



MEDIA INFO

THE ESSENCE OF MALAYSIAN CUISINE

Melaka was once a famous trading port and a very busy commercial hub for merchants and traders from China, India, Europe and the Arab nations.

In retrospect, the Straits of Melaka was often busy with merchant ships and spice barges, laden with jute sacks of herbs and spices from the spice islands in the Celebes, plying through its waterways.

Today, evidence of the indelible past can be seen etched not only in the architecture and language of present-day Malaysia, but even in the very food we consume.

Lemongrass



The herbs and spices used in Malaysian cooking lend a fragrant and flavourful taste to many local dishes. One such ingredient, often used in Malaysian

cooking, is lemongrass (citronella) known as *serai* in Malay. Lemongrass gives dishes a lemony fragrance, inducing a mouth-watering sensation in anticipation of the first taste. It can be added to steamed fish dishes and soups and used as a marinade for chicken and other meats. Sometimes, a lemongrass stalk is crushed to release flavour and fragrance and added whole to soups. At other times, it is chopped thinly and stir-fried with other spices. Lemongrass is also an ingredient in the very healthy *nasi ulam* or herb rice. In this recipe, cooked rice is mixed with a variety of finely chopped fresh herbs and leaves, including lemongrass which gives a refreshing zing to the dish.

Pandanus



The pandanus leaves, or *daun pandan* in Malay and screwpine leaves in English, is a fragrant herb that grows easily in tropical climates. It releases a very sweet, fragrant vanilla/rose-like aroma, which makes it a popular ingredient in Malaysian cooking. For example, rice is often steamed with a piece of pandanus leaf thrown into the rice cooker for flavour. In making syrup to sweeten drinks, the pandanus leaf is also added for fragrance. In making pandan chicken, small pieces of chicken fillet are marinated in herbs and a variety of spices, then wrapped in pandan leaves and deepfried in a wok. The leaves impart a most exotic aroma to the meat.

Tamarind



The tamarind or *asam jawa*, is a much-valued spice in Malaysian cooking, especially the dishes inspired by Indian cuisine. Many Malaysian chefs use tamarind to give their dishes a slightly sourish and tart flavour that appeals to the tastebuds. It's the perfect alternative to lemon and lime juice. To use tamarind, the fruit is taken out of the pods and mixed in a bowl of water to extract the sourish juice. The juice is then poured into gravies, especially curry-based ones and complements the fiery taste of chillies very well. The same juice can also be sweetened with some honey and ice and taken as a drink that is soothing to the throat.

Ginger



Ginger is the fleshy rhizome of the ginger plant sometimes referred to as ginger root, although that is not accurate. In Malaysia, it is known as *halia* and has a warm, sweet aroma and a hot, biting flavour. In cooking, fresh ginger is used, chopped and stir-fried with garlic or shallots. Occasionally, it is grated and sprinkled over the dish just before it is served, to give the dish a fresh, inviting aroma.

Turmeric



In typical Malaysian cooking, turmeric is used in the form of leaves, dried powder and fresh rhizome. Turmeric powder adds a brilliant yellow colour to glutinous rice known as *nasi kunyit* which is normally eaten with chicken curry. It is also the favoured ingredient to complement deep-fried fish. For this, generous amounts of turmeric powder and some salt is rubbed on the fish, allowing the simple flavours to penetrate within. A deep wok is used to fry the fish in very hot oil, sealing in the juices and flavour. The turmeric leaf and powder is also used to impart a delicious flavour and some colour to coconut-based dishes like *ayam masak lemak cili api* – a simple dish that involves simmering coconut milk, turmeric, onions, chicken and fiery chili peppers. In this case, the turmeric flavours the rich coconut gravy very well.

Chillies



Malaysian cooking is especially renowned for its strong and fiery flavours courtesy of the chillies used in the cooking. In general, the smaller they are, the more potent the “fire” in the mouth! Chillies can be used in a variety of ways in Malaysian cuisine. Sometimes they are pounded and sautéed to flavour the oil. At other times, they are dried, blended and stir-fried with garlic for a flavourful taste. Occasionally, they are sliced and left to simmer in gravies. For

most Malaysians, chillies add that extra zing to a favourite dish and there are not too many Malaysian dishes that do not call for chillies in the recipe. A favourite chilli-based dish that usually accompanies Malaysian meals is *sambal belacan*. It is a mixture of fresh red chillies, some shrimp paste, and a squeeze of lime, all pounded together to be served as a condiment to accompany rice and other dishes.

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