

METROLIFE

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Hungry for knowledge

FOOD AND DRINK

Malay cookery at Ning

This year, and especially last week, Malaysia has been celebrating 50 years of independence. Northern Quarter restaurant Ning has joined in, and on Saturday held its first class in Malay cookery. Bereft of a gap year in South-East Asia, I didn't know my Sabah from my Sarawak, making me an ideal pupil for head chef Norman Musa and visiting teacher Maziah Omar.

Omar's other job is as the pre-eminent choreographer of South-East Asian dance; her company, Nusantara, is the one you call when the Queen is coming. Myself and fellow student Chris quickly learn enough about Malay food culture to see that exercise might keep you from an early grave. In Malaysia, any time is time for food, and the national tooth is sweet, savouring condensed milk, cakes and extraordinary iced drinks loaded with rose-flavoured syrups and coloured sugar.

Before we start, we learn about the influences on food in culturally-diverse Malaysia. The Brits introduced spices and famous dishes can be loosely grouped into Malay, Indian, Portuguese and Chinese categories. We see pictures of ingredients such as turmeric leaves, banana shoots and snake beans and learn how traditional Malay meals are eaten; with the right hand, men first.

After all this hunger-making talk it's nice to find that our first recipe is for a quick snack, murtabak. In the restaurant kitchen, which features three exciting wok burners, we combine shreds of cooked chicken with onion, boiled potatoes, chilli, spring onion and an egg, seasoning with curry powder. This is fried like a chunky omelette, and you poke it into square shape so that it can be wrapped in a thin envelope of pastry sheets and fried again until crisp. Hangovers might not be a problem for the Muslims of Malaysia, but I earmark murtabak, served with chilli dipping sauce, for my next rough morning.

The next dish is a lesson in how the Malay people like to eat curry. Sometimes, it's all about the gravy. We combine chicken chunks with curry powder (imported from Malaysia and without the tang of ready-prepared Indian mixes), chopped onion, minced garlic and ginger, then fire up our wok burners to brown sliced onions in



Watch and learn: Northern Quarter restaurant Ning is offering traditional cookery lessons to celebrate 50 years of Malaysian independence

▶ **As the class continues we learn that the sign of a good curry is oil floating on top, which shows that it's been cooked correctly** ◀

vegetable oil. Omar doesn't entirely approve. At home, where her British husband feasts on an all-Malay diet, she'd use a wide-bottomed wok over a conventional gas flame. But the wok burners get results quickly and they are extremely good, fiery fun. Once the onions are browned, it's in with the chicken and aromatics, then coconut milk, star anise, cinnamon bark and salt.

It's interesting how different our two attempts are. Chris, being a chap, has used lots of curry powder and his curry is richer and more flavoursome than mine. I've been too generous with the salt and need to add tamarind juice to even it out. Musa, about whose cooking I was only semi-complimentary when I visited Ning in its trembly opening weeks, looks quietly amused. I deserve it. But it's important to taste, because this curry sauce is going to be carried to our mouths on roti jala, a king among pancake-style breads.

Watching Omar use a special pourer with five tiny holes to cast a batter of flour, turmeric, salt, water and eggs on to a flat, oiled pan so that it looks like an intricate net, we're already working out how to fashion a home-made pourer – a tin can with holes drilled in it would do the job. She expertly folds the pancake in on itself so that the cigarette-packet sized bread can be dipped into flavoursome gravy. It's not as easy as it looks, but our pale yellow finished rotis, hamfisted as they are, look rather spectacular.

Then it's on to beef rending, which has a base of onion, garlic, ginger, lemon grass and galangal added to dried chillies that have been reconstituted and blended to give a vibrant red colour. The beef and more coconut milk are added, but it's the crucial ingredient, kerisik, which gets us excited. It's toasted coconut that has been blended until the oils come out, and tastes like a coconuty, moreish

version of peanut butter, dry and mouth-coating. This is what gives rending curries their unique taste, and I can't wait to make my own.

As the class continues, we learn that the sign of a good curry is oil floating on top, which shows that it's been cooked correctly. We make red-hot banana fritters strung on to satay sticks, and a biriyani curry finished with coriander and onion slices. Then we sit down to eat the results with teh tarik, the famously sweet, lukewarm Malaysian tea, and are packed off with boxes of delicious leftovers.

Ning plans more cookery classes, and we've only really touched on a style of food I'm now fascinated by. Musa and Omar are generous teachers, and I wouldn't hesitate to go back and learn more from them. Now, where's that tin can? *Emma Jean Sturgess*
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★★★★☆ Very good
★★★☆☆ Good
★★☆☆☆ Adequate
★☆☆☆☆ Poor