About the Author

Lee Geok Boi is a freelance writer of popular Singapore history, a former journalist and an established cookbook author. Cooking, collecting and experimenting with recipes has been a life-long passion that started in her teens. She graduated with an MA in philosophy from the University of Singapore (now National University of Singapore) but maintains a lively curiosity about the physical world around her. She once took up the challenge to go around the world without flying and succeeded. Her travels have given her insights into the food of different cultures and the tremendous possibilities from combining simple ingredients to create amazing flavours.

While researching the Straits-born community for this cookbook, Lee Geok Boi realised that the culinary delights typically classified as Peranakan were more than just Straits Chinese. It is also Eurasian, Chetti Melakan, Indonesian Chinese, Malay and Indonesian. The trove of salads, curries, soups, stews, *kueh-kueh*, cakes and biscuits are all found in the different branches of the Straits-born communities who were drawn to this island at the crossroads of world trade. They show the histories of exploration, economic imperatives and colonisation that go back to the days of the Maritime Silk Road. Although there are differences, Straits-born cuisines share many common elements and dishes. Fragrant local roots and leaves, chillies originally from Central America, and spices from the famed Spice Islands and South and West Asia were ground up to prepare iconic dishes that became family favourites through the generations.

Discover the rich history and unique culinary flavours of the Straits-born communities with Lee Geok Boi *In A Straits-Born Kitchen.*

visit our website at:
www.marshallcavendish.com

Marshall Cavendish Cuisine

COOKERY
ISBN 978-981-4928-76-2
9 789814 928762

LEE GEOK BOI

In a Straits-Born Kitchen

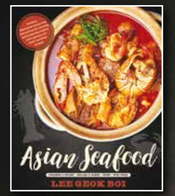
Marshall Cavendish Cuisine

In a Straits-Born Kitchen

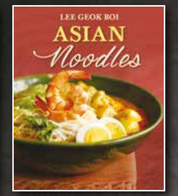
LEE GEOK BOI

Marshall Cavendish

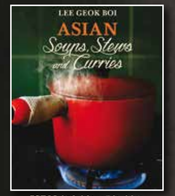
Also by Lee Geok Boi



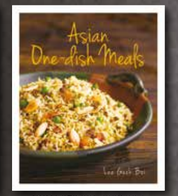
ISBN 978-981-4779-51-7



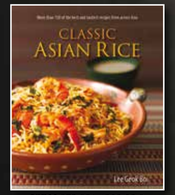
ISBN 978-981-4561-51-8



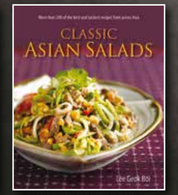
ISBN 978-981-4561-03-7



ISBN 978-981-4398-38-1



ISBN 978-981-4302-02-9



ISBN 978-981-261-632-6

In a Straits-Born Kitchen

LEE GEOK BOI

Marshall Cavendish Cuisine

Some of the recipes in this collection were first published in other titles by Lee Geok Boi: *Classic Asian Noodles,* Marshall Cavendish, 2007; *Classic Asian Salads,* Marshall Cavendish, 2009; *Classic Asian Rice*, Marshall Cavendish, 2010; *Asian Soups, Stews & Curries,* Marshall Cavendish, 2014; *Asian Seafood,* Marshall Cavendish, 2017

Published by Marshall Cavendish Cuisine
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International

A member of the
Times Publishing Group

Other Marshall Cavendish Offices:
Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 800 Westchester Ave, Suite N-641, Rye Brook, NY 10573, USA • Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 16th Floor, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Name(s): Lee, Geok Boi.
Title: In a Straits-born kitchen / Lee Geok Boi.
Description: Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Cuisine, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references.
Identifier(s): OCN 1232438545 | ISBN 978-981-49-2876-2 (paperback)
Subject(s): LCSH: Cooking, Peranakan. | Cooking, Malaysian. | Cooking, Singaporean. | Cooking, Indonesian. | LCGFT: Cookbooks.
Classification: DDC 641.5959–dc23

Printed in Singapore

Contents

The Straits-Born: An Introduction

Straits-born cuisine shows the histories of exploration, international trade, migration and colonisation. It is the story of unique communities formed at the cross-roads of the fabled Maritime Silk Road. Although many think of Straits-born as "Peranakan Chinese", the Malay word "Peranakan" means "local born", and the Peranakan community consists of Penang Chinese, Melaka Chinese, Eurasians (Portuguese, Dutch and English), Chetti Melakans aka Chetti/Chitty, Singapore Straits Chinese and Indonesian Chinese, when spoken in the context of colonial era Singapore. The communities were defined partly by their cultural practices such as their womenfolk wearing the *sarong kebaya* on formal occasions and the use of a Creole dialect but not necessarily. Today, they are defined by their heritage recipes. Straits-born cuisine could only have come about because of where the cooks were from, the essential ingredients that were on hand easily, and where there were already established ancient culinary traditions in the use of these ingredients. It is a cuisine that grew out of the multitude of natural resources and plenty enjoyed by ancient Island South East Asia of which Singapore is a part. Straits-born cuisine bloomed in Singapore because it became the meeting place of the Straits-born diaspora whose cooking was further shaped by the prosperity created on the island.

When modern Singapore was founded by the English East India Company in 1819, it was the last of the three Straits Settlements and it attracted migrants from the older established Straits-born communities. Melaka had been a fabled trading emporium in the 15th century and Penang had been founded in 1786.The hotly contested Spice Islands (once Moluccas, today Maluku) and the rest of the Indonesian Archipelago were coming together as part of the Dutch colonial empire. The bazaars of Melaka saw silks from China, cottons from India and edible and non-edible products from all over the region — what the history books called "Straits produce" — were the trade goods of the ships that flocked to the port. The arrival of the Europeans in South East Asia starting with the Portuguese and Spanish in the 16th century brought produce native to Central and South America, the most significant being Central American chillies. Introduced by the Portuguese to South India when they captured Goa, and Melaka, chillies changed the culinary flavours of not just South Indians and South East Asians, but also far-flung Korea. Imagine South Indian curries, kimchi or *sambal belacan* without chilli?

The people of Island South East Asia were not devoid of fabulous flavours. There was pepper (*Piper nigrum*) originally native to India, but which was already being grown in the Indonesian islands since the days of the Buddhist-Hindu kingdoms in Java and Sumatra in the 12th and 13th centuries. Turmeric (*Curcuma longa*), cardamoms (*Elettaria Cardamomum*), two members of the ginger family, were originally native to India, as were tamarind (*Tamarindus indica*) and mangoes (*Mangifera indica*). The trade connections that brought Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism to South East Asia also introduced these essential ingredients to Straits-born cooking. The Indian and Arab trading ships also carried the seed spices from further afield: coriander (*Coriander sativum*), Italy; cumin (*Cuminum cyminum*), West Asia; fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*), southern Europe and West Asia; fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*), southern Europe and West Asia; cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*), Sri Lanka; Chinese cassia (*Cinnamomum cassia*), southern China. The fabled Spice Islands had nutmeg (*Myristica fragrans*), candlenuts aka *buah keras* (*Aleurites moluccana*) and cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*). South East Asia itself had several native gingers and numerous fragrant plants and flowers. Lemongrass (*Cymbopogon*)/*serai* is a South East Asian native, as is galangal (*Alpinia galanga*) aka *lengkuas* aka *lam keor* (Hokkien meaning blue ginger) aka greater galangal, both almost de rigueur in Straits-born cooking. Ginger (*Zingiber officinale*) was common from India across South East Asia to China. Two examples of fragrant leaves used in Straits-born cooking are kaffir lime aka *makrut* lime aka *limau perut* (*Citrus hystrix*) and pandan leaves (*Pandanus amaryllifolius*)/screwpine. Flowers are used too. There is the blue of the pea flower aka butterfly pea flower (*Clitoria ternatea*) aka *bunga talang* in rice desserts and the superb fragrance of the torch ginger bud (*Etlingera elatior*) in salads and seafood curries. Coconut palms as well as several species of palms including the sago palm were native to South and South East Asia and coconut-enriched dishes go back centuries.

It was trade that brought the South Indians, Hokkiens and Europeans to the ports of South East Asia. Indians from the southern coasts of the subcontinent were amongst the very earliest traders starting circa 4th century, bringing with them more than trade goods. They brought Hindu and Buddhist cultures to South East Asia. Bali is Hindu to this day, and Java's Prambanan and Borobodur, Cambodia's Angkor Wat complex testify to these faiths. The two great Hindu epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, are embedded in traditional Javanese, Thai and Cambodian cultural iconography and performing arts. The Srivijaya trading emporium founded circa 11th century to which the ancient history of Singapore is linked, was a Hindu-Buddhist polity. Thus was formed the community of Chetti Melakans who originated from these early Tamil traders and who are today the smallest of the Straits-born communities. The largest Straits-born community, the Straits Chinese, evolved from the Hokkien traders who were part of the growing maritime networks between southern China and South Asia from as early as the 11th century. Fujian on the South China Sea coast was once described as "eight parts mountains, one part water and one part farmland". Looking towards the sea came naturally. Hokkien was the lingua franca in the early overseas Chinese communities in this region. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the Portuguese and Dutch were the next groups of men to descend on South East Asia. Like the Tamils and Hokkiens, the men married local women who, by then could also be Chetti, Melaka Chinese or Malay women, thus creating the Portuguese and Dutch Eurasian community. These women kept their traditional South East Asian cooking, but tweaked it to suit their menfolk and their religious leanings. Thus evolved Straits-born cuisine with its roots in regional culinary essentials, but also incorporating the diverse range of new ingredients from international trade and the arrival of the Europeans. After 1819, the Straits-born diaspora from Penang, Melaka and Semarang to Singapore saw the development of a Singapore Straits-born cuisine that brought together their heritage recipes — as seen in the growing range of Straits-born cookbooks.




Making Fresh Coconut Cream (Santan)

Before the availability of freshly ground coconut from the market and later packaged coconut cream, grating coconut on an old-fashioned scraper was dangerous work. The scraper was a piece of thick aluminium with spikes gouged out of it and injuries were not unknown. There is no substitute for freshly grated coconut and fresh *santan* in certain Straits-born delectables. Snacks and desserts like *ondeh-ondeh* must be coated with fresh grated coconut and *chendol*, sago pudding or *pulot hitam* must be topped with fresh *santan*, not packaged coconut cream. The same goes for some *kerabu-kerabu* (salads).

Grated coconut may be squeezed without any water to get a thick, rich and very tasty cream called *patti* although only the most traditional cooks insist on making *patti* today. The word is even seldom heard nowadays. Two squeezes are the norm, with the first squeeze made with a small amount of water to get *santan* or first milk. The second squeezing is simply coconut milk or second milk, and very thin third milk is also possible and useful for hard boiling. While *santan* is usually added at or near the end of cooking, the second or third milk is added early in the cooking.

Wet market grated coconut is convenient, but may sometimes be a little off because of Singapore's hot humid climate. One way around this problem is to buy the grated coconut early in the morning and refrigerate it as soon as you get home. Another way is to extract the *santan* as soon as you get home, add some salt to it and refrigerate until needed. If it's only grated coconut that you need, some cooks suggest mixing in a bit of salt and steaming the coconut lightly. Cool, then refrigerate until needed. I find that freezing grated coconut is another way to keep the coconut fresh. To get a good milk from frozen coconut, add warm water to the cold or defrosted grated coconut. To thicken the first milk, extract the second or even third milk, combine the two and refrigerate it. The cream will rise to the top and form a layer that is easily scooped out to thicken the first milk.

If you have a powerful blender that can crush ice cubes, make your own fresh *santan*. Get a whole coconut with the skin still on from a wet market. If the coconut has no cracks and the water inside won't leak out, the coconut will stay fresh outside the fridge. If there are cracks, it is best to either refrigerate the nut whole or in pieces. Whichever way, first rinse the nut clean. To break it open, place the cleaned nut in a large bowl and pierce one of the cracks with a sharp knife. The water can be enjoyed right off. Trim the brown skin before storing or just before processing. Either way, immerse the pieces of coconut in a bag of fresh water with a bit of salt added and refrigerate until needed. It will keep fresh for up to a week, but change the soaking water every couple of days.

Coconut Cream and Coconut Milk from Grated Coconut

Makes about 200 ml (7 fl oz / 4/5 cup) coconut cream and 250 ml (8 fl oz / 1 cup) coconut milk

The richness of the *santan* depends on the age of the coconut as well as the amount of water added. Older nuts have a richer cream and stronger flavour. If it is easier, squeeze the *santan* out through a piece of cheesecloth (on right).

300 g (11 oz) grated coconut

Coconut Cream
150 ml (5 fl oz / 2/3 cup) warm water

Coconut Milk
250 ml (8 fl oz / 1 cup) warm water

1. Combine grated coconut and 150 ml (5 fl oz / 2/3 cup) warm water in a bowl. Mix and squeeze the coconut a few times.
2. Place a sieve over another bowl. Using both hands, take a large handful of coconut and squeeze the milk into the bowl. Set aside the squeezed handful of coconut in a separate bowl for the second milk. Repeat until all the coconut cream has been extracted.
3. To get the second milk, add 250 ml (8 fl oz / 1 cup) water to the coconut and repeat squeezing over a sieve.

Coconut Oil Lees

Preparation and cooking: 30 minutes

There was a time when Straits-born housewives made their own coconut oil from freshly squeezed coconut cream. Freshly made coconut oil is super fragrant as is the lees at the bottom of the pan once the oil has been extracted. Coconut oil lees adds instant richness to a dry sambal, curry or *kerabu*. Better yet, it can be made with packaged coconut cream.

Packaged coconut cream

1. Place packaged coconut cream in a saucepan and bring to the boil. Turn down the heat and simmer gently, stirring and scraping up the bottom of the pot until the oil comes out and the lees starts turning brown. Take care not to burn the lees. It should be a nice shade of brown.
2. Keep the lees together with the oil in a box. Refrigerate until needed or freeze it.

Rice and Noodles

Rice is Nice and Noodles Too

Traditional rice-eating cultures cover a huge geographical swathe stretching from India to Japan. All of South East Asia is rice-eating and where there is land for agriculture, rice is grown — even when terraces have to be cut into mountain slopes for rice to be grown. While the hill tribes of South East Asia grow short-grain rice (*Oryza sativa japonica*), the common rice everywhere else is long-grain rice (*Oryza sativa indica*). This is the rice that takes pride of place in daily and celebratory meals in all the Straits-born communities. Plain boiled rice is eaten with elaborate or simple side dishes. For special occasions, the rice may be dressed up in a variety of ways to get a biryani or the simple yet delicious coconut rice or *nasi lemak* (rich rice). Rice-eating cultures even eat rice for breakfast and little packets of *nasi lemak* wrapped in banana leaf are still sold for breakfast in coffee shops throughout Singapore. *Nasi lemak* makes a great weekend special and is even enjoyed stone-cold. Sides are easily increased for unexpected guests and leftovers are just as delicious. Grandma and Grandpa can sit down to mahjong sessions and the younger folks can take care of themselves meal-wise. Other flavoured rice such as biryanis and *nasi kebuli* are also good for family gatherings and celebrations. Who would say "no" to prawn biryani, fond as so many of us are of prawns? And glutinous rice plays a prominent role in not only Straits-born desserts and treats.

Where there is rice, there are rice noodles and more than that. The Straits-born have elaborate rice noodle dishes — laksa, *mee siam*, *kerabu bee hoon* (a very Penang way of preparing rice noodles), fried noodles and noodle soups. Wheat noodles are just as popular. Hokkien mee aka yellow mee aka cooked wheat noodles get star status for Chinese New Year and birthday celebrations in many families. In mine, every Chinese New Year's Eve dinner had to include a plate of fried Hokkien mee which everyone had to eat, even if only a token mouthful. "*Jia tng mia*" my mother would say in Hokkien, meaning "eat for a long life", although I have never needed any persuading to eat noodles of any kind.

Straits-born celebrations were always with a huge spread of soups, curries, salads, *acar*, chutneys, rice and noodles laid out on a long table literally, a *tok panjang*. The term came to be synonymous for celebratory meals. Guests took turns to enjoy the food which would be constantly replenished. The seniors and men were the first to sit at the table, followed by the women and children. The communal nature of all Straits-born dishes made them perfect for a *tok panjang*.

Prawn Biryani

Preparation and cooking: 1½ hours

This is a Straits-born creation inspired by how the Straits-born communities in Singapore love these crustaceans, in part because they get them very fresh and in different sizes. This is another no-fuss biryani that can be prepared in a rice cooker. If, like me, you stock up on prawn shells and heads whenever you cook prawns, there will always be enough in the freezer to make the stock for this biryani.

400 g (14 oz / 2 cups) basmati/ long-grain rice

2 tsp red chilli powder

1 tsp ground coriander

2 tsp salt

1 kg (2 lb 3 oz) shelled prawns with tails on

4 Tbsp + 2 Tbsp cooking oil

200 g (7 oz) onions, peeled and finely sliced

1 packed cup coriander leaves, chopped

Prawn Stock

Prawn shells and heads

1 litre (32 fl oz / 4 cups) water

2 stalks lemongrass, bruised

1 tsp cracked white pepper

6-cm (2½-in) stick cinnamon

6 green cardamom pods

Rasam

½-1 Tbsp tamarind paste

500 ml (16 fl oz / 2 cups) water

1 Tbsp cooking oil

¼ tsp ground black/white pepper

½ tsp ground cumin

3 dried red chillies, seeded and cut into several pieces

¾ tsp salt

2 ripe tomatoes, cubed

1. Make prawn stock ahead of time so it can cool before using. Combine all the ingredients in a stockpot and bring to the boil. Turn down the heat and simmer for 15 minutes. Scoop out the solids and discard. Set stock aside to cool.
2. Rinse the rice, then soak in water for an hour.
3. Mix chilli powder, ground coriander and 1 tsp salt with shelled prawns and marinate in the fridge for at least 30 minutes or overnight.
4. Heat 4 Tbsp cooking oil in a frying pan and fry sliced onions until nicely browned. Remove half the browned onions from the frying pan and set aside.
5. Add marinated prawns to the pan and sauté until prawns begin to change colour. Turn off the heat.
6. Put drained rice into the rice cooker, add 750 ml (24 fl oz / 3 cups) cooled prawn stock, the remaining 2 Tbsp cooking oil and 1 tsp salt.
7. When rice is ready, stir in prawns, chopped coriander leaves and reserved browned onions. Cover and rest rice for 30 minutes or so.
8. Serve hot with rasam, *urap timun* (page 38), *acar* (page 26) and/ or pineapple *kerabu* (page 39).
9. To prepare rasam, mix tamarind paste with water and strain. Combine tamarind juice with the remaining ingredients in a saucepan and bring to the boil. Simmer until tomatoes are very soft. Adjust the seasoning to taste.

Penang Birthday Mee Sua

Preparation and cooking: 1 hour Makes 1 serving

I always got this for dinner, with a boiled egg that had been dyed red, on my birthday when I was a child. I used to look forward to this treat because I liked the texture of kidney and that of the slippery, soft wheat thread noodles! Kidneys need to be well-cleaned to taste good.

1 pig's kidney
1/2 tsp cornflour
1 Tbsp minced pork
1/4 tsp ground white pepper
1/2 tsp salt
1/2 Tbsp cooking oil
2 tsp chopped garlic
1/2 Tbsp shredded ginger
500 ml (16 fl oz / 2 cups) pork/chicken stock
30 g (1 oz) pig's liver, sliced
50 g (1 3/4 oz) fine wheat vermicelli (*mee sua*)
Chopped spring onions
1 hard-boiled egg, dyed red with food colouring
Dark soy sauce (optional)
Sliced fresh red chilli (optional)

1. To clean kidney, split in half crosswise and trim off smelly, white renal tubes. Using a sharp knife, score outside of kidney with a criss-cross pattern, then cut into bite-size rectangles. Soak in several changes of water until kidney no longer smells of urine.
2. Mix cornflour into minced pork with a touch of pepper and a pinch of salt. Form mixture into 2 or 3 small balls.
3. Heat oil in a saucepan and sauté garlic and ginger until garlic begins to brown. Add stock and season with salt and pepper. Bring to the boil.
4. Add pork balls, liver and kidney slices and cook for a minute.
5. Rinse noodles quickly under running water before adding to pot. Bring to the boil and cook for a minute.
6. Garnish with spring onions and serve immediately with a dyed hard-boiled egg and a dip of dark soy sauce, with slices of fresh red chilli, if preferred.

Sweet Birthday Noodles

Preparation and cooking: 30 minutes Makes 1 serving

A friend with a Penang-born mother always got this sweet *mee sua* soup as a birthday breakfast when she was young. Lilian Lane in *Malayan Cookery Recipes* gave a similar recipe also as a birthday treat, but with two hard-boiled eggs in the soup.

1 Tbsp sugar
1 pandan leaf, knotted
250 ml (8 fl oz / 1 cup) water
25 g (1 oz) fine wheat vermicelli (*mee sua*)
1 egg

1. Put sugar, pandan leaf and water in a pot and bring to the boil. When sugar has dissolved, remove and discard pandan leaf.
2. Rinse noodles quickly under running water, then add to boiling syrup. Return syrup to the boil, lower heat and simmer for a minute.
3. Crack egg into pot and turn off heat. Cover pot to semi-cook egg for 2 minutes, until white begins to solidify. Dish out into a bowl without breaking egg yolk and serve immediately.

Pictured: Penang Birthday Mee Sua

Seafood

The Bounty of the Seas

The Straits-born originated from Island South East Asia, a region with long coastlines. In the 14th and 15th centuries, Singapore's original inhabitants, the *Orang Laut* (Malay for Sea People) even lived on water either in boats or water villages in sheltered coves. The seas have always been the region's source of sustenance and riches. The seas not only connected the peoples of the region to the world, but they were also responsible for creating the Straits-born communities. Since ancient times, explorers, traders and colonisers came on sailing ships in search of trade and economic opportunities. The ports of South East Asia were the crossroads for international traders east and west of the region.

The bounty of the seas set up some of the earliest links between the region, South India and China. From ancient times, Chinese traders came south in search of tropical trade goods such as dried sea cucumbers (*tripang*), salted fish and shrimps, seaweed aka agar-agar as well as fragrant woods and exotic animals. Fishing in the region has long been a very traditional industry, as is the drying and salting of fish, shrimps and squid. *Grago* (krill) would be made into *belacan* or fermented into *cinchalok*.

The seas brought new spices, herbs, fruits, vegetables to the bazaars of South East Asian ports. Cooks experimented with and made them essential in their cooking. Imported seed spices were combined with introduced and native roots and gingers with chillies and seafood. The cooking of seafood developed into a fine art, but many also made much of the freshness of the seafood by simply grilling or steaming. Straits-born seafood cooking ranges from simple boiled or grilled prawns and crabs, to fried, stuffed and grilled fish, curries, soups, stews and *sambals*, pickled and fermented seafood, condiments from seafood, and garnishes for rice and noodles. Prawns are stars in celebratory meals. The rich variety of fish yielded numerous fish-based dishes whether simple or complex. All are delicious.

If there is one thing that characterises Straits-born cuisine, it is this prominence given to seafood in small and big ways. One small but critical way is in the role of *belacan* in Straits-born cooking. The big way is in the huge array of fresh seafood available to a Straits-born cook in Singapore every day. Even in the time of Covid-19, it has been possible to buy fresh clams, crabs, prawns, shrimps and fish by the kilos. Straits-born cooks are united by the loving attention given to seafood and the wide array of similar yet different culinary creations that have emerged over time in the communities.

Asam Fish Head Curry

Preparation and cooking: 1 hour

The head of any large fish usually has the best-tasting morsels of flesh — and there are people who love the gelatinous eyeballs, too. With such a well-developed community taste for fish head, getting one at the market means going early or asking your favourite fishmonger to keep one for you. If a fish head is not available, use the spice paste to cook fish steaks or small whole fish, but halve the quantity of the spice paste or make and freeze.

100 g (3½ oz) tamarind paste

1.25 litres (40 fl oz / 5 cups water)

4 Tbsp cooking oil

1½ tsp salt

500 g (1 lb 1½ oz) aubergines (eggplants), trimmed and thickly sliced

1–1.5 kg (2 lb 3 oz–3 lb 5 oz) fish head

2 torch ginger buds, halved/ 10 large sprigs laksa leaves (*daun kesom*)

Spice Paste

200 g (7 oz) shallots, peeled

2 cloves garlic, peeled

5-cm (2-in) knob turmeric, scraped and sliced

2 large stalks lemongrass, peeled and thinly sliced

2.5-cm (1-in) knob galangal, scraped and thinly sliced

6 candlenuts (*buah keras*), broken up coarsely

1½ tsp dried shrimp paste (*belacan)*

30 g (1 oz) dried red chillies, seeded and softened in water

4 Tbsp water

Note

Any leftover gravy may be poured over blanched bean sprouts and boiled Hokkien mee/fine rice vermicelli (*bee hoon*) for a special treat.

1. Make spice paste by blending all the ingredients together in a food processor until fine. Set aside.
2. Mix tamarind paste with 1.25 litres (40 fl oz / 5 cups) water and strain away the solids. Set aside tamarind juice.
3. Heat oil in a large saucepan and fry spice paste until fragrant and oil rises to the top.
4. Add tamarind juice, salt and aubergines and bring to the boil. Turn down the heat and simmer until vegetables are soft or to your preferred texture.
5. Place fish head in the pot with the eye facing upwards if it is half a fish head. Add torch ginger halves/laksa leaves and bring to the boil. Turn down the heat and simmer for 10–15 minutes or until the eye begins to turn opaque. Carefully transfer fish head to a microwave-safe serving bowl. Cover the bowl and cook in the microwave oven for 2 minutes on High. Keep it covered. Residual heat will continue to cook the fish.
6. Meanwhile, adjust the seasoning in the curry to taste. Boil for 1–2 minutes, then turn off the heat and rest the curry gravy for several hours before serving.
7. To serve, boil up curry gravy. Reheat fish head for 2–3 minutes in the microwave oven on High. Pour gravy and vegetables over the fish head.
8. Serve with rice.

Crab Cakes

Preparation and cooking: 45 minutes

There should be plenty of fat in the minced pork to keep these crab cakes juicy. Adding water chestnuts gives the crab cakes crunch, while bamboo shoot gives it a distinct Straits-born flavour. My mother would plan ahead and save empty crab shells to use as casings for the crab cakes, or she would cook chilli crabs so that there would be enough shells for crab cakes. The shells must be thoroughly cleaned and patted dry with paper towels before they are filled.

150 g (5 1/3 oz) crab meat
3 water chestnuts, peeled and chopped
150 g (5 1/3 oz) minced pork
150 g (5 1/3 oz) shelled prawns
1/2 cup finely shredded bamboo shoot
1/2 tsp salt
1/2 tsp ground white pepper
2 tsp cornflour
Cooking oil for frying

1. Mix all the ingredients, except the cooking oil, together. Divide into 12 portions and form each one into a patty. If crab shells are available, stuff the mixture into the shells. Any leftover mixture can be made into patties. Alternatively, turn leftovers into meatballs and cook in pot of chicken stock to make *bakwan kepiting* (crab and pork ball soup).
2. Heat 3-cm (1 1/2-in) depth of oil in a frying pan. The patties need to be more than half-covered in oil so that the sides are browned nicely. If frying stuffed crab shells, fry the shells meat-side down until nicely brown before frying shell-side down to cook the filling inside.
3. Serve as a side dish with rice or as a main course with a dressed salad on the side.

Mum's Sambal Hae Bee (Dried Prawn Sambal)

Preparation and cooking: 1 hour

This dried prawn *sambal* was my mother's emergency side dish to eat with rice porridge, or mix into hot rice. It's another comfort food. Strangely, however, it is not so tasty with bread. For sandwiches, the *hae bee hiam* sandwich filling (page 122) is much better.

100 g (3 1/2 oz) dried shrimps (*hae bee*), softened in water
1 tsp sugar
Juice of 2–3 limes
3 Tbsp vegetable oil

Spice Paste

4 candlenuts (*buah keras*)
30 g (1 oz) fresh red chillies, seeded and chopped
50 g (1 3/4 oz) shallots, peeled and chopped
1 tsp dried shrimp paste (*belacan)*

1. It is better to pound this spice paste using a mortar and pestle because any addition of water to blend the ingredients will make for a very damp mixture, and lengthen the frying process.
2. Pound softened dried shrimps until fine. Remove and set aside.
3. Place the ingredients for the spice paste in the mortar and pound until fine. Mix the spice paste into the pounded dried shrimps together with the lime juice and sugar.
4. Heat oil in a wok. Add dried shrimp mixture and stir-fry over low heat until mixture is fragrant and dry. While frying, do a taste test and adjust seasoning to taste.
5. Leave to cool in the wok, then bottle and refrigerate.
6. Serve as a side dish with rice or rice porridge.

Meats

Comforting Curries, Stews and Soups

While there are very few differences in the ways that Straits-born communities prepare seafood, there are significant differences in their approach to meats, starting with what they do and do not eat. The Hindu Chettis, for instance, do not eat beef and if they have intermarried into the Indian Muslim or the Malay Muslim communities, then they do not eat pork. Straits Chinese Buddhists traditionally do not eat beef, also for religious reasons, and many may not eat mutton because this meat is thought of as "strongly flavoured". The Christian Straits-born, which include the Eurasians and Chinese, go with personal preference, and roasts and grills are popular. The one meat that all except vegetarians will eat is chicken. Pork, too, is popular with the non-Muslim Straits-born and practically a must for most Straits Chinese.

Meat dishes in Straits-born cooking are often tweaks of ethnic recipes. Take a Straits Chinese classic like *babi pong teh*. This pork dish probably evolved from Hokkien *tau eu bak* (braised pork in dark soy sauce), but the addition of spices has turned it into quite a different dish. Portuguese Eurasian vindaloo, too, originated from a combination of New World chillies with a traditional South Indian dish to give another Straits-born classic. *Ayam buah keluak* is another iconic Straits-born dish that is a clear example of how geographical proximity contributed to the development of the dish. *Buah keluak* come mostly from East Java where *nasi rawon* is a culinary specialty of beef braised with *buah keluak*. *Mrs Lee's Cookbook* (1974) even has a *nasi rawon* recipe. Both dishes may look somewhat alike, but they taste different. Eurasian and Singapore Straits Chinese cookbooks usually have a *keluak* recipe, but Penang heritage cookbooks do not.

Straits-born meat dishes are characterised by the fact that practically all benefit from being given a rest period after cooking for the flavours to mature. Even some of the soups taste better if left to sit for a while. Many of the stews and curries freeze very well and almost all may be left outside the fridge overnight without spoiling if handled correctly.

The celebration of festivals are times when this old trick that my mother taught me may come in useful. To store outside the fridge, bring the pot of food to the boil, stir it and keep it on the boil for about 5 minutes before turning off the heat. Cover the pot and leave it alone and the food will not go off for up to 24 hours. Before serving, return it to the boil. This process may be repeated for a number of days, but of course, the meat will begin to fall apart with repeated boiling. So keep the meat firm if you think you might have to resort to this method of storage. Alternatively, store in two smaller pots to minimise repeated boiling.

Babi Pong Teh (Pork and Cinnamon Stew)

Preparation and cooking: 2 hours

The Straits Chinese added fried shallots, spices and bamboo shoots to Hokkien *tau eu bak* (pork braised in dark soy sauce) to get *babi pong teh*. In the Philippines, which also has a lot of Hokkien migrants, cooks turned the same dish into *adobo* by adding vinegar to it. "*Adobo*" comes from a Spanish word that means marinade or seasoning. Amongst the Straits Chinese, this dish may have had ritual significance in the days when many practised ancestor worship. Like the Chettis, certain dishes would be cooked as prayer offerings and the dark-coloured *babi pong teh* was considered more appropriate than brightly coloured curries.

1 kg (2 lb 3 oz) pork foreleg/belly pork, chopped into pieces

3 Tbsp cooking oil

200 g (7 oz) shallots, peeled and thinly sliced

30 g (1 oz) garlic, peeled and thinly sliced

2 Tbsp fermented soy beans (*taucheo*), rinsed and mashed/ brown miso

1 tsp dark soy sauce

3 Tbsp light soy sauce

1 tsp salt

2 tsp sugar

$^1/_2$ tsp ground white pepper

1 tsp ground cinnamon

6-cm (3-inch) cinnamon stick

552 g (1 lb 4 oz) canned bamboo shoots, cut into chunks/thick slices

1 litre (32 fl oz / 4 cups) water

Condiments

Green chillies

Sambal belacan with or without lime juice

Note

Japanese brown miso has the same flavour as Chinese fermented soy beans (*taucheo*), but it is easier to use and comes ready-mashed.

1. If using pork foreleg, wash meat carefully to remove any bone fragments: feel each piece of meat carefully. Clean belly pork.
2. Heat oil in a saucepan and fry shallots until they begin to turn golden. At this point, add garlic slices and continue frying until shallots are brown. Keep a close eye on the shallots as they brown fairly quickly once they turn golden.
3. Stir in miso/mashed fermented soy beans and fry for 10 seconds. Add pork and the rest of the ingredients and bring to the boil.
4. Turn down the heat and simmer for about $1^1/_2$ hours until the meat is tender, but not falling off the bone. Adjust the seasoning to taste and add a few more drops of dark soy sauce if the stew is too pale. There should be about 500 ml (16 fl oz / 2 cups) of gravy left.
5. Rest the stew for half a day before serving. Reheat and serve with crusty French bread or rice and fresh green chillies and *sambal belacan* as condiments.

Beef Rendang

Preparation and cooking: 3 1/2 hours

This classic Malay and Indonesian dish has become part of Straits-born cooking, and I associate it with Hari Raya Puasa in the 1950s. This was when my family would visit our Malay neighbours to extend festive greetings and enjoy a *rendang* feast.

1 Tbsp tamarind paste

4 Tbsp cooking oil

1 kg (2 lb 3 oz) beef cubes/ shin beef

5-cm (2-in) knob galangal, scraped and smashed

4 stalks lemongrass, smashed

1 litre (32 fl oz / 4 cups) water

250 ml (8 fl oz / 1 cup) packaged coconut cream

1 1/2 tsp salt

3 tsp sugar

6 kaffir lime leaves, crushed (optional)

Spice Paste

65 g (2 1/3 oz) shallots, peeled and chopped

30 g (1 oz) *krisek* (page 17)

2.5-cm (1-in) knob old ginger, scraped

25 g (4/5 oz) dried red chillies, softened in water

125 ml (4 fl oz / 1/2 cup) water

1 1/2 Tbsp ground coriander

1/2 Tbsp ground fennel

1. Make spice paste by blending shallots, toasted grated coconut, ginger and softened chillies with water in a food processor until fine. Stir in ground spices.
2. Make tamarind juice by combining tamarind paste with some water. Strain away the solids.
3. Combine all the ingredients in a pot and bring it to the boil. Turn down the heat and simmer gently for about 2–3 hours or until beef is tender. When the rendang begins to look dry, stir continuously to prevent the meat from sticking to the bottom of the pot. If beef is still not tender, add enough water to continue simmering until meat is tender. Do not add too much water as this is a dry dish. If using kaffir lime leaves, add at the end of cooking.
4. Rest the rendang for at least an hour before serving. Reheat and serve with rice, bread or rice cakes (*ketupat*).

Light Bites and Sweet Treats

For all Occasions

When it comes to light bites and sweet treats, the Straits-born share many identical recipes that arose from communal proximity and simply good neighbourliness. In the days before the proliferation of cookbooks, cooking shows and the Internet, good recipes spread by word of mouth. If you enjoyed something very much, you asked for the recipe. If you found a good recipe or were given a good recipe, you shared it with whoever asked you for it. This was how I accumulated many of my favourite festive treats.

While each community may have had recipes that were once special to them, many have been happily adopted by others. Practically everyone enjoys *sugee* cake or Christmas cake, both Eurasian specialties. My recipe for Christmas cake given here goes way back to a recipe for an English fruit cake. It was the first kind of cake that I tried baking in my teens.

Traditional Straits-born desserts were made with rice/rice flour, tapioca/bean flour (*tepung hoen kwe*, a Dutch-Indonesian product). They still are. Think *cendol*, *kueh bangket* or *kueh salat*. The use of wheat flour and butter for cakes, pineapple tarts and biscuits, and even love letters were the result of colonisation. Butter and wheat flour were introduced by the Europeans. All the three earliest local cookbooks —*The YWCA International Cookery Book* (1931), *My Favourite Recipes* (1952) and *In a Malayan Kitchen* (1954) — had numerous recipes for very colonial era cakes and biscuits as well as recognisably Straits-born favourites. *In a Malayan Kitchen* had a Dutch slant because Mrs Susie Hing was Indonesian Chinese. And hers was the only one of the three with a recipe for pineapple tarts which looked similar to any of today's pineapple tart recipes. So did pineapple tarts originate in Dutch Indonesia? While the first clearly labelled Nonya cookbook, *Mrs Lee's Cookbook* (1974), did not include desserts, Mrs Leong Yee Soo's *Singaporean Cooking* (1976) had recipes for both open pineapple tarts as well as pineapple-shaped tarts, like Mrs Hing's, but this was some 20 years later than Mrs Hing's 1954 recipe. My recipe for pineapple tarts dates back to the 1950s and came from my Malay neighbours. It was given to them by an aunt who had learnt how to make the tarts at a baking class. Wherever that recipe came from, to me, it is one of the best, if not *the* best, pineapple tart recipe ever.

Straits-born treats are not all sweet treats. A number are savouries and are often prepared for special occasions. *Kueh pie tee* is one such festive treat and actually made for large crowds. So is *roti jala*. Others like *sambal lengkong* are more homely but special because it is time-consuming. If making something time-consuming is a way to show affection for family and friends, then Straits-born treats are certainly expressions of affection. Enjoy!

Kueh Pie Tee

Preparation and cooking time: 1 day

This Nonya festive treat shows up in the run-up to Chinese New Year when the shops that specialise in Straits-born treats will also offer *pie tee* shells for sale. Some 30 years ago, my huge disappointment with one of these commercial preparations prompted me to experiment and quantify a vague recipe that my mother gave me together with her *pie tee* irons. Since then, making *pie tee* shells has become an annual all-day, pre-Chinese New Year party for myself and a few friends. Note that the number of shells you get from this quantity of batter depends on how much wastage there is as well as how you thin the batter. There was no wastage when I worked out the number of shells from this batch of batter. There are two recipes for fillings here. The bamboo shoot filling is a traditional Nonya filling also used for Nonya *popiah*. The other is a simple yam bean filing that my mother preferred.

Pie Tee Shells

Makes about 150 small shells

180 g (6 1/3 oz) plain (all-purpose) flour

65 g (2 oz) rice flour

1/2 tsp salt

2 eggs

400 ml (13 fl oz / 1 2/3 cups) water + more as needed

2 litres (64 fl oz / 8 cups) peanut oil

2 *pie tee* irons

1. Sift plain flour, rice flour and salt together. In a large mixing bowl, beat eggs lightly and stir in the water. Using a wire whisk, add the sifted flour mixture.
2. Pour the batter through a large sieve and rub the lumps through the sieve. A wire sieve works best.
3. To adjust the batter to the right thickness, first fry a test shell once the *pie tee* irons are hot. Thick batter gives you fewer and thicker shells. If the shell is too thick, dilute the batter with some water to your preferred thickness.
4. Heat the peanut oil in a pot together with the *pie tee* irons. The pot should be at least half-full of oil. When coated with batter, the irons must not touch the bottom of the pot, but be held suspended in the hot oil.
5. To check the temperature of the oil, press the tips of wooden chopsticks against the bottom of the pot. You should see vigorous bubbles when the temperature is right. If using an electric fryer, set the temperature to 180°C (350°F).
6. Stir up the batter and ladle enough batter to fill a large mug that is kept near the pot of hot oil. Cover the bowl of batter with a damp cloth to prevent drying out.
7. Dip one of the hot irons halfway up into the batter. If the iron is hot enough, the batter will sizzle. Return the coated iron to the hot oil and fry until the shell is firm, but not yet brown. Using the tips of the chopsticks, push the shell out of the iron and continue frying to brown the shell.
8. Repeat until the batter is used up.

Nonya Rice Dumplings

Preparation and cooking time: Half a day; advance preparations required

Making rice dumplings was an annual ritual that my mother practised. Sometime during the fifth Chinese lunar month, the kitchen would be filled with the scent of boiling bamboo leaves and soon a frenzy of activities would erupt, from knotting together a bundle of straw strings to the chopping and cutting of boiled pork and mushrooms. My mother's dumplings were different from the Chinese ones. Hers were what are called Nonya dumplings today. These dumplings are so popular that they are available year-round today.

600 g (1 lb 5 1/3 oz / 3 cups) white glutinous rice, soaked overnight

2 tsp salt

125 ml (4 fl oz / 1/2 cup) water

2 Tbsp cooking oil

3 Tbsp dried butterfly pea flower (*Clitoria ternatea*)

Filling

300 g (11 oz) lean pork

30 g (1 oz) dried shiitake mushrooms, soaked for 30 minutes in 250 ml (8 fl oz / 1 cup) water

1 1/2 Tbsp ground coriander

1 tsp ground white pepper

2 Tbsp cooking oil

85 g (3 oz) shallots, peeled and thinly sliced

100 g (3 1/2 oz) sugared winter melon, finely chopped

1 Tbsp dark soy sauce

For Wrapping

40 dried bamboo leaves

1/2 tsp alkali salts/bicarbonate of soda

Straw twine/raffia string

A small bowl of oil for greasing leaves

A bowl of water for dampening hands

1. Prepare filling and bamboo leaves a day ahead. When buying bamboo leaves, try to get larger leaves, which make for easier wrapping. If small, estimate two leaves per dumpling with some extras in case of tears.

2. To prepare bamboo leaves, heat a wok of water with 1/2 tsp alkali salts/bicarbonate of soda and boil leaves for 10 minutes. Boiling makes the leaves more pliable. Wipe dry as leaves are sometimes dusty, then keep the leaves soaking in water until needed.

3. Cut straw twine/raffia string into 16 pieces, each about 60-cm (24-in) long. Bundle them together and knot one end into a loop so that the strings can be hung up. If using straw twine, soak in water for 10 minutes to make it more pliable.

4. To prepare filling, boil pork in a pot of water for 10–15 minutes until cooked through. Drain and cool, then cut into very small cubes. Trim stems off dried mushrooms and slice caps into small pieces. Keep the soaking water for cooking filling.

5. Mix ground coriander and pepper with 1 Tbsp water into a paste.

6. Heat oil in a pot and fry shallots until golden brown, taking care not to burn them. Scoop out and set aside. Fry coriander and pepper paste until fragrant, then stir in pork, mushrooms, winter melon, dark soy sauce and mushroom water. Mix well and stir-fry until all the liquid is almost evaporated and the filling is just moist. Stir in fried shallots.

7. When ready to make dumplings, start by preparing rice. Steam soaked rice for 10 minutes. Mix salt, water and oil together, then stir into steamed rice. Leave rice covered until cool enough to handle.

8. If colouring rice, soak dried butterfly pea flowers in 1–2 Tbsp water for 30 minutes. Use the liquid to streak the rice blue.

9. Divide rice and filling into 12–16 portions depending on the size of your bamboo leaves. Wrap dumplings (see below).

10. The wrapped dumplings can be either boiled or steamed. The latter reduces the risk of soggy corners or lost dumplings if they haven't been well wrapped.

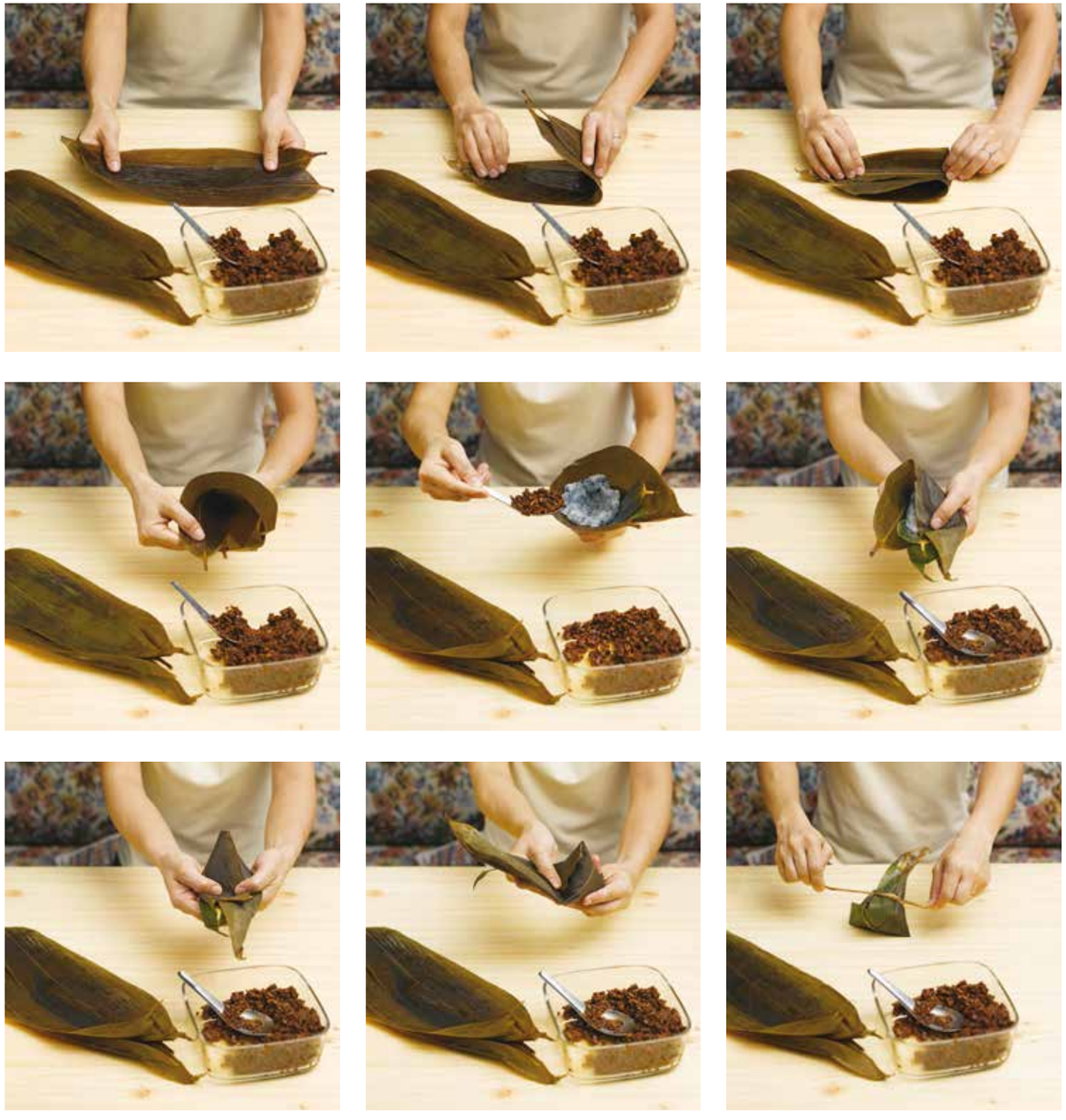
11. To steam dumplings, place a Chinese steamer with at least 2 layers on a large wok filled with water. Arrange the dumplings loosely on the tray, if possible. Steam for an hour, adding water to the wok as needed. Remove dumplings and hang them up to drain.

12. To boil, fill with water a pot large enough to contain all the dumplings and bring to the boil. Place dumplings in and return to the boil. Keep it on the boil for an hour, adding more water to the pot as needed. Remove dumplings and hang them up to drain.

13. Rice dumplings should be kept well aired by hanging them up in a cool spot, and never packed inside a plastic bag. Kept well aired, they do not need refrigeration. If not consumed after 3 days, boil them up again for 30 minutes.

How to Wrap Rice Dumplings

1. Assemble the rice, filling and leaves near you. Have a large bowl of water nearby for wetting your hands, and a bowl of oil with a brush for greasing the leaves.
2. Grease two leaves and layer them such that you get a larger surface area to work with. Fold the leaves in half, then fold one-third from the edge near you. Open out the leaves into a cone.
3. With dampened hands, put a portion of rice into the cone. Press the rice upwards as a thin layer round the cone and a little higher than the dumpling will be for covering up the filling. Keep the centre hollow for the filling.
4. Spoon filling into the hollow, pressing it to pack tightly. Turn the excess rice near the top to cover the filling. Add more rice, if needed.
5. Fold the ends of the leaves to cover the opening and shape the ends to form a neat four-cornered pyramid-shaped dumpling. Tie with twine in such a way that the ends are held tightly round the dumpling.



Kueh Salat

Preparation and cooking: 1 hour

This *kueh* has several names and is another very old Straits-born dessert. It may be called *kueh salat*, *kueh serimuka* or *kueh serikaya*. Whatever its name, it is basically steamed glutinous rice with a layer of *kaya* (coconut egg custard) on top. Penangites make a similar dish known as *pulot tatai* which is steamed glutinous rice pressed into a flat cake that is cut into bite-size pieces and served with a bowl of *kaya*.

Rice Layer

300 g (11 oz / 1 cup) white glutinous rice, soaked overnight

2 Tbsp water

2 Tbsp packaged coconut cream

½ tsp salt

2 Tbsp dried butterfly pea flowers

Kaya Topping

150 g (5⅓ oz) sugar

4 Tbsp plain (all-purpose) flour

6 eggs

150 ml (5 fl oz / ⅔ cup) packaged coconut cream

150 ml (5 fl oz / ⅔ cup) pandan juice

Pandan Juice

12 pandan leaves, rinsed and chopped

250 ml (8 fl oz / 1 cup) water

Note

To make durian *kueh salat*, substitute the pandan juice with 1 cup durian puree when making the *kaya* topping.

1. Drain the rice and spread on a steamer lined with muslin. Steam for 10 minutes. Mix water, coconut cream and salt together, then stir into rice. Let rice continue steaming for another 30 minutes until tender.
2. If using dried butterfly pea flowers for colouring, soak dried flowers in 1 Tbsp water to extract the colour. When rice is done, streak colouring through the rice. (The blue in the picture is pale because I ran out of pea flowers.)
3. Line a 22-cm (8-in) square cake tin/glass dish with banana leaves, then pack in the hot rice. Press rice down with a spoon to get a level surface.
4. Prepare the *kaya* topping by first making pandan juice. Blend the chopped pandan leaves with water to pulp. Strain to obtain the juice and discard the fibre. Measure out 150 ml (5 fl oz / ⅔ cup) pandan juice for flavouring the *kaya*.
5. To make the *kaya* topping, mix sugar and flour to dissolve any lumps of flour. Beat eggs, coconut cream and pandan juice into sugar mixture. Pour mixture into a small saucepan and cook over low heat, stirring constantly to thicken the custard. The mixture should be smooth. Be careful not to allow lumps to form. The *kaya* does not need to be fully cooked.
6. Spread the hot *kaya* mixture over the rice layer. Place cake tin/glass dish in a steamer filled with water and steam for 30 minutes or until the *kaya* topping is cooked through.
7. To prevent drops of water from falling onto the custard and making pockmarks in it, tie a large piece of cloth or clean dish towel around the lid to soak up the water vapour.
8. Cool *kueh* thoroughly to allow the topping to set before cutting to serve.