who cooked for the aristocrats were essentially unemployed, and started opening up their own establishments to cater to the masses.

Et voilà, the restaurant industry was born.

The Michelin Guide started listing Penang food establishments in 2023. Since then, two Penang restaurants have been awarded one star, 32 are listed as Bib Gourmand Restaurants and another 35 as Michelin Selected. While it is clear that Michelin stars are awarded to restaurants judged to offer an outstanding dining experience, the details are murkier when it comes to what Bib Gourmand and Michelin Selected actually mean. The Bib Gourmand, introduced in 1997, recognises wallet-friendly establishments that serve good food at moderate prices.

"A restaurant in the selection without a star or Bib Gourmand is the sign of a chef using quality ingredients that are well cooked; simply, a good meal," says Michael Ellis, International Director of the Michelin Guides. "A hawker stall in the selection, but without a Bib, indicates good food at a good price."[1]

Au Jardin, one of two Penang restaurants embellished with the revered Michelin star, believes that internationally recognised awards such as the Michelin Guide and Asia's 50 Best Restaurants, can catapult us to global attention.

"We believe Penang has the potential to become a major culinary destination in Asia, on par with cities like Bangkok or Tokyo, in the next five to 10 years. The vibrant and diverse food culture here, deeply rooted in tradition yet constantly evolving, has all the right ingredients to attract international acclaim," says Zoe Michelle Saunders, the Communications and Public Relations Manager at Au Jardin.

LET THEM EAT RICE

When bread became too expensive for the commoner to afford, French proletariats rebelled against and eventually toppled the French monarchy. Rice, the Asian equivalent, is equally serious business here. In China, the Changsha rice riot erupted in 1910, triggered by the soaring price of rice in the waning years of the Qing dynasty. In Japan, the rice riots of 1918 involved more than 66,000 workers and culminated in the ousting of Prime Minister Terauchi Masatake.

In more recent years, protests and quarrels too have broken out among Asian families who travel abroad to the Western hemisphere, where rice is not the mainstay of the local diet. In Paris, my mother had wanted to munch on a baguette at the Champ de Mars Park while admiring the Eiffel Tower, but my father, who had gone without rice for an unthinkably long time (four days) insisted on going to an Asian restaurant—a Thai restaurant—nearby for a fix, much to my mother's vexation.

When I was living in the US, I quickly learned that outside of bigger cities, your best bet for passable Asian food is at a Thai restaurant. Apart from the fact that Thai restaurants seem to be everywhere, they also tend to taste a lot closer to authentic Thai food than the odd Japanese sushi—I am using the words "Japanese sushi" very loosely— or Chinese—think Panda Express—place.

The omnipresence of Thai restaurants, not only in the US but around the world, is, in fact, the outcome of the Thai government's Global Thai programme launched in 2001 to increase the number of Thai restaurants outside of Thailand. The programme provided training, financial incentives, grants and support to Thai nationals who wanted to open Thai restaurants abroad. To ensure the authenticity of these restaurants and to encourage the use of ingredients imported from Thailand (flown in through Thai Airways), the government also established the "Thai Select" certification awarded by the Ministry of Commerce. To be a "Thai Select" establishment, these restaurants must meet criteria such as employing government-trained Thai chefs and using Thai products. Pad Thai—a dish that did not exist in Thailand until the 1900s, and was rumoured to have been created after American presence in Thailand during the Vietnam War to present a character of "Thai-ness"—was chosen to be the poster child of Thai cuisine.[2]

The Global Thai Restaurant Company, set up with the goal of establishing at least 3,000 Thai restaurants worldwide, has since seen that number grow to more than 15,000. Furthermore, the world's voracious appetite for Pad Thai, which uses rice noodles made from a Thai rice variety, has significantly contributed to Thailand's agricultural and food exports; according to the Thai Rice Exporters Association, Thailand exported a whopping 8.8 million tonnes of rice in 2023 alone.[3] Since the launch of the initiative, the country also experienced a 200% increase in tourism, with nearly a third of new tourists saying food was a critical reason for travel.[4]

Inspired by the Thai government's remarkable success, in 2006, the Malaysia Kitchen Programme was launched with the same objective. Placed under the Malaysia External Trade Development Corporation (MATRADE) with backing from the Export-Import Bank Malaysia (EXIM Bank), it was to be a national branding initiative. EXIM Bank offered loans and financial support inclusive of three months' working capital to help Malaysians open restaurants serving "food that is traditionally and customarily consumed by Malaysians" abroad.[5] Moreover, MATRADE also provided support in the form of publicity as well as employment visa applications for Malaysian chefs to the US. By 2012, the number of Malaysian restaurants outside of the country registered with the Malaysia Kitchen Programme rose to 647.[6]

The programme also set up "Malaysian Night Market" at the Trafalgar Square in London and in US cities to simulate the feeling of a *pasar malam*; cooperated with major food importers in Australia to increase awareness of Malaysian food products; as well as organised "Taste of Malaysia" and "Christmas Ala Malaysia" events around the world to promote Malaysian cuisine.[7]

Lulu's Char Koay Teow, a popular Malaysian eatery in Melbourne, says that there is definitely an awareness among Australians when it comes to Malaysian fare. "However, I find that many people don't fully know what makes Malaysian food distinct from other Asian cuisines, so part of what we do at Lulu's is to introduce them to lesser-known, but iconic dishes and flavours."

In spite of Malaysia Kitchen Programme's big ambitions and valiant efforts, I suspect that it is food and travel shows such as Anthony Bourdain's *No Reservations* and *Parts Unknown*, and Netflix's *Street Food* that do more to really fan one's desire to taste something unfamiliar and slightly intimidating. There is something about the cinematic nature of these shows, the way personal stories and history are fused into the script, that makes you want to experience places that, until then, have never appeared on your radar.

Before watching Anthony Bourdain fall head over heels for Vietnam and its food on TV, I had had no real inclination to visit the country, nor did I have much of

FOOTNOTES

[1] https://guide.michelin.com/en/article/features/what-it-means-listed-Michelin-guide

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“We believe Penang has the potential to become a major culinary destination in Asia, on par with cities like Bangkok or Tokyo, in the next five to 10 years.”

—Zoe Michelle Saunders, Communications and Public Relations Manager at Au Jardin.

Photo Credit: Fam Kai Cong

SHERYL TEOH holds a Bachelor of Arts degree from Linfield College, a liberal arts college in the United States, and majored in History with a focus on Classical Greece and Rome. Her interests include the study of philosophy as well as a range of humanities and socio-political issues.

an opinion on Vietnamese food. In spite of Vietnam's geographical proximity, I knew little about the country apart from its colonial French past and present communist disposition. But seeing it through Bourdain's eyes—its frenetic energy, the way traffic goes in all directions but still manages to weave together seamlessly in a "mysterious, thrilling, beautiful choreography",[8] the city grime, the strange charm in slurping noodles half-sitting, half-squatting on a child's stool perilously close to the road, the camera zooming in on dishes I have never tried but could almost taste in my head—I *had to* taste the Lunch Lady's Bun Bo Hue, I *hungered* for it.

When he said, "This is the way so many of the great meals of my life have been enjoyed. Sitting in the street, eating something out of a bowl that I'm not exactly sure what it is. And scooters going by… Fellow travellers, this is what you want. This is what you need. This is the path to true happiness and wisdom,"—he was my spiritual guide. Vietnam was the first country I went to when I was old enough to travel without my parents; I have since visited the country again twice, and every time, I had been blown away by it. Until now, I wonder if Vietnam truly *is* that great, or if it was just the Bourdain effect.

SELL IT LIKE HAUTE CAKE

When I joined the Swedish embassy's Wikigap edit-a-thon in March earlier this year, I did not expect to end up in an acrimonious war of words with Singaporeans on the origins of Kaya toast. The objective of the edit-a-thon was to create more Wikipedia articles about notable women in order to narrow the gender gap on the crowdsourced platform. But I had somehow found myself on an article on Kaya toast, and the first sentence of the article immediately caught my eye: "Kaya toast is a Singaporean dish consisting of two slices of toast with butter and kaya (coconut jam), commonly

served alongside coffee and soft-boiled eggs. In Singapore, the dish is traditionally consumed for breakfast, where it has been described as the 'quintessential Singaporean breakfast'."

As a self-respecting Malaysian and Penangite, and freshly armed with Wikipedia article-editing skills, I immediately set about amending what I thought was a grievous wrong. Little did I know that this would trigger a flurry of heated counter-edits by indignant Singaporeans on one side and incensed Malaysians on the other—both fighting for their ancestral right to claim Kaya toast as their own. It was bizarre and slightly surreal to be caught in the crossfires of this passionate fight over Kaya toast—I gave up within two re-edits and preferred to spectate instead.

More than a week later, victory came. The Wikipedia entry now reads: "Kaya toast is a dish consisting of two slices of toast with butter and kaya (coconut jam), commonly served alongside coffee and soft-boiled eggs." And Malaysia is now mentioned under its place of origin.

My point in bringing up this anecdote is to highlight the fact that Singapore has always been particularly good at marketing itself to the world; of course, its government is also flush with money. In the aforementioned Wikipedia article, someone—not me—had written: "Kaya toast is generally associated with the Singaporean cuisine, due to the active promotion of the dish by the Singapore Tourism Board."

In 2020, Singapore managed to get its hawker culture inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity—an accolade glaringly missing from Penang and other major street food cities such as Bangkok. Similar to the UNESCO World Heritage Site listing (which was awarded to Penang in 2008), it aims to raise awareness for the preservation of fragile traditions, cultures and skills unique to a place. When Singapore put forth its application for hawker culture to be inscribed as a cultural phenomenon susceptible to extinction, it had described, among other reasons, the fading interest among young people to take up hawking as one of the threats to its existence.

In spite of Singapore's global renown as a street food mecca, anyone who has been to Singapore can tell you that proper street food—as in, food literally served on the streets—can no longer be found there. In the 1970s to 1980s, waging a hygiene war against the unsanitary conditions of street hawking, the government ushered all street food hawkers into newly constructed, puritanical, antiseptic food courts. The chaotic, haphazard appeal of what makes Southeast Asia such an interesting and exciting place was thus lost in Singapore.

While the hawker culture in Penang retains much of its old-world charms, especially within the historic enclave, it faces many of the same threats as that in Singapore. For one thing, the younger generation is more often than not uninterested in inheriting their parents' hawker business—it is, after all, an unglamorous career characterised by low pay, long hours, hard work and less-than-ideal conditions. Supinya Junsuta, the chef-owner of Jay Fai, a one Michelin star street-side restaurant in Bangkok famous for its crab meat omelette, has steadfastly refused to pass the business on to her children, because as lucrative as it has become, it is also still gruelling work.

> **"This is the way so many of the great meals of my life have been enjoyed. Sitting in the street, eating something out of a bowl that I'm not exactly sure what it is. And scooters going by… Fellow travellers, this is what you want. This is what you need. This is the path to true happiness and wisdom."**
>
> **—Anthony Bourdain**

There are also different factions when it comes to discussions about the future of Penang's street food—regulations, hygiene and safety are important, but how do we ensure that street food still tastes like street food, and not food court food after that? You know exactly what I mean—they just won't and don't taste the same. Jenny Miller, a food writer writes, "Hawker centre food tastes good, sure, but I still have the mindset that it's somehow watered down, inferior."[9]

Some view the listing of Penang's street food on the Michelin Guide as a boon, and others a bane. On the one hand, such prestigious recognition can make food hawking much more appealing to the younger generation and dispel the notion that it is a lowly profession. It can and has put Penang on the global foodies' map, as Penang Global Tourism, the state's tourism bureau, attests. On the other hand, some question if Michelin, with its Eurocentric, high-society, glitterati background, can do street food justice. Given Michelin's secrecy around its inspectors and the reasons behind why certain food establishments get chosen, the lack of transparency has also bred distrust and scepticism.

Personally, I take Michelin's foray into street food as a generally promising sign, or a necessary evil, if you will—it can be a way to push street food vendors into taking hygiene and service more seriously, and, as mentioned, elevate the profession as a whole. It can spur competition. And, like it or not, it is still globally accepted as a reputable authority on good food, which means it can do wonders to boost a city's culinary tourism. Perhaps this can be a way for us to avoid going the food court route the way Singapore has done.

"There has always been an appetite for what Penang offers—it's not just growing, it's something that has consistently been there, we have known many people returning time and again for the diverse flavours that reflect our cultural tapestry," Saunders adds.

In the end, the future of street food in places like Penang hinges on finding a delicate balance—one that honours tradition while adapting to changing times. As global recognition and prestige continue to shape how we view street food, it is essential that we approach the future of these culinary traditions with care. Ultimately, the goal should always be to honour the people behind the food—their stories, their labour, their craft and their passion.

CAPTION

1. (Top) A Wikipedia article on Kaya toast called it a "Singaporean dish". (Bottom) The amended article is a lot more diplomatic.

WHO GETS TO COOK PENANG'S ICONIC DISHES?

BY CAROLYN KHOR

At the time of publishing, Penang Monthly *has yet to receive responses from several stakeholders involved in the decision-making process regarding this matter. However, it is understood that a modified proposal for the foreign worker ban is being prepared by MBPP councillor Tan Soo Siang for presentation at the next council meeting, which will be held soon. It is expected that the expansion of the ban will be enforced early next year.*

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

EARLIER THIS YEAR, MBPP Councillor Tan Soo Siang and Penang EXCO Jason H'ng echoed the 2016 call by Lim Guan Eng to ban foreigners from cooking 13 local dishes in Penang—Nasi Lemak, Assam Laksa, Pasembur, Mee Sotong, Char Koay Teow, Koay Teow Soup, Hokkien Mee, Curry Mee, Wan Tan Mee, Lor Bak, Chee Cheong Fun, Char Koay Kak and Oh Chien. Currently, this ban applies only to state-owned food courts.

However, I see the proposed expansion of the ban—a protectionist measure intended to "preserve the authenticity" of Penang's iconic street food—as not only short-sighted, but a hindrance to the growth of the food and beverages sector in the state.

What makes Penang's street food special is its unique blend of multicultural flavours—a result of the island's rich past as a bustling port. Among this convergence of cultures is the Baba Nyonya culinary tradition. Renowned for its distinct and complex flavours—a fusion of Chinese, Malay and other influences—it would not have been seen as "authentic" at its period of creation. And if our forefathers had snubbed the unusual flavours and techniques used in the cuisine, which marries the use of local ingredients such as coconut milk, shrimp paste and lemongrass, with immigrant Chinese staples like soy sauce, tofu and *tauco*, we would not be able to enjoy Nyonya food now.

THE QUESTION OF AUTHENTICITY

Food vendors, many of whom are second- or third-generation descendants of immigrants, carry with them recipes passed through generations, together with stories and traditions behind each dish. They are, without a doubt, the custodians of culinary knowledge, and serve as the living links to Penang's past.

However, as with any tradition, these practices evolve in response to changing times and needs. For example, due to the shrinking supply of blood cockles, many dishes that used to be served with these, such as Curry Mee, are now served without. To suit the Muslim market, many traditional Chinese hawker dishes are now also available in the halal version. Cooked without pork lard, halal Char Koay Teow will certainly taste different; likewise, without the base of pork bone broth, halal Hokkien Mee tastes decidedly more prawn-y. Both of these renditions, still cooked by Malaysians, can hardly be thought of as "traditional". And yet, based on the reasoning of the original proposers of the ban, just because they are cooked by locals, they are automatically deemed more authentic than those cooked by a foreigner, even if he has been well-trained by a local cook.

In terms of taste and authenticity, based on the principles of supply and demand, if the food fails to meet customer expectations, it will soon lose market appeal. Therefore,

innovation should not be seen as a threat to originality, but as a natural continuation of cultural and culinary evolution. It is only through adaptations that Penang's food culture can continue to flourish, remain relevant and attract future generations.

Rather than limiting opportunities, the government should provide support through training and education to ensure the quality and authenticity of Penang food—not merely to foreign cooks, but to local ones as well.

This notion is shared by the Penang Hawkers' Association chairman Ooi Thean Huat who is equally vocal about extending the ban to restaurants and cafés, including food and beverages outlets in hotels and also Mamak eateries, which employ a large number of foreign workers.

"What is the difference between restaurants and hawker centres? We all need licenses to operate, and we all pay taxes," he says.

UNFOUNDED FEARS

The state's Local Government & Town and Country Planning Committee chairman Jason H'ng clarified in July that by restricting certain cooking roles to locals, the Penang government hopes to maintain traditional flavours and ensure quality in the preparation of local dishes.

H'ng also pointed out that foreign influence risks altering traditional recipes. This reasoning reflects a sentiment often heard when it comes to food heritage: the desire to keep "true" versions of these dishes alive, and prevent them from being improvised by "non-local" practices or ingredients.

Rozita Ahmad, a homemaker with two grown-up children, is firmly supportive of the state government's proposal. "Definitely, no foreigners should cook our local food."

Another supporter of this ban is Gillian Oon, a tourist guide who exclaims, "Of course, foreigners should not be allowed. Penang's authentic taste or 'Kor Cha Bee' will be destroyed."

However, an evolving food culture does not necessarily mean that taste is sacrificed; it can actually strengthen a cuisine's reach, adding depth to traditional flavours in ways that can appeal to broader audiences, both locally and internationally. Take, for instance, Hainanese chicken chop. Marketed as "Western food", chicken chop is as Western as Hainanese chicken rice—and yet, it is still widely enjoyed here and has become a uniquely Malaysian creation.

According to H'ng, the ban focuses on hawker stalls to maintain the quality of local dishes in settings where customers expect a local cook at the helm.

Melissa Anne Cornelius, who is self-employed, opines that if tourist spots, such as the hawker centre at New Lane, were all staffed by foreign workers, it would look bad on us, as the food would "come off as less authentic".

In the discussion about whether foreign cooks should be allowed to cook Penang food, there is one particular point that has not been considered—the general aversion among local youths towards jobs perceived as low-status or labour-intensive, such as working at a hawker stall. Younger generations are less inclined to take on these roles, viewing them as lacking prestige and low paying, which limits the supply of local hawkers. In fact, when asked if anyone would encourage their children to be hawkers, none could reply in the affirmative.

Acknowledging this, Gillian says, "The younger generation does not want to be hawkers. However, they can still open cafés or restaurants."

It is worth reminding that the current ban excludes restaurants and cafés, as their kitchens are usually hidden from customers. This exemption can also be seen as a double standard, raising questions about whether the policy genuinely serves to preserve Penang's food culture, or is merely a restriction imposed for optics, and caters to xenophobic sentiments.

Ultimately, the real issue is not simply whether foreign workers should be banned from preparing Penang's local food. Instead, it raises a key question: is authenticity best preserved by restriction? Or should it evolve through sharing, adaptation and exposure?

PENANG FOOD FLOURISHING IN OUR TWIN CITY ADELAIDE

BY RACHEL YEOH

PENANG PEOPLE ARE very proud of their food. As I sat in one of the board rooms awaiting the Lord Mayor of Adelaide, Jane Lomax-Smith, and her team to get on the Zoom call, I knew that the staff of the City Council of Penang Island (MBPP) and the beaming Mayor, Rajendran Anthony, were ready to *sell* how delicious Penang (and Malaysian) food actually is to our sister city of 50 years.

It was one of the first official meetings between the two sister cities to discuss plans on how to strengthen the relationship through friendship in conjunction with the 50th anniversary. There was a delegation from Penang that would be visiting Adelaide very soon—me included. Naturally, what better way to bond than through food. Rajendran started by expressing his regret that it was not possible to bring in the hawkers from Penang to introduce the state's vibrant street food as Australia practices very strict biosecurity procedures at their international borders—this is to prevent the introduction of harmful pests and diseases.

However, Lomax-Smith assured us that the Adelaideans already love Malaysian food—specifically Penang food—because it was introduced to them 50 years ago, when Penang delegates and our famed food and culture representatives descended upon the city to have the first Penang Week in 1975.

"It is very much part of our lives, and I cannot imagine Adelaide without Malaysian cuisine," she said.

Penang's renowned hawkers were flown in to serve authentic local delicacies, including Lor Bak, Pasembur, Curry Kapitan, *choon piah* and Char Koay Teow. Ahmad Khairummuzammil, the then Tourism and Industrial Promotion chairman, revealed in

CAPTIONS

1. Teng Hock Nan (far right) with his daughter (second from left) with Jane Lomax-Smith (second from right) during a delegation visit to Adelaide in the 90s. Photo credit: Teng Hock Nan
2. Lim Ah Kwang frying up crispy Lor Bak during Penang Week in Adelaide. Photo credit: Tun Dr. Lim Chong Eu Foundation
3. Lim Siew Choo and her son at their Lor Bak stall in Kedai Kopi Malabar.

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FOOTNOTES

[1] George Town & Adelaide Sister Cities 50th Anniversary 1973-2023 by Marcus Langdon and Rachel Yeoh

[2] Ibid

[3] https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/celebrity-chef-adam-liaw-looks-back-on-early-life-in-australia/udv7538ec

RACHEL YEOH is a former journalist who traded her on-the-go job for a life behind the desk. For the sake of work-life balance, she participates in Penang's performing arts scene after hours.

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an interview with me that a cargo plane was chartered just to get the hawkers and all their cooking equipment, food items and other needed materials to Adelaide. On the day of travel, the hawkers and those appointed by MPPP (then, it was called the Penang Island Municipal Council or Majlis Perbandaran Pulau Pinang) had to load the carts into the plane.

"I was one of those in the cargo plane with some of the hawker sellers," he said. "There were about 50 of us. We had Satay, Murtabak and Char Koay Teow from the two brothers in Gurney Drive who brought along their cooking wok."[1]

One of those on that cargo plane to Adelaide was the late Lim Ah Kwang, a renowned hawker from Ho Ping Kopitiam (now closed) located on the corner of Penang Road and Kampung Malabar in the 1970s. When I visited the stall that has now relocated to Kedai Kopi Malabar a few doors down from the corner lot Lim used to sell at, his daughter, Lim Siew Choo, and her son were there, continuing her father's legacy. She recalls his experiences in Adelaide, saying that he was present for the two instalments of Penang Week in the South Australian city. "I remember him telling the family that they had to work very hard because there were so many people queuing up for food because no one there had tasted anything like that before. There was a long line every day, and what was rationed for the day sold out daily," she said.[2]

Fast forward almost five decades later, I am walking along Adelaide's Chinatown, just a stone's throw away from Victoria Square and mentally ticking the number of Malaysian restaurants along the street. There is OTown (not the Old Town White Coffee we have here though), PappaRich and Kampung Boy, among others.

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Just a few days before that, I was invited, along with the MBPP delegates, to a dinner hosted by the Australia Malaysia Business Council South Australia (AMBC SA) at the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute (SAHMRI). We were served a delicious spread of Malaysian delicacies: fragrant Nasi Lemak and Ayam Rendang, Kuih Ketayap and a super *kao* Teh Tarik that can rival the best ones we have here. I was told later that the caterer of the spread was Truly Malaysian Village, located within the city.

Lomax-Smith alluded that the desire for Malaysian and Penang food by the locals is due to its introduction to the locals when our Penang hawkers were transported over during the Penang Weeks that stemmed from the sister city relationship.

It may seem like an inorganic introduction of our street food to Adelaide, but that genesis has taken on a life of its own, with many Malaysian restaurants there serving Penang fare. Of course, the sister-city relationship drove many parents from Penang to send their children to Adelaide to further their studies, which in turn created demand for Malaysian food. Teng Hock Nan, the MPPP President in the early 90s, leveraged on the sister-city relationship by sending his daughter to study medicine in Adelaide. During her time there, she was warmly welcomed by Lomax-Smith, who then was also the Lord Mayor of Adelaide, who helped her settle down in the city. Some Penangites migrated to Adelaide too, like the parents of Adam Liaw, who won the second season of MasterChef Australia. In an interview with SBS News, he said that the sister city connection was one of the reasons his parents decided to migrate to Adelaide in 1981. "It made them [my parents] think 'Oh, we could go to Australia', and a few years after I was born, that's where we ended up."[3]

Seeing how Penang food has become a common cuisine in Adelaide, it makes me wonder if running outreaches to introduce Penang food—and no, I don't mean having them at international exhibitions with booths—to the locals of whichever country who would open up their doors for us to have a "Penang Week". Thailand does strengthen our soft power very well. We have plenty of Thai restaurants in Penang, and Thai fairs continue to draw crowds. For those who have not been to Penang, our food becomes a draw for them to add our little island into their bucket list. We do have many food festivals within our city; as an example, the Penang International Food Festival held just last month, the Penang Street Food Festival during the pre-Covid-19 times and the Penang International Halal Food and Heritage Festival (PIH2F). But these are for those who are already living in or visiting the city. If we are looking at our food influence, we could learn from what happened in Adelaide and perhaps a significant interest in Penang food will grow, along with a desire to step foot on our humble little island.

ON THE CUSP OF PENANG HAUTE CUISINE

BY LIANI MK

GROWING UP IN Penang as a lover of *nasi* (rice) in all forms, I recall queasiness at sampling what I felt at the time was "elevated" cuisine—through my first taste of sushi at a newly opened Japanese establishment. The small bundles of cold rice and fish felt oddly overpriced. The rice certainly tasted different, and, at the end of the meal, my stomach was left still rumbling and my taste buds unconvinced. Sometimes, that experience lingers as a reminder that refined tastes don't always work with everyone. After all, whether refined or not, isn't food a daily need, or a matter of survival as much as it is an experience?

My palate—and appreciation for different types of food—has evolved since (plus, sushi joints have become more affordable now). Indeed, every food has its story. For some, fine dining indeed feels excessive and a little too decadent. Its luxury is too far removed from the everyday joy of eating—surely not the type of food you sink your hands in.

For others, sophisticated gourmet food is a work of art that tickles one's taste buds with flavours that punch in multiple tastes and stories in a bite. In the Netflix series *Chef's Table*, we see different chefs painstakingly hike through terrains of their homeland, researching their own culture to present elements of them all on a tiny spoon—a tiny speckle of one's culture. Peruvian chef, Virgilio Martínez, whose restaurant is in the top five World's Restaurants List, is known for bringing together ingredients from across Peru's different climates, coasts and terrains to showcase his country's diversity.

In a place like Penang, with its age-old family recipes and ubiquitous street food of various Malay, Chinese, Indian and Peranakan influences, the concept of ethnic fine dining can bring different meaning to food appreciation. It raises questions about authenticity, accessibility and the fine line between appreciation and exoticism.

Can Penang's diverse heritage dishes be served in fancy white-tablecloth settings, or is it best enjoyed by the streets? What does it mean to rethink our ethnic flavours in a new way?

APPETISERS / HORS D'OEUVRES: REDEFINING FINE DINING

Fine dining encompasses upscale restaurant experiences that are characterised by meticulous service, elegant ambiance and high-quality dishes often presented with artistic flair.

> "Every culture can arguably be said to have its own version of fine dining—its own elaborate meals prepared for special occasions."

It is the scene of romance and elegance—of candlelit dinners where the plate is the canvas, and the chef is the artist-researcher. Haute cuisine—French for "high cuisine"—evokes exclusivity and carefully studied flavours meant to impress. This is likely why they cost so much.

Fine dining has traditionally been associated with occasion, exclusive experiences and meticulous presentation set to the standards of French cuisine and dining conventions. In this way, the fine dining industry can be scrutinised for its Eurocentric bias, as it favours cuisines that conform to Western standards. This can mean neglecting the depth and complexity of non-European cuisines.

The Michelin Guide's expansion to Asia, for instance, sparked controversy, with critics arguing that it evaluates food from a European point of view. On MasterChef UK, when a British chef criticised a Malaysian Rendang dish for not being "crispy", Malaysians immediately questioned why a Western view should dictate the authenticity of the Southeast Asian flavours we know best.

In fine dining, this conversation can seep into discussions on cultural appropriation versus appreciation. Especially when viewed through a Eurocentric lens, where fine dining presumes "elevating" ethnic dishes—it can sometimes blur the line between who sets that standard, and why one is appreciated more than the other. While some chefs incorporate ethnic flavours with respect, others can also risk exoticising them. This means crafting a diluted version that caters to Western tastes rather than staying true to its roots.

There are instances where chefs have been criticised for culturally insensitive representations of ethnic dishes as well as cultures. When the New York-based Michelin-starred Malaysian restaurant owner was found to have never been to Malaysia, Malaysians questioned its authenticity. In some cases, chefs from the Global North (or "developed countries") often review Global South ("developing countries") food as though they have only just been discovered. Other times, local favourites like durian have been described with distaste. Meanwhile, such reviews often trivialises cultures—recently, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver withdrew his children's book, which stirred controversy for oversimplifying the experiences of First Nation Australians.

Turning a local accessible cuisine into an exclusive fine dining experience can also risk reducing the food to a curated, consumable experience for the haves. This removes the lived experiences that make each dish unique.

MAIN COURSE / ENTRÉE: EVERY CULTURE'S HIGH CUISINE

Yet, every culture can arguably be said to have its own version of fine dining—its own elaborate meals prepared for special occasions. In Penang, traditional Nyonya dishes, which were once reserved for significant gatherings, encapsulate the intricacy in form with their labour-intensive preparations and exquisite presentation, such as ones served in the endearing Auntie Gaik Lean's Old School Eatery, which has a one-star Michelin. Kebaya Dining Room also offers a refined Peranakan dining experience that remains rooted in heritage, while still bearing an air of formality.

Jawi Peranakan cuisine, with lavish spreads like biryani and rosewater-infused curries, offers another

example. These blend Malay, Indian and Middle Eastern influences in carefully crafted recipes that are served in restaurants and homes alike. Similarly, Chinese families gather for multi-course banquets with elaborate dishes during important events such as weddings. These are often served in traditional Chinese restaurants that uphold the formal but celebratory spirit of a family meal.

Penang also has a few restaurants experimenting with upscale interpretations of local flavours traditionally seen as home-cooked or comfort food—thus giving twists to familiar tastes. Irama Dining, for example, serves handcrafted Malay dishes in a snazzy setting, making it an easy pick for locals and visitors alike for anniversary dinners and special celebrations. The Irama Group of Restaurants, founded by Shad Kamarulzaman and Bella, which also operate The Tamarra, Sutera Restaurant and Lagenda House & Cafe, has managed to successfully create different ways of experiencing classical Malay dining in Penang.

While there is no one restaurant dedicated to ethnic fine dining in Penang, fine dining establishments sometimes integrate local flavours into an upscale menu, and thus give diners a taste of familiar flavours presented with finesse. At Communal Table by Gēn, this is evident in their homemade nutmeg harumanis gelato. They also incorporate into their dishes unique local ingredients such as the *engkabang* of Sarawak, whose high-fat content lends it a taste similar to that of butter.

However, while these restaurants offer a fresh outlook on Penang's culinary offerings, there are opportunities to fully explore fine dining cuisine that centres on heritage flavours and local stories. The idea of a restaurant exclusively devoted to ethnic fine dining remains generally underexplored. Could such a place embrace Penang's cultural diversity without compromising authenticity? If Penang's beloved street foods were to be reimagined in a fine-dining setting, would they still feel authentic? Or could the transformation risk veering into an exoticism that caters to Western or international tastes rather than honouring local culture?

DESSERT: HONOURING PENANG'S CUISINE EXPERIENCE

As Penang's culinary scene continues to change by the season, there is the question of whether ethnic fine dining will find a place. Perhaps with hawker culture earning a UNESCO status as an intangible cultural heritage—such as in Singapore—Penang's street food could similarly be recognised as a culinary treasure with its value firmly rooted in the everyday lives of its people.

Efforts to elevate these dishes must balance tradition and creativity, so that the best flavours are served with no frills, and with great appreciation and respect. Fine dining may offer a new way to learn and appreciate the story behind ingredients—so long as Penang's true spirit continues to be reflected.

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Of mixed indigenous roots, **LIANI MK** is an independent writer, journalist and artist covering indigenous knowledge, migration, language, film and culture in Southeast Asia. With a background in history and Southeast Asian Studies, she also engages in media advocacy with a regional feminist organisation.

PRESERVING THE RECIPES OF PENANG'S HOME KITCHENS

BY WONG ZEN-ZI

Perhaps my taste buds have matured. Perhaps, as I notice the wrinkles and fine lines on my mother's hands only grow deeper, I realise I want to capture all the recipes she made in my youth."

"WHAT ARE THOSE sweet bean curd sticks called again?"

"*Te-ga-kee*. You can get it from the market. Please also get me some *kim chiam*."

"What? A golden needle?!"

"They're lily buds. The dried kind. *PoPo* always adds it."

"And how much *orh bok nee* do you want?"

"Just a handful."

"But how big is a handful? 10g? 20g?"

"*Aiya,* you know Mama *lah!* Everything I cook also *agak kaki*."

I watched as my mother surveyed the ingredients I had just gathered. Then, she gets to work, chopping and slicing a myriad of vegetables swiftly with a confident hand. I juggle between weighing the ingredients, taking notes, photos and videos as Mom makes her vegetarian *bee hoon,* or "*jiak chye bee hoon*" as she calls it in Hokkien.

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"The seasoning is perfect now," Mom declares. She offers me a mouthful of *bee hoon* to taste, in what would have been our third attempt at nailing down a reproducible recipe for a dish that most self-taught cooks of her generation would make intuitively, sans weighing scales and measuring spoons.

I nod in agreement, as the familiar taste transports me back to childhood. It wasn't a dish I particularly enjoyed as a kid. The *bee hoon* tasted too… vegetable-y. The sweet bean curd sticks are decidedly too funky. But I actually like it now—appreciate it, even. I saw how my mother patiently stir fried the carrots, cabbage and choy sum, gently coaxing out their sweetness, combining it with dried mushroom stock to infuse the *bee hoon*—a blank canvas—with flavour. The bean curd sticks were crisp, the dried lily buds chewy. Each mouthful of *bee hoon* was a delight to the senses.

Perhaps my taste buds have matured. Perhaps, as I notice the wrinkles and fine lines on my mother's hands only grow deeper, I realise I want to capture all the recipes she made in my youth.

HOW @ONEGOODMEAL.A.DAY WAS BORN

"You're sure you want to post the recipe? But it's so simple, anyone can make it!"

"Of course! Because this is how *you* make it. There aren't a lot of recipes online, and I think it's important to preserve our family's version."

As I shared the recipe on my little food account, @onegoodmeal.a.day on Instagram, I am heartened by the warm reception from friends and strangers alike.

"I haven't eaten this in nearly 25 years!" "Reminds me of my late grandma and great grandma. They used to make it on the first day of CNY." "Forgotten about these beancurd sheets and dried lily buds. Old school, but so good!" "You can't find this home-cooked taste elsewhere."

Together, we reminisced about our younger days and the dishes our elders used to make. I felt so encouraged that a dish as simple as fried *bee hoon* could evoke

such profound memories among fellow Malaysians, including those living across the seas.

Back in October 2020, I started @onegoodmeal.a.day as a way to document my favourite meals and recipes. At the time, Instagram was still a relatively simple photo-based platform. I would take a quick snap of the final dish, a few photos of the cooking process and share it along with the recipe in the caption.

In the beginning, the account was a journal of all the home-cooked meals we loved. I shared everything we ate! It could be a Chinese chicken congee. An attempt at Nasi Lemak. A fusion pasta dish that would make the Italians cry blasphemy! We had an adventurous palate and the account was a reflection of that.

When I started introducing some of my favourite childhood dishes that my mother used to make, I never anticipated the enthusiastic response that would ensue. The dishes she made were quintessentially Malaysian Chinese—reflecting her Hokkien-Teochew heritage—and made the most of easily accessible local ingredients. Some were simple, some were elaborate, but they were all rooted in tradition and offered a glimpse into your everyday Malaysian home cook.

It became a pivotal turning point for @onegoodmeal.a.day. I truly started to connect with my audience, the majority of whom were in their early 30s to 40s—millennials like me, who were juggling careers or just starting families. Many could relate to the quick stir-fries and one-dish meals, or nostalgic recipes like yam rice, braised mustard greens and salted fish curry. Suddenly people were engaging more, sharing childhood memories of a particular dish and heartwarming anecdotes of how their mothers and grandmothers made it.

It felt like we were building a community of like-minded folks. Some were seasoned home cooks eager to share their family's version, along with valuable tips passed down through generations. Some were novices in the kitchen, open to learn. And more often than not, there were those who had lost their mothers and yearned for recipes of the home-cooked meals that defined their childhood.

At the suggestion of a few friends, I also started using Hokkien in my voiceovers that accompanied the video recipes. After all, we speak Hokkien at home, and it felt only natural to convey the recipe in a manner most authentic to us.

The responses were fiercely positive, to my surprise. "I am a Penang *lang* too!" "Never thought I'd hear Hokkien here on IG." And I'll never forget one who wrote, "Whenever I speak to my clients, they pick up the way I speak and ask if I'm from Penang. Oh, I feel so proud and happy!"

I was connecting with proud Penangites near and far, especially those who had migrated for studies or work overseas in countries like North America, Australia and New Zealand. They were leaving such heartfelt messages, noting that hearing their mother dialect reminded them of the warmth of home. There was also the occasional Medanese from Indonesia, who delighted at their strikingly similar accent with our Penang Hokkien diaspora.

Time and again I would receive a few curious comments, "What dialect is this?" My heart swells with pride as I tell them we speak Penang Hokkien. I was reaching an even wider audience, not just through food, but through language as well!

EMPOWERING THE AUDIENCE TO COOK PENANG FOOD

Ask anyone what dishes Penang is known for, and the answer would most certainly be the likes of Char Koay Teow, Hokkien Mee or Assam Laksa. In an age where hawker fare, trendy cafés and Michelin-tipped restaurants enjoy prominent exposure on social media, I want to show a different, underrepresented side of Penang, and showcase its rich culinary traditions through the lens of your typical Penang home cook—especially the lesser-known, family-oriented dishes that our mothers and grandmothers used to or still make.

The wet market is an integral part of Malaysian food culture—one of my favourite things to do is to bring the audience along on our wet market trips. There is just so much life, charm and human connection that happens when you interact with the vendors; of course, they are also a wealth of knowledge! Ask and they will happily offer you tips on the best ways to cook a certain dish and the ingredients needed.

Every trip to the wet market is a learning experience! For instance, one day I'd find the fishmonger patiently explaining the difference between wild-caught and hybrid-farmed fish. Another day, the vegetable seller auntie would whisper in my ear, "the wrinkly chillies are more fragrant than the *kilat* (shiny) ones." "Clean the pandan leaves and let them dry overnight before adding it to your *tongsui* (Chinese soup dessert), the fragrance will be stronger," the vegetable uncle advises.

CAPTIONS

1. Vegetarian *bee hoon*, a dish popular during the Nine Emperor Gods Festival.
2. Braised Boey Chai with porridge, a common Teochew staple.
3. Zen-Zi (R) and her mother, Laura Khoo (L).

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4. Preparing preserved mustard greens for braising.

5. Penang-style Pengat, a close cousin of Bubur Cha Cha, enjoyed on Chap Goh Meh, the 15th day of the Lunar New Year.

6. Stir frying jicama with dried cuttlefish for Jiu Hu Char.

7. Jiu Hu Char, best served with *sambal belacan* and fresh lettuce for wrapping.

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As I share these invaluable know-hows with my audience, I hear from many who are my age how much they appreciate these market stories. Buying and using local ingredients may feel second nature to seasoned cooks of the older generation, but shopping at the wet market can be daunting for the younger generation more accustomed to the conveniences of a supermarket. I can shamelessly admit to once calling my mother before a solo market adventure, anxiously triple checking the exact instructions for purchasing chicken at the butcher!

Today, I am a confident wet market regular—is this a sign that I've graduated into the coveted "Aunty" status?!—and I want to make the experience feel just as approachable for everyone. I feel that I can bridge the gap between the young and the old, taking what I had learned from the market vendors, the *agak-agak* family recipes, tips and tricks distilled from chatting up hawkers, and breaking them down into simple, straightforward terms. On my platform, I explain the ingredients, the different varieties available and the cooking techniques that can bring the best out of these. There is no greater feeling than hearing from someone that they have tried a new dish, or that our family favourites have now made it into theirs. I feel so fulfilled knowing that I can bring a slice of Penang to them!

When people tell me that watching my stories has inspired them to visit Penang to try our local food, or ask for recommendations on the best local ingredients, or simply that they had not known this side of Penang, it is so incredibly rewarding.

"Just want to say thank you for journaling and preserving these timeless and important heritage recipes! We need more people to preserve our heritage."

@Onegoodmeal.a.day may have started as a diary of my every day meals, but it has evolved into something far more impactful than that. I am eternally grateful to the people who have come along on our journey, to friends who have generously shared cooking tips and to the collaborative community we have built.

Having worked previously in the food ingredients industry with a background in food science, **ZEN-ZI** is now a full-time recipe developer and content creator for @onegoodmeal.a.day on Instagram.

DIFFERENT DIALECTS

DIFFERENT FLAVOURS

BY
CHONG
LEE
CHOO

DIFFERENT STORIES

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CAPTIONS

1. Uncle making Hokkien dried oyster porridge.
2. Hakka Dapu noodles with Yongtaufu.
3. Teochew To Kuih.
4. Teochew Koay Teow Th'ng in the making.

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WHENEVER I THINK of the diversity of Chinese cuisine, which is most distinct between the different dialect groups, a particular memory always comes to mind—a slightly uncomfortable one. It happened years ago in a Hakka restaurant nestled in a mall. I had ordered Hakka noodles and yam abacus (算盘子)—familiar and comforting dishes for me. My dining companion—who is Hokkien—however, flipped through the menu sceptically. When our dishes arrived, she took one look and announced flatly, "These don't look appetising at all. I'm not eating that. You go ahead." Though I thought the food was delicious, she politely but firmly declined my repeated offers to taste them.

That moment has always served as a reminder of how easy it is to be put off by dishes of other groups—whether it is just a passing hesitation or outright resistance. We may not fully understand or appreciate these dishes simply because they seem unfamiliar; but sometimes, we are merely letting such biases stop us from discovering a new, delicious dish.

People who harp on preserving iconic Penang dishes like Char Koay Teow might not think much of the gradual disappearance of certain flavours and dishes found among smaller dialect groups in Penang. I believe that such perspectives often arise from a lack of exposure—those who feel indifferent to certain foods simply have not experienced their full depth.

One of the most commonplace mnemonic that captures the essence of what each Penang Chinese dialect group is known for is: Teochew Koay Teow, Hokkien Mee, Hainanese coffee and Kwong Fu Chao (Cantonese stir-fry). This saying highlights how food—along with languages and customs—is a powerful marker of cultural identity. It is through their dishes that we can easily distinguish linguistic communities from each other.

My appreciation for traditional dialect cuisine began years ago, when I attended a culinary event hosted by the Teochew Association's women's group. As I watched them serve plate after plate of traditional Teochew food—red peach cake (紅桃粿), Kuang Chiang (光锵), Teochew stir-fried noodles and Teochew-style mung bean soup—I discovered that the flavours were as rich as the cultural stories behind them.

Yet, it was not only the food that left a lasting impression. The act of preparing these dishes together with the womenfolk revealed a deeper connection: the strong sense of community that defines the Teochew people.

Is Nyonya cuisine considered a dialect food? To me, it certainly is. Nyonya cuisine holds a special place for Penangites, weaving its way into daily meals and ceremonial dishes. In many households, these flavours are a familiar staple on the dining table—be it in simple family meals or as religious offerings. On the streets, you can easily spot economy rice stalls serving beloved Peranakan dishes like *perut ikan* and stir-fried squid with jicama (*jiu hu char*). There is also a notable presence of Nyonya restaurants in Penang, so much so that it has become a way for locals to introduce visiting friends to a taste of the island's proud heritage—even if they are not of Nyonya descent themselves.

Compared to the central and southern regions of Malaysia, Penang's Hakka community is relatively small; here, Hakka cuisine does not permeate the local food scene as deeply. Yet, there are still several places that serve up comforting, traditional Hakka flavours to satisfy the community here. One such gem on my list is a nondescript stall selling Hakka noodles in Beng Chin Garden Kopitiam near the Kek Lok Si Temple in Air Itam. Every Chinese New Year, during the Miao Hui celebration in George Town's heritage enclave, Hakka chefs also set up stalls to showcase their culinary craft, their dishes standing proudly alongside those from other Chinese dialect groups.

Women's groups in clan associations play an especially pivotal role in preserving and passing on traditional dialect dishes—often behind the scene. These women go all out on key festivals like Chinese New Year, Winter Solstice and the Dragon Boat Festival. Using recipes handed down through generations, they prepare beloved dishes—glutinous rice balls (Tangyuan), rice dumplings (Bak Zhang) and a dizzying array of reunion meals—at community events and celebrations.

Having had the privilege of tasting these offerings, I have gained a deeper appreciation for how the same dish can carry different meanings and interpretations across dialect communities. Whether it is Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka or Fuzhou cuisine, each version of their time-honoured dishes is unique yet equally delicious.

OLD TASTES, FAMILY RITUALS

I have always been drawn to old restaurants because they are the guardians of the flavours of the past. Often, they have been around for more than 50 years, and many of them specialise in hometown dishes. Whether it is Goh Teo Kee for Teochew food, Boey Chong Kee for Cantonese fare, Ang Hoay Lor for Hokkien dishes, or Yaw's Roast and Grill for Hainanese delights, these establishments have weathered the years while staying true to tradition.

In traditional Chinese families, there is a deep reverence for the hierarchy of age, and throughout the year, several family rituals take place to honour this. Beyond the remembrance of ancestors on their death anniversaries, Chinese families often gather for festivities. At the heart of these is the preparation of a grand meal—with recipes handed down through generations and tweaked to the family's preference.

The altar during these ceremonies is a moving sight—a lavish spread of lovingly and tediously prepared dishes that represent not just sustenance, but tradition. Hakka braised pork belly with yam, Cantonese poached chicken, Teochew soy-braised chicken and duck, and Hokkien vinegar pork trotters are a few favourites that regularly grace the altars. These are often food that the deceased used to love eating, or food deemed good enough to appease and please the gods.

These meals are more than just food; they are a continuation of ancestral traditions and a manifestation of familial love. In Penang, where culinary trends continue to shift, these dishes need to be preserved to tell each family's story and each dialect group's history.

CHONG LEE CHOO is a local media professional who is passionate about observation, and has long been focusing on and writing about Penang's local culture, customs and human stories.

PENANG SNACK MAKEOVER

BY LIANI MK

Of mixed indigenous roots, **LIANI MK** is an independent writer, journalist and artist covering indigenous knowledge, migration, language, film and culture in Southeast Asia. With a background in history and Southeast Asian Studies, she also engages in media advocacy with a regional feminist organisation.

FOR A PENANG foodie who is always in need of the occasional kick in between dry meetings on long weekdays, a snack would fill the lull; and we don't always need an excuse to snack. Wherever Malaysians go, the craving for something spicy or tangy follows. And whenever we can, we share our love for it.

Sambal belacan, for instance, has turned heads and tickled our taste buds with its unique mix of fishy, spicy and umami zing. There are many who must pack their trusted bottle of *sambal belacan* wherever they travel—my father would request for the coveted sauce even at lavish Western restaurants.

But we all know Penang has more to offer than just spice. It is all about snack-sized delights that Penangites and tourists alike love to bring back as souvenirs. With the need to entice more snack lovers across the board, Penang's snack industry bears opportunities to integrate creative marketing techniques such as packaging with strategic partnerships and, of course, social media coverage.

PACKAGING AND FLAVOUR TWISTS

For years, Malaysian tastes and flavours have trickled across borders in ways that no one could have anticipated. A pride of Malaysia, Lingham's chilli sauce is a simple yet delicious mix of vinegar, sugar and red chillies that can be found in stores on the other side of the world even before the existence of social media. The condiment was first made in Penang in 1908, and has become a mainstay in many eateries from across.

More recently, in 2021, Sabasco, a Sabahan chilli sauce version, made its way into Malaysian food culture. With its look resembling the Tabasco chilli bottle, the Sabahan sauce features local Momporok chilli (in Dusun), and offers a range of flavours: original, green chilli as well as sweet and spicy.

Assam boi (salted plums) often come with packaging as lively as the snack itself, sometimes resembling medicinal packaging, hinting at its reputation as a "remedy" for nausea or long journeys.

Alongside packaging, inventive flavours are changing the way traditional items are experienced. Mooncakes and durian are perhaps the most famous examples of traditional foods reimagined with modern and often unique ingredients. Salted egg yolk has found its way into everything from fish skin to potato chips, and it is only a matter of time before Penang snack brands adopt other similar innovations.

JERUK MADU PAK ALI

One snack that has made its name is Jeruk Madu Pak Ali, Penang's premier pickled fruit brand. *Jeruk* is a tangy, sweet-sour pickle that appeals to locals and tourists alike, especially as a gift from Penang. The line that sometimes forms outside their shop speaks for itself; Pak Ali's *jeruk* is synonymous with quality and tradition, and it is found in strategic spots that draw in passing tourists. This classic snack has a loyal following, thanks to its unique flavours and, crucially, a marketing strategy that focuses on brand visibility and word-of-mouth reputation.

TAMBUN BISCUITS

Another famous Penang treat, *tambun* biscuits, also has a leg up in the souvenir market. With longstanding brands like Ghee Hiang and Him Heang dominating the scene, it has become the first souvenir stop for tourists, operating strategically located stores near popular attractions, and often working with tour guides to make sure visitors know where to find their freshly baked *tambun* biscuits. Even the biscuit's minimal packaging has a charm that tourists associate with authenticity—an effortless and recognisable way to brand itself as a "must-eat" in Penang.

BAN CHANG KUIH PENETRATES SUPERMARKETS

For a more recent example of marketing success, a Penang vendor's *ban chang kuih* was able to make its way onto shelves in local stores. Because of this, the peanut-stuffed pancake has stepped beyond its typical street food reputation. Slathered in a thick, luscious layer of peanut butter and addictively crispy, *ban chang kuih* is a snack that could easily resonate with global audiences. In fact, the vendor has plans to expand to Singapore and Australia.

SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS

Platforms like Instagram and TikTok, particularly with food-promoting pages like Penang Foodie, have made it possible to share these snacks with a wider audience. Snack makers are now catching on to the potential of these platforms for viral marketing. Some vendors even create mini-drama scenarios or stage interactions featuring their snacks. Social media gives traditional snacks a new stage to shine on, appealing to younger, tech-savvy consumers and opening doors to global interest.

The upscale organic trend has also gained traction, especially with products like Green Acres Orchard's organic nutmeg jam, made from locally grown nutmegs. Presented in sleek jars and touted for its "wholesome goodness", this organic angle appeals to health-conscious consumers looking for something "natural" and authentic from Penang.

HYPING UP HERITAGE

Through packaging, flavour inventions and a little help from social media, Penang's classic snacks could soon find their way into the hands of a global audience. Much like how Lingham's chilli sauce became an international staple, Penang's snacks have a chance to make a name for themselves beyond Malaysia's borders. With some creativity, perhaps Penang's own beloved snacks—whether *tambun* biscuits or *jeruk*—can be enjoyed wherever we go, as they gain popularity as much overseas as they do at home.

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THERE ARE ROLLS AND THERE ARE ROLLS, IN NYONYA COOKING

BY ONG JIN TEONG

The *choon piah* rolls on the left are made with Popiah skin and the rolls on the right are made using homemade egg-roll skin.

HAINANESE SPRING ROLLS or *choon piah* may be related to Popiah, but they are not the same thing. This uniquely Penang dish with origins from Nyonya and Hainanese kitchens is a deep fried, golden brown dish that is crispy on the outside and tender on the inside. Popiah, however, is not fried. *Choon piah* is served during the Spring festival—better known as Chinese New Year; it is an auspicious golden brown (by the way, *choon* means spring in the Hokkien dialect).

The original *choon piah* was served at old Penang's heritage Hainanese/Nyonya/Western restaurants like Loke Thye Kee at Penang Road, Garden Hotel and Hollywood restaurants at Tanjong Bungah, and Chooi Lim Koo at Air Itam. The delicate, pancake-like skins enveloping savoury ingredients are served with cut chillies in *ang moh tau eu*, a local version of Lea & Perrin's Worcestershire sauce.

Today, Garden Hotel, Loke Thye Kee and Chooi Lim Koo have closed down, and other restaurants in Penang have begun serving *choon piah*. Some are more authentic, using specially-made pancake-like skin, but many have swapped it for Popiah skins since these are commercially available and they are easier to keep crispy after frying. Some dip them in a thin batter before deep-frying, giving their *choon piah* a crunchier texture.

MY MOTHER'S RECIPE

Choon piah and *kuih pie ti* (which has similar filling to Popiah but served in a small crunchy shell) are two recipes that appear frequently among my mother's personal handwritten recipe books. Her *choon piah* recipe is very close to those prepared in the old Hainanese restaurants mentioned earlier. I found an early handwritten recipe which pre-dates the earliest type-written *choon piah* recipe from her collection. On 28 May 1955, she conducted one of her earliest cooking demonstrations at YWCA, at its old location at Peel Avenue in Penang. This recipe later appeared with minor changes in the Penang YWCA Recipe Book to commemorate their 80th anniversary in 1989. The *choon piah* recipe was also in the Penang Methodist Girls' School Ex-Pupils' Association's cookbook, *Original Penang Favourites*, published in 2002.

I contributed an article on "Choon Piah - Roll of Yester Years" in the February 2013 issue of *Flavours*. I was invited to participate in Astro's Asian Food Channel (AFC) programme which was broadcasted on August 2016.

PREPARING *CHOON PIAH*

Now, the question is, how do I describe all the fine details on how to make *choon piah* to beginners? It all started more than a decade ago when I offered to cook for some of my old St. Xavier's Institution classmates in KL. As I am based in Singapore, my classmate, Oh Chong Peng very kindly offered to play host. He specifically asked me to make *choon piah*, along with other Hainanese Nyonya/Western dishes. I was assisted by his wife, Swee Kee, a few of his capable relatives and his helper, Yeti.

The recipe calls for the preparation of the *choon piah* wrapper and its filling. The preparation of the filling should not be problematic except for the fine cutting of the ingredients. I made the *choon piah* wrapper quite straightforwardly, and I have done it so many times before.

An issue arose when it came to deep frying the *choon piah*. The *choon piah* skin ruptured, spilling the filling into the hot oil. I had to move into emergency mode to clean up the oil. There was a failure in quality control when it came to wrapping the *choon piah*. All the wrapped *choon piah* had to be checked to identify if there were any rips on the skin. I had to reinforce the skin of some of the wrapped *choon piah*. This episode explains why Penang restaurants serving *choon piah* prefer to use Popiah wrappings instead.

What went wrong? Well, my assistants were trying to pack as much filling as they could into each *choon piah* like they do when wrapping Popiah. Unfortunately, that is a wrong technique. Ideally, the fillings should be wrapped at least twice. With two layers, the steam generated when the *choon piah* is fried will not reach the outer layer, thus keeping the *choon piah* crispier for longer.

Recently, I was asked by my cousin, Boon Kee, to teach his helper to prepare *choon piah*. He decided to ask along his sisters and their helpers as well as his friends who are keen on cooking Penang food. I ended up with seven students.

This time, I asked my students to have a go at making the *choon piah* skins themselves. With pancake, it is not critical whether it is thin or thick, or whether the thickness is uniformed. It is different when making *choon piah* skins. The proof is in the eating; we ended up with thick-skinned *choon piah*!

Learning from mistakes is an important part of learning to cook. I don't think any of my students have made pancake before in their lives, and making *choon piah* wrappers requires practice.

A week later, my sister asked the family if anyone has tried the *choon piah* from an established Hainanese restaurant in Penang. I had, and my reply was that if I were running a culinary school, their *choon piah* would serve as case studies for the students to work out what was done correctly and what was wrong.

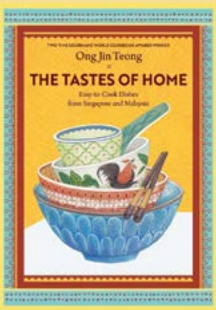
Other non-trivial issues when making *choon piah* are marketing for the ingredients and identifying the appropriate pans and utensils to use for preparing the *choon piah* skin, and the utensils for deep-frying and for draining off the oil from the *choon piah*.

ENJOYING *CHOON PIAH*

Choon piah should be consumed right after frying, when it is most crispy. It is traditionally served with sliced red chillis in Lea & Perrins' Worcestershire sauce or *ang moh tau eu*, locally made by the Hainanese with added mustard.

The main ingredients of the Lea and Perrins' Worcestershire sauce are: malt and spirit vinegar, anchovies, tamarind, garlic, onions, molasses, sugar, salt and spices. My mother used to brew her own *ang moh tau eu* using an heirloom recipe which doesn't include anchovies or tamarind, but soya sauce and numerous spices including pepper, dried chillies, fennel, cumin, cloves, mace (nutmeg), star anise, cinnamon and turmeric instead. The dry ingredients are finely ground before they are boiled with soya sauce, good quality vinegar and sugar. Then, the powder is simmered. When cool, the mixture is sieved to obtain the *ang moh tau eu*. The sediments are kept and added to the next brew.

Preparing *choon piah* is a complex process, making it challenging to provide a detailed recipe. While those who do not cook might appreciate a more in-depth explanation, experienced cooks may find it unnecessary. For those who have made pancake, preparing the *choon piah* wrapper would be quite straightforward. The key to getting it just right is from learning from past mistakes.



In 2024, Ong Jin Teong launched his latest book, *The Tastes of Home: Easy-to-Cook Dishes from Singapore and Malaysia*. The book provides easy-to-follow recipes of tasty, everyday dishes from Singapore and Malaysia, which were not commonly recorded in writing, until now. With his Nyonya family background, where his culinary experiences have been deeply shaped, the book contains recipes that connected him with his family and Penang when he was away from home. The book is the materialising of his wish to help Malaysian and Singaporean students living overseas cook their beloved dishes easily in a small kitchen.

DR. ONG JIN TEONG is the author of two award-winning books—*Nonya Heritage Kitchen: Origins, Utensils, Recipes* and *Penang Heritage Food: Yesterday's Recipes for Today's Cook*. Following his retirement as a Nanyang Technological University's College of Engineering professor, he lectures, conducts classes, writes books and articles on Nyonya cooking and food heritage, and runs the occasional supper club.

VIVALDI'S *FOUR SEASONS*

FEATURING
ELIAS MONCADO
AND
THE PPO STRINGS

Photo credit:
Penang Philharmonic Orchestra

BY
DANNY GOON
AND
KATIE COOLBAUGH

THE ATMOSPHERE WAS buzzing with anticipation as the Penang Philharmonic Orchestra (PPO) featured acclaimed musicians from Germany and the UK to perform Antonio Vivaldi's *The Four Seasons* in August 2024. The PPO must have a certain reputation to attract such talented musicians to its stage. Here, we want to capture the event from both the audience's and the musicians' perspectives.

FROM THE AUDIENCE

BY DANNY GOON

The best known of Antonio Vivaldi's works, *Le Quattro Stagioni* or *The Four Seasons*, is a group of four violin concerti giving musical expression to each season of the year. The concerti had accompanying sonnets, probably written by the composer himself, which exemplified the spirit of each season that the music was intended to invoke. It would become an example of what would come to be known as programme music, meaning music with a narrative element. An art form wherein the instrumental music is intended to evoke something extra-musical.

Each concerto is structured into three movements—fast-slow-fast—and just like the linked sonnets, are descriptive and reflect scenes, events and emotions associated with each season. Vivaldi's innovative use of musical techniques and forms creates a rich tapestry of sound that brings the seasons to life.

Elias David Moncado, a 23-year-old German-Spanish-Malaysian, had generously offered his services to PPO and brought his interpretation of Vivaldi's masterpiece to his native Penang while on a busman's holiday, visiting family and friends on his summer break. His mum's a Penang-*lang*, and the PPO turned hope to reality by filling the E&O Hotel Ballroom with many Penangites to witness what would be a gift to their senses. The soloist's maternal grandmother was beaming proudly and bursting with pride, sitting upright in her wheelchair. Moncado was joined on stage by 16 members of the PPO Strings Section plus two young visitors, Clarice Ngo and San Choi from the UK, who were here with their parents on summer break too. With growing ambitions and accolades earned in their respective National and Regional Junior Orchestras in England, both had sought out PPO to share their musical journeys. A quick audition, and resident conductor, Ng Choong Yen, had no hesitation in drafting both Clarice and San into the concert. Elias Moncado is the youngest winner of the Grand Prize at the International Karol Lipinski Violin Competition, Poland, which he achieved in 2019. He also won 1st Prize at the International Valsesia Musica 2021 and the International Vladimir Spivakov Competition 2021. He is also the youngest prize winner of the International Sendai Violin competition in Japan, which he won in 2019. Currently a scholarship holder of the Anne-Sophie Mutter Stiftung, he has done three tours, with him performing as a soloist in Iceland, the US, Canada and much of Europe. As a prize winner and scholarship holder of the Deutsche Stiftung Musikleben Hamburg, he plays a violin by Giambattista Rogeri of Brescia (around 1700) as well as a G. B. Guadagnini, Turin c. 1771, on loan from a private sponsor.

His virtuoso interpretation of *The Four Seasons,* ably supported by PPO's String Section led by Tann Soon Pin and Judy Oh (Elias' grand aunt), brought the house down. Judy mentioned that our local musicians did not find it easy to play alongside a professional, and a brilliant one at that. Suffice it to say, the PPO has come a very long way since its resurrection just over a decade ago. It has reached the stage where it receives offers to host and perform with established and internationally recognised artistes. Pianist Sir Stephen Hough comes to mind, having recently performed with PPO. And while PPO continues to receive such offers, the lack of a suitable performance theatre does inhibit substantially our ability to host celebrated international artistes.

The fervent demands for an encore saw Moncado returning to the podium to reprise "Tempo Impetuoso Destate", the movement from L'Estate or Summer. It was followed by a solo encore piece by Bach, "Sarabande in D minor", said to be one of the more difficult partitas for solo violins, showcasing what an accomplished violinist Elias Moncado is becoming.

FROM THE STAGE

BY KATIE COOLBAUGH

The news was very exciting: PPO was going to perform all four of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* in August and Elias David Moncado would be the soloist. He wowed Penang audiences two years ago playing Beethoven's violin concerto with PPO. But this would be different: He would not only play these four virtuosic concertos, he would also conduct the small, intimate string ensemble that brings them to life, evoking the sounds of chirping spring birds, howling summer winds, autumn harvests and hunts, and chattering teeth in winter.

As exciting as this news was, it also held an element of terror for this principal cellist. Vivaldi's elegant score contains numerous passages in all four seasons where the solo violin and a solo cello—sometimes with the welcome support of the harpsichord—play alone together. Nobody else moves. Most of these passages aren't technically difficult, but some are downright scary. All require hawk-like attention to what the soloist is doing so the dialogue between the two can be crisp and precise.

I had my work cut out for me. In fact, everyone in the small, hand-picked ensemble did.

Playing in a conductor-less orchestra is like playing chamber music (the love of *my* musical life). Every voice is an essential thread in the tapestry of Vivaldi's sometimes whisperingly delicate music. And when there are only four voices (two violins, viola and bassi), there's no taking cover behind the brass! You keep one eye on your part and the other glued to the soloist. You watch his every move and nuanced cue to ensure that you breathe with him, run with him, explode in excitement with him, recede into nothing with him—especially when you have *solos* with him.

I practised my part, studied the orchestra score, studied the soloist's score. When Elias arrived from Germany and before we started full orchestra rehearsals with him, I asked if he wanted to meet privately to go over those solo sections together. Still jetlagged from his trip, he graciously agreed to this extra rehearsal and brought his father with him to our flat to play the harpsichord part on my rickety portable keyboard. I knew his father, Berhhard, was a musician, but it was only during that session and throughout the week that I got to learn the extent of his own accomplished musical career. For two hours, the three of us went from one solo bit to the next, discussing the character of each dialogue; its tempos, bowings, harmonies, dynamics. We even discovered two misprints in the cello part that, once fixed, made a huge difference in how those sections sounded! It was an intense, exhilarating and instructive afternoon for me, making it much easier for me to move in and out of those solo sections within the larger orchestra "tutti" framework.

The week of rehearsals was just as intense and exhilarating. Elias's impressive knowledge of every part in the score meant that he heard every note we in the orchestra played—no detail was too small to stop and address. Over the course of the week, we could both feel and hear the music take the desired shape, like bread dough rising to the perfect height and softness.

On concert night, our levels of anticipation and jitters ran high. Elias had urged us all just to have fun, for which we were grateful, but we also wanted to do our very best to perform this glorious music, to give an amazing soloist the support he deserved, and to make PPO proud.

On stage, the four concertos seemed to fly by, like seasons often do. And then we were hearing *"Encore!"* from the enraptured audience. Elias whispered to us, "Last movement of Summer!" and took off at an exhilarating pace much faster than we'd ever played it before. The orchestra flew with him like a kite on a summer wind.

DATO' DANNY GOON is a Board Member of the PPO. He is a practicing retiree. Having more available time, he has opinions on this and that, and gladly shares them with all and sundry.

KATIE COOLBAUGH lived on a sailboat for more than 20 years, with no room on board for a cello. She resumed playing after arriving in Penang, and now serves as principal of the PPO cello section.

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IT WAS 20 YEARS AGO WHEN THE INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI HIT

BY LEE KHIAM JIN

DECEMBER 26, 2024 marks the 20th anniversary of the deadliest of tsunamis, triggered by a 9.3 magnitude undersea megaquake off the shore of Banda Aceh in the Andaman Sea. Now known as the Indian Ocean Tsunami, it brought giant waves at run-up heights over 100ft and killed more than 227,000 people across 14 countries from Indonesia to Somalia. It is also the first-ever recorded tsunami in Malaysia.

Penang was not spared, with Batu Ferringhi, Telok Bahang and Pulau Betong being among the areas to be hit worst. In Malaysia, Penang showed the largest number of fatalities, on top of damage to property and severe disruption of livelihood. Out of the national death toll of 68, 52 were from Penang, with five missing and another 206 injured; in addition to that, 615 houses and 1,332 boats were damaged. A family lost their three young, school-going children when picnicking by the beach.

Mega-scale disasters are uncommon in Penang and Malaysia, though this does not mean that they never happen or will never happen again. Large-scale flash floods, severe drought and even earthquakes may strike, especially when rare climate events are becoming more frequent.

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Take the flash flood in Valencia which claimed more than 200 lives just this past October for example. One year of rainfall was recorded in eight hours. Friederike Otto of the World Weather Attribution at the Centre for Environmental Policy in Imperial College London asserts that "these explosive downpours were intensified by climate change". Human activities drive climate change, altering our weather systems in ways that create conditions for intense thunderstorms to linger over specific areas, such as in Valencia, resulting in record-breaking rainfall.

In addition to climate factors, the Valencian regional government faced strong criticism for delayed flood warnings; when these warnings came, flooding had already begun in some areas, and long after the national weather agency had issued a red alert for heavy rains.

CHANGES IN DISASTER MANAGEMENT SINCE 2004

The National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA) was established in 2015 after the catastrophic floods in Kelantan in December 2014; its job is to provide overall leadership and direction, as well as facilitate coordination between public and non-public actors during the official disaster response phase. Prior to its establishment, the Disaster Management Division, a unit of the Malaysian National Security Council (NSC), was in charge of matters related to disasters.

The 2004 tsunami was the catalyst for advancing disaster preparedness and mitigation mechanisms. Before that, Malaysia had no early warning system for an incoming or occurring disaster. The Malaysian Meteorological Department has since established the Malaysia National Tsunami Early Warning System to deliver timely and effective warnings to the public in the event of a tsunami originating in the Indian Ocean, the South China Sea, the Sulu Sea or the Pacific Ocean. 80 seismic stations were also erected, including in Penang, which are equipped with seismometers to measure ground motion velocity, accelerometers to measure ground motion acceleration and data loggers. Furthermore, 25 tide gauge stations were set up to measure changes in sea level relative to a vertical datum, and 18 tsunami coastal cameras were erected across beaches in Malaysia.

Ambika Devi, the Head of the Disaster Management Unit in Penang, asserts that her unit has engaged the state district office and NADMA for joint collaboration. For example, officers from Penang's five district offices, who were previously focused on socio-development issues, now play a crucial role in disaster response, coordinating local efforts to ensure efficient and unified action. Their responsibilities include activating disaster response plans, overseeing relief and rescue operations, managing evacuation centres, and handling communication and information dissemination. Additionally, the Penang Disaster Management Unit also conducts tabletop exercises and full-scale simulation drills to test SOPs.

"The 2004 tsunami was the catalyst for advancing disaster preparedness and mitigation mechanisms. Before that, Malaysia had no early warning system for an incoming or occurring disaster."

Community-Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM), awareness campaigns and disaster simulation exercises are now regularly conducted. Additionally, civil society organisations such as the Penang Inshore Fisherman Welfare Association (PIFWA), augment the work of local councils by adopting nature-based solutions and planting mangrove saplings along the coast to restore coastal ecosystems and protect against future erosion and storm surges, including in Pantai Aceh and Kuala Sungai Pinang. With that said, CBDRM can only become sustainable when NGOs, local communities, volunteers and the private sector share the same vision, supported by the government. In fact, the Penang state government has established the Rakan Unit Pengurusan Bencana (UPB) to encourage registered NGOs to aid in disaster relief and humanitarian assistance during and after disasters.

In the ASEAN context, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER), a framework designed to coordinate response efforts, facilitate resource sharing and build capacity for disaster relief personnel among ASEAN member states, has been set up. This agreement was signed by ASEAN member states in July 2005, merely seven months after the disaster. AADMER subsequently came into effect in December 2009 to provide a legally binding framework for coordinated disaster management among ASEAN nations. Consequently, the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) was established in 2011, and functions as the operational engine of the AADMER work programme.

Malaysia is committed to learning the best practices of disaster management from ASEAN member states and partners, as Khairul Shahril Idrus, the Director General of NADMA attests. Indeed, disaster management requires inter-disciplinary knowledge and an inclusive and collaborative approach. This article pays tribute to those who lost their lives in the tsunami, survivors and to the international emergency respondents.

DR. LEE KHIAM JIN served the United Nations and ASEAN in disaster management. He enjoys teaching, writing, mentoring and researching on matters related to disaster risk reduction, sustainable development, smart cities and ASEAN. You might bump into him hiking at Sungai Ara or when running half-marathons.

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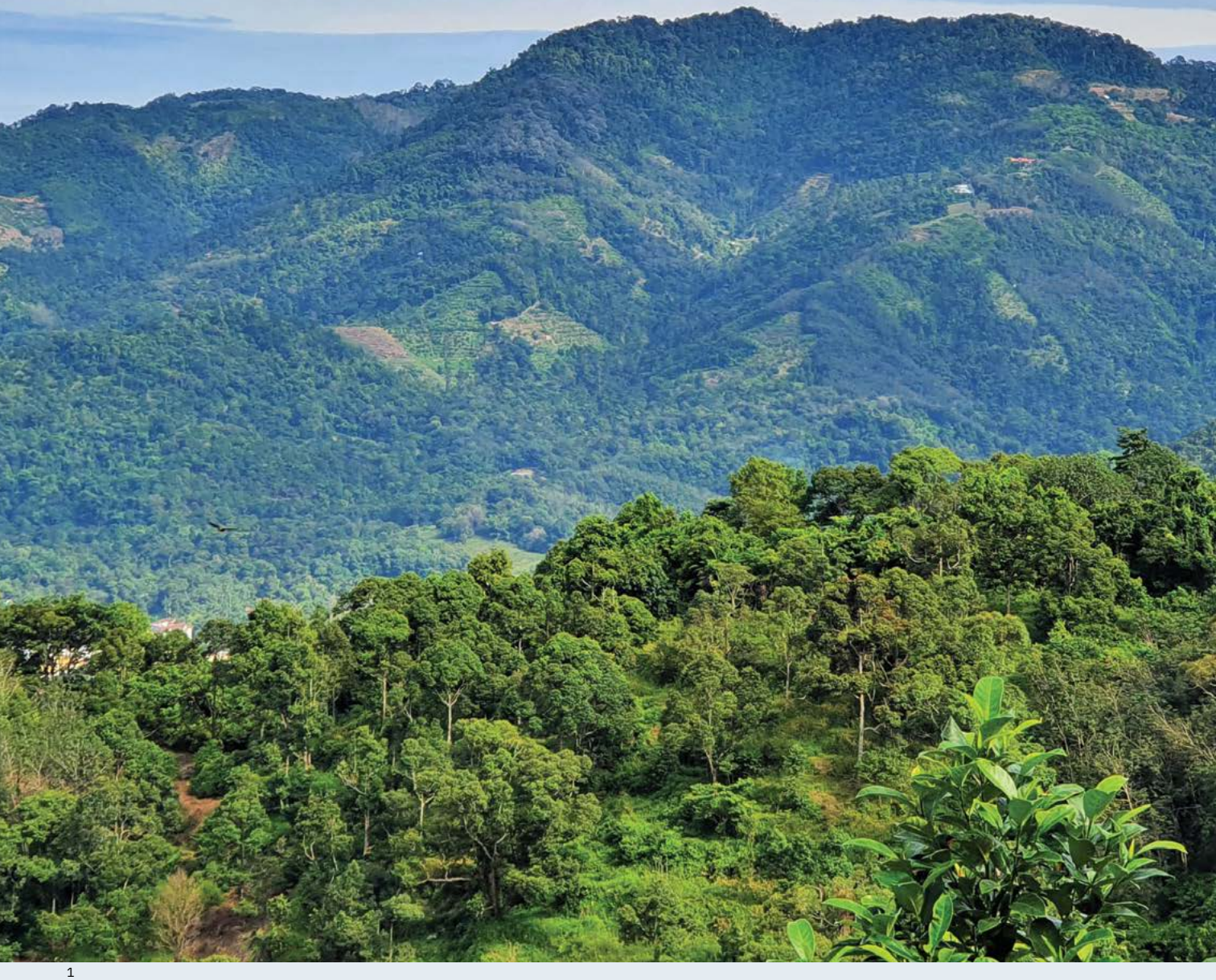
MOUNT ELVIRA

IN SEARCH OF A LOST BUNGALOW

BY REXY PRAKASH CHACKO



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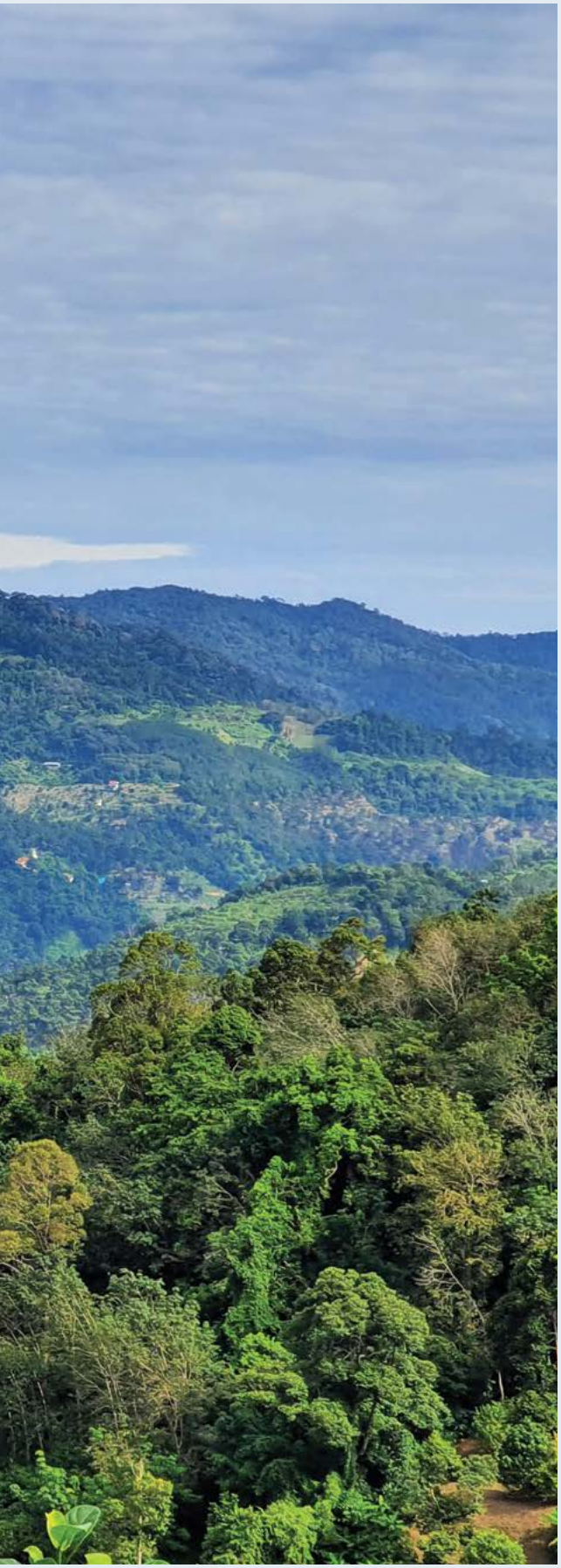

HIKE AT A GLANCE

LENGTH
4 hours (one way)

DIFFICULTY
Difficult

INTEREST LEVEL
High

SIGNPOSTING
Yes

LIKELIHOOD OF GETTING LOST
Low

NUMBER OF HIKERS
Few till the Iron Cross Junction.

REXY PRAKASH CHACKO is an electronic engineer by profession and a nature lover by passion. While he spends his weekdays earning a living at the Bayan Lepas Free Industrial Zone, his weekends are spent reflecting and recharging on the green hills of Penang.

ANY AVID HIKER in Penang with a keen interest in conquering the many peaks of the state would spend time pouring over topographic maps to locate peaks of prominence. While it is no secret that the highest peaks in Penang are located close to the touristy area of the Penang Hill summit, tucked away slightly south are two peaks that rise steeply from the plains of Balik Pulau—the 720m Mount Elvira and the 721m Batu Itam.

While lesser known to modern day hikers until very recently, these peaks, especially Mount Elvira, have a special place in the annals of Penang's history. Reading Mike Gibby's classic, *Penang Hill—A Journey Through Time*, I discover that Mount Elvira is named after the founder of Penang Free School, Reverend Robert Sparke Hutchings' wife, and that there is a long-forgotten bungalow on its peak. A lost bungalow atop a hill? That quickly spurred me to make plans to hike up and find what remains of it.

There are several ways in which one can hike up to Mount Elvira, the shortest being from Air Itam Dam. However, wanting a bit of a challenge as well as the satisfaction of getting to the summit of Mount Elvira from near sea level elevation, I decide to start my hike from Balik Pulau instead.

We begin early in the morning at Jalan Bukit Penara, beside the 170-year-old Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church, a prominent Balik Pulau landmark famed for its distinct Anglo-Indian architecture. The walk begins rather gently, first on a tarred road, then cement, passing over the Titi Teras River and several quaint *kampung* houses. About 30 minutes in, we follow the path as it curves to the right and ascends sharply. This stretch is mainly through orchards of durian and cempedak trees. The steep trail slows us, giving us more time to observe our surroundings. The sight of a medium-sized tree with oval-shaped fruits hanging off its trunk catches our attention. Looking closer, it turns out that this is a cocoa tree, the source of chocolate! Once a common crop in Malaysia, cocoa plantations—let alone cocoa trees—are rare today as falling prices saw them rapidly replaced with other crops.

CAPTIONS

1. View of Mount Elvira.
2. A stunning view of Balik Pulau flanked by hills with Pulau Betong in the far background.

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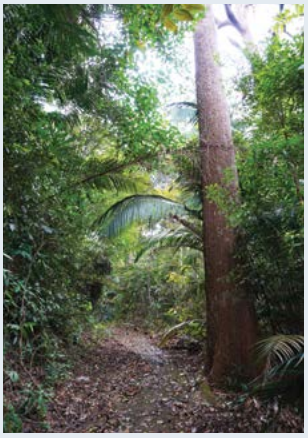

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As the path winds its way further up, we get a stunning view of Balik Pulau flanked by hills, with Pulau Betong in the far background. It takes us 1.5 hours to reach the Hill Turn hut, which sits on a col. Here, the path branches out in three ways, and we take the path that leads downhill to Air Itam Dam.

As we descend, we immediately feel a crispness in the air—unlike before, this stretch is still blanketed in thick forest. The sight of the flowers of a local aroid, *Amydrium medium*, high up on a tree excites us, while the ruffling of leaves by a troop of long-tailed macaques (*Macaca fascicularis*) prompts us to pass through cautiously, avoiding eye contact all the while so as to not agitate them.

The gentle descent brings us to the tarred road circling the Air Itam Dam, where we take a left turn passing over a crystal-clear feeder stream into the dam, and very quickly to the next junction which leads up to Iron Cross. From here, the wide cement path begins a steady climb, a section I remember trudging through on my way to Tiger Hill for my very first *Peaks and Parks* article in 2017.

While the uphill ascent had been strenuous, this section is an absolute delight, with bubbling streams, the sound of birds chirping and the awe-inspiring sight of large dipterocarp trees. Occasionally, the sound of a motorcycle carrying produce from the farms or a mountain biker freewheeling down the road would break the serenity. It takes about an hour from the junction at the tarred road to reach Iron Cross, a major four-way junction in the hills, with the path to Mount Elvira rising gently ahead of us. We decide to take a quick snack break at Iron Cross to reenergise.

After a good rest, we begin the uphill ascent. Quite immediately we realise that we are in a botanical paradise; *Shorea curtisii* tower from the periphery of the trail, while bright orange-red flowers of a ginger, *Alpinia vitelline*, and an orchid, *Calanthe pulchra*, splash much-needed vibrance on the green understorey. The sight of a curlygrass fern (*Schizaea digitata*) intrigues us with its un-fern-like appearance, spore-bearing fronds right at the leaf ends, almost akin to an unopened flower bud. We stumble upon old marker stones covered in lichen hidden in the undergrowth, with the letter "M" inscribed prominently on it, showing that, while the cement road we are using might be a rather new upgrade, paths in this area are more than a century old. Interestingly enough, these marker stones still indicate parts of the current forest reserve border, and some have been painted over in red to denote this.

3. The blooms of a wild ginger, *Alpinia vitellina.*

4. Cocoa fruits seen beside the trail.

5. Large granite blocks which are the foundations of the Mount Elvira bungalow at the summit of the hill.

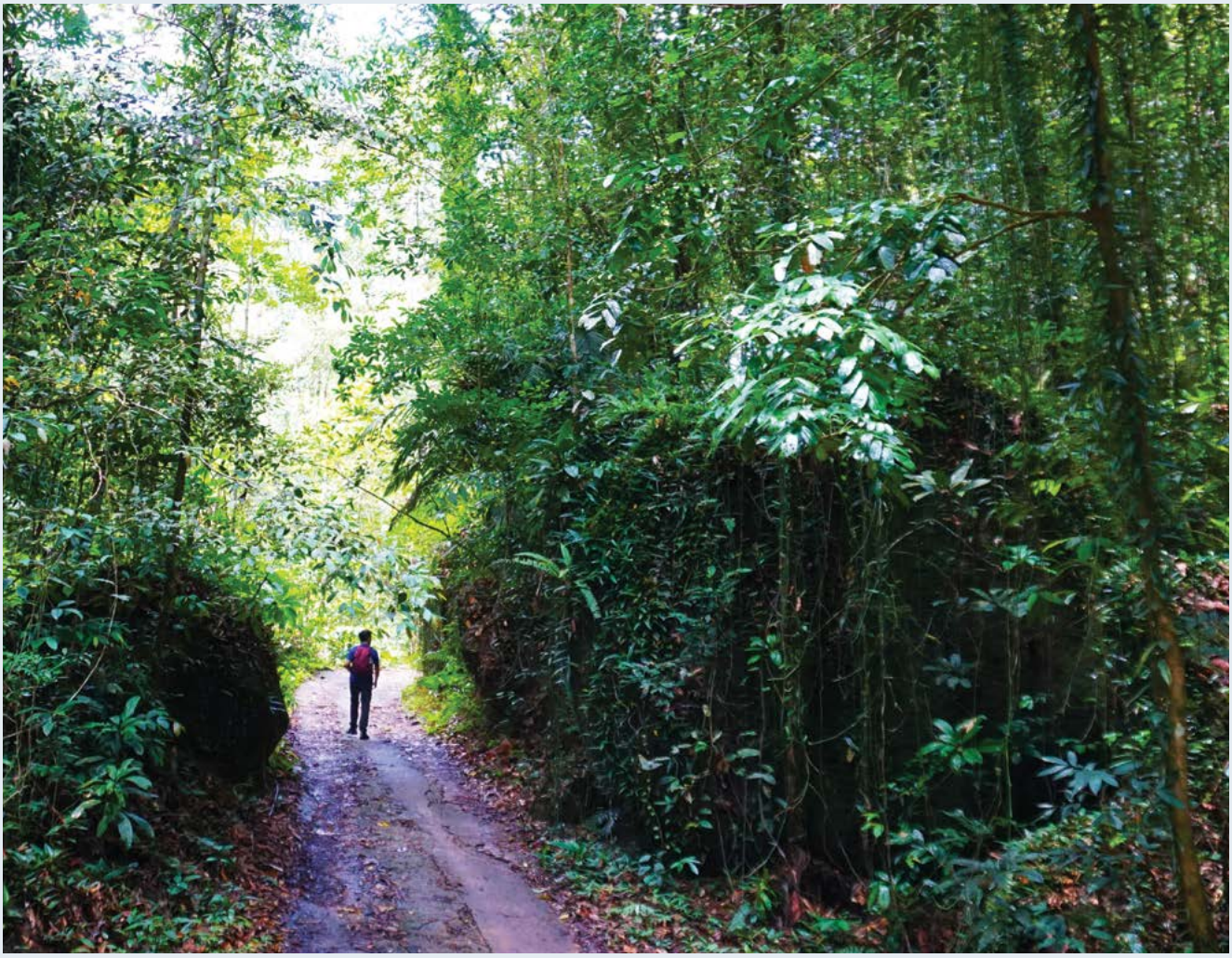
6. The peculiar looking curlygrass fern (*Schizaea digitata*).

7. The stunning orange-red flowers of a wild orchid, *Calanthe pulchra.*

8. An old marker stone with the letter "M" inscribed prominently on it.

9. Going up to Iron Cross.

10. The stretch towards the peak of Mount Elvira is dominated by huge trees.



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As the area is often covered in mist and it rains regularly here, the moss-covered cement trail seems slippery, so we tread very carefully. It takes us about 40 minutes from Iron Cross to reach a small junction, where several spray-painted arrow signs point in the direction of the Mount Elvira summit. We follow this fork, which ascends gently, and soon the dense forest gives way to an open area dominated by ferns. Looking at our smartphone GPS application, we realise that we are already here, at the summit of Mount Elvira.

Being an Old Free myself, I feel a sense of pride at this moment, knowing well that more than two centuries ago, the founder of my alma mater had set foot and established a dwelling here. We immediately start looking around for whatever remains of the elusive Mount Elvira bungalow. Four large granite blocks—which are the foundations—are spotted, and further searching unearths broken roof tiles as well as granite slabs which were quite possibly steps leading up to the bungalow. The bungalow is marred by a rather eerie tale: Soon after acquiring it, its second owners—three members of the Jackson family—perished of "jungle fever", one after the other within 24 hours. The bungalow and its surrounding plantation were hastily abandoned, becoming yet another dwelling swallowed by the jungle.

I feel an immense sense of satisfaction in being able to see a rich variety of tree crops, experience a pristine jungle and hunt for a lost bungalow—all in one hike!

11. A leafy section of the trail as it approaches Iron Cross.

12. Flowers of a local aroid, *Amydrium medium,* high up on a tree.

13. Crystal clear stream along the way up to Iron Cross.

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AN INDIAN FROM CHINA STREET: A LASTING REALITY

BY BALAKRISHNAN NARAYANAN

BALAKRISHNAN NARAYANAN is a financial journalist who has worked around the world. He now lives in Malaysia. He attended Penang Free School.

THERE WERE ONLY three Indian families living on Penang's China Street in the 1960s. And of course, no Malays at all. Perhaps it is only fitting it was called China Street, since there were so few non-Chinese living on it. The "Indian areas" of old Penang were in Penang Street and Market Street.

We lived about three blocks away from the famous Chinese temple at the junction of China Street and Pitt Street. Our family ran a curry powder mill in a shop house called Narayanan Flour Mill. Our neighbour was Alagappa Flour Mill. Alagappa and my father, Narayanan, were partners when the mill was founded in the 1950s. When the partnership split, my father set up his own shop. Alagappa Flour Mill is still family-owned and now managed by the third generation. Unfortunately, my father passed away when I was young, and I was more interested in pursuing my studies in the US than running his business. Narayanan Flour Mill was eventually sold to Alagappa Flour Mill.

Looking back, I now see that Narayanan and Alagappa were visionaries and innovators who mechanised the back-breaking process of grinding curry powder using stone grinders worked by housewives. I still remember the embossed European names in the machines. One was Danish with a name spelled "Skjold". A few other machines came from England.

My clothes always smelled of curry powder and the soles of my white school shoes were often yellow from turmeric and curry powder. Other students thought I was strange, and I felt very self-conscious about it.

In hindsight, I can say we lived in Penang's "Indian ghetto" in the 1960s and 1970s. However, I did not feel deprived in any way. I lived in a cosy home, where Tamil was spoken and Indian groceries and food, Indian temples and barbers were available within walking distance. The harbour, located within walking distance of China Street, connected us to the wider world. Ships from India and other places would dock there, and occasionally, even huge British cruise ships such as the one named *Chusan* would berth, dwarfing the harbour itself.

There were also three libraries within walking distance of my home. There was the biggest Penang City Council Library just across from St. John's Church—I realise now that Penang must have had an educated and enlightened bourgeoisie running the affairs of the city to have spent so much on a splendid library. On the way to the Penang Library and not far from it was the British Council Library, a smaller library with the latest copies of cerebral British weeklies and monthlies such as the *New Statesman*, *The Spectator* and *Encounter*. Many years later, when I finally made it to London, I was greatly disappointed to find out that the circulation of such magazines was tiny, and that most of the people of London never heard of them let alone read them. Numerous newspaper stalls in London sold mostly tabloid newspapers such as the *Daily Mirror* and other low brow tabloids.

The most exciting library when I was a teenager was the USIS (United States Information Services) library in India House along Bishop Street. It had a prominent statue of an elephant head at the top of the building. The building belonged to a prominent Indian family, and thus the name. The American library had a more exciting selection of magazines such as *Life* and *Esquire*. They certainly had much better and coloured pictures than the monochrome British periodicals.

These libraries shaped my early life. Sometimes, I wonder how different my life would have been if those libraries had not been close by. I also wonder how many "cities" in the world then or even now would have three excellent libraries next to each other.

No one around me spoke English, and since the medium of instruction in schools was English then, I had to learn it quickly. I read a lot, and the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* was my constant companion. I attended English tuition run by an Indian man named Paul. He began all sessions with what sounded to me like "Prise the Lall", and the Chinese kids in the school all repeated "Prise the Lall'. It was only in Penang Free School (PFS) later that I figured out that Paul was saying "Praise the Lord!"

On either end of the block I lived in was a *kopitiam* serving not only piping hot tea and coffee, but also some light food items. To the left was an Indian coffee shop selling Teh Tarik made from strong tea leaves drowned in hot water fed from a copper samovar (fired by charcoal imported from Indonesia, which gave out minimal smoke), and fresh milk. Next to the shop was a Chinese-owned wholesale charcoal seller. Natural gas cylinders were rare and expensive, and most people still used charcoal for cooking, at least in my neighbourhood.

Next to Alagappa Flour Mill was the Windsor Hair Dressing Saloon, where I used to get my hair cut. It is still in operation, but no doubt under a different management. The barbers were very friendly to me and even indulged my requests for weird teen haircuts.

Immediately in front of my shophouse was a perm parlour, popular among the Chinese ladies. I still remember them with their heads in plastic cocoons. Towards the right, opposite our shop were two bicycle shops—Teik Soon & Co assembled bicycles and sold bicycle spare parts such as dynamos and tyres, and fixed punctures. The bicycles assembled included "Hercules," "Raleigh" and "Robin Hood"—imported in knock-down kits and assembled in Penang. The next shop was called Lee Huat & Co, and was owned by a short plump man who was always in singlets and shorts. The trishaw shop owner seemed to be mild mannered and quite a loner. However, during the 1967 "Currency Riots" and the "Hartal" called by the Socialist Front party, I saw the same guy forcefully leading a small group of determined Chinese men and asking all the shop owners to put down their shutters to observe the "hartal". Appearances were misleading in China Street!

At the end of the block and opposite the Windsor Saloon was a coffee shop and hotel. It served coffee and beer, and even had a juke box inside. I used to gawk at the beauty of the machine that would pick up a vinyl record and play it when patrons inserted a coin. That was downstairs.

The mysterious hotel was upstairs. There were always two or three women wearing heavy make-up sitting near the staircase leading upstairs. As a young boy, I could not figure out what they were doing, but heard some men snigger about "night work". I later figured out it was a brothel. I still remember the night I saw a woman, wearing a kebaya, running away from the beatings of a pimp, and he, with blood shot eyes, running after her.

The neighbouring King Street had notorious Indian gangs—I occasionally saw them fighting viciously. However, in our "micro" world in China Street, it was mostly peaceful. During my primary school years, I hardly ventured out of my neighbourhood, apart from trips to Penang Road to see English movies in Cathay and Capital cinemas.

When I entered PFS, my horizons expanded considerably. PFS was in Green Lane which, at that time, looked like a fancy and leafy California suburb. I made new friends and mingled with students and teachers from more cosmopolitan backgrounds. I even fell in love with a clever girl from Peel Avenue during Form 6.

I left Penang in 1974 to study in the US and the UK on scholarship. I have travelled extensively since. But whenever I come back to Penang for short visits, I make a point of going back to visit China Street and the little shop from which I dreamt about seeing the world. Because the old town of Penang has been preserved as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the structures are still there, as I remember it; though the people I had known are long gone. When I stand on the corner of China Street and King Street, and close my eyes for a moment, it feels like the rest of my life is just a dream, and China Street is the only real street.

TURTLE CONSERVATION FACES HUGE CHALLENGES

BY CELINE TAY

WITH ECOTOURISM BEING a popular focus for the modern traveller, it's not too unfamiliar or uncommon to see travel businesses pursuing partnerships with wildlife conservation bodies or vice versa. The most common in Malaysia are marine conservation programmes, in which hoteliers and tourists can get involved or visit conservation or research sites. Many revolve around sea turtle conservation work at turtle nesting areas. With several years working in the ecotourism sector, I've been able to witness how conservation groups operate and work extensively on their sites, learning how research groups like MareCet and Lang Tengah Turtle Watch (now known as PULIHARA) collect data while running physically demanding work, engaging marine mammals and sea turtles. The one thing that always stood out was the need to form strong synergies with hoteliers within their research area—to ensure their work can be sustained through tourism support.

While tourism activities have supported sea turtle conservation efforts for many years, a delicate balance must be struck to ensure that these activities do not negatively impact the very species they aim to protect. Given that sea turtles' livelihood is highly affected by ground developments, it is crucial for them to have a safe nesting space—one guarded not only from egg poaching, but disturbances by well-meaning tourists.

By fostering mutual relationships with hoteliers or landowners along these nesting hotspots, conservation teams can secure beaches and make way for sea turtles to complete their hours-long nesting process undisturbed. Based on behavioural observances at many nesting sites, some nesting mothers do not return to their usual nesting beaches once they have been "spooked" by human activities. This brings a substantial loss to data collection and to our understanding of sea turtles' behaviour.

TURTLE NESTING IN TELUK BAHANG

The recent collaboration between the Department of Fisheries Malaysia (DOF) and Aquawalk Group is aimed at enhancing sea turtle conservation efforts in Teluk Bahang, where beach resorts dot the area and hence, where the risk of disturbance is high. This partnership is focused on public awareness, research and habitat protection. By working together with Angsana Teluk Bahang Hotel, they hope to reduce disturbances to nesting sea turtles, particularly green and olive ridley turtles.

The olive ridley turtle, an endangered species, made a rare appearance at Teluk Bahang beach after nearly two decades, making it one of only 54 global nesting sites for this species. To protect this critical habitat, a 5km radius along the coastline from Teluk Bahang to Batu Ferringhi is now classified preserved and protected. The initiative is part of a broader effort to safeguard marine biodiversity and promote sustainable tourism practices in the region.

LAND TAKEOVER IN PULAU KAPAS

Kapas Turtles is an NGO in Pulau Kapas, Terengganu, that runs the sea turtle conservation project there. It is a relatively new initiative that started in 2021 amidst the lockdown, and is led by Pok Roni and Noemi. They've seen the project up to where it is today—running a hatchery to safeguard the eggs, patrolling the nesting beaches morning and night, providing educational talks about sea turtles to all island guests and guiding them on how to participate in ethical conservation programmes. They also engage in island clean-ups and work closely with the DOF in maintaining the island ecosystem.

As a project in its foundational years, closing the gap of their knowledge and skills in conservation such as data collection, hatchery management, manpower and establishing trust to work with local communities has been an ongoing challenge. Noemi shared that acquiring and maintaining land for the sea turtle hatchery is tough, especially with the risk of land being repurposed. Their current rental land has been acquired by a new owner who plans to build a resort by early 2025. This puts the team at Kapas Turtles and their work in limbo. They may need to relocate, and are currently exploring options to secure a more permanent location, aiming to reduce their reliance on private properties, which the team claims has historically led to uncertainties.

Moving to a new site may temporarily disrupt Kapas Turtles' conservation activities. Setting up new infrastructure, including the hatchery and facilities for interns and volunteers, will also be a substantial task. As a result, they may not be able to accommodate volunteers or interns next year, causing additional challenges to their manpower dilemma. This is why it is important for beachside resort owners and hoteliers to play a part in conservation initiatives.

Kapas Turtles believes resorts can show support by sharing information about local conservation projects in their welcome materials and offering guests opportunities to visit conservation sites or participate, such as joining the night sea turtle patrol to experience firsthand what it is like to spend the night waiting for a nesting turtle. Creating an emotional connection to the environment is one of the most effective ways to inspire care and commitment. By supporting conservation work, adopting eco-friendly practices like offering ethical snorkelling and diving activities, reducing plastic use in operations and integrating beach clean-ups programmes for guests, beach hotels can attract guests, given the rise of eco-tourism demand.

ACHIEVING GOOD SYNERGY

PULIHARA is a great example of a conservation project working in good synergy with hotel operators. The team operates outreach programmes on top of their core operations of safeguarding sea turtles' nests in their designated hatchery with YTL Hotels at Tanjong Jara Resort. PULIHARA monitors turtle landings and protects nests from poachers on two beaches adjacent to the resort—Pantai Tahu Tiga and Pantai Kuala Abang. They rely on local rangers to safeguard the nesting populations of turtles, primarily green turtles and painted terrapins.

One crucial support needed is for their Nest Adoption Programme, wherein locals can bid for the right to collect turtle eggs from specific beaches on mainland Terengganu, enabling the team to save as many nests as possible. By allowing guests to adopt a turtle nest and give it a unique moniker, guests can donate to the programme. These donations help the team approach licensed egg collectors and purchase freshly laid nests before they reach the market, where they would otherwise be sold for consumption. Once purchased, the nests are relocated to the hatchery for safe incubation.

At the same time, a great eco-tourism edge to Tanjong Jara's operations is their support of PULIHARA's interactive activities. When asked about the value given by PULIHARA to the resort, Tanjong Jara Project Manager for PULIHARA, Isandra, shared that this hatchling release experience has become a standout attraction, captivating many of Tanjong Jara Resort's visitors. Since PULIHARA's inception in 2016, many guests have cited its programmes as a highlight of their stay. Having this eco-tourism edge allows the resort to attract a niche market of travellers who prioritise sustainability, thereby increasing the resort's brand value and reputation. Meanwhile, the opportunity to contribute to sea turtle conservation gives guests a meaningful, purpose-driven experience that goes beyond typical holiday offerings.

CELINE TAY is a wildlife enthusiast who has spent the past five years in the eco-tourism business as an adventure and eco-tour operator (Mowgli Venture), conservation intern and conservation artist collaborating closely with marine conservation groups across Malaysia. She creates educational and fundraising artworks to support conservation efforts of various endangered species.

THE EARLY DAYS OF THE ESTATE AND COUNTRY RETREAT OF THE COLLEGE GENERAL

MARIO

PHILE

BY
EUGENE
QUAH
TER-NENG

THE COLLEGE GENERAL, off Jalan Cengal, is a venerable Catholic seminary emphasising a prayerful and secluded life for its students—and it rarely opens its doors to the public. Last year, I visited with a group of Penang Heritage Trust members, and was greeted by the Rector, Very Rev. Fr. Simon Labrooy, a man with a large moustache and a calm demeanour. Two seminarians (priests in training) were appointed to be our guides. As we climbed a set of stone steps, the anticipation heightened. On our right was the chapel, while on our left, Mariophile's elegant bungalow caught our eye, standing stately on the lawn with an old decorative cannon in front.

Scant prior research—almost all based on secondary English sources—indicates that the bungalow and chapel were built in the early 1800s. Local oral sources provide a muddled narrative, suggesting that the College General was granted the land in the early 1800s, and that the area was once a stockade with a cannon placed there by Captain Light himself in 1785 with the help of villagers who later called it Bukit Meriam (Cannon Hill). However, both French missionary documents and British East India Company records paint a different picture. This article, primarily based on French primary sources, is an excerpt from a draft chapter of my forthcoming book on Penang's North Coast.

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COLLEGE GENERAL

College General is also known as Mariophile, a name referring to the entire property, and not just the bungalow. What remain today are traces of what was once a vast estate and country retreat belonging to the College General of the Paris Foreign Missions Society (*Société de Missions Étrangères de Paris*), or the MEP. The MEP reached Malayan shores in 1781 after being expelled from Siam in 1779, arriving first at Kuala Kedah. Fr. Arnaud-Antoine Garnault and his congregation relocated to Penang in 1786 as soon as the British settled there.

The College General can trace its history "back to the very first seminary in the region established in Ayutthaya, Siam, by the MEP in 1665" for the training of Asian clergy. In 1808, free from the persecution that they had faced in Indochina, the MEP reestablished their college at George Town after a hiatus. The following year, *Collège Général de Poulo-Pinang* relocated to Pulau Tikus, then a ramshackle seaside village, where it would remain for the next two centuries until 1984, when the land was sold. Gurney Plaza was later built over its grand main building. The College General then moved to its current location at Tanjung Bungah.

MISSION OF EDUCATION

In 1851, Bishop Jean-Baptiste Boucho, an MEP priest who was then Vicar Apostolic of Melaka-Singapore, "decided to call for the services of French educators who had the experience and competence to set up and administer big schools".

The *Sœurs de l'Enfant Jésus* (Sisters of the Infant Jesus, abbreviated IJS) and the *Fratres Scholarum Christianarum* (Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, abbreviated FSC) were invited to take charge of education for girls and boys respectively. The former is commonly known by the public as the Sisters (or Dames) of St. Maur, and the latter as the La Salle Brothers. Both IJS and FSC arrived in Penang in 1852. The IJS then established a convent on Light Street, while the FSC took over the management of an existing school, the Penang Catholic Free School, and renamed it St. Xavier's Institution.

The arrival of the IJS and FSC upon the invitation of the MEP was a pivotal moment in the educational history of the Malay Peninsula. They would go on to establish many more schools—some of them still providing quality education to the masses after 172 years.[1]

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover spread) The Mariophile bungalow and the chapel to its right. Source: Eugene Quah Ter-Neng

2. The view of the western side of the Chapel of St. Joseph, also known as the Chapel of the Sacred Heart. Photo: Ganesh Kolandaveloo

3. On the original College General site at Pulau Tikus now stands Gurney Plaza. Prior to 1984, Mariophile was the plantation and country retreat of the College General. It is no longer run by the MEP, but the name has been kept in respect of its storied past. Source: Map of Prince of Wales Island 1853, M.J. Moniot

4. The Mariophile bungalow is decorated with an old Dutch cannon in front. Construction began in 1872 and was completed by 1874. The bungalow is currently used as the archive building of the College General. The symbol of the MEP can be seen on the pediment—the letters M and E with a Christian cross. The architectural style is similar to Lim Leng Cheak's country house, Elsiedale, 1km south of it. Photo: Eugene Quah Ter-Neng

5. Also known as the College of Martyrs, the College earned its moniker due to the sacrifices of its students. Five Vietnamese priests trained here were martyred upon returning home to continue their missionary work, and were canonised as saints in 1988. Photo: Ganesh Kolandaveloo

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FOND OF MARY

Mariophile means "fond of Mary", from the Latin word for Mary, *mari* and the French suffix "-phile". This term reflects the Catholic tradition of Marian devotion, which places special emphasis on the veneration of Jesus Christ's mother.

French historian, Bernard Patary, an authority on the history of the College General, stated that as early as 1834, "the minutes [of the College] refer to two plantations, that of the College and another located at Tanjong Tokong, not far from Pulo Tikus".

The earliest mention of Mariophile that I managed to find was in a letter dated 28 October 1843 by the Superior, Fr. Claude-Charles Tisserand, regarding some *travaux á Mariophile* (works at Mariophile). During this early period, Mariophile appeared to be just a plantation—there is no mention of it as a retreat, nor of the presence of a country house—although there are mentions of some construction works and expenses. Another letter by him from 30 May 1846 gives us a glimpse of those early days:

> "The good Chinaman Ya Yin Ko has been a faithful servant of the College these eleven years past. He has ever served us with marked intelligence and, above all, with unfailing loyalty. At present, he oversees the plantations at our country estate of Mariophile, which he quits but briefly to visit his wife and children, in his earnest desire to lead them upon the path of salvation."

The present bungalow was built much later. The "Mémorial de La Société des Missions-Étrangères", published by the MEP in 1886, credits Fr. François-Victor Chibaudel, the *procureur*,[2] as being responsible for the construction of the new "country house at Mariophile". The construction was approved on 12 October 1872. By 1874, it was already completed; Fr. Joseph Liagre describes a "grand house erected at Mariophile, complete with drawing room, eight chambers, a veranda, and a pavilion—the prospect and air being truly delightful therein".

The estate was continually expanded with adjacent lands purchased piecemeal, as shown in this letter sent from Paris to the College General dated 17 April 1849:

> "M. Tisserand tells us in a letter we received these past few days that at the beginning of 1847 he acquired a piece of land adjacent to Mariophile for 400 *piastres* to clear its most uncultivated part and plant nutmeg trees there. Today, this land would be worth between 1,000 to 1,200 *piastres*..."

Seven decades later, the College General had become the largest landowner in Tanjung Tokong. The Superior, Fr. Justin Pagès, reported on 16 September 1920 that the "Mariophile plantation is 80 hectares", equivalent to 112 football fields.

PRIEST HILL

Today, the grounds of College General still cover a substantial portion of the foothills of the west-facing secondary peak of Mount Erskine. Maps show this hillock only acquired the name Bukit Paderi (Priest Hill)[3] in the 20th century. Jules Moniot's[4] map of 1853 makes no mention of Bukit Paderi, and only records the names "Mount Erskine" and "R.C. College Plantations" for the site.

While oral tradition holds that the hillock was known as Bukit Meriam before the MEP acquired it—supposedly due to a cannon attributed to Captain Light—the Straits Settlements records give a different account:

> On 15 April 1807, Thomas Stamford Raffles, then Secretary of the Penang Presidency, informed the government that John James Erskine[5] and the Company's chaplain Rev. Atwill Lake had applied to clear an unnamed hill "to the westward of Pulo Ticoose Point[6] the property of the [East India] Company". [See *Penang Monthly*'s July and August 2022 issues on Mount Erskine.]

There is only one hill matching that description—today's Mount Erskine. Raffles later informed the applicants that "the Board permit you to clear the ground applied for", indicating it was then just jungle. Erskine named the hill after himself (now colloquially known as Pearl Hill). Tellingly, in the subsequent years, he made no mention of discovering neither a cannon nor remnants of a stockade there.

There are also no known archival sources that show that the College General was granted any of the Mariophile lands, as suggested by oral tradition. Instead, Patary offered convincing evidence from the MEP's own records that the lands were bought in the open market. Funds were raised through mostly rental of land and buildings, supplemented by funding sent from Paris.

THE CHAPEL OF ST. JOSEPH

Monday, 16 August 1886, was the eve of the centenary of the British settlement in Penang. It had been raining that morning. That afternoon, Bishop Édouard Gasnier went to see Sir Frederick Aloysius Weld[7] at his residence. The Governor of the Straits Settlements was a fellow Catholic, and the first one to hold the highest post in the land. The bishop wanted to make sure their planned trip to Mariophile was still on despite the earlier showers.

"The Governor assured me he would depart at half-past four, accompanied by his daughters, as arranged," Bishop Gasnier wrote the following day. "This excursion was accomplished without incident, and at half-past five we arrived at Mariophile, where the pupils received us to the sound of drums, tam-tams, and so forth. We first visited the chapel; above the High Altar stands a magnificent statue of the Sacred Heart, a gift from His Excellency. Then we proceeded to the refectory, where all had been prepared for a reception."

In an address read out in Latin, "[the seminarians] expressed their gratitude for the gift of the statue [of Christ], and wished him and his noble family all manner of prosperity."

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FOOTNOTES

[1] The St. Xavier's Heritage Gallery—a museum inside the school—is testament to the illustrious alumni of these schools. The exhibit reads like a Who's Who of Malaysian society.

[2] An official responsible for managing the financial and administrative affairs of the seminary.

[3] Some English sources suggest it was called St. John's Hill. However, this name is likely a confusion with the MEP's other hill bungalow at Teluk Bahang named St. Jean.

[4] Michel (anglicised Michael) Jules Moniot was later the first Surveyor General of the Straits Settlements.

[5] John James Erskine was later the second-highest ranking EIC official in the Penang Presidency.

[6] Tanjung Tokong. The promontory and the hill apparently were yet unnamed. Raffles, who was fluent in Malay would have used the native name; the EIC in Penang almost always used the existing pre-1786 place names.

[7] Sir Frederick Weld was the sixth Prime Minister of New Zealand. Weld Quay was named after him. He was educated at Stonyhurst College, an institution his grandfather Thomas Weld saved from oblivion.

EUGENE QUAH is an independent researcher and writer who is working on a book tentatively called "Illustrated Guide to the North Coast of Penang". He rediscovered the joys of writing after moving back to Penang from abroad.

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CAPTIONS

6. The interior of the chapel. Photo: Carsun Ang

7. The Z-VOC-M cypher on this late 18th-century Dutch cannon meant it was commissioned by the *Zeeland Kamer* (Zeeland Chamber) of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) based in Middelburg. The trunnion inscriptions Ö and 1785 indicate it was forged in the "iron foundry in Överrum in Sweden" in that year. This cannon was likely one of the 30, including the famous Si Rambai, that were brought to Penang as war trophies in 1871 by Colonel Anson from the fort of Kuala Selangor. Sir Frederick Weld, Anson's successor, may have donated it to the College General as a decorative piece. Inset: The Crest of the Zeeland Chamber of VOC in Middelburg. Photo: Eugene Quah Ter-Neng

8. The statue of Jesus Christ was gifted by Sir Frederick Weld to the chapel. He visited Mariophile on the eve of the centenary of the founding of the British settlement of Penang with Bishop Gasnier. Photo: Ganesh Kolandaveloo

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2. Archibald Edward Harbord Anson (1920), "About Others and Myself", 1745 to 1920)

3. Bernard Patary (2009), "Homo Apostolicus. La formation du clergé indigène au Collège général des Missions Etrangères de Paris, à Penang (Malaisie), 1808-1968: institution et representation", Unpublished thesis.

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6. Mendel Lazear Peterson (2014), "Encyclopaedia of Markings and Decoration on Artillery (Part 2)"

7. MEP (1886), "Mémorial de La Société des Missions-Étrangères"

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11. MEP, "Set A: Ancient collection, 3A : Collège général de Penang", Volume 33g 1808-1850, via L'Institut de recherche France-Asie (IRFA)

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15. Nico Brink (2020), "Kanonnen van Nederland, Nederlands geschut en andere oude kanonnen in Nederland", Commissioned by Rijksdienst voor het Cultureel Erfgoed (Cultural Heritage Agency of the Netherlands)

16. Wazir Jahan Karim (2013), "The 'Discovery' of Penang Island at Tanjong Tokong before 1785: Bapu Alaidin Meera Hussein Lebai and Captain Francis Light", JMBRAS June 2013 86(1): pg. 1, 8-10,13-14, 16-17, 22, 26.

The chapel, dedicated to the Sacred Heart, was originally supposed to be made entirely of wood, but due to the prohibitive cost, masonry was used instead. Construction took a year.

"The benediction of the new chapel at Mariophile took place on July 13th [1885]" with Bishop Gasnier presiding. Fr. Michel-Clément Laumondais, who spoke English, Malay, Annamite (Vietnamese), Chinese and Japanese, oversaw the construction of the chapel. He was appointed as director on 15 July 1874; his diverse skill set also saw him successively entrusted with a range of duties: "nurse, sacristan and *procureur*. In this latter capacity, he had to execute important works, including a chapel at Mariophile."

The soft natural light filtering through the tall windows of the Chapel of St. Joseph's provided a gentle illumination, enhancing the sense of serenity of the airy interior—a perfect sanctuary for reflection. Above the altar was the statue of Christ gifted by Sir Frederick Weld, which would serve as focal point of the space for more than a century.

We went out to take in the view; the same thing Bishop Gasnier and Sir Frederick Weld had done 138 years ago: "After this reception, we went to enjoy Mariophile's splendid vista; to the West lay the wooded mountain, to the North, East and South the magnificent Penang Strait, to the East the Wellesley province, and forming the backdrop, mountains once again."

Bishop Gasnier's description of this view is still accurate. The vista is indeed splendid, apart from a few tall buildings now blocking part of the sea view.

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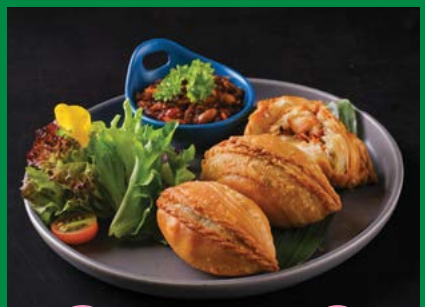

2

KOTA BISTRO REDEFINES THE HONG LEONG BANK EXPERIENCE

ASK ANY MALAYSIAN, and chances are high that they have a fond Penang food story. It might be the memory of tasting Char Koay Teow for the first time, having Laksa at the famous Air Itam roadside stall, or falling in love with Penang Nasi Kandar. It could also possibly just be Penangites droning on about how the food is so much better in Penang.

Whatever it is, Penang has long been a food mecca—where history, heritage and flavours culminate in a rich diversity of unique dishes.

As a bank that has been deeply embedded in the Malaysian financial ecosystem for 120 years, Hong Leong Bank (HLB) knows a thing or two about the importance of preserving heritage and honouring traditions. So, when HLB launched its first "Iconic Branch" in Penang at No.1 Light Street, a beautifully restored heritage building, it made perfect sense to house a café right in the branch. In an age when banking can easily be done online, HLB's Light Street branch goes beyond merely providing customers with banking services and advisory; the branch has been transformed into a community hub, equipped with a beautiful banking hall, a Priority Banking lounge, an art exhibition space, rooms for community events and meetings, as well as Kota Bistro, a Peranakan-themed café that offers both indoor and al fresco seating for casual networking and winding down.

Being "Your Digital Bank Plus Much More", HLB provides an omni-channel presence that integrates digital innovation with personalised, in-person service to cater to the evolving needs of individuals, families, businesses and communities in Penang.

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It also looks to bring the outside in, creating a comfortable space where community events can take place, and where deeper connections can be built. Branches like HLB Light Street break the mould of a traditional bank branch, transforming it instead into a place where families would want to visit, and where networking sessions can be held.

KOTA BISTRO

Kota Bistro is a Peranakan-themed café that serves innovative dishes inspired by local flavours and executed using Western fine-dining techniques. The café, the brainchild of F&B entrepreneur Nigel Law, is run by the acclaimed Kota Dine, which received Michelin Bib Gourmand recognitions in 2023 and 2024 for its "neo-Nyonya menu with a strong East-meets-West concept".

"Penang food deserves to be placed within the highest echelon of international cuisine," Nigel says. "Penang cuisine, and indeed Malaysian cuisine, is widely known to be one of the best, but somehow it hasn't risen the ranks of global gastronomy to be on the same tier as French, Japanese or Italian cuisine. We seem to have a branding problem in that we don't rival the ultra-fine dining cultures in Europe, but we are also not at the top of the mind when it comes to comparisons with more down-to-earth cuisines like Thai or Indian. In fact, the Michelin Guide only came to Malaysia in 2023, despite our deep-rooted gastronomic history.

"With Kota Bistro, we become part of a nationwide movement to introduce gastronomic innovation and creativity to Malaysian cuisine, elevating familiar Penang dishes into fine-dining fare worthy of Michelin recognition."

In its attempt to elevate traditional flavours, Kota Bistro also echoes HLB's conversion of a heritage building into a modern, innovative community banking space. By integrating a fine-dining experience, HLB has transformed the mundane act of banking into one of cultural immersion. Imagine enjoying a meticulously crafted rendition of Nasi Ulam while discussing your financial portfolio, or savouring a delicate Kueh Pie Tee after a productive meeting in the branch's community space. This is banking redefined and refined into a holistic experience for both body and soul.

"That was a major pulling factor for us in deciding to partner with HLB at their Light Street branch," Nigel adds. "They understand the importance of preserving heritage in their digitalisation journey, ensuring that local culture and community roots are not only protected, but celebrated.

"We aim to achieve this with the food that we make, and in the hope that our signature fusion dishes successfully preserve our food culture, start conversations and ultimately catalyse community building right in the heart of Penang."

Nigel's menu at Kota Bistro consists of a wide range of "fancified" traditional Penang dishes, served beside an array of cakes and coffees.

Here are Nigel's Top Five Selections from Kota Bistro's menu:

1. **"Ayam Soto" Capellini**
   Fragrant turmeric and spiced chicken broth, shredded poached chicken, fried potato cake, free-range egg topped with fried shallots and spring onions, served with homemade chilli sauce.
2. **Kota Signature Crème Brûlées**
   Blue pea flower crème brûlée with black glutinous rice and pandan crème brûlée with Cendol.
3. **Malaysian Seafood "Otak-Otak" Pop-Sticker**
   Served with chilli lime mayo and ginger flower.
4. **Nasi Lemak Curry Puff**
   Fragrant coconut milk rice, fried chicken bites and free-range egg served with Sambal Ikan Bilis and crushed peanut.
5. **Trio Asian Capellini**
   Signature Assam Laksa, spicy chilli crab and fragrant chicken rice.

CAPTIONS

1. Kota Signature Crème Brûlées.
2. Nasi Lemak Curry Puff.
3. "Ayam Soto" Capellini.
4. Malaysian Seafood "Otak-Otak" Pop-Sticker.
5. Trio Asian Capellini.
6. The HLB Light Street branch.

Visit Kota Bistro at: Hong Leong Bank Light Street, No. 1, Light Street, George Town, 10200 George Town, Penang.

Open every day, 8am-9.30pm

Please note that these operating hours are different from those of the HLB branch.

6

PENANG'S GASTRONOMIC LANDSCAPE EVOLVES: THE CASE OF 麻辣

MALA AND OTHER SPICES

BY IYLIA DE SILVA

PENANG HAS LONG been a haven for food lovers, renowned for its diverse culinary scene that mirrors its rich cultural heritage. While Nyonya and Jawi Peranakan dishes have traditionally taken centre stage, the recent influx of tourists from China has introduced a new dimension to this vibrant food landscape, leading to an increase in demand for Chinese cuisine.

THE MALA PHENOMENON: A TASTE OF SICHUAN

Mala, a personal favourite of mine, is a combination of the Chinese characters for má (麻) for "numbing" and là (辣) for "spicy", capturing its bold and distinctive flavour profile. This unique sensation comes primarily from Sichuan peppercorns, which contain about 3% hydroxy-alpha-sanshool—the compound responsible for the numbing effect—combined with chilli peppers that deliver the heat. With a heat level ranging from 50,000 to 75,000 Scoville Heat Units (SHU), these chillies can feel even hotter when used whole, seeds and membranes included, intensifying the fiery experience.

The origins of mala are often traced back to the Yangtze River in Chongqing, where boatmen would anchor their vessels and cook soups in earthenware pots. This practical method not only kept them warm but also helped ward off the dampness. Over time, this cooking technique spread across various docks and evolved into a cherished culinary tradition among the Sichuan people, solidifying Chongqing as a hotpot hotspot.

In March 2007, the China Cuisine Association officially designated Chongqing as the "Chinese Hot Pot Capital" during the China (Chongqing) Hot Pot Food Culture Festival, in recognition of its rich hotpot culture and its network of over 3,000 chain stores nationwide.[1]

One notable establishment in Chongqing is Pí Pá Yuán (枇杷园), or Loquat Garden, recognised by the Guinness World Records in 2022 as the world's largest hotpot restaurant. Spanning 3,300m² and featuring nearly 900 tables, this colossal eatery, situated on a large hill in the Nan'an district, can accommodate around 5,800 diners at once, a testament to the massive scale and enduring popularity of hotpot in Chinese culture.[2]

THE CHINESE TOURISM BOOM IN PENANG

As of May 2024, Malaysia welcomed 1,185,050 visitors from China—a staggering 194% increase compared to the same period last year. Tourism, Arts and Culture Minister, Tiong King Sing attributed this spike to the implementation of visa-free travel arrangements between Malaysia and China.[3]

The introduction of new direct flights to Shenzhen and Shanghai has brought the total number of direct flights between Penang and China to 44. China Southern Airlines leads with 14 flights, followed by seven each from Xiamen, Juneyao and Cathay Pacific, and three flights from Hong Kong AirAsia.[4]

This influx has spurred a rise in Chinese restaurants and eateries in Penang, particularly those offering mala hotpot experiences. Some establishments, like Loka Mala Hotpot, even offer halal versions, featuring flavours from Xinjiang. The hotpot's communal dining concept—where families, friends and coworkers can leisurely eat and converse—has been warmly embraced. Local businesses are even adapting their language, using an accent similar to that of mainland China to better cater to tourists.

Recently, Penang welcomed its first branch of Zui Ma Tou Hot Pot, a popular mala hotpot chain, proof of the city's growing connection to mainland Chinese dining culture. This opening also celebrates 50 years of diplomatic relations between Malaysia and China, marking a significant milestone in Penang's evolving food scene.[5]

Some local F&B businesses also experiment by blending mala with Western and Malaysian ingredients. This fusion is driving an exciting evolution in Penang's culinary scene, making it even more diverse and vibrant.

GLOBAL SPICES: A COMPARATIVE LOOK

While mala has made a significant introduction in Penang, each country offers its own unique chilli varieties that add distinct flavours to their dishes. Bird's eye chillies, for instance, are staples in both Thai and Vietnamese cuisines. These small but potent chillies come in green (unripe) and red (ripe) varieties, each adding a different layer of heat. In Thai dishes like Tom Yum, these chillies are balanced by lemongrass, lime and a touch of sweetness, creating a blend of hot, sour, sweet and salty flavours.

For someone who adds chilli in almost everything she eats, I personally love adding bird's eye chillies to Vietnamese Phở, to add a burst of heat. When the chillies are added fresh, it delivers a straightforward heat that complements the soup's delicate, aromatic broth.

Malaysian sambal is another vibrant chilli-based condiment, crucial to the country's cuisine. Varieties like Sambal Ikan Bilis includes crispy anchovies, and is an essential component of the classic Nasi Lemak. Meanwhile, *sambal belacan,* made with fermented shrimp paste, is a daily staple for many Malaysians, often paired with rice and various dishes to add a spicy, pungent and savoury kick. Indonesian varieties, on the other hand, are often slightly oily and creamy. They range from the raw heat of *sambal oelek* to the complex, fermented taste of *sambal terasi,* and the fresh, citrusy notes of *sambal matah.* Together, these contribute to the rich, layered flavours that make Indonesian cuisine so unique.

Indian cuisine features aromatic and flavourful dishes with complex spice blends. A great example is *rasam,* a tangy soup made with tamarind, tomatoes and spices like black pepper and cumin. Well-known to be beneficial for health, the heat in *rasam* is balanced with sourness and earthy warmth, showcasing the depth of Indian spice blends.

While there are still many other chilli blend varieties from around the world not covered here, the ones mentioned highlights the ever-changing nature of Penang's culinary culture, showcasing the continuous fusion of local traditions with global influences. This culinary fusion not only enriches the city's diverse gastronomic offerings, but also illustrates how food can transcend borders, connecting people from around the world.

IYLIA DE SILVA is a law graduate from the University of London. Balancing work and play, she savours every moment by indulging in her passion for food, languages, music and engaging with people from diverse cultures.

FOOTNOTES

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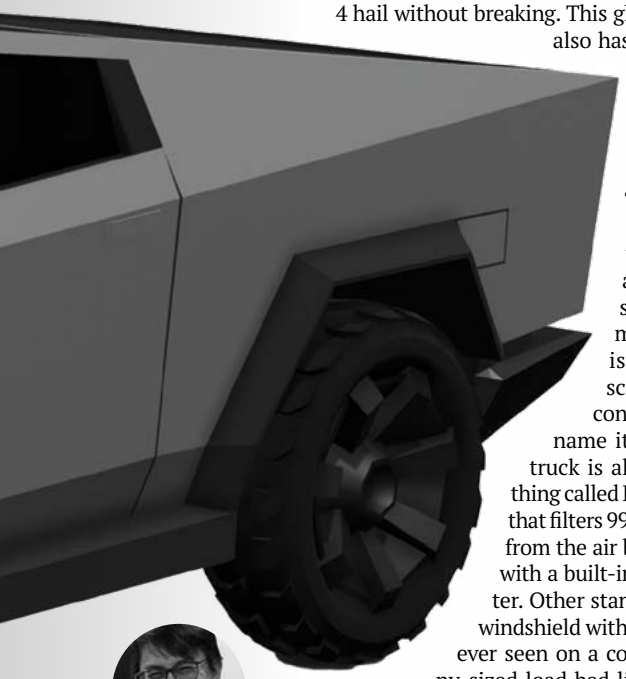
EVs ARE CRUISING INTO THE CITY

BY JOSEPH LAU

MANY MOTORHEADS FLOCKED to Gurney Plaza's main concourse when Tesla Malaysia showcased the Tesla Cybertruck in June, alongside their all-time best-selling Tesla Model 3 and Tesla Model Y.

When I arrived, my eyes instantly fell on the Cybertruck, which looks like something out of a sci-fi movie with its sharp, angular and futuristic design. It is definitely huge in terms of length, width and height, which beats any consumer 4x4 currently on the Asian market—and even by American standards, since our western friends love their F-150s, Silverados, Caddys, Tacomas and so on. Can you imagine if the Cybertruck was made available in Malaysia and our Penang-*lang* buy it? It would be literally impossible to manoeuvre around our narrow streets, and don't get me started about parking issues.

Tesla went down the route of leaving the Cybertruck's external body panels paint-free. Yes, not a drop of paint to colour its body. Instead, it boasts an ultra-hard stainless-steel exoskeleton, which could withstand the swing of a hammer or an intentional ram with a shopping trolley. Also highly advertised was its shatter-resistant armour glass that can withstand the impact of a baseball swung at over 100km/h, and handle Class 4 hail without breaking. This glass fit that is for warfare also has noise reduction properties, also called acoustic glass, for a quiet cabin during drives.



In its cabin, it is clear that their motto is "less is more". It features an 18.5-inch Infinity touchscreen in the front and a 9.4-inch touchscreen at the back. This means almost everything is controlled via touchscreen: from the drive, air conditioning, lighting, you name it. For germophobes, the truck is also equipped with something called Bioweapon Defence Mode that filters 99.97% of airborne particles from the air before entering the cabin with a built-in hospital grade HEPA filter. Other standouts include a massive windshield with the longest wiper blades ever seen on a consumer vehicle, a balcony-sized load bed like most condominiums and very cool lights all around.

Of course, the appearance of the Cybertruck—not for sale in Malaysia unless you are willing to part with RM1.2mil—is to draw the crowd to the new Tesla Model 3. The Tesla Model Y is already a familiar sight on our roads, so it is the Model 3, with its sleek design and powerful performance, which truly steals the show. The blacked-out wheels wrapped in Pirelli P Zero performance tyres, along with the black accents on the door handles, rear spoiler and window frame exude a sporty aura. This isn't just for show; the dual-motor all-wheel-drive powertrain delivers 460 horsepower and accelerates from 0 to 100 km/h in a mere 3.1 seconds, rivalling supercars at a fraction of the cost. The base Model 3 starts at RM181,000, while the top-of-the-line Performance model is priced at RM242,000. To spec it further, an Enhanced Autopilot option for RM16,000 will allow the car to do the driving, lane change and RM32,000 to "smart summon". However, using this is not permitted in Malaysia until further notice.

ELECTRIC VEHICLES ON PENANG ROADS

I currently use a conventional internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicle, and have used a hybrid that includes an electric propulsion system (hybrid vehicle drivetrain). Though I am not an owner of an electric vehicle (EV)—Tesla manufactures only fully electric vehicles, while BYD manufactures EVs and hybrids—EVs definitely perform way better in our city, since traffic jams are a way of life. At stand-still or idle, an EV does not waste energy and only uses its battery power for necessary devices like climate control, screens and phone charging, without any air or noise pollution.

However, many road users who can afford these EVs are still wary about getting one because there is not enough infrastructure to accommodate recharging of the battery—and honestly, Penang-*lang* are also *kia si* (can't take risks). Penang is not EV-friendly yet, but we're getting there with more charging stations and kiosks popping up around the island and mainland at places of interest—mainly shopping malls and designated public parking spots. We're still heavily dependent on ICE vehicles, but people are now open to the idea of having an EV as a non-primary vehicle. The obvious way to get people to use EVs is to increase the number of charging stations around Penang. It is a no-brainer since EV's, like any electronic device, will need time to charge up, and more slots/ports being available will minimise "charging jams".

Authorities should encourage companies to install chargers at workplaces through incentives and subsidies; this will significantly reduce clutter at public charging stations.

Then, there is also talk about "battery swapping" for EVs. I know it's easier said than done since every EV company has their proprietary battery assembly, but it is something to consider. The option is already possible in China, and swapping batteries takes about the same time or less to fill up an empty ICE car.

Looking at the Tesla Cybertruck, I am excited that we are embracing the future; that maybe, just maybe, there can be out-of-this-world models that Malaysians and Southeast Asians can design to fit our tiny, congested roads. Spotting other EVs on the roads today—the Ora Good Cat from Great Wall Motor, the many models of BYD, and of course, the common car brands that have introduced their EV selection such as the Volvo XC40 Recharge EV and the Hyundai Ioniq 5—I am optimistic about our adoption of electric vehicles.

JOSEPH LAU is a car enthusiast who has been passionate about automobiles from a young age. Growing up in Penang, he has spent countless hours tinkering with toy cars and now spends his time on his mini fleet.

WE ARE WHAT THROW AW

BY LIM WAN PHING

T WE AY

HOW MANY OF us like to look through rubbish? Ipoh-born artist Chin Pik Wun is one who would raise her hand. Then, she would tell you to think about the kitchen scraps we throw away daily (and let's not even talk about food wastage—as in cooked food).

As George Town Festival's (GTF) inaugural artist-in-residence this year, Chin wants to raise awareness of landfills, and to re-examine our relationship with food. For one month, she lived and worked in the heritage zone, and the end result was an exhibition called "B for Burung, L for Lalat" as part of the festival.

The KL-based artist was selected out of 87 applicants from 29 countries, and together with Charuwan Noprumpha from Thailand and Juan Arminandi from Indonesia, this first batch of artists aimed to highlight a part of our present reality in their artworks in accordance with the 2024 theme "Here & Now".

2

A MODERN-DAY KITCHEN WASTE MAN

A graphic designer by profession, Chin runs her own boutique studio in KL from her home, surrounded by her cats, the occasional python, a civet cat and parakeets outside her window. An avid bird watcher, she credits her childhood in Ipoh's Taman Canning for inspiring her care for the environment.

"When I was growing up along Jalan Raja Kam, a man with a bucket would come to our house every night in a van," Chin recalls. "I remember him to this very day, down to the shirt that he wore. He was the *sau suey lou*, or kitchen waste man in Cantonese."

The tall, burly man collected residents' kitchen scraps for his pigs, and he would in return give each family a chicken for Chinese New Year. This childhood memory is what inspires Chin's GTF project.

The one-month residency at Journal Georgetown on Muntri Street provided artists with accommodation and studio space, but Chin's workstation had to be relocated to COEX's community kitchen because she needed a fridge to preserve her perishables—potato peels, lettuce leaves, apple cores and mango skins.

"Like the *sau suey lou*, my initial idea was to engage with the local community by going on an 'alms round' every morning to collect food scraps," she explains. "I would be the modern-day kitchen waste man! But some days, the cafés didn't have anything for me. Other days, my small fridge would be filled."

Logistical challenges—as well as the hot weather—did not deter her. However, with a four-week time frame to the exhibition opening on 23 July 2024, Chin quickly got down to work with whatever was available (food waste omakase, anyone?).

RUBBISH CAN BE BEAUTIFUL

The result was a participatory exhibit at Fiesta by Beaverly Chill, a heritage shophouse on Lebuh Noordin. Viewers were invited to pick up a piece of "artistic" food waste and place it on a map of Pulau Burung. When the map is fully covered, the message is simple: "Pulau Burung will be full by 2028, so please think about what you throw away. Also, rubbish can be beautiful if you care to look."

With only a trusty dehydrator, a fridge and some kitchen utensils, the artworks that went on display included a "glass" bowl made of lettuce leaf, a "letter" made from mango and apple pulp, and a "chrysanthemum" made of dried potato peels. The purpose is to put a fresh spin on discarded food, and to rebrand it from just *smelly* and *yucky*.

Chin also adds a touch of playfulness to an otherwise heavy topic like climate justice, as viewers were asked to hold, sniff and guess what the artwork was made of. Entirely eco-friendly materials were used, with no adhesives, fixatives, chemicals or sprays—only natural pectins from boiling and straining fruits.

At the end of the show, the artworks were dropped off at a food waste collection centre in Auto City Juru, on Chin's way back to KL, to complete the organic life cycle.

"My only carbon footprint was the big map of Pulau Burung, which Grow Community Market agreed to adopt," explains Chin, who had made quick friends with the arts community at COEX, and who made sure there was no branding on the map so it could be repurposed.

THE BEST IS YET TO COME

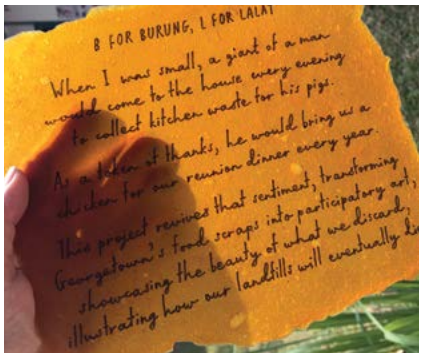
Now that the residency is over, Chin is back at her desk in KL designing a guide for a wildlife agency. Her experience as GTF's inaugural artist-in-residence has ignited her creativity and motivated her to embark on new and exciting projects. "I'm learning Arabic letters now and reading more Chinese content," Chin says, as she looks forward to expanding her repertoire beyond print design.

3

Chin concludes that her exhibit would not have been a success without the friendly community she encountered. Fellow artists stepped in to help at the last minute, while others passed on contacts, and festival-goers were genuinely engaged with her work.

"The arts community in Penang seems unpretentious, earnest and non-elitist, and there is a certain resilience and adaptability in the Penangites I met," she recalls. Chin herself is resilient, adaptable and professional as an artist, despite the playfulness of her works. That is her exact advice to younger artists: "Treat each project as if it is your last" as a way of giving our best.

As the first residency of her career, Chin is grateful for the opportunity, and explains that physical space is essential for art to flourish so that different art forms are available for the public to enjoy, in a way of "democratising" it. She says, "The other thing about spaces is that it draws ideas out of people. So, the best is yet to come for the Penang arts scene!"



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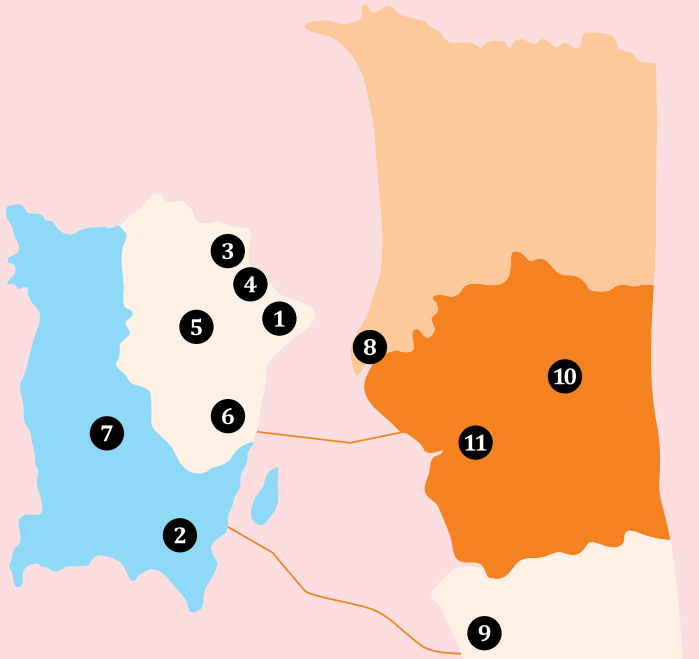
5

CAPTIONS

1. (Cover photo) Setting up the participatory station for the exhibition.
2. All the food scraps were dehydrated using a small dehydrator, seen on the table in this photo. Here, a volunteer is helping with the setup of the exhibition.
3. Placing dehydrated food scraps on the map of Pulau Burung.
4. The artist's "Pig Farmer Story" written on dehydrated fruit.
5. A piece of dehydrated vegetable scrap.

LIM WAN PHING is a freelance writer based in Penang. She has a short story collection, *Two Figures in a Car* published by Penguin SEA.

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 Cafe

◯ 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 Cafe
Le Petit Four Patisserie
More by Arang Coffee
Penang House of Music
Penang Institute
Penang Island City Council
(Komtar Level 3)
Penang Island Municipal Council
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
Penang Skills
Development Centre
Spices by Yin's
Urban Republic

3 Tanjung Bungah
Gusto Cafe
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
Universiti Sains Malaysia,
Hamzah Sendut Library 1
(Main Entrance Foyer)

9 Batu Kawan
IKEA Batu Kawan

10 Bukit Mertajam
Seberang Perai Municipal Council

11 Juru
AUTO CITY Management
Office

READING SPOTS
PENANG

1 George Town
Bricklin Cafe Bar
Consumers' Association
of Penang
Forward College
G Hotel
Kim Haus
Komichi Tea House
Mugshot Cafe
Narrow Marrow
Pik Nik
Penang Public Library
USM Library
Wheeler Cafe

4 Tanjung Tokong
Leo Books

7 Balik Pulau
Botanica Mansion
Nada Natural Farming

8 Butterworth
Artichoke Cafe

9 Batu Kawan
Peninsula College

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