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The Modern NONYA TABLE

The Modern Nonya Table is a compendium of Sylvia Tan's beloved Peranakan recipes for the modern kitchen. Herself a modern Nonya, Sylvia draws from family heritage recipes and updates them, dispensing with tedious techniques but never compromising on the flavours. She helps readers navigate their way through the Peranakan kitchen, explaining the food culture of the Peranakans (or Straits Chinese) and its influences, as well as the fundamental elements of spice pastes, which form the foundation of Peranakan cooking. With Sylvia's guide, mouthwatering favourites like *ayam buah keluak*, *babi pongteh* and *laksa lemak*, to lesser-known dishes such as *loh kai yik*, *charbeck* and *hati babi bungkus*, can be easily prepared by the modern home cook.

Sylvia Tan

The Modern
NONYA TABLE

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Sylvia Tan



With over 70 recipes for authentic Peranakan dishes made with modern methods

Breaks down the fundamentals of spice pastes to help readers understand the foundation of Peranakan cooking

Includes tips on substitutions, recipe variations and how to make the most of ingredients and avoid wastage



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The Modern NONYA TABLE



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Dedication

*In memory of my late grandmother,
Then Neo, who cooked my early meals,
all Peranakan, which I fondly remember
and replicate today years later.*

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Introduction



I am a Peranakan, that is, my forebears came from China generations ago and I was born in Singapore. Although of Chinese origin, I do not speak Chinese, am conversant with Malay and I eat differently from most Chinese.

I like food that is infused with all sorts of influences. For the Peranakans, that means influences from mostly the Malays and the Indonesians, the Indians, Thais, Portuguese and even the then-colonial masters, the British.

And it is no wonder, as historically the Peranakans were local-born descendants of early China-born settlers in the British Straits Settlements. Straits Chinese males were also known as Babas and females, Nonyas.

One Singapore commentator, Lim Boon Keng, described Chinese Peranakans as “a new race... created by the fusion of Chinese and Malay blood” and there was indeed some

intermarriage between Chinese men and local women. Lim also observed that the Peranakans had “lost touch with China in every respect, except that they continued to uphold Chinese customs, and follow, in variously modified forms, the social and religious practices of their forefathers”.

But they were a class apart, not only because of cultural attributes, but also due to their social and economic position. They were predominant in the commercial sectors and in closer contact with British administrators and merchants than other Chinese. They enjoyed the advantages that came with their knowledge of native ways, their experience of mixing and working with the British, and their command of the English language.

These advantages made them useful as intermediaries between Europeans and the local people; and between them and the new arrivals.

Their position as a leisured class therefore allowed their womenfolk to refine their domestic skills and crafts of embroidery, beadwork and, of course, cooking—to a fine art.

FIRST FUSION FOOD

Believed to date back some 500 years, Nonya food or *lauk embok embok*, may be called the first fusion food. It offers an extensive and complex array of appetisers, main courses, snacks, one-dish meals, side dishes, sauces, pickles, cakes and desserts.

While it borrows heavily from both Malay and Chinese cuisines, it is different from either, for the Nonyas love to gild the lily.

The use of pungent and aromatic roots, herbs and spices follow the Malay style, yet many of the traditional ingredients of Chinese food are also found in the cuisine. (In fact, despite the dishes having Malay names, many of them include

pork, which is forbidden to Muslim Malays.)

Peranakan recipes indeed make wonderful and clever combinations of spices and herbs such as *lengkuas* (galangal) and *kunyit* (turmeric); aromatic leaves of kaffir lime, *pandan* and *kesom*; and thickeners such as candlenuts and shallots. Flavour enhancers like chillies and *belacan* are integral ingredients. *Belacan* is like a stock cube. A tiny amount of this prawn paste adds sweetness to meats, intensity to vegetables and creates a flavourful base for sauces.

But the Peranakans are firmly Chinese, and so Chinese products

such as dried mushrooms and fish maws, bamboo shoots, soy sauces, preserved soy bean paste or *taucheo* and other soy products are also found in their recipes.

Meats used would be pork, of course, chicken, fish and prawns, but seldom lamb or beef because the southern Chinese, who formed many of our early forebears, did not like the strong gamey smell of such meats.

Vegetables would include Chinese greens such as cabbage, long beans and gourds, as well as sour fruit, green mango, *belimbing* or sour carambola, pineapple, binjai and petai bean, which are all

favoured by Southeast Asians.

Preparations include marination of meats and employing a combination of different cooking methods—boiling and then frying in one dish, such as in *babi assam garam* (tamarind pork) or *itek* or *ayam sioh* (coriander duck or chicken).

But they also do mean stir-fries as in their versions of *char siew* and *babi tempura* (Portuguese influence here), a soy and lime pork; and produce old-fashioned braises as in *babi pongteh* (pork and bamboo shoots in soy bean paste), *chap chye* (a cabbage stew) and *babi assam* (spiced tamarind pork).



Re-enacted Peranakan wedding for the stage.



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Cold Tauhu with Dried Prawns and Fresh Ginger Topping

A forgotten dish, which my grandmother used to whip up for lunch. It was plain bean curd topped with chopped dried prawns and ginger, then dressed with black soy sauce and vinegar. Strangely, the Chinese have no such dish, even though all the ingredients used are Chinese.

For 4 as part of a meal

- 1 cake silken bean curd
- 1 Tbsp dried prawns (shrimps)
- 1 thumb-size knob ginger, peeled
- 1 Tbsp dark soy sauce, or to taste
- 1 Tbsp rice vinegar, or to taste

GARNISH

- Coriander (cilantro)
- Sliced red chillies

Remove bean curd carefully from the pack so as not to break it. Place on a plate with kitchen towels in the refrigerator to drain.

In the meantime, wash dried prawns quickly under a tap, pat dry and process in a blender. Do the same with the ginger. This chopped mix makes the topping for the bean curd.

Place drained bean curd on a plate. Top with the chopped prawns and ginger mixture. Drizzle dark soy sauce and rice vinegar over and serve at once, garnished, if you like, with coriander leaves and sliced red chillies.

Tip

This is a versatile dish; you could eat a whole cake of bean curd to replace a meal if you're on a diet, or cut it into squares and offer it as a starter to a meal.

Tauhu Titek

Essentially a Chinese bean curd soup, here the flavours are heightened with a light spice paste and salted fish bones! They give complex layers of smoky flavour to the broth, traditionally made with water, but I use prawn stock—just water in which prawn peelings have been boiled.

For 6–8

300 g (10 ½ oz) pork, minced
100 g (3 ½ oz) small prawns (shrimps), peeled and chopped fine
½ tsp light soy sauce
Ground white pepper to taste
4 Tbsp water
1 Tbsp oil
2 litres (64 fl oz / 8 cups) prawn stock or water
3 salted fish bones, rinsed
2 cakes soft bean curd, drained and cut into squares
1 tsp salt
A pinch of sugar

GARNISH

Spring onion (scallion) as needed, sliced diagonally
Coriander (cilantro) as needed, plucked

TITEK SPICE PASTE

1 cup shallots, peeled
2 red chillies
1 Tbsp dried prawn (shrimp) paste (*belacan*)
4 candlenuts

Make spice paste by either pounding the ingredients till fine in the mortar or blending in a food processor. You can double or triple the quantities and freeze the remainder for another use.

Place minced pork and prawns in a basin. Season with soy sauce and white pepper. Add water to loosen the mixture. Leave aside covered in the refrigerator.

Heat oil in a pot and gently fry spice paste till it softens. Add stock or water and bring to the boil. Add salted fish bones. Turn down fire and simmer, about 30 minutes.

Add meat mixture, loosely formed into balls. When balls float, they are done. Then add bean curd squares and turn off the fire. Season with salt and sugar or to taste.

Serve garnished with spring onion and coriander. Offer *sambal* chilli on the side.

Tip

Try to obtain the bones of the salted *ikan kurau* (threadfin) to flavour the soup. The ones made in Penang are best. If not, use a couple of slices of the salted fish meat instead.



Ayam Tempura

Chicken in Soy Sauce and Lime Juice

This is a dish with a history, for this idea of marinating meats in lime juice (or vinegar) probably stemmed from the Portuguese—who once lived in these parts and had a habit of curing meats in this manner. Here, fresh kaffir lime and lime zest also up the aromatic ante.

For 4–6

- 1 Tbsp oil
- 1 large purple (or Bombay) onion, peeled and sliced
- 4 chicken breasts, sliced thickly
- 1 Tbsp dark soy sauce
- $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt
- 1 Tbsp sugar, or to taste
- 125 ml (4 fl oz / $\frac{1}{2}$ cup) water
- 2 red chillies, sliced
- 4 kalamansi limes (*limau kesturi*), or to taste, juice extracted

GARNISH

- 4–5 kaffir lime leaves

Heat oil in a wok and fry onion till soft.

Brown chicken pieces. Season with soy sauce, salt and sugar. Allow to caramelise, then pour water over the meat to deglaze the pan—that is, to obtain a sauce from the pan juices.

When chicken is tender, add the chillies and squeeze lime juice over just before serving. For extra fragrance, garnish with kaffir lime leaves or lime zest. Serve with plain rice.

Tip

The same sauce could be used for fish, pork or even whole fried eggs.



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Ikan Geram Assam

This is again a spiced gravy, but the spice paste is browned first, unlike the boiled *pedas* gravies. Cooked with fish or large prawns, you may add sautéed tomatoes, ladies fingers, aubergines or better still, that sour fruit called *binjai* to it, in which case, increase the sugar level.

For 8–10

2 Tbsp tamarind paste
1.25 litres (40 fl oz / 5 cups) water
15 shallots, peeled
1 Tbsp dried prawn (shrimp) paste (*belacan*)
2–4 red chillies
5 candlenuts
1 thumb-size knob turmeric, peeled
10 slices galangal (*lengkuas*), peeled
1 Tbsp oil
1 stalk lemon grass, white part only, bruised
600 g (1 lb 5 1/3 oz) whole fish or fish steaks (sea bass, snapper, pomfret or *batang*), rubbed with 1/2 tsp salt
4 tomatoes, halved
1 tsp salt
1 tsp sugar, or to taste

Mix tamarind paste with water. Strain to rid it of seeds and grit. Set aside tamarind water.

To get spice paste, blend shallots, dried prawn paste, chillies, candlenuts, turmeric and galangal in a food processor till fine or pound in a mortar.

Heat oil in a pot and fry spice paste over a low fire till fragrant. Sprinkle a few drops of water if it is browning too fast. Add the bruised lemon grass stalk.

After a few minutes, add the tamarind water and increase the heat.

When gravy comes to the boil, add the fish, then the tomatoes. Add salt and sugar, then taste to adjust seasoning.

Serve immediately with rice and some *sambal belacan* (page 157).

Tip

You can shorten the cooking time by resorting to using bottled spice pastes. To 1/2 cup bottled *sambal* chilli (taste to check the spice level and add 1 finely chopped onion if needed), add 1 tsp turmeric powder and 1 Tbsp galangal powder. Then proceed with the rest of the recipe.

Bottled tamarind purée solves the chore of making tamarind water. Merely add the same amount specified in the recipe to the pot and thin down with water.



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