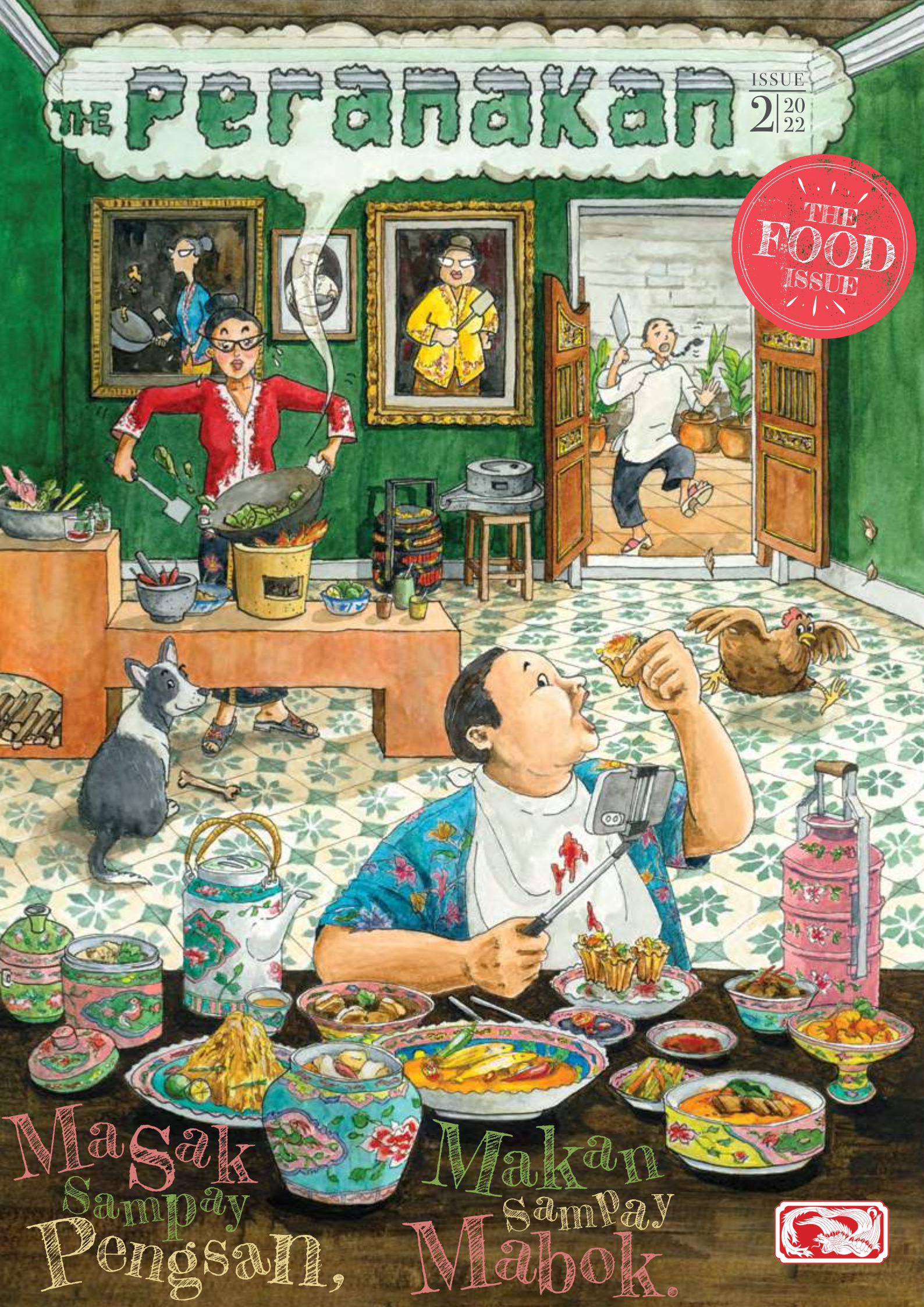


THE PERANAKAN

ISSUE
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THE
FOOD
ISSUE



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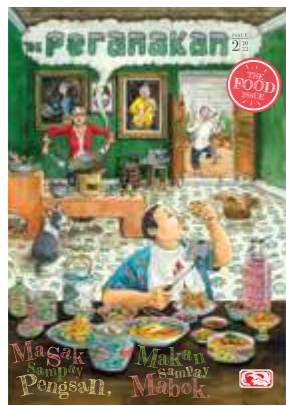
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On The Cover



WATERCOLOUR ARTWORK SPECIALLY CREATED FOR THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE BY NYONYA BENGKIAN SAW, A GIFTED CARTOONIST WHO IS A PRACTISING ARCHITECT IN HONG KONG.

Various illustrations in subsequent pages have been extracted from Bengkian's artwork.



THE FOOD ISSUE

5

EDITOR'S LETTER

Sampay Kita Jumpa Lagi

Linda Chee's fond farewell to readers and the last hard copy of The Peranakan

6

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Getting Down to Business

A very busy start for the association's first female president Peggy Jeffs

8

FEATURES

Masak Sampay Pengsan Makan Sampay Mabok

Eleven cooks and food writers view the future of Peranakan cuisine. By Linda Chee

26

FEATURES

Flavours from Afar

Seven cooks champion Peranakan cooking from kitchens across continents. By Linda Chee and Emeric Lau

30

FEATURES

Food for the Gods

Young Lee Yuen Thien learns a forgotten art to preserve an ancient tradition

36

FEATURES

From Java with Love

The intoxicating origin of the keluak dish. By Khir Johari

38

FEATURES

Mari Makan Minom, Sama Karang Pantan

Seven babas compose food-themed pantons

42

FEATURES

Born Baba & Eating My Way Through

Desmond Sim shares his joy on being born Peranakan

44

AMEK GAMBAIR

My Grandfathers' Roads

Maureen Koh's family connections behind Koon Seng Road and Katong beachfront heydays. By Linda Chee

58

EVENTS

Tedx-ers Visit NUS Baba House

Benedict Khoo reports on the Tedx visit to NUS Baba House

61

NOTICEBOARD

63

CHAKAP HABIS

Of Rumours & Rivalries

The final episode closes with drama at the grandest party in Heeren Street. By Bryan Tan

52

BOOKS

One United People Emman. Time Traveller There's No Such Thing as a Skinny Bibik In a Straits-born Kitchen More Daily Nyonya Dishes

Edible Memories

Reviews by Colin Chee

59

EVENTS

Manyak Khabair

Our collaborations with ACM and lantern painting. By Gwen Ong

56

EVENTS

The 2nd Baba Nyonya Literary Festival

The world's smallest literary festival returns as a cross-border event despite covid. Report by Ngiam May Ling

61

EVENTS

TPAS AGM 2022

The election of our first nyonya president

62

FEDERATION LISTING

64

DIRECTORY

The Peranakan Guide SINGAPORE



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The Peranakan is published by The Peranakan Association Singapore, Raffles City PO Box 1640, Singapore 911755 Email | secretariat@peranakan.org.sg • Printer | Oxford Graphic Printers Pte Ltd MCI (P) 067/10/2021

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THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE HOUSE STYLE REFLECTS THE BABA MALAY SPELLING FOUND IN A BABA MALAY DICTIONARY BY BABA WILLIAM GWEE THIAN HOCK.



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Sampay Kita Jumpa Lagi

Till we meet again

WITH THIS SECOND ISSUE OF 2022, I WOULD LIKE TO CONVEY MY FOND FAREWELL TO OUR READERS, WITH THANKS. AND TO THE LAST HARD COPY ISSUE OF THE PERANAKAN.

Going digital

It is time. We have been thinking of digitalising *The Peranakan* since 2018.

Many of you are aware that the cost of producing each issue is expensive. Designing, printing and mailing are heavy expenses. Going digital will save us thousands of dollars as a volunteer non-profit heritage and cultural organisation. A technical team led by our 1st Vice-President **EDMOND WONG** is working on the transition to an online news magazine by next year at the latest.

I am positive about the change. Viable paper publications are fast becoming extinct. Many of our members have also asked whether we will go digital to be environmentally sustainable. While I am heartened to know that our magazine is prized as a collector's item, no matter how used we are to holding and reading print, we just have to get on with the transition.

With thanks

The magazine has been my passion since 2004. That was when I joined **PETER LEE** to promote our culture through the printed word. After 18 years and many, many hours spent on producing issue after issue, it is time for change. Many of you know I have been asking around for several years to find someone to replace me, without success. Going digital requires different skillsets. While I will still help the team, the opportunity is for others to seize.

Don't get me wrong. The learning from magazine production has been irreplaceable. The friendships that I have made as editor of this magazine are immeasurable. It has been tremendously satisfying to work with our editorial committee and an army of writers and illustrators - all of us volunteers - over the years. A special *kamsiah* to my design partners **JOANNE LOW** and **JOHN**

LEE whose talents make every issue stand out. Muacks and hugs for the fun at work and for staying with me! To our **READERS**, my deepest gratitude for your support and encouragement. To our loyal **ADVERTISERS** and generous **SPONSORS**, you have made it possible for us to defray our expenses. To our partners such as **NATIONAL HERITAGE BOARD** and the



teams from the **PERANAKAN MUSEUM** and the **ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM**, you have enriched us with your collaboration. Thank you all so, so much. Please continue to give your strong support to the Association. I count all of you as friends for a lifetime.

I look forward to devoting more time to my husband **COLIN CHEE**, ever patient while I worked on the magazine at odd hours, and who has stepped down as president of The Peranakan Association Singapore after two terms. More time with our precious grandsons, **MICAH**, five, and **LEVI**, two, whose exuberance and antics bring us endless joy.



Never a dull moment: Creative adviser John Lee, editor Linda Chee and designer Joanne Low at the layout wall. Photograph by Colin Chee

Masak Sampay Pengsan, Makan Sampay Mabok

This last bumper issue marks the debut of **BENKIAN SAW**, a newly-found niece by marriage, who is a practising architect in Hongkong. She has a rare natural talent for her humorous depictions of life. I had seen her caricatures given to a cousin during the COVID lockdown, and she willingly and patiently put up with all sorts of suggestions to create the marvellous cover for our food-themed *Masak Sampay Pengsan, Makan Sampay Mabok* issue.

We have many well-known babas and nyonyas who readily contributed to this issue, covering everything from favourite recipes, kitchen tips, history, *pantons* and food for the gods to hunting down ingredients to ensure our cuisine has a bright future anywhere in the world. A special mention to **KHIR JOHARI** who took time from his hectic schedule to pen a story for us.

First female president

My heartiest congratulations to **PEGGY JEFFS**, the Association's first female president in its 122-year history. I love Peggy. She has heart and the ability to pull people together to do amazing things.

Colin and I look forward to bumping into our friends in Katong, around Singapore, anywhere. *Kita boleh minom kopi chakap chakap, la!*

Linda Chee
Editor | lindacheesg@gmail.com



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president's message

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS



Dear Nynonyas & Babas,

IT HAS BEEN A VERY BUSY FIRST MONTH after the recent Annual General Meeting (AGM) of The Peranakan Association Singapore (TPAS) to elect the new General Committee (GC) for the 2022-2024 term. We had our first GC Meeting on 13 June - the structure of GC members' duties has been clearly laid out and announced on our website and facebook page. You will also find the office-bearers listed on page 61 of this magazine.

I visited Phuket and had an informal meeting with the Thai Peranakan Association based there, which has been reported in our first video clip on facebook/YouTube and our website. I look forward to more collaboration with our Thai counterparts in the near future.

We are also supporting our sister association, Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) in Melaka to raise funds by selling their *Let's Manik Together* book in Singapore. Copies can be obtained from Rumah Kim Choo at SGD10 per copy.

In June, NUS Baba House and TPAS co-hosted over 40 people from various countries within the international organisation TEDx. Our volunteers conducted a tour of the Baba House and gave insights into what life was like living in a Baba household in the old days.

Going forward, we are preparing for our own fund-raising Gala Dinner to be held at the end of the year on 31 December. **THE NEW YEAR'S EVE GALA** advertisement can be found in this magazine, on facebook and our website. Do support the Association by reserving tables to celebrate with your families, colleagues and friends! Your generous support is very much appreciated!

A sub-committee selected from the present GC and editorial team has been formed to look into converting **THE PERANAKAN** magazine to a digital format this year; this should be the way forward so our communications are more effective and timely.

My very best wishes to all and I look forward to meeting you in the near future. Thank you.

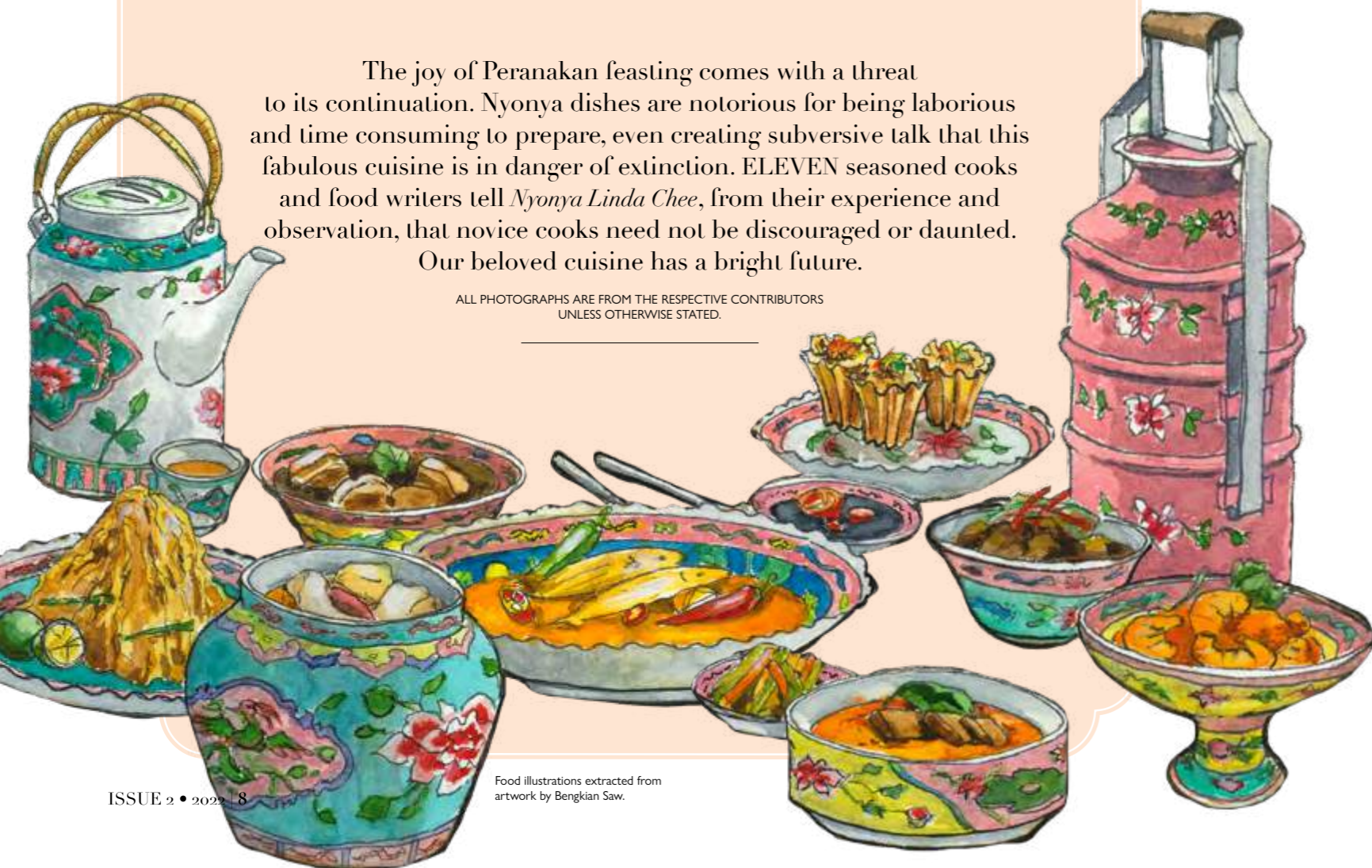
Nyonya Genevieve Peggy Jeffs
President, 2022 - 2024

From left:
(Seated) Bryan Tan,
Edmond Wong,
Genevieve Peggy Jeffs,
Theresa Tan, Yip Wai
Kuan, Romney Tan
(Behind) Philip Yeo,
Elizabeth Ng, Stella
Clare Wee, Raymond
Wong, Ngiam May Ling,
Anne Than, Josephine
Tan, Tony Tan.

Masak Sampay Pengsan, Makan Sampay Mabok.

The joy of Peranakan feasting comes with a threat to its continuation. Nyonya dishes are notorious for being laborious and time consuming to prepare, even creating subversive talk that this fabulous cuisine is in danger of extinction. ELEVEN seasoned cooks and food writers tell *Nyonya Linda Chee*, from their experience and observation, that novice cooks need not be discouraged or daunted. Our beloved cuisine has a bright future.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS ARE FROM THE RESPECTIVE CONTRIBUTORS UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED.



Food illustrations extracted from artwork by Bengkian Saw.

THE Seven Ps of PERANAKAN COOKING

BABA CHRISTOPHER TAN,
author of the award-winning *The Way of Kueh*,
shares his philosophical approach

TIP!

SAVE TRIMMED-OFF SERAI STALK TIPS AND LIME PEEL TO SIMMER IN WATER IN AN UNCOVERED PAN: THE STEAM WILL DISPEL UNWANTED LINGERING KITCHEN ODOURS SUCH AS BELACHAN OR ONION.



I know what
you're thinking:
Pulot? Pandan?
Pokok kelapa? Pisang? Periok?
Popiah? Petai?

NONE OF THESE, ACTUALLY. The P's which I have in mind, essential to the enterprise of baba-nyonya cooking, are neither produce nor implements which one can simply purchase at the *pasar*, or market. Rather, I am thinking of the foundational personality traits possessed by proficient Peranakan cooks, qualities intangible in themselves but whose presence is palpable in the sumptuous food which pours from the *dapor-dapor*, or kitchens, of those paragons.

Passionate | The first and the greatest P – a wholehearted and spirited love for the cuisine, its pedigree and possibilities, and for the deep craft its preparation mandates. Passion undergirds everything that a truly great cook does, empowering them to tread the long road to mastery.

Perceptive | The most significant tool in the Peranakan cook's kit is the ability to use all six senses in concert, in order to *agak-agak* like a boss. Sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing and intuition all play a pivotal part in assessing and adapting to variable kitchen conditions.

Persevering | Patient perseverance is what enables the cooks to pick themselves up and keep going after every failed tray of *kueh*, every pan of scorched *rempah*, every arm-aching bout of pounding and face-reddening session of *panggang*, wiping away their perspiration to rise above and learn from every trial.

Poetic | *Panton* and plays in *baba patois* are not the only artistic language a Peranakan can speak. If ingredients are nouns, spices and herbs are adjectives, cooking techniques are verbs, and *agak-agak* the source of adverbs, then every well-made recipe is a beautiful and balanced poem, whether short and pithy or long and flowery.

Playful | A sense of wit, fun and *joie de vivre* always pervades the Peranakan character. This is as true in cooking as it is in any other sphere.

Progressive | The attitude of never resting on one's laurels, but rather always seeking to improve one's skills, to cook every dish a little bit better than the last time one prepared it. Also, a pioneering attitude towards new ideas and ingredients, and innovative creative expressions.

Panday | Proper pursuit and practice of all the preceding P's enables the perspicacious Peranakan cook to attain the pinnacle of kitchen greatness: true culinary intelligence, the ability to weave the humblest of ingredients into a multi-dimensional tapestry – cuisine that is superb, soulful and peerless.

CHRISTOPHER TAN IS A WRITER, COOKBOOK AUTHOR, CULINARY INSTRUCTOR AND PHOTOGRAPHER WHO TRIES HIS BEST NOT TO PEROT SENAK SAMPAY PENGAN (LITERALLY, TO COLLAPSE FROM OVEREATING).



GEOK BOI'S Buah Keluak Sauce

THIS IS NOT A RECIPE PER SE, BUT A SAUCE THAT FREEZES WELL. USE IT FOR FRYING RICE OR MAKING A CHICKEN, PORK OR BEEF SAMBAL.

AS A BASIC SEASONING FOR BOILED NOODLES SUCH AS KWAY TEOW OR PASTA, BUMP UP THE FLAVOUR WITH SOME FISH SAUCE, BLACK VINEGAR AND SHALLOT OR GARLIC OIL. THE ACIDITY AND SPICINESS WILL DISAPPEAR OVER TIME. **RESTORE WITH ASAM WATER AND COOKED DRIED CHILLI PASTE.**

Ingredients

Rempah | Blend to a smooth paste
 100g shallots, peeled
 25g garlic, peeled
 4 stalks lemongrass, sliced thinly
 50g dried chillies, seeded and soaked
 1 thumb-size piece galangal
 1 thumb-size piece fresh turmeric
 1 tbsp belachan
 4 buah keras (candlenuts)
 ½ cup water

Ingredients continued
 200g shelled buah keluak
 100g asam
 1 cup water
 ½ cup cooking oil (canola/peanut/soya/vegetable)
 1½ tsp salt

Method

Pound the shelled buah keluak to a smooth paste. Mix the asam and water together. Strain away the solids but keep in case you need more asam water.

Heat the oil in a saucepan and fry the rempah till oil rises to the top. Add the pounded buah keluak, salt and asam water. Mix well. Bring to the boil. Cook for about 3 minutes, stirring frequently. Adjust the seasoning to taste as well as the liquidity with more asam water if needed.

Cool the sauce and store in labelled glass jars.

STRAITS-BORN COOKING GOES NATIVE

'Peranakan' and its cuisine applies to more than the 'Straits Chinese', says historian and cookbook author **NYONYA LEE GEOK BOI**



WHY IS PERANAKAN or Straits-born cuisine more often than not seen as 'Straits Chinese'? For that matter, why does the word 'Peranakan' automatically connote 'Straits Chinese'? The Malay

word meaning 'local born' has a much wider meaning: it applies to the different communities in Nusantara, from natives in the region (Malays and Indonesians) to migrants from further afield who ended up calling the region home, including Chinese, Eurasians and Chitty Indians. They all have equal claim to a most complex and nuanced cuisine with a wide range of flavours.

The food popular today as 'Peranakan cuisine' – but which I prefer to call 'Straits-born' – is a fusion of the ethnic roots of the communities, the history and geography of the region, and the iconic ingredients and ancient recipes of Malay-Indonesian cooking. The impact of global trade and colonisation led to both the creation of the Peranakan communities and the evolution of the cuisine.

One possible explanation for why Straits-born cuisine

came to be seen as Straits Chinese could be due to the prominence of Peranakan Chinese *datok dapor*, or domestic goddesses, in the 1950s. The first cookbook labelled as *Nonya Cooking* was by Mrs Lee Chin Koon, the mother of Singapore's founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew. A 1950s cookbook by an Indonesian Chinese, Mrs Susie Hing, titled *In a Malayan Kitchen*, showed the Indonesian elements in Singapore Straits-born cuisine.

Early Penang Peranakan cookbooks were all by Peranakan Chinese. There are still very few Eurasian cookbooks and yet Eurasians are truly Peranakan. Were it not for intermarriage between local women and Portuguese and Dutch adventurers who came to an unknown part of the world, there would be no Eurasian communities as we know them.

There are no Chitty Peranakan cookbooks as yet, perhaps because intermarriage into the larger and more prominent Indian and Indian Muslim

communities may have shrunk the small Hindu Chitty community further. Yet they were the earliest Peranakans because South Indian traders were sailing to this part of the world pre-16th century, before the appearance of the first Europeans. They brought with them Indian cultural influences, religion (including Islam) to Nusantara. Bali is Hindu to this day. Think of the Majapahit kingdom in Java, and Srivijaya in Sumatra to which Singapore's pre-colonial history is linked through Parameswara, a Srivijayan who was the last king of Singapura.

In the 1950s and 1960s women interested in preparing good food went for cooking and baking classes conducted by the said domestic goddesses, further spreading Straits-born cooking styles. Mrs Lee, her sister Mrs Leong Yee Soo and Mrs Wee Kim Wee were among the women who conducted cooking classes. Today the numerous cookbooks and YouTube videos have made cooking classes redundant.

Where *sambal belachan* once had to be laboriously pounded at home, today it comes commercially bottled and ready to serve. Where Straits-born cooking was once specific to certain communities, the mass manufacturing of spice pastes and the growing number of cookbooks have made Straits-born food almost generic to any Singapore home that wants to eat Straits-born.

The future of Straits-born cooking? Like any great cuisine, it can only continue to evolve to reach more interesting heights by incorporating new ingredients, adopting new treatments for ancient iconic ingredients and recipes and yet without losing its significant flavours. Just as it has done over the ages. ♦

EX-JOURNALIST LEE GEOK BOI, 76, BEGAN COLLECTING RECIPES AS A SCHOOLGIRL GOING BEYOND HER MOTHER'S RECIPES. NOW A FREELANCE WRITER, COOKBOOKS ARE A HOBBY AND IN HER LATEST AND SEVENTH COOKBOOK IN A STRAITS-BORN KITCHEN, SHE HAS COMBINED HER CULINARY HOBBY WITH HER PROFESSIONAL INTEREST IN SINGAPORE HISTORY.

TIPS!

COMBINE MULTI-TASKING WITH FREEZING AND A GOOD PROCESSOR AND YOU CAN WHIP UP A GOOD PERANAKAN MEAL AT THE DROP OF A HAT. ALWAYS DOUBLE BASIC STUFF LIKE REMPAHS AND STEWS LIKE BABI PONG TEH. AN HOUR IN FRONT OF TELEVISION IS A GOOD TIME TO PEEL SHALLOTS, SEED DRIED CHILLIES, SLICE LEMON GRASS... FREEZE UNTIL NEEDED OR BLEND AND MAKE THE REMPAH AFTER THE SHOW.

DO YOUR OWN COOKING

Short cuts and stripped-down methods for cooking at home are the way to go, advocates cookbook author **NYONYA SYLVIA TAN**



DURING MY CHILDHOOD, I only ate Peranakan food, albeit homestyle: simple soups and perhaps a fried fish with the occasional *sambal* or curry. For special occasions, we had the Hainanese *chongpohs* come to the house to cook a fancy *tok panjang* meal, laden with various dishes in bowls (*laok mangkok*) or on plates (*laok piring*). Nobody complained then about how difficult it was to cook such food.

I WOULD LIKE TO SEE SUCH TIMES AGAIN...

While I am heartened that everybody seems to love *laksa*, *mee siam* and *nasi lemak*, hardly anyone cooks them at home. It seems easier to buy food for the table than to cook it.

WE NEED TO COOK OUR CUISINE FOR IT TO CONTINUE AND LIVE!

In a way, I blame the nyonys of old. Every *bibik* who cooks seems to almost wax lyrical about the tediousness of cooking nyonya food. It's laborious, difficult and *lecheh*. And woe betide anyone who takes a short cut! *Tak spekah* (not proper) they would cry, or *hairan* (strange), they whisper to a willing ear.

Yet the reality is, we need short cuts, lots

of kitchen help (not foreign maids) and a willingness to break away from the past to bring Peranakan food into today. With women out working as a norm, we need to urgently relook old recipes if we want people to keep cooking them!

Which is why I like to test old recipes to see if there are steps I can cut, aids and store-bought pastes I can use, or substitute with, to make things easier. I am unashamed of such shortcuts. In the past, our grandmothers only had the *lesong* or *batu giling* to grind the spice pastes so essential in the cuisine. I remember making *sambal chilli* in the *lesong*, but how convoluted the process was! I had to wear long sleeves and cover the whole mortar with a plastic sheet with a hole cut through that allowed the pestle to poke through, to ensure that chilli seeds did not fly into my eyes.

Today, we have the food processor or chopper. But people lament that these do not grind down the chilli seeds and so they shun them. But isn't this a small price to pay for the convenience? I ignore them. I make my *sambal chilli*, *sioh rempah*, *rempahs* for *laksa* and such in a food processor.

Many nyonya recipes such as *sioh* and *babi asam garam* demanded a tedious two-step process in the cooking. My guess is that they never had an oven back then, so they had to fry to sear the meat. But they boiled the meat (first step) to ensure tenderness before frying the meats (second step) to obtain an attractive browned finish. Today, I skip the two steps and use the oven. Similarly, I make *nasi ulam* using the essential five herbs, but I reduce them to a paste in the processor to toss with the rice. No laborious shredding by hand.

With short cuts, I no longer baulk at cooking these dishes. I turn them out quickly and easily. I recall making a *sayor lodeh* late at night for a group of friends who refused to go home. I had *taukwa* and vegetables in the fridge but no *rempah*. So, I opened a bottle of *nyonya sambal chilli* (a larder staple), boiled that in a pot of water with dried shrimp, added some powdered turmeric, galangal and coriander and finished off with coconut milk to make a pot of *lemak* gravy with *taukwa*, vegetable and hard-boiled eggs.

All my cookbooks emphasise such stripped-down methods. They are based on old recipes, but I offer ways to shorten the time spent in the kitchen and suggest bottled aids to make it easier to turn out Peranakan meals. For me, keeping it simple is the way forward for Peranakan food. ♦

DOYENNE OF SHORT-CUT COOKING, SYLVIA TAN IS THE AUTHOR OF NINE COOKBOOKS INCLUDING THE MAD ABOUT FOOD SERIES. SHE UPDATES TRADITIONAL WAYS OF PERANAKAN COOKING BY DISPENSING WITH TEDIOUS TECHNIQUES BUT NEVER COMPROMISING ON THE FLAVOURS.

Note: More recipes using bottled pastes and other larder staples as shortcuts without compromising on taste can be found in Sylvia's book, *Asian Larder*.

"I IGNORE THEM. I MAKE MY SAMBAL CHILLI, SIOH REMPAH, REMPAHS FOR LAKSA AND SUCH IN A FOOD PROCESSOR."

Ingredients | SERVES 8 – 10

100g fresh prawns
1 stalk lemongrass – white stems only, bruised with the back of a knife
½ cup dried prawns, rinsed
4 cups water
5 cups coconut milk
1 tbsp salt
1 tsp sugar
500g fresh thick *beehoon* (rice noodles)
100g *tang hoon* (bean threads), soaked to soften
100g bean sprouts
2 tbsp bottled nyonya sambal chilli
1 tbsp galangal powder, available commercially
1 tsp turmeric powder
2 tbsp roasted coriander powder
4 fried fish cakes, sliced
1 cucumber, peeled and cored, shredded
1 cup *kesom* (laksa) leaves, finely shredded

TIP!

INSTEAD OF MAKING A REMPAH FROM SCRATCH, RELY ON BOTTLED SPICE PASTES. YOU WILL FIND IT EASY TO COOK MORE OFTEN. ADD FRESH HERBS TO REFRESH THE TASTE: E.G., SHREDDED KAFFIR LIME LEAVES AS A GARNISH, BANANA OR TURMERIC LEAVES AS WRAPS OR LEMON GRASS STALKS OR GINGER FLOWERS TO FRAGRANCE THE GRAVY. COMMERCIAL PASTES HOWEVER HAVE QUITE A LOT OF OIL AND SUGAR, SO ADJUST SEASONINGS ACCORDINGLY. FINALLY, BEWARE, SOME BOTTLED CHILLI PASTES MAY BE WAY TOO SPICY, SO BE CAREFUL BEFORE ADDING A HUGE DOLLOP TO ANYTHING!

Method

Bring a cup of water to boil and add prawns to cook till just pink. Remove prawns and set aside. When cool, peel prawns and reserve, together with the water they are boiled in.

Heat 2 tablespoons oil in a pot large enough for the gravy. Lightly sauté bottled spice paste, together with spice powders till fragrant. Add a stalk of bruised lemon grass and a little of the reserved prawn stock from time to time to prevent burning.

Add dried prawns to the sautéed spice mixture. After a few minutes, add the rest of the prawn stock, the remaining water and bring to the boil.

When boiling, add the coconut milk. Keep stirring till gravy comes to the boil again. Season with salt and sugar. Adjust to individual taste. Keep aside.

Now scald noodles, *tang hoon* and bean sprouts with hot water and drain. Prepare the toppings: Slice fish cake and shred cucumber and *kesom* leaves.

To serve, place a portion of noodles, topped with *tang hoon* and bean sprouts in a bowl.

Garnish with prawns, fish cake, cucumber and, importantly, fresh *kesom* leaves. Pour over hot gravy and serve at once. Serve with *chilli garam*, just pounded red chillies seasoned with a bit of salt, if you like it spicier.

SYLVIA'S Laksa Lemak



PROBABLY SINGAPORE'S FAVOURITE DISH WHICH RELIES ON DAON KESOM FOR ITS CHARACTERISTIC AROMA.

SYLVIA USES BOTTLED NYONYA SAMBAL CHILLI, A PASTE OF CHILLI, ONION AND SHRIMP PASTE,

TO TURN OUT THE DISH IN A JIFFY. POWDERED SPICES ADD COMPLEXITY TO THE POT.

A TIMELESS CUISINE

NYONYA WEE ENG HWA, author of the best-selling *Cooking For The President*, says true nyonya food is here to stay



Eng Hwa (right) with her mother, Mrs Wee Kim Wee.

NYONYA FOOD, otherwise known as Peranakan food or Straits-Chinese food or *laok embok-embok*, has taken a few hundred years to evolve and mature to what it is today.

Nyonya food has become a cuisine of its own. So much so that I dare say it is timeless.

My mother, Mrs Wee Kim Wee, was a culinary expert and artist. She foresaw the need to record all the nyonya dishes her grandmother (whom she would never fail to describe to me as an expert) had cooked and she herself had created. She wanted to ensure that the family's nyonya food was going to be preserved for current and future generations. It took her half a century to fulfill her dream.

My mother was focused and tenacious. It took me, with her help, 21 years to publish the book, *Cooking For The President*, which was published on 15 November 2010. She taught me the essentials of nyonya cooking, one-on-one in the kitchen. In the past, I had simply enjoyed eating her food. Ultimately, the experience of savouring true nyonya food became very useful for writing the book.

The reader might have heard the view that the best nyonya food is found at home. Nevertheless, today, there are many who have entered the culinary world as Peranakan chefs. This is something to be applauded. Because she loved seeing people relishing her nyonya dishes, my mother had wanted

to open a restaurant in the early 1960s. But my father's job as head of the Straits Times in Singapore and the incessant wildcat strikes due to the communist elements in the unions made it difficult for my mother to pursue her restaurant dreams.

Many chefs now have attempted to change or tweak grandmother's or great-grandmother's recipes. However, I am of the view that nyonya food is timeless. The characteristics and tastes of the nyonya dishes, as the past generations of nyonyas knew them, should never be changed or tweaked: for example, *babi pong teh*, *masak buah keluak*, *pong tauhu*, *chap chai*, et cetera should remain as they knew them.

What should be taught is: what kind of ingredients should be used; the way the ingredients and *kueh kueh* should be cut; how the *rempah* should be fried and why it is important to achieve the optimum level of frying; which dish or dessert should be served hot or at room temperature; which dish and dessert should be paired with which; amongst other do's and don't's. ♦

WEE ENG HWA, UNTIL HER RETIREMENT IN 2020, WAS A LAWYER BY PROFESSION AND IS THE FOURTH DAUGHTER OF THE LATE BABA WEE KIM WEE, SINGAPORE'S BELOVED PEOPLE'S PRESIDENT.

The original and second editions of *Cooking For The President* provide a preliminary description of the recipes, exacting descriptions of the ingredients and the sequence and timing of cooking, plus menus in the second edition. The upcoming third edition will include a new chapter on alternative ingredients. It is her hope that this updated edition will contribute to the longevity of true nyonya food in our culture and lives.

TIP!
ONE IMPORTANT THING ENG HWA'S MOTHER TAUGHT HER IS THAT HOWEVER FRAGRANT AN INGREDIENT IS, **ONE MUST NEVER GO OVERBOARD BY ADDING MORE OF IT TO THE DISH.** A SENSE OF BALANCE IS IMPORTANT.



MRS WEE KIM WEE'S Babi Masak Assam

Pork in Spicy Tamarind Gravy

THIS CLASSIC PORK DISH USES *KIAM CHAI* TO WHET THE APPETITE AND ENHANCE THE ASAM AND *TAUCHEO* SALTINESS. ADD *KUAK CHAI* TO LIGHTEN AN OTHERWISE FATTY-TASTING DISH. THE GREEN CHILLIES ADD A SPECIAL NUANCE TO THE FLAVOUR.

"I AM OF THE VIEW THAT NYONYA FOOD IS TIMELESS. THE CHARACTERISTICS AND TASTES OF THE NYONYA DISHES, AS THE PAST GENERATIONS OF NYONYAS KNEW THEM, SHOULD NEVER BE CHANGED OR TWEAKED."

Ingredients | SERVES 8

- 400g *kiam chai* or preserved Chinese mustard leaves, half green-leaf type and half thick-leaf type
- 180ml oil
- 30g light brown *taucheo* or preserved soya bean paste
- 700g belly pork or *samchien bak*, cut lengthwise 3cm wide, then crosswise 1.5cm thick
- 15g sugar
- 120g *assam* or tamarind, *ramas* or knead-squash with 1.5 litres water
- 2 *assam gelugoh*
- 500g *kuak chai* or Chinese mustard leaves, cut crosswise 5cm long
- 100g large green chillies, retain some stem
- Salt to taste

- Rempah titek** | Cut into small pieces and pound very finely in this order
- 20g *buah keras* or candlenut
- 15g dried red chillies, soften in hot water
- 300g small red onions, peel
- 2 tbsps *belachan* powder

Method

Cut the *kiam chai* this way: for the green-leaf type, cut the thick part crosswise 1cm wide and leafy part crosswise 2.5cm wide. For the thick-leaf type, cut lengthwise 4cm wide, then crosswise 7mm wide. Soak 15 minutes.

Fry the *rempah* in hot oil in a wok over medium-low to low heat until light brown and aromatic. Add the *belachan* powder

and fry for a few seconds, then set aside. Fry the *taucheo* over low heat for five minutes until intensely aromatic.

Add the pork and sugar, and fry over low heat for five minutes. Add the *assam* water, *assam gelugoh* and *kiam chai* and simmer until semi-tender. Add the *kuak chai* and green chillies, and simmer until all the ingredients are tender and saturated, but the pork remains elastic with some bite.

The sauce should have enough body to lightly cling to the pork and vegetables, not draining off easily. To adjust, add water or rapidly boil down to concentrate. Adjust the salt content, after allowing salt to leach from the *kiam chai*.

Serve hot with hot rice, accompanied by *sambal belachan* with *lemo kesturi*.

Recipe extracted and image reproduced from *Cooking For The President* with kind permission from the author and publisher Wee Eng Hwa.

JIN
TEONG'S
AW

THIS **SIMPLE FAMILY HEIRLOOM EGG DISH** WAS PASSED DOWN FROM JIN TEONG'S PATERNAL GRANDMOTHER. THE EGG SHOULD BE SUFFICIENTLY COOKED, BUT NOT OVERCOOKED, SO THAT THE EGG WHITE TURNS FROM TRANSPARENT TO BRILLIANT WHITE YET STAYS SOFT.



AW

Nui

Family Heirloom Scrambled Egg

Ingredients

- 2 eggs
- 1 tsp black sauce
- 1 tsp light soya sauce
- Ground pepper
- ½ tsp sesame oil
- 2 tsp oil
- 4 small shallots, peeled and sliced thinly

Method

Break the eggs into a bowl. Add half an egg shell of water, the black and light soya sauces and sesame oil. Grind or sprinkle some pepper over the egg mixture.

Heat up the frying pan. It is hot when you feel the heat upon placing your palm over the pan. Add the oil and spread it uniformly over the pan.

Add the sliced shallots, spreading them over the pan. Just as the shallots turn transparent and parts begin to

caramelize, pour the egg mixture into the pan and scramble it. Prepare to scoop out the egg as soon as the white parts turn from transparent to white. Turn off the heat and place the scrambled egg on a plate to serve with other dishes in a meal of rice or porridge. Or stand by with toast and place the egg neatly on top.

***THIS RECIPE WILL APPEAR IN A NEW BOOK THAT JIN TEONG IS WRITING ON EASY-TO-COOK FAMILY DISHES.**

OLD FUSION OR CON-FUSION?

Food researcher and author **BABA ONG JIN TEONG** urges babas and nyonyas to preserve their own family recipes for posterity



THE PERANAKAN CUISINE must evolve to survive. It has to adapt to changing times. However, certain traditional Peranakan traits must be preserved. The adaptation should be evolutionary and not revolutionary. One of the earliest forms of fusion food is the nyonya and baba cuisine, which I shall label as 'old' fusion. I shall describe a newly adapted dish as 'new' fusion. If it is accepted it eventually becomes old fusion Peranakan, otherwise I label it as 'con'-fusion! The question is, accepted by whom?

We need to encourage younger Peranakans to learn from their parents' and grandparents' generations. They should record their family recipes because each family has its adaptations. They need to own and preserve their family recipes.

The traditional preparation of many Peranakan dishes is very labour intensive. The younger Peranakans have an easier time now. Advances in technology have enabled the integration of multiple functions into all-in-one cooking appliances, such as slow-cooking, pressure cooking, microwave cooking,

TIP!
BE DISCIPLINED. GET ALL THE INGREDIENTS READY BEFORE YOU START COOKING. AND WASH AND CLEAN UP AS YOU COOK!

steaming, air-frying, searing and sautéing, sous vide, baking and grilling.

Food processors have also undergone radical transformation with heating built in, plus a host of other functions such as weighing, steaming and precise control of the temperature, speed and time. Wi-fi built into the processes enables automated cooking. The software is automatically updated from time to time. What's more, recipes are provided to fully utilise the processors.

"THE ADAPTION SHOULD BE EVOLUTIONARY AND NOT REVOLUTIONARY."

Many years ago, a participant at a cooking demonstration for *curry kapitan* asked if it was possible to prepare the dish without having to (manually) *tumis* the *rempah*. I thought it was a silly question then. But today it is possible. Cooking *seri kaya* is now a breeze. The latest kitchen innovations can weigh the ingredients individually, mix, slow-cook and stir the *kaya* then cook at a constant temperature. In the preparation of *heybee hiam*, soaked dried prawn can be pounded in seconds and then slow-fried with *rempah* - the whole process is programmed and automated, saving time for other tasks.

However, an experienced cook can tell if *sambal belachan* is *tumbok* or prepared in a processor. So do not throw away your *batu lesong*, or mortar and pestle. You can occasionally prepare *sambal belachan* the traditional way to remind you of the difference in the texture!

Nyonyas and babas who appreciate their food culture and traditional dishes should make the effort to adapt their way of cooking while retaining the taste and characteristics. It is more difficult but still possible for someone who is not familiar with our food culture to adapt Peranakan dishes. ♦

DR ONG JIN TEONG IS A RETIRED PROFESSOR FROM THE NANYANG TECHNOLOGICAL UNIVERSITY'S COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING. HE DOES RESEARCH, WRITES AND CONDUCTS COOKING CLASSES AND GIVES TALKS ON HERITAGE FOOD AND HERITAGE RELATED TO PERANAKAN FOOD. HE LIKES TO COOK FOR FRIENDS AND RELATIVES AND OCCASIONALLY RUNS HIS OWN SUPPER CLUB.

The above article has extracts from Ong Jin Teong's paper on Effects of Digitalisation on the Peranakan Cuisine from the States of the Straits Settlements, which was presented at the online seminar on Cultural Heritage, Digitisation & Urban Diversity in Asia, organised by Asian Research Institute, National University of Singapore, on 23-24 September 2021.



CREATE MORE AWARENESS

Celebrity chef **NYONYA FLORENCE TAN** believes the case for saving an endangered culture is through the stomach



THE STRAITS-BORN CHINESE CULTURE has survived for close to two centuries. Will it continue to thrive in the future? No one knows. The Peranakan community is shrinking. There are endeavours to promote its survival with the founding of nyonya-baba associations. The events that have been organised are occasional and unlikely to have great impact.

Creating awareness of our culture can be helped by promoting our unique cuisine as a tourist attraction. If we can have more food outlets to serve nyonya food, organise food festivals, inspire more people to write cookbooks, have classes or cooking schools to teach the preparation of nyonya cuisine – all these will do much to perpetuate our culture.

The young today live in an extremely fast-paced world. They have little time to even cook themselves proper meals. Nyonya cuisine prides itself in its laborious preparation and that is what makes it special. Perhaps the more enterprising ones can ‘convert’ some of the traditional nyonya recipes into a more instant form and make them commercially available. Otherwise our great food culture may die off with the passing on of the older generation of nyonya cooks.

It will be a great shame to just lose a fascinating culture such as ours to time and neglect. Consider it endangered. Now is a call to action to revive interest in it. Through our food. *Mari berhibor hati dan berjoget, datang rameh, rameh makan!* (Let us be merry, come together to dance and celebrate!) ♦

MELAKA-BORN FLORENCE TAN IS A CELEBRITY CHEF AND THE DOYENNE OF PERANAKAN COOKING IN MALAYSIA. NOW IN HER 70S, SHE HAS AUTHORED SEVERAL COOKBOOKS AND HAS GARNERED LEGIONS OF FANS IN HER MANY YEARS OF IMPARTING FAMILY RECIPES AND TIPS ON TELEVISION.

Ingredients | SERVES 6 – 7

- 180 ml or 3/4 cup cooking oil
- 30 shallots, peeled and finely pounded
- 15 cloves garlic, peeled and finely pounded
- 150g *taucheo*, or preserved soybean paste
- 1 kg chicken, cut into bite-sized pieces
- 10 dried Chinese mushrooms, soaked in water and stemmed
- 1 litre or 4 cups water
- 3 large potatoes, peeled and quartered
- 2 tbsp light soy sauce
- 2 tsp thick soy sauce
- 50g or 1/4 cup sugar
- Coriander leaves (*cilantro*) for garnishing

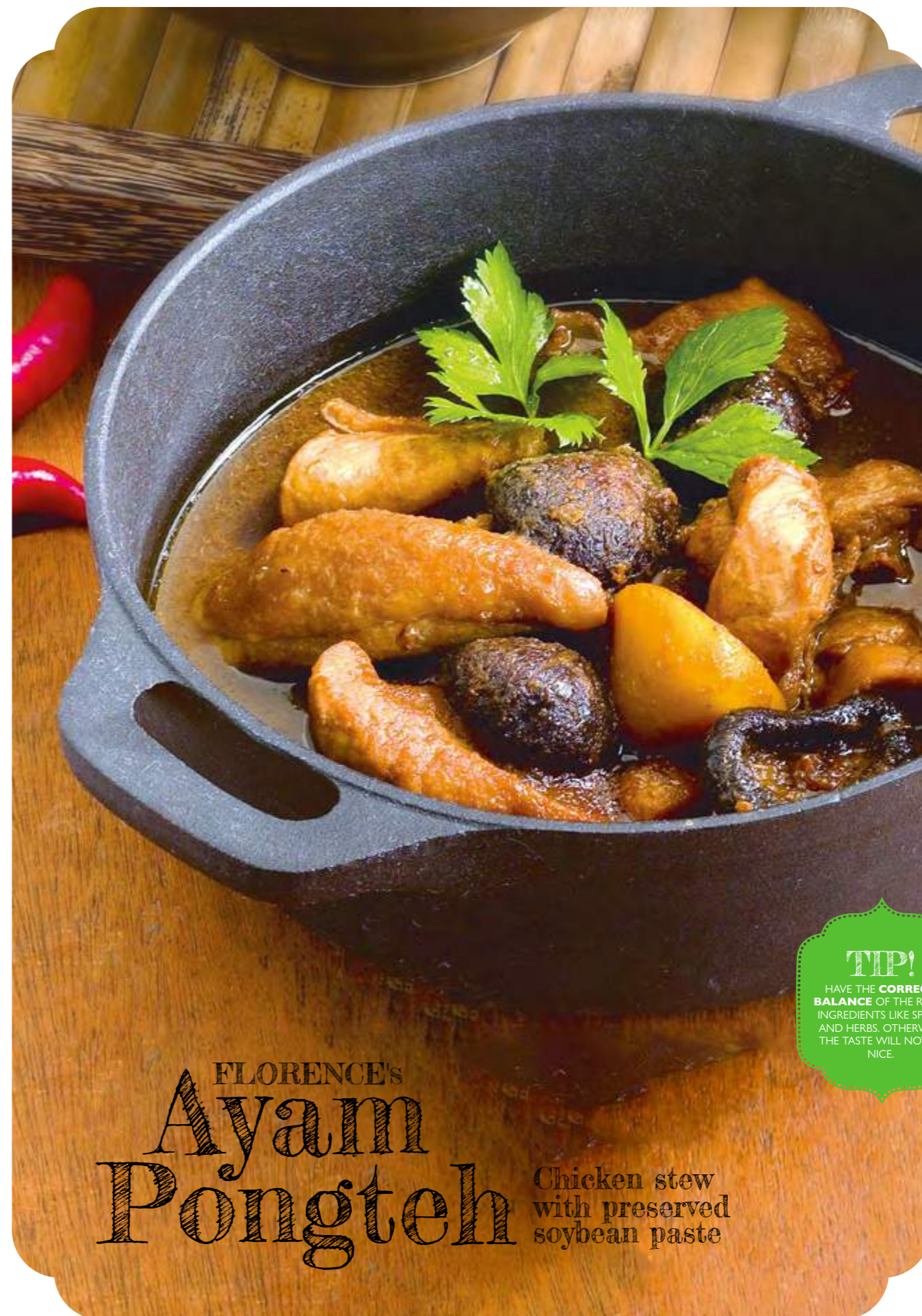
Method

Heat the cooking oil and fry pounded shallots and garlic until fragrant. Add the soybean paste and sauté until oil surfaces. Add the chicken and mushrooms. Stir fry until well mixed. Add the water. Bring to boil and add potatoes. Season with light and thick soy sauce and sugar. Lower the heat and simmer for 25 minutes until potatoes and chicken are cooked. Garnish with coriander leaves and serve.



Chef's note: This dish can be prepared a few days ahead and stored in the freezer as the flavour improves with storage. It is best served with *sambal belachan*. Another traditional way is to snap red chillies into two or three pieces and stir them into the hot *pongteh* gravy.

Recipe extracted and image reproduced with permission from Florence Tan's Timeless Peranakan Recipes published by Marshall Cavendish International.



TIP!
HAVE THE **CORRECT BALANCE** OF THE RIGHT INGREDIENTS LIKE SPICES AND HERBS. OTHERWISE THE TASTE WILL NOT BE NICE.

FLORENCE'S Ayam Pongteh

Chicken stew
with preserved
soybean paste

Cook for the LIVING, not the dead

Private dining host
BABA FRED LAM keeps an
open mind to go with the times



ABOUT 10 YEARS AGO I posted a picture of my family's mango *sambal belachan* in a Baba facebook group. It was criticised as not being Peranakan. To these critics who also sniff at *buah keluak* ice cream as "inauthentic" or cringe to see *pulot hitam* topped with ice cream, I say, why not?

Peranakan cooking is a free-flowing art. We use whatever is available in the kitchen or from our backyard. Every family has its own cooking style. While there is commonality in the way dishes are cooked, you will realise that no one recipe is identical to another in the measures or ingredients used.

Some may add a spice or two, others may omit a couple of standard ingredients. Tastebuds differ too, for a variety of reasons. For instance, beef

could have been affordable only to the wealthy in the past. Who knows, they may have relished beef *buah keluak* instead of pork or chicken! Tastebuds also evolve over time. People are now more health conscious and more hesitant to indulge in cholesterol-rich dishes like *hati babi bungkus*.

My view is that so long as the food is presented the way it should be, it is the diners' stomach that we should be targeting. Why must *babi chin* have bamboo shoots? Why not have a healthier *buah keluak* fish burger, for instance?

If we are not open-minded to change with the times, our food culture may become obsolete or worse, extinct. You may observe that in Chinese cooking, fusion is hardly a hot potato. It is regarded as another branch of Chinese cuisine. No one fusses about using oyster sauce and plum sauce to cook sweet and sour pork, where in the past only tomato ketchup and chilli sauce were used.

We must not safeguard our traditional ways of cooking so tightly. Not when others are so readily adopting a more practical, fuss-free, modernised approach to stay relevant and interesting. It is no use cooking food that only our ancestors can 'appreciate'. If you tell me, "my grandmother cooked this way", I will rebut with, "ask your grandmother to cook lah!"

Remember, we cook for the living, not the dead. ♦

FRED LAM IS A PURVEYOR OF THE PERANAKAN MATERIAL AND FOOD CULTURE. HE CONDUCTS TALKS FROM HIS FULLY RESTORED PERANAKAN HOME, AND HOSTS PRIVATE DINNERS.

Ingredients

400g blended shallots/garlic in the ratio of 3:1
300g *taucheo* or fermented soybean paste
3 tbsp coriander powder (pan roast 5 tbsp coriander seeds then blend into powder)
3 kg pork, cut in chunks
2 tins bamboo shoots, cut into bite sizes, boil to remove strong smell as necessary
10 black mushrooms, soaked till soft. Drain and squeeze out excess water
3 tbsp fish sauce or light soya sauce to season the pork
250g *gula melaka*
4 tbsp dark soya sauce
3 ½ litres water
1 tsp pepper
½ tbsp *asam* or tamarind paste

Method

Fry the shallot and garlic paste till aromatic for about 5-10 minutes. Add *taucheo* and fry for 5 minutes. Add seasoned pork, dark soya sauce and *gula melaka* and fry till brown for about 10-15 minutes. Add coriander powder and fry for another 1-2 minutes. Add water, bring to boil, cover and simmer on medium fire for 45 minutes, stirring at intervals.

Add bamboo shoots and mushrooms and continue to cook for the next 35 minutes, stirring at intervals. Taste and adjust accordingly.

Let it rest overnight to bring out the full flavour. Consume the next day with hot rice and *sambal belachan*.

PAIRINGS

Pair the *babi chin* with a vegetable dish or offset its richness with pineapple *sambal belachan*, an appetiser which is also featured in Wee Eng Hwa's tome, *Cooking For The President*, in which she recreates recipes from her mother, Mrs Wee Kim Wee. In Peranakan cooking, unripe fruits like pineapple or papaya are often used to cook savoury dishes.

TIP!

COOK NYONYA FOOD ONLY WHEN YOU ARE MENTALLY PREPARED. THIS IS NOT CHINESE COOKING WHERE SAUCES ARE EASILY AVAILABLE. THE *REMPAH* THAT GOES INTO COOKING NYONYA FOOD REQUIRES TIME AND EFFORT TO PREPARE. PUT ALL YOUR **TLC (TENDER LOVING CARE)** INTO IT. YOUR EFFORT CAN BE FELT BY THE DINERS EATING IT.



FRED'S Babi Chin

THE TRADITIONAL FORM OF *BABI CHIN* USES PORK TROTTERS AND BELLY PORK WITH BAMBOO SHOOTS. **FRED ADDS BAMBOO SHOOTS NOT FOR THE SAKE OF CONFORMITY BUT BECAUSE IT PROVIDES A CRUNCHY TEXTURE.** FOR THE PORK, HE PREFERS THE INNER THIGH AND "YE CHU BAK". THESE ARE MORE EXPENSIVE CUTS BUT THEY ARE TENDER AND LEAN. POTATOES ARE OPTIONAL.

A THRIVING HERITAGE

Food ambassador **NYONYA VIOLET OON** celebrates our exquisite cuisine



THERE HAS NEVER BEEN such a flowering and blossoming in Peranakan food as today in Singapore. Restaurants, cafes, food court outlets, recipe books, cooking classes! There is so much going on with the cuisine. Is it authentic? Does it pass my grandmother's taste test? Why

is this version totally alien to MY family's style of cooking? All these busy noises are actually very good indicators that this particular genre of Singapore's cooking will live on.

Whatever one's opinion of another chef's or housewife's cooking - the general consensus is that this is a cuisine of intense deliciousness that is quite a beloved part of our food in Singapore.

What is there not to love? The perfect marriage of East and East. The spicy, creamy coconutty flavours and textures of robust Malay cooking married with the more restrained Hokkien dishes rich in soya sauces, bean pastes and dishes that celebrate the use of prawns, garlic, leeks and offering finesse in textures. Mention dishes like *itek tim*, *buah keluak ayam*, *rebong masak lemak*, *chap chye*, *ikan garam asam*, *ngoh hiang* and *sambal belimbing*, and we're out of the door headed to our favourite Peranakan restaurant.

It is a cuisine which is in an exquisite class of its own - always celebratory and evoking fun, and I have not mentioned the well-loved repertoire of *kueh* - those sweet endings to a meal.

The cuisine lives on as it has won whole legions of food lovers and gourmets not only in the Peranakan heartlands in Singapore and Malaysia - but also all over the world. ♦

VIOLET OON IS A SINGAPOREAN CHEF, RESTAURANTEUR AND FOOD WRITER KNOWN FOR HER FOOD COLUMNS, COOKBOOKS AND RESTAURANTS SPECIALIZING IN SINGAPORE FOOD, WITH A FOCUS ON HER OWN PERANAKAN CUISINE. SHE HAS BEEN A MUSIC AND ARTS CRITIC IN THE NEWSPAPERS AND IS A WRITER. MORE RECENTLY SHE HAS RELAUNCHED INTO VIDEO BROADCASTING WITH A SERIES OF FOOD PROGRAMMES. VIOLET HAS BEEN THE FOOD AMBASSADOR OF SINGAPORE SINCE 1988.



TIP!
DO NOT ADD SEASONING LIKE SALT AND SUGAR ALL AT ONCE. **ADD ONLY 3/4 AND TASTE!** YOU CAN ALWAYS ADD MORE LATER IF THERE IS NOT ENOUGH TASTE. TO 'REPAIR' A DISH THAT IS TOO SALTY OR SWEET IS NEAR IMPOSSIBLE WITHOUT RUINING THE REST OF THE PROPORTIONS.



THE SIMPLE SAMBAL TIMUN OR CUCUMBER SALAD MATCHES EVERY OTHER DISH! JUST USE YOUR TRUSTY SAMBAL BELACHAN, ADD LIME JUICE, SUGAR AND SALT. TOSS IN THE CUCUMBER WEDGES AND THERE YOU HAVE IT! THE TASTE IS TO BE CHILLI-HOT SPICY, SWEET AND SOUR AND WITH THE UNDERLYING UMAMI OF TOASTED BELACHAN. IDEAL WITH ROUGHLY CHOPPED PINEAPPLE TOO.

VIOLET'S Sambal Timun Cucumber salad

Palate of TRUST

Chalk Farm owner **BABA BRYAN KOH** appreciates the cooks who taught him and welcomed new ideas



peeling ingredients for *rempah*, then grinding and frying the blend until it seized in hot fat.

I remember soaking *pangium edule* nuts for days and then spending the best part of an afternoon, seated on a stool, hammering and eviscerating them for the all-too-famous *ayam buah keluak*. Despite the intense labour, I had immense fun. I did harbour reservations about not being up to scratch – the big boss herself was Peranakan. But I found myself warmly welcomed.

Since then, I have worked with numerous Peranakan cooks, most of them more than willing to show me the ropes, surprisingly open to contemporary ideas, and who always encouraged me and their kin to trust our palates. And just as well too: as paradoxical as it may seem, to preserve a tradition is to allow it to evolve. ♦

BRYAN KOH IS THE CO-DIRECTOR AND OWNER OF CHALK FARM CAKE SHOP AND AN AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF FOUR COOKBOOKS: MILK PIGS & VIOLET GOLD (2014) AND ITS SECOND EDITION, MILKIER PIGS & VIOLET GOLD (2020); MORNINGS ARE FOR MONT HIN GAR, BURMESE FOOD STORIES (2015); BEKWOH (2018); AND TAMU, A GUEST AT THE BORNEAN TABLE (2021).

PORTAL TO THE PERANAKAN WORLD

BABA BENEDICT KHOO discovers how young **BABA SEAN KOAY** shares on his food heritage



THE MATERNAL SIDE OF MY FAMILY has roots in Malaysia. My grandmother, in particular, spent a great deal of time in Penang. My mother was born there. While not Peranakan, they were extremely familiar with the *patois* and of course, the cuisine. *Gulai tumis*, fish cooked with spices, coconut milk and laksa leaves (*persicaria odorata* or *daon kesom*); *jiu hu char*, fine shreds of dried cuttlefish sauteed with yam bean (*bangkwang*); and the Penang *otak otak*, spiced custard of fish perfumed with glossy blades of wild *betel* (*piper sarmentosum*), were some of the nyonya dishes my grandmother used to cook.

At a fairly young age, I found myself besotted with the sumptuous layering of flavours in nyonya dishes, the constantly harmonious results. From stolen glances at Peranakan friends busy in their home kitchens, working the *batu lesong*, laboriously slicing leafy herbs into ribbons, I had more than a suspicion that hard work was involved.

But it was not until I worked in a Peranakan restaurant over a decade ago that I acquired a fresh respect for those who made it. Peranakan food requires time, effort and staggering attention to detail. Under the supervision of the head chef, I spent hours

TIP!
WHEN FRYING REMPAH, BE GENEROUS WITH THE OIL – ANY EXCESS MAY BE REMOVED AFTER THE FRYING IS DONE. GO MEDIUM-HIGH WITH THE HEAT JUST AS THE REMPAH HITS THE OIL. AFTER SEVERAL SECONDS OF VIGOROUS STIRRING, REDUCE THE HEAT TO MEDIUM-LOW AND FRY NOT JUST UNTIL IT SEPARATES FROM THE OIL AND DEEPENS IN COLOUR, BUT UNTIL IT IS FRAGRANT WITHOUT ANY RAWNESS DETECTED.

PLENTY OF PORTALS await those who desire to discover our Peranakan heritage. For Sean Koay, his first step to finding his cultural roots was from a portal about food. That's no surprise because Sean has been surrounded by food all his life. The 26-year-old based in Kuala Lumpur helped his *Por-Por* (maternal grandmother) in the kitchen as a young boy. He now manages his family's artisanal chocolate confectionery, *Chocolat World*, while running his own pastry café called *Knead*.

Educated in a Chinese school, Sean never questioned the 'Chinese-ness' of his identity until he was invited to a friend's house for dinner after taking his Primary School Leaving Examination (UPSR). The herby Hakka *lei-cha* (tea rice) that was served was worlds away from the spicy, strong-flavoured dishes he was used to at home, like *tauyu bak*, *gulai kay* and *tu thor th'ng*.

The stark differences stayed in his mind. In 2010, he was visiting his paternal *Chor-Chor* (great-grandmother) at their ancestral home in Bukit Mertajam near Penang, during Chinese New Year. She had whipped up a feast that included her unrivalled *lor bak*, *achar hu* and various types of *kueh*. He asked her in Mandarin what these dishes were. She replied in Penang Hokkien and Malay, saying the spread was typical nyonya food.

Stirred by his newfound knowledge, Sean started researching his Peranakan heritage and identity. He experiments with recipes passed down to him by his *Por-Por* and from various cookbooks. The old recipes were recorded in different scales such as *katis*, handfuls and cents which was initially problematic for Sean.

In 2019, Sean learnt how to cook *lor bak* and *achar hu* from his *Jee Kor-Poh* (second paternal grandaunt) in Penang. He also learned the Hokkien names of ingredients used by the Penang Peranakan community such as *wee kiau* (turmeric), *bak tau* (pork shoulder), *goh hiang hoon* (five spice) and *chniah hu* (bluespot mullet).

Living in Kuala Lumpur gives Sean exposure to the contrasting ways Peranakan food is cooked in the northern style of Penang and the southern ways of Melaka. It has also confused him quite a bit. He once asked his *Jee Kor-Poh* whether their family was "Peranakan enough" because *buah keluak* is not cooked in the north. Interestingly, *buah keluak* dishes have now become a menu staple in Penang restaurants.

Sean shares stories of his discoveries and learning experiences on his social media accounts. He believes that young Peranakans like him crave cultural knowledge but are unsure where to find the information. By uploading photographs and anecdotes on his Instagram, he hopes to open new portals for his peers to rekindle their Peranakan identities. In fact, Sean has opened another portal by collecting vintage *sarongs* and *kebayas* since 2017.

Sean quotes the renowned American chef, Julia Child: "you don't have to cook fancy or complicated masterpieces – just good food from fresh ingredients". Surely, the delectable taste of Peranakan food can be that portal to understanding your culture. Take the first step. The journey will be rewarding! ♦

FIND OUT MORE FROM SEAN'S INSTAGRAM: @JUANSEAN_ AND @THESTRAITSDAPUR

ADOPT & ADAPT

Food writer **BABA PETER YEOH** takes a leaf from the past making the best use of what is available



PURGENCY IS A PRIZED COMMODITY among Penang's babas and nyonyas – our cuisine bristles with herbs and spices. Close inter-community relations between the earliest settlers since its founding by Captain Francis Light in 1786: the mercantile babas from Melaka, Christian refugees from Siam and Burma, and Hokkiens from Kedah, gave rise to a diverse, polymorphous mix of cuisines which cross-borrow and cross-pollinate each other to eventually evolve into the Penang-nyonya cuisine of today.

Penang's herbaceous *asam laksa*, rice noodles bathed with spicy-sour fish broth, drizzled with assertive *hae koh* (fermented shrimp paste) and festooned with aromatic herbs and cucumbers, onions and pineapples, is a case in point. It amalgamates Burmese *mohinga*, Siamese *khanom chin nam yaa* and Melakan-nyonya *laksa* but, in its Penang incarnation, stands on its own.

Penang's *otak-otak* draws from its Khmer and Siamese origins: the Cambodian *amok* and Thai *hor mok* are its modern-day counterparts from an older, wilder progenitor of fermented fish, spiced and wrapped in banana leaves.

From Dutch-influenced Medan, Penang has its *kueh pai tee*, the crispy patty shell which the Dutch adopted from the Scandinavians, then dispersed throughout its colonies in the East Indies.

So, where does Penang-nyonya cuisine go from here? Its history of adoption and adaptation will continue. Perhaps we can see *xiao long bao* filled with minced fish in *asam laksa* broth, or K-pop's Hallyu wave bringing in Korean kimchi-tinged *kerabu*, or nyonya *nasi ulam* presented neatly like the Korean *bibimbap*.

I would say make the best use of what is available to produce culinary masterpieces. For nyonya cooks since the days of yore, that has always been their credo. ♦

PETER YEOH IS A SIXTH-GENERATION PENANG BABA. HE IS AN AVID TRAVELLER WHO WRITES EXTENSIVELY ABOUT FOOD. PETER IS THE ADMINISTRATOR FOR POPULAR FOOD-RELATED SITES LIKE HUNGRY ONION, MALAYSIAN FOOD WHISPERERS AND THE 30,000-MEMBER PENANG WALKABOUTS GROUP.

FAVOURS FROM AFAR

Agile, innovative and passionate - these qualities describe our clutch of SEVEN cooks across continents who have taken it upon themselves to champion Peranakan cuisine. *Nyonya Linda Chee* and *Baba Emeric Lau* find out how they overcome the challenges of replicating our food far away from its birthplace in Southeast Asia.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS FROM THE RESPECTIVE COOKS IN THIS FEATURE.

AMONGST THE CHALLENGES FACED is the scarcity of certain ingredients needed to recreate the myriad flavours of home. In general, Asian supermarkets are a reliable source for fresh produce, mixes and seasonings, but some items are simply unavailable, necessitating substitution. All the cooks credit e-commerce sites as a great source of ingredients.

Born and bred in Melaka, university lecturer **RACHEL ONG** moved to Germany just two years ago. She shares that she can obtain *buah keluak* flesh, but not the nut itself, from an Indonesian online vendor, who imports it from the Netherlands. *Cinchalok*, on the other hand, is simply impossible to procure. Author **ALEXIUS WONG** is from Kuala Lumpur and resides

in Washington DC. He likewise sources *daun lemo perot*, *lengkuas* and *petai* from Asian stores, while other ingredients have to be purchased from sellers on social media. He cannot get hold of turmeric leaves or *daun kunyit* unless someone in the warmer southern states sends some over. **PEARLY CHUA-NORDLUND**, a Singaporean living in Ontario, Canada, says she turns to Lee Kum Kee Black Bean Garlic Sauce in place of *tauchoe*, and molasses in place of *tee chionh* for *popiah*. She is keen to seek out stores in big cities for more items.

Over in Japan, **MIKI TAMPO** in Tokyo and **MIDORI NUKUMIZU** in Kyoto have resourcefully found substitutes for some ingredients. Miki uses red paprika as a replacement for fresh chili in her *rempah*, and visits Thai grocery stores for *bawang*. *Bangkwan* or yam bean is unavailable, so she uses *yakong*, a South American substitute, in her *joo hu char*. Midori has found more substitutes: for *popiah*, there is dried

radish or *sengiri daikon* instead of *bangkwan*; edamame instead of *petai* for *sambal udang*, brown sugar from Okinawa instead of *gula melaka* for *sago gula melaka*, fermented shrimp instead of *chincalok* for *chincalok omelette*, and *sambal belachan* made in Thailand (and known as *kapi*). She shares that *kangkong* can now be bought from local supermarkets in the summer. For other items, she uses Amazon online. Midori also grows ginger, coriander, lemongrass, kaffir lime and curry leaf plants in her own garden. Down Under in Geelong, Melaka-born **JASMINE BRAYSHAW** grows many of her own herbs and harvests them seasonally.

into her *History, Traditions and Cuisine*, and *Edible Memories*. Pearly Chua-Nordlund's cookbook is called *Recipes Down the Line*. Jasmine and Midori

have been teaching Peranakan cooking for many years. Miki recently conducted a webinar on Peranakan culture with Hankyu Departmental Store (Osaka) where she produced a video on cooking *itek sio* for their YouTube channel. She tempers the level of spiciness in her dishes for the Japanese palate, though they are intrigued by the uniqueness of flavours such as tamarind and lemongrass. Alexius recalls an encounter with a beautician who shared her family's recipe for *sambal timun*. Coincidentally, this was the same dish prepared by his late grandmother. He recreated it that very evening for his family, who turned quiet as they savoured a taste that they all knew but had not encountered for 25 years. It was a



Miki Tampo's video.

RECORDINGS & RECOLLECTIONS Being passionate advocates of nyonya cuisine, it comes as no surprise that our cooks are keen to share their knowledge and recipes. Alexius has authored two cookbooks, *The Baba Nyonya Peranakans: A Journey*

poignant moment that drove home the need to preserve the precious knowledge of heirloom recipes. Rachel shares her recipes and the preparation of Peranakan food with her German husband as a means of recalling hearty, big family gatherings "filled with laughter and a whole lot of *Baba Malay*." On a more somber note, Jasmine finds that while her two children cook Malaysian food when away from home, they are more career-oriented and their time-starved lifestyles do not allow them to try out the more laborious recipes. Nonetheless, they all enjoy foods from various cultures. Similarly, Midori's children love Thai curry, Thai vermicelli salad and satay. Her grown-up son has learnt how to make chicken rice, while her daughter can make *ondeh-ondeh* and *kueh dadar*.

ON STAYING SERONOH & ADAPTING For Alexius, it is important to honour his grandmothers, who lavished much care to make sure that cooking was done properly or *seronoh*. They would chide any helper who did not exercise the requisite understanding or care.



Jasmine's pie tee.



Alexius' otak-otak.

ABOUT THE COOKS



United States

ALEXIUS WONG

Alexius Wong resides in Washington DC, USA. He has published two books on our culture and also promotes Peranakan cooking on his website. Alexius makes *otak otak* with sea bass instead of *ikan tenggiri* or Spanish mackerel. *Chili kering* is substituted with Mexican dried chillies called *chile puya* which is similarly spicy. He wraps the *otak otak* with *perilla* leaves for the slightly minty aroma and steams it both in round ramekin bowls and banana leaves. He cannot get hold of turmeric leaves or *daun kunyit* unless someone in the warmer southern states sends some over.

WEBSITE
BABANYONYAPERANAKANS.ORG
FACEBOOK
1. BABA NYONYA PERANAKANS
2. EDIBLE MEMORIES COOKBOOK



Australia

JASMINE BRAYSHAW

Originally from Melaka, **Jasmine Brayshaw** lives in Geelong, Victoria. She has been teaching Peranakan cooking in Australia for 37 years and finds it a great way to pass on her knowledge as well as to meet new people. Jasmine improvises her *pie tee* filling using zucchini as *bangkwan* is not available all year round. Instead of coriander leaves as a garnish, she uses Thai basil as the latter grows in abundance in her garden. She prefers to use seasonal ingredients especially if she can grow them on her own. Jasmine is collecting and preserving her recipes for future generations.

INSTAGRAM
@JASMINEBRAYSHAW



Japan

MIKI TAMPO

Miki Tampo lived in Penang for 10 years and Singapore for 15 years. She relocated to Tokyo three years ago. Miki now conducts cooking demonstrations and cooks for private home dining occasions. She wrote the first book on the Peranakan culture in Japanese. Miki created a Japanese language video on cooking *itek sio* as part of the Asian Food Festival held by Hankyu Department Store in Osaka in July 2021.



ITEK SIO VIDEO LINK

On his part, he keeps in mind the complex combinations of ingredients needed to produce the right textures and flavours.

There is some flexibility in replacing ingredients, experimenting with cooking methods - such as by using modern appliances - and in the presentation of the dish. The same goes for Rachel as replicating familiar tastes brings comforting memories of her growing up years. She makes an effort to use the pestle and mortar to *tumbok rempah* and make *sambal* whenever she has the time. Rachel concedes that she has had to adapt, using sweet potatoes instead of potatoes, and replacing candied wintermelon with *gula melaka* when making *pang susi*: "Of course, it lacks the chewiness, but the *pang susi* still tasted good!"

Midori tries to replicate a dish's original taste as far as possible, but both she and Miki lament the scarcity of fresh ingredients like fresh big red chillies in Japan. Miki makes her own *kiam chye*, *chye poh*, salted mackerel and *lap cheong*, but has had to give up making *nyonya kueh* such as *ondeh-ondeh*, "I can't compromise. There's no coconut milk. How can you expect to eat *ondeh-ondeh* with dried coconut flakes?" Jasmine loves to recreate Asian flavours. She uses *nyonya* curry powder to marinate meat when making a roast in the oven.

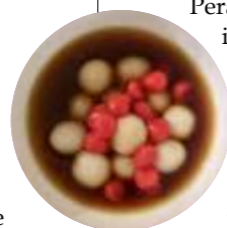


For Pearly, healthy eating practices are of concern, "...authentic foods are sometimes very 'unhealthy' - high in oils and lard and salt - that's why very *sedap*." She prefers to use leaner cuts of meat and less salt, and is "still experimenting" to find the right balance. Pearly reaches for Prima *laksa* paste when the craving strikes, which she says is close to the authentic taste, otherwise, she makes *popiah* and rice dumplings herself, "No *pandan* leaves, so I steam it in a casserole dish; some semblance of the familiar taste is better than nothing."

EATING OUT

Finding suitable dining places is a challenge, especially for those who do not live in bigger cities where there is a sizeable Asian population.

There are no Straits Chinese or Peranakan restaurants in Geelong, Australia; Ontario, Canada; Frankfurt, Germany; and Kyoto, Japan. There are two Chinese-Malaysian restaurants in Tokyo with a couple of Peranakan dishes, but in general, there is very low awareness as these all fall under the umbrella term of "foreign cuisine" for the Japanese.



In the USA, Alexius shares that there are quite a few Southeast Asian restaurants and eateries. Many are in New York City, along the West Coast in California and up through Vancouver, Canada.

LOOKING TOWARDS THE FUTURE

Our cooks are unanimous in wanting to preserve and pass on the practices of *nyonya* cooking to future generations. Young Rachel wishes that more young people would take the time and effort to learn and prepare

Peranakan food as it is worth it and part of our heritage. Alexius elaborates the importance of having a sentimental connection with the dishes: we need to make sure more young people develop a personal link to the recipes of their upbringing by imbuing our cooking with care, love and attention.

At the same time, we should not shy away from adaptations such as healthier forms of these dishes, and also try to support entrepreneurial efforts in making more ingredients available across the globe. ♦



MIDORI NUKUMIZU

Based in Kyoto, **Midori Nukumizu** has run her cooking studio, Bunga Hijau, specialising in Southeast Asian cuisine, for almost 30 years. She has lived and worked in Singapore extensively.

When Midori first started research on Peranakan food 38 years ago, she could not find the ingredients in Japan. Things have changed. Southeast Asian food is popular now, so ingredients like coriander leaves are easy to find in food stores all over Japan.

She makes her own *sambals* and *popiah* skin and substitutes *bangkwang* with dried radish or *sengiri daikon*, which she says does not taste the same.



RACHEL ONG

Melaka-born **Rachel Ong** and her German husband moved from Malaysia to Germany a year ago. They reside in the historical town of Lubeck. She trained as an ethnomusicologist and currently lectures at Leuphana University Lüneburg. Rachel cannot do without her mortar and pestle to *tumbok* her own *rempah* and *sambal*. Cooking Peranakan food like how her mother or grandmother cooked them using the *agak agak* way brings a sense of belonging and home, and memories of growing up as a *nyonya*.

INSTAGRAM @NYAROSY.COOKS

ABOUT THE COOKS



PEARLY CHUA-NORDLUND

Pearly Chua-Nordlund lives in Ontario, Canada, but keeps the delicious taste of her heritage food close to heart. She continually tries to whip up Peranakan dishes with her children who are of half-Peranakan-half-Caucasian ancestry.

SMUGGLER NO MORE

Cookbook author **Sharon Wee** recalls the trials and travails of sourcing for ingredients in New York in 2006, and how times have changed.



Sharon enjoying the satisfaction of replicating Peranakan dishes far from Singapore.

SHARON WEE New York

BACK IN 2006, during the bird flu epidemic, I had lost my brand-new suitcase from Mustafa at JFK Airport. In it, I had smuggled *buah keluak*, fresh *popiah* skin and grated coconut from Bedok, *pandan* leaves and *daon lemo perot* from home, plus dried *bunga telang* that I had furtively picked from the Church of the Holy Family (Katong church) as suggested by Baba Peter Wee (RIP).

I was a 'criminal' waiting to be caught. The slip-up was the *lap cheong* that my helper had put in. Thankfully, the suitcase was not confiscated by Customs but it was mistakenly picked up by another passenger! My brother-in-law teased me that I would know where it ended up if I saw someone serving *popiah* skin with grated coconut and *pandan* leaves!

In those days, my sister would kindly drive me all over the east coast in a mad rush the morning of flying from Singapore, to stock up my

American pantry. They ranged from bags of Sunshine sago flour, bottles of *pandan* flavouring and tins of King's *sugee* from NTUC, to our favourite brand of *taucheo* from Ah Tee, my mother's old provision shopkeeper.

Those moments have become nostalgic for me because as our world gets smaller, the selection here has widened. The latest round of recipe testing for my upcoming cookbook was done in New York

because I wanted to get a sense of accessibility to ingredients and consistency in cooking outside of Singapore.

Besides, my kitchen *barang barang* are here. Every Saturday, I visited Asian supermarkets and specialty shops in the city to stock up.

Manhattan's Chinatown was once my primary source. The entire range of Lee Kum Kee, Koon Chun and Amoy sauces, peanut oil from Knife or Lion, Cock brand glutinous rice, and Erawan rice flours is available. Locally-made products have improved considerably and become household brands for the



With the large migrant communities in cosmopolitan New York City, Sharon has managed to find the actual ingredients from the many food shops there to make the wide range of Peranakan food for her second cookbook, including *bakchang*, *bubor cha cha*, *puteri salad*, *kueh ambon* and *otak otak*.

Asian population. These include Twin Marquis for their *wonton* skins and yellow wheat noodles. The popular Korean supermarket, H-Mart stocks fresh *galangal* and Asian shallots.

In the last two decades, more Chinatowns have come up in New York City. Elmhurst, in Queens, is a residential hub for Southeast Asians. I have been able to buy *tepong hoen kwe*, fried *keropok*, candlenuts and best of all, fresh *tempeh* from an Indonesian shop.

Online shopping has also changed my life in the past decade. My favourite *belachan* and *gula melaka* are bought online. To make *kueh chang* recently, I tried *tangkueh* from China that was repackaged in Brooklyn.

These days, trendy Keto and Paleo ingredients at Whole Foods include *tempeh*, tofu, coconut oil and ghee. The Nona Lim brand of *laksa* noodles was started in California by a Singaporean. Holland chillies, lemongrass and turmeric are available almost all year round. 'Beancurd skins' are far-ranging, from

ngoh hiang skins to supple lasagna-sheet-like skin used by migrants from China and Taiwan.

I no longer need to smuggle in *popiah* skin, grated coconut and *pandan* leaves. They can all be bought from the Asian supermarket. *Senang senang*. ♦

BORN AND RAISED IN SINGAPORE, SHARON WEE MOVED TO NEW YORK IN 1996 WHERE SHE LIVES WITH HER FAMILY NOW. SHARON IS THE AUTHOR OF GROWING UP IN A NONYA KITCHEN, 2012. SHE IS WORKING ON THE 10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION OF HER COOKBOOK.

Food for

Baba Lee Yuen Thien
learned a long-forgotten
art just to present the most
sacred of offerings to the
supreme Taoist deity, *Tikong*
or the Jade Emperor.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY LEE YUEN THIEN.

the

GOODS



The prayers begin with a special altar erected in front of the main door. This is the elevated tok samkai altar - considered the grandest and most sacred altar dedicated to Tikong. Sometimes the altar would be placed in the inner courtyard or chim chen if the ceremony is conducted in pre-war townhouses commonly referred to as Peranakan shophouses.

Sugarcane stems flank the entrance to the house. The Semayang Tikong tradition was started by Hokkiens who were attacked by foreign invaders and sought refuge by hiding in the sugarcane fields. After the battle ended on the ninth day of the Lunar New Year, the grateful survivors offered a pair of sugarcanes and a variety of fruits to Tikong.



Yuen Thien and his beloved grandmother whom everyone fondly calls Mama Batu Berendam.

SEMAYANG TIKONG IS AN ANNUAL AFFAIR

that takes place on the evening of the eighth day of the Lunar New Year. The entire family comes together for prayers to the supreme Jade Emperor or Tikong in gratitude for all the blessings he has bestowed throughout the year, and in the hope that Tikong would continue to shower blessings and protection in the coming year.

The Semayang or prayers to Tikong is a Hokkien tradition upheld

by the baba and nyonya community, which is mostly of Hokkien descent. Having said that, my family is not Hokkien but of Hakka origin. We offer prayers to Tikong, perhaps influenced by the common practices of our community at large.

Both my paternal and maternal grandmothers say their families have been observing Semayang Tikong since the generation before them. My maternal grandmother, nicknamed Mama Batu Berendam for where she is living, used to "tumpang semayang" or join the prayers at my Kimpohcho or great grand aunt's house every year, mainly to fulfil

a vow she had made. Eventually, Mama's husband convinced her to hold their own prayers at home as the prayers usually go on into the early hours of the morning. It was rather troublesome in those days to make their way home in the dark. We have kept the tradition till today.

Since a child, I have been tasked to assist Mama in the preparations. She often described to me how it was done at Kimpohcho's house and that for many years, they did not put up the elevated tok samkai altar as the chanap offerings of elaborately-carved candied papaya were not available. They depended on one elderly

nyonya to supply the chanap to all the baba and nyonya families in the neighbourhood. Upon her death, the supply stopped as the chanap-carving skill died with her.

I began to develop an interest in the chanap. Eventually, I learned the skill from my Chimpoh or grandaunt who is one of the very few in Melaka skilled in the art. Chimpoh had not done it for so many years. Thankfully, she remembered after some months and taught me all. Since then, our family has put up the tok samkai again every year.

Watching my grandmother and other elders growing older



year by year, I realise that in order to sustain this tradition, we must involve everyone in the preparation, especially the young. Many are not willing to sacrifice their time and are preoccupied with work and other commitments. It is not easy.

But we must try. It can be as simple as buying the fruits or other items, cutting the red paper, folding the joss paper (left) or even helping to erect and arrange the tables, and lay out the spread. A little 'help' can spark awareness and interest, eventually generate a sense of commitment and obligation to continue this important family tradition.

The grand feast of offerings laid out behind the tok samkai altar, facing the inside of the house.



the

Table



THE CHANAP is an offering of candied papaya that used to be commonly seen in households of Malacca and Singapore aban and nyonya families. It is rich in symbolism besides having a mesmerisingly beautiful appearance. Sweet preserved pineapple or other preserved fruits can be offered in place of the candied papaya. After the prayers, the chanap is soaked in the syrup again and can be preserved for years if kept well. It is normally used at the household altar in the following year. Or, if a family member dies that year, the chanap would be used as part of the prayer offerings to the deceased on the funeral day. To make the chanap,

half-ripe papaya is thinly sliced and soaked in salt water to dehydrate it, then woven and carved into crab shapes. The papaya is then soaked in kapor or lime water to harden the carvings before soaking it again in syrup for preservation. In Chinese culture, crabs represent scholarly accomplishment particularly for excellent examination outcomes (“甲” or jia which means first, derived from the crab’s protective shell, and “蟹” and “协”, both pronounced xie which mean harmony, bountiful and additional yield).

IN ISSUE 04, 2013 OF THE PERANAKAN MAGAZINE, BABA YUEN THIEN DEMONSTRATED HOW HE CARVED THE CHANAP INTO BEAUTIFUL SHAPES. PLEASE REFER TO THE ARCHIVES AT PERANAKAN.ORG.SG



Looking through the chanap into the house, where Mama as the matriarch of the household prays to Tikong. The altar in the house also has a chanap as part of offerings to Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy, since the first day of the Lunar New Year.



At the front of the tok samkai altar: cooked sweet wheat vermicelli or mee sua denotes longevity. This is accompanied by three cups of Chinese tea and condiments known as teh-liao comprising candied peanuts and sweet crackers (placed on an intricately carved gilt wooden stand behind the bowls of mee sua).



The base of the kimchiam or dried lily buds is carefully shaped into a 'chignon' and knotted all the way upwards.



A home-made potpourri known as bunga rampay comprising finely sliced pandan leaves mixed with fresh flower petals adds fragrance to the colourful display.



The kengtok (“敬桌”, literally “salutation altar”, consists of six bowls of tall offerings of skewered vegetarian ingredients (knotted lily buds, black fungus, shitake mushrooms, lion’s mane fungus, beancurd skin and bean thread noodles or tang hoon) and six bowls of skewered

candied fruits (white fungus, kumquat, winter melon, longan, red dates and steamed red and white buns in three shapes of Buddha’s hand, peach and knots). These have their own auspicious symbolism of blessings of prosperity, longevity and well-being.



The cakes have auspicious meanings as well. The steamed cakes known as huat kueh symbolise prosperity, angku kueh or red tortoise cakes symbolise longevity, red buns or kueh kemoh symbolises blessings.

METICULOUS PREPARATIONS BEGIN MONTHS AHEAD

of the semayang, starting with the chanap. Other things done weeks ahead include folding the joss paper and cutting the red and gold paper to decorate fruits and other offerings. It is inexplicable to most people to fathom why we put so much time and effort into creating such an extravagant display of offerings for something that lasts only a few hours. Undoubtedly, it is an enduring effort driven by faith.



The gold paper ‘ingots’ and paper hangings are set on fire to send them off to the celestial world.

The main offering is known as the chanap, candied papaya that is hand-carved and skewered, to be placed atop the black lacquered chanap container which takes prime position on the elevated tok samkai altar - considered the grandest and most sacred altar dedicated to Tikong, the supreme Taoist deity. Bouquets of fresh flowers, pairs of red candles lit throughout and fragrant sandalwood joss sticks are placed alongside rows of carefully arranged fruit and cake offerings.

On the actual day of prayers, a pair of fresh sugarcane stems complete with leaves and roots flank the main door. The prayers usually last till the early hours of the morning when strings of gold paper ‘ingots’ are set on fire to convey them to the celestial world. After this, all the offerings are removed from the altar. It is important that the offerings be distributed to everyone in the family to be consumed as the belief is that they will be receiving the blessings of Tikong. ♦

MELAKA-BASED LEE YUEN THIEN IS A FIFTH GENERATION BABA AND MANAGER OF THE BABA & NYONYA HERITAGE MUSEUM IN MELAKA. PASSIONATE ABOUT HIS OWN HERITAGE, HE IS VERY MUCH INVOLVED WITH THE BABA & NYONYA ASSOCIATIONS IN MELAKA AND IS THE VICE-PRESIDENT OF PERSATUAN PERANAKAN BABA NYONYA MALAYSIA.



Acclaimed food historian *Khir Johari* looks deeper into the intoxicating origin of the *keluak* dish.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS BY KHIR JOHARI.

KEDIRI WAS A HINDU KINGDOM that existed in East Java from 1042 to 1221. This period saw significant contributions in the field of Javanese classical literature. One such text is the *Bhomakarya*, where we find the *rawon* dish immortalised: “*anak ikang rarawwan amareg-maregi*”, or “the *rawon* is delicious and makes you full”.

The central ingredient is the dark brown kernel of the *buah keluak* (*Pangium edule*) seed. *Rawon* is the true ancestor of *ayam buah keluak* and *keluak curry*, dishes often attributed to various Peranakan communities with roots in Melaka.

The Chitty Melaka and Portuguese Eurasians are avid consumers of *keluak*, inheriting the long-standing Malayo-Javanese

character of Melaka city. According to the Italian adventurer and traveller Ludovico di Varthema who visited Melaka in 1506, “The inhabitants of this city are of the nation of Giavai”, acknowledging strong Javanese presence there.

There was also constant contact between the merchant communities of Melaka and coastal Java. But beyond the Javanese per se, the influence of their culture permeated Melaka’s different communities. The Malay speech of the Peranakan groups is itself evidence for this, with heavy Javanese borrowing: *kepiting*

instead of *ketam* (crab), *changkir* instead of *chawan* (cup), *ranjang* instead of *katil* (bed), *kuping* instead of *telinga* (ear), and of course, *keluak* instead of *kepayang*. The characteristic diphthong in word endings is also very Javanese: *rampe* instead of *rampai*, *sampe* instead of *sampai*, *rame* instead of *ramai*, *pande* instead of *pandai*, *halo* instead of *halau*.

A little attribution goes a long way in understanding the origin of this dish, and other regional dishes and delicacies that are shared by diverse groups in the Malay world. So close is this association of the *keluak* with

the Javanese that the Malays have a special saying to describe the intoxicating effects of the kernel which the Javanese were experts at removing through a special process: *Adindaku laksana buah kepayang, ditelan mabuk dibuang sayang* (My beloved is like the *kepayang*, intoxicating when eaten, too dear to throw away)

That said, the Malays of Singapore are no strangers to *keluak/kepayang*: the single largest Nusantara group here are the Javanese after all. In terms of culture and trade, Java has always

been a ‘powerhouse’ of the region. Today *buah keluak* is seen as the badge of Chinese Peranakan cuisine, in home cooking and in commercial dining. This shared love of *keluak* is no surprise: their foremothers were Melaka women, of various local ethnicities.

But we are all the richer for remembering the wider story of *keluak*, beyond its popular association with the Chinese Peranakans. ♦

IN 2021 FOOD AUTHOR AND HISTORIAN KHIR JOHARI WROTE THE SEMINAL 624-PAGE TOM, THE FOOD OF SINGAPORE MALAYS, WHICH IS NOW INTO ITS THIRD PRINT. KHIR WAS EDUCATED AND TAUGHT MATHEMATICS IN THE US. NOW BASED IN SINGAPORE, HE IS A RESPECTED HERITAGE CONSULTANT AND GIVES TALKS ON HISTORY, HERITAGE AND CULTURE.

The *keluak* seeds embedded in the large reddish-brown fruit of the *Pangium* tree. All parts of the tree have hydrogen cyanide, which is leached out from the *keluak* seeds before they can be used for cooking.



feature

MARI MAKAN, MINOM

LET'S EAT, DRINK

SAMA KARANG PANTON

& COMPOSE POEMS

SEVEN babas in their 20s to 80s from Singapore and Malaysia celebrate our food culture by composing these *pantons* for *The Peranakan* magazine

ALL ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANASTASIA ZENIA.

Pakay sendok pakay tangan,
Pakay sumpet pun boleh makan;
Tak kira apa chara belajar masakan,
Yang yaukin adat di turunkan.

Babi pongteh, jiu hu char,
Laok pindang atas meja;
Lain tempat, lain rasa,
Satu Peranakan, satu keluarga.

Use a spoon or use your fingers,
Or use chopsticks to consume your food;
It does not matter how you learn to cook,
Important to preserve for the next generation.

Pongteh, jiu hu char,
Pindang, all served at the table;
Different places, different palates,
All Peranakans in one community.

Metal basin filled with clove,
From the town of Daik they manifest;
Of choicest spices and added love,
The nyonya cuisine is definitely the best.

Friendly Timah is a spritely young thing*,
A kind-hearted lass from Rumbia village;
From a humble home in the beginning,
Now elevated onto the world stage.

*Timah is an allegorical reference to Peranakan cuisine

Bunga chingkeh dalam loyang,
Semua asal nya dari Daik;
Rempah terpilih ditambah sayang,
Laok nyonya memang terbaik.

Adek Timah memang peramah,
Orang nya baik lagik Rumbia;
Dulu cuma laok di rumah,
Nijam naik ke panggong dunia.

Ayam pongteh si laksa nyonya,
Makan mari sampey sumpey;
Terkenal lebih seluruh benua,
Sedap sekali si ondey-ondey.

Ayam semangkok buah keluak,
Makan sama sambal belachan;
Bermacam laok makan tak jelak,
Warisan budaya orang Peranakan.

Chicken pongteh and nyonya laksa,
Deliciously eaten with a mouthful;
Famously known all over Asia,
Ondey-ondey is truly delightful.

Pangium chicken is uniquely tasty,
Dried shrimp chilli paste makes it wholesome;
Ample dishes are cherished heartily,
Peranakan heritage is for years to come.

BABA BENEDICT KHOO, 26, HAS A PASSION FOR GENEALOGY AND PERANAKAN CULTURE. HE IS FLUENT IN BABA MALAY. BENEDICT HAS JUST GRADUATED WITH A MASTER'S DEGREE IN ARCHITECTURE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE.

BABA CEDRIC TAN, 57, WAS A FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE PERANAKAN ASSOCIATION IN KUALA LUMPUR AND IS AN AMBASSADOR FOR MALAYSIA FOR PERANAKAN CULTURE. HE IS ALSO AN ESTABLISHED DONDANG SAYANG PERFORMER AND WAYANG PERANAKAN ACTOR.

PENANG-BORN CULTURE ENTHUSIAST **BABA HAIRUL ASRAF BIN ABU HUSSAIN**, 40, REPRESENTS THE NEW GENERATION OF DONDANG SAYANG SINGERS. HE SUCCEEDS HIS MOTHER, THE LATE NYONYA TAN ABDULLAH, WHO REMAINS POPULAR AS A DONDANG SAYANG LAUREATE TILL TODAY. SHE DIED IN 2012.



**SEDAP ENAK MAKANAN EMBOK,
KUAH LADA MASAK IKAN PARI;
BILA BABA MAKAN ITU LAOK,
SAMPAY MABOK TAK PERDULI!**

**PERAH SANTAN PAROT KELAPA,
KUAH HEE PEOW AYAM PESAK;
KUPAS BAWANG TUMBOK REMPAH,
SAMPAY PENGSAK NYONYA MASAK!**

Nyonya food super delicious,
Sting ray cooked with spicy pepper;
When Baba eats such dishes,
Until dizzy, he doesn't care!

Squeeze the coconut for its milk,
Boiled chicken fish maw soup;
Peeled shallots ground to paste,
The nyonya cooks relentlessly!

**Cheng Beng ikot adat Cheena dulu,
Semayang nenek moyang toksa pesan;
Kueh ku sio ayam itek tak da berbulu,
Tok panjang masak sampay pengsan.**

**Chuchu jantan kawin dua blas hari,
Ator sini sana penat sampay terok;
Ajek sedara dekat sedara jauh mari,
Suma minom makan sampay mabok.**

BABA RONNEY TAN KOON SIANG, 67, IS A RETIRED ACCOUNTANT WHO HAS A PASSION FOR HISTORY AND GENEALOGY. THIS IS HIS WAY OF REMEMBERING HIS NUMEROUS RELATIVES VIA LINKAGES ACROSS MANY GENERATIONS. HIS JUST-FOR-FUN PANTONS CAN DESCRIBE JUST ABOUT ANYTHING ABOUT LIFE: MOSTLY, EVERY DAY EVENTS, EMOTIONS AND HUMAN FRAILTIES.

BABA CHAN ENG THAI, 65, GREW UP IN HIS GRANDFATHER'S RAMBLING BUNGALOW AT 40, LORONG 27A, GEYLANG WHICH HOUSED FOUR RELATED FAMILIES AND PROVIDED HIM WITH COLOURFUL MEMORIES OF LIVING IN A BABA HOUSEHOLD. HE IS COMPILING PANTONS ON HIS PERANAKAN CULTURE AND UPBRINGING, AND HOPES TO PUBLISH THEM IN A BOOK FOR POSTERITY.

Cheng Beng is an ancient tradition,
Remembering ancestors is a given;
Turtle cakes, roast chicken and duck,
Cooking many dishes is painstaking.

Grandsons marry in 12-day tradition,
Wedding arrangements are tiresome;
Relatives all and sundry are so invited,
To drink and eat to their hearts' content.



Manyak orang sibok di dapor,
Lagi jongkok menumbok chilli;
Manyak mengaku diri dia chompor,
Apa masak tak satu jadi.

Dudok di balay raut lidi,
Sudah di raut jemor di tembok;
Kalu rumah Peranakan jati,
Dah tentu chootmia lauk embok.

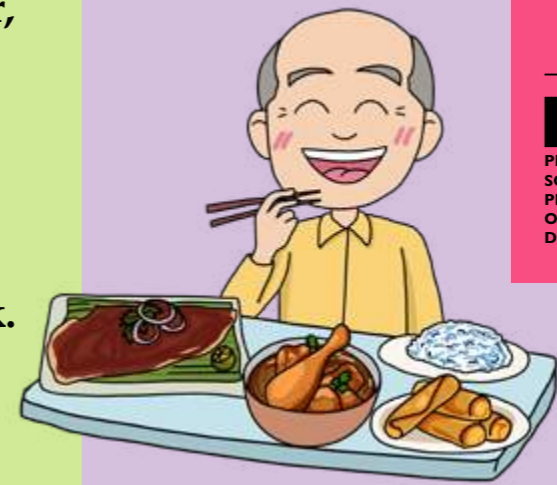
Pergi ke Pekan membeli bedak,
Cari yang ada gambair si nyonya;
Laok Peranakan memang sedap,
Lain tangan masak, lain rasa nya.

Many people look so busy in the kitchen,
They squat to pound chilli;
Many people think they are good cooks,
But whatever they cook does not turn out well.

Sit on the wooden deck to devein palm fronds,
Once completed, sun them against the wall;
If it is a truly Peranakan home,
The cooking will surely be very good.

Go to the village to buy face powder,
Look for the brand with the face of a lady;
Peranakan food is always very tasty,
Different cooks produce different results.

BABA GT LYE, 83, IS THE MUCH-LAUDED DOYEN OF WAYANG PERANAKAN OR THEATRE, AND ONE OF THE LAST REMAINING SPONTANEOUS DONDANG SAYANG PERANAKAN SINGERS.



BABA WILLIAM GWEE, 88, HAS WRITTEN BOOKS ON PERANAKAN CULTURE AND SCRIPTS FOR PERANAKAN PLAYS. HE IS THE AUTHOR OF A BABA-MALAY DICTIONARY.

MARI NYONYA MARI BABA,
RAMAY RAMAY KITA MENYANYI;
KITA DI-DUNIA TAK LAMA,
SENANGKAN ATI ILANGKAN SUNYI.

BILA IDOP BAIK BERSUKA-SUKA,
DUNIA INI DUNIA TUMPANGAN;
BILA PERGI TINGGAIRKAN NAMA,
BERSAMA PANTON BUAT KENANGAN.

ABIS BERPANTON PEROT PUN LAPAIR,
MISTI CHAREK MAKANAN DI-RUMAH;
KALU LENGAH BADAN ILANG SEGAIR,
DATANG PULAK LESU SAMA LEMAH.

Step up, ladies and gentlemen,
Let us all come together to sing;
We are not long in this world,
Let us be happy and make merry.

While we are alive let us have fun,
We are in this world only for a time;
We must leave behind a good reputation,
And poetry that is fondly remembered.

One gets hungry after composing poetry,
And must look for food around the house;
Do not delay or the body will lose vitality,
And become weak with fatigue.



Mid-Autumn Festival 1 (1997)

BORN & EATING MY WAY THROUGH! BABA

Baba Desmond Sim shares his joy in having the ultimate ticket to the most amazing food adventure

PAINTINGS BY DESMOND SIM.

FEW OF US REALISE WHAT A PRIVILEGE IT IS TO BE BORN PERANAKAN.

ASIDE FROM THE LOUD, cosy and invasive horde of family members that many of us are born with, we are given an ultimate ticket for the best and most amazing food adventure of any lifetime one could ever imagine.

It starts at infancy. One of the first memories I have as a toddler was being in my cot, staring at the colourful glass panes of our shophouse windows and smelling the aroma of toasted *belachan* wafting into my room. Yes, the scent of toasted *belachan* and the waves of fried *rempah* aromas were in my first breaths of air.

So until I was fourteen, I assumed every household wafted with the pungent aromas of Peranakan homes. Until one day, when I had a stay-over at a Chinese friend's home – and dropped the clanger, "Where's the *sambal belachan*?"

They reacted as if I had asked for some alien maggot sauce. "Sambar si mi leh?" After a few more exchanges, the matriarch of the *sinkeh*

addressed every person at the table, starting from the oldest till the person immediately elder to you. You would hold back from rushing to begin as that would be poor form. If you were the youngest in a multi-tiered family, life sucked. Your only way out was if a favourite grandparent, uncle or aunt 'blessed' you with a drumstick when it came to their turn to eat. If you were smart, you would sit right next



Lap Of Luxury 2 (2006)

to your favourite grandparent and eye that drumstick hungrily.

Once kids were old enough to be of use in the Peranakan kitchen, we became conscripted into manual labour. I actually enjoyed sitting around the table and making pineapple tarts as family time. We were too young to get the pineapple jam or pastry proportions right, but our small and nimble fingers were good at crimping the edge of each tart with small, neat rows of pleats.

We had competitions to see who would win Granny's approval. She had very high standards. It was a proud moment when I learned her style of cutting and pinching pretty little sprays of leaves to put atop her tarts... and she put me in charge of that!

On the other hand, what every Peranakan child – boy or girl – remembers clearly, without wanting to, is the purgatory of pounding *sambal belachan*. Once old enough to handle the mortar and pestle, we would be taught to make *sambal belachan*. It was like a rite of passage. We would be handed equipment, a mound of chilli, slices of toasted

Chinese household finally surmised, "Orh... he wants that stinky chilli paste that *nor-hia* people like to eat." I was too perplexed to be offended. They don't have *sambal belachan*?

Slowly, I realised the differences. In our extended family, Meals were sacrosanct. TV off. No arguments. You

belachan and told, "Pound. Not too coarse, not too fine."

The first step was to deseed the chilli. You start, and soon feel a slow burning at your fingertips. After deseeding the whole pile, the burn becomes more pronounced. If you forget for a second and wipe the sweat from your brow, a stream of chilli-laced sweat would run into your eyes. It was not fun.

But you had to persist. Once the chilli went into the mortar, you knew what would come next. As you pound, the juices of the chilli would splatter – on the whole underside of the hand holding the pestle and on the other hand covering the mortar, to prevent the juices from splattering to more parts of your face and body.

Purgatory did not end until the chilli was pounded with the toasted *belachan* into a paste. That was not the end of the ordeal. The hands would be burning for the next few days. All we could do was suffer quietly and trust that the experience would build us up to be fiercer and tougher when we grew up. Well, that is the secret of how we grew up *garang*. We pounded endless *sambal belachan* and survived!

Now I am at the age where you would think I would be squirreling recipes out of Mum's cookbook, but I am not. Mum proudly still wants to cook for us with her own recipes for as long as she can – and her kitchen is still her own private domain. I am actually learning to cook one Peranakan dish at a time drawing different recipes for each dish from different cookbooks.

How will I know whether the flavours are 'accurate'? I have a whole lifetime of stored references in my tastebuds. And I have learnt how to re-create dishes just the way my Granny did – through trial and error. Being born Peranakan is indeed to be given the best ticket to a food adventure for a lifetime, and we should each be ever so grateful to be part of this amazing journey! ♦

DESMOND SIM IS A PLAYWRIGHT, PAINTER, POET AND WRITER. HE TEACHES PUBLIC SPEAKING, DRAMA AND CREATIVE WRITING AT AN ENRICHMENT SCHOOL. HIS ARTWORKS CAN BE SEEN ON HIS FACEBOOK PAGE 'DESMOND'S WORLD' UNDER HIS PROFILE DES SIM.

My Grandfathers' Roads

Nyonya Linda Chee is fascinated by the family connections behind three roads in the East Coast named after Nyonya Maureen Koh's grandfathers

ALL PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF MAUREEN KOH UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED. MAUREEN WAS AN EDITORIAL TEAM MEMBER OF THE PERANAKAN FROM 1997 TO 2004.

Koon Seng Road

The famed stretch of colourful pre-war shophouses at Koon Seng Road in the Katong suburb is named after Maureen Koh's maternal grandfather Cheong Koon Seng. They have become a tourist attraction.

NYONYA MAUREEN KOH'S maternal grandfather Cheong Koon Seng was born in Singapore in 1880 to Cheong Ann Bee who migrated from Melaka. He studied at Anglo-Chinese School and contributed much to ACS and MGS. His sons and all his grandsons studied at Anglo-Chinese School.

Baba Koon Seng set up his auction firm, Cheong Koon Seng & Co, in Chulia Street. It was during his tenure as the president of Chinese Swimming Club from 1921 to 1934 that the Club purchased in 1925 the freehold land which it now occupies.

He built the Theatre Royal at North Bridge Road as the home for the Star Opera Company, a Malay language *bangsawan* performing

company that starred luminaries such as Khairuddin who also has a road in Opera Estate named after him. His children, as a result, attended operas, Shakespeare and classic Chinese plays in the Malay language.

Besides property in the city and East Coast, Baba Koon Seng once owned land in Upper Thomson Road that was so huge that Adelphi Park, a large landed housing estate, was later developed within it. His *rumah abu* or ancestral house in the area was destroyed by Japanese bombing during the invasion of Singapore. Generous to a fault, Baba Cheong bought a house at 291 River Valley Road for his sister when she was widowed. It was a few doors away from his house at 299. When her house was sold after her death, it served as a clubhouse and chapel for the Missions to Seamen.



1931 Members of the City Club held a tea party for their president Baba Koon Seng (by then a Justice of the Peace) in honour of his appointment as Municipal Commissioner. Photo taken at Chia Keng Tye's residence at 148, Killiney Road. Baba Koon Seng led an extremely active life. Among his many appointments: president of the Chinese Swimming Club, Chinese Association, Singapore Funeral Association, Straits Junior Association and Straits Hunting Party. He was also vice-president of the Straits Chinese British Association, Licensing Association and the Boxing Board of Control.



CHEONG KOON SENG (1880–1934) married **CHIA SIEW TIN** (1896–1953) after the death of his first wife. She was the daughter of the very wealthy Chia Hood Theam, Compador of the Mercantile Bank, who had 11 children.

Photograph courtesy of Eric Cheong, son of Cheong Hock Leng and grandson of Cheong Koon Seng.



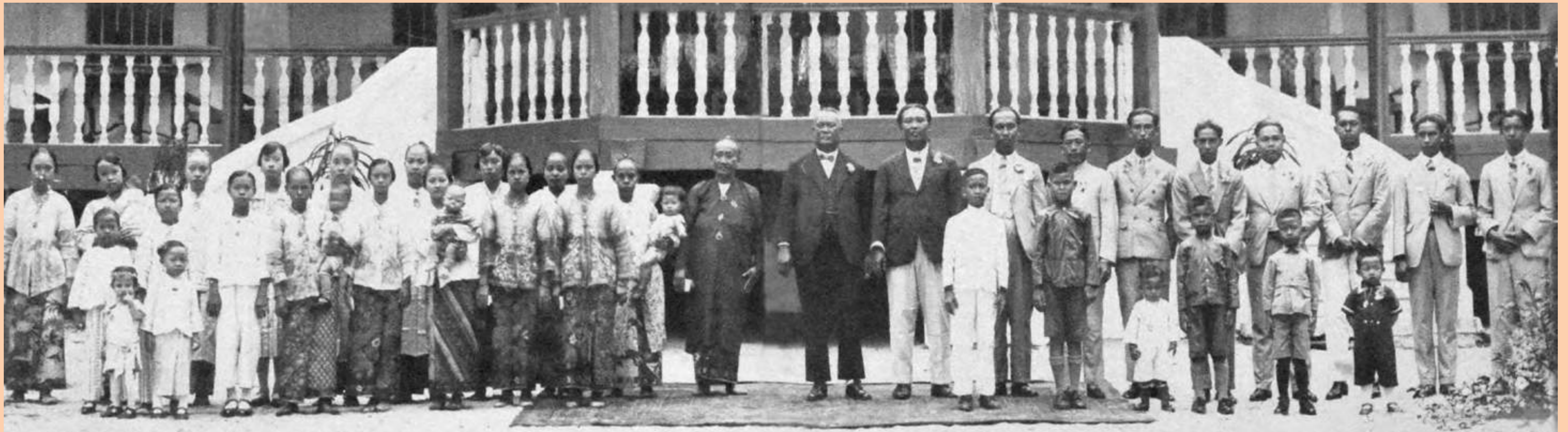
1933 Cheong Koon Seng & his family at their home at 299 River Valley Road. From left: Eldest son Hock Chye (from his first wife), Cheong Koon Seng, Cheong Keong Poh, wife Chia Siew Tin carrying daughter Keong Hee, Ensoh 'Bulat', wife of Hock Chye. Younger children seated cross-legged on the floor, from left: Liang Neo, Hock Leng, Thiam Gee, Keong Tuan and Thiam Siew. Hock Chye later founded the valuer and auctioneer company Knight Frank, Cheong Hock Chye & Baillieu. Keong Tuan and Keong Hee were the mothers of siblings Maureen and Alan Koh, and David Ong respectively; the latter three were previous committee members of The Peranakan Association Singapore.

Photograph courtesy of Eric Cheong.



1934 **Left** | 299 River Valley Road was sold and functioned as Ngee Ann Girls' School until 1981, when the school was relocated to Marine Parade and renamed Ngee Ann Primary School. **Right** | The funeral hearse of Baba Koon Seng outside his home at 299 River Valley Road. When he died of ill health at the age of 53 in 1934, both ACS and MGS closed for a day to honour him.





1930

Koh Sek Lim (middle) had five wives, 28 children and numerous grandchildren. His massive bungalow by the sea at *Padang Terbakar* (literally field on fire, now Siak Kuan Road) had twin white marble staircases leading up to the verandah. Baba Sek Lim's 15 sons are on the right. On the left are his wives, daughters and other women in the household. The woman in black *baju panjang* next to him is believed to be his first wife while the woman with baby on hip next to her is his second wife and Maureen's grandmother, Chua Kim Lian. Maureen's father, Koh Kong Hai, is standing at extreme right. Photograph courtesy of Shirley Koh, cousin of Maureen Koh.

**Koh Sek Lim Road
Xilin Avenue**

Two roads in Singapore are named after Koh Sek Lim. Xilin Avenue is the pinyin transliteration of Sek Lim.



THEIR GRANDFATHER'S ROAD.
From left: Siblings Mildred, Alan and Maureen Koh.

MAUREEN'S paternal grandfather Koh Sek Lim had five wives, 28 children and numerous grandchildren. He was known to be very frugal and stern to his children. Once the children were married, they were given their choice of land and houses along the beachfront on either side of Sungei Bedok, within his enormous estate. As a result, the Koh cousins grew up together and were close. However, education was not a virtue to him. Sons had to stop their studies early to help out in the estate. Daughters did not attend school and some struggled financially all their lives after they were married off.

Baba Sek Lim must have also given a meagre allowance to his second wife, Chua Kim Lian, who

bore him the most children - four sons and six daughters. As a schoolboy, her son Baba Koh Kong Hai went around the neighbourhood to sell *kueh* which she made to supplement her income. Once, he placed the basket of *kueh* on a rock and ran off to play. The rising tide splashed over the *kueh*, which he dried off and sold anyway. The complaints poured in to his mother; "Asin skali!"

Baba Sek Lim's Christian funeral was an elaborate affair that even had stilt walkers performing. A large marble winged angel stood protectively over his grave in the Bidadari Cemetery that has since given way to development. Like the long drawn out wills of many wealthy men of the era, his estate could only be sold or divided 21 years after the death of the last of his issue,

or children. The land now includes Chempaka Kuning, Chempaka Puteh and the Bedok Market Place - land that has been leased on tenure to private developers which, after expiry, will revert to his estate. The estate has about 70 beneficiaries at present.



Koh Sek Lim

1864 - 1948

BABA SEK LIM (1864 - 1948) was a Hokkien merchant who came to Singapore from Malacca at a very young age. He was an auctioneer with offices at 3 Malacca Street and 20 Raffles Place. The self-made businessman built his wealth through tin mines, coconut plantations and property rentals. He inspected his vast plantations on a *sedan* chair carried by coolies. After his death, part of his property in Bedok was leased in the early 1950s for sand-mining to support Singapore's burgeoning building industry.

His estate stretched along the East Coast from the start of Bedok Road all the way inland to Old Upper Changi Road. It included much of Padang Terbakar near the first hole at the Laguna Golf Course; Somapah, at the site of the NeWater plant, the Singapore EXPO and the Singapore University of Technology and Design; Changi and Simpang Bedok. He also owned land in the Gulega Road area and in Jalan Senang. These areas were compulsorily acquired by the government under the Land Acquisition Act.

Katong Vibes

IDYLIC
BEACHFRONT
LIVING

BEACHFRONT LIVING IN KATONG was very much carefree and idyllic for Maureen's father, Koh Kong Hai, the sixth son of Koh Sek Lim. Educated at St Andrew's School, he spent so much time with sun, sea and sand that when he began courting Cheong Keong Tuan, he was not initially welcomed by her traditional-minded mother. She thought he was from another race! This was during a time when mixed marriages were considered taboo.

Kong Hai and his wife briefly lived at 157 Marine Parade after marriage and during the Japanese Occupation. Keong Tuan's mother, Chia Siew Tin, lived next door at 159. They were a swinging couple who could be seen zipping around town in his red MG sports convertible. She was educated at MGS and became a schoolteacher at Katong Convent. He worked in a clerical position in the British Administration until his retirement after World War II. Gentle and musically inclined, he was part of the Merrilads, an all-male performing group of baba musicians and actors.



Koh Kong Hai (left) and Cheong Hock Leng.

1936 **Left** | 157 and 159 Marine Parade were a pair of semi-detached houses facing the beach at Marine Parade. The houses were meant to be Baba Koon Seng's seaside home but he died before they were completed. They shared a badminton court. The dirt road just outside the front gate ran along the seashore. Photograph courtesy of Eric Cheong.

Below | The front gate where the sea can be seen in the background.



1938
TO
1939



Above | Cousins spent a lot of time together, like sunbathing at this Bedok sandbank on the fringe of Baba Sek Lim's vast estate. The three-storey building behind them was the home of Wong Chai Lung who owned the British Pharmacy at Middle Road. Wong's two daughters later married two of Baba Sek Lim's sons.



Left | Baba Kong Hai loved the life in front of the family houses along the East Coast. He had a sailboat called "Baby Kong" and a canoe called "Hiawatha".



1940 **Left** | Baba Kong Hai married Nyonya Cheong Keong Tuan, the sporty, outgoing daughter of Baba Cheong Koon Seng. He was 30 and she was just 19.

Above | Keong Tuan is seen sitting in front, on Kong Hai's red MG sports convertible, with her friends.

The War Years

TRAUMATIC
TURMOIL OF
OCCUPATION

THE THREE TRAUMATIC YEARS of Japanese Occupation claimed the lives of many young men including several of Maureen's uncles. She remembers: "It is generally accepted that the brutality inflicted on the civilian population was committed by the common soldiers who were by and large crude and uncouth, cruel and murderous. But tales have been told of gentlemen officers who were respectful and even friendly towards the local population." One of them was Suzuki-san. The other was Kametaro Hontoku, a handsome and gentle, well-bred man who visited with gifts of food.

Maureen was born during the Occupation. Nyonya Keong Tuan traded her kerosangs and other jewellery for milk powder to feed Maureen as a baby. "She said I 'ate up' all her jewellery." They grew tapioca and reared chickens. "We survived any way we could. Dad cycled around Katong with eggs to sell. I was often asleep on the handlebars."



1943 Suzuki-san, at left, at left, was a Japanese officer who befriended the Kohs. 159 Marine Parade was next door to a Chinese-language school, now the site of the Church of Singapore, which was used by the Japanese as an Officers' Club.



1944

Unoki-san with **Joyce Cheong**, the youngest daughter of Baba Koon Seng.

He was a high-ranking Japanese officer who had taken a liking to young Joyce, daughter of Baba Koon Seng. He once whisked her off for a drive in his sports car. Her mother was so relieved that she rushed out with lighted joss sticks in thanksgiving to Tua Pek Kong.



Maureen's aunt Cheong Keong Hee at the beach in front of 157/159 Marine Parade with her children. Local fishermen used to beach their sampans or boats overnight. They are sitting on nibong poles, which were used as kelong stakes. The house behind, at top left, is where the then-Tung Ling English School used to be, now the Church of Singapore. During the Occupation it was used as the Japanese Officers Club. Today, Parkway Parade sits opposite, on reclaimed land where the beach used to be.



AUGUST 1949 **Maureen** with her father **Baba Kong Hai** at the air display at Kallang Airport.



1948 **The bicycle brigade** at Kuo Chuan Avenue. Maureen is on a tricycle in the middle. The semi-detached houses with modern sanitation were leased from the Lee Kong Chian Estate for \$46 a month. There were no fences and the main avenue was then a dirt road that became muddy after the rain.



1951 **An older Joyce Cheong**, 17, at the

dirt road outside the Marine Parade home. The building (at top left) was a fisherman's pier at the beach end of Joo Chiat Road, where sampans were beached. At night when the lights turned on, the pier became one of the earliest open-air hawkker centres in Singapore, where Katongites would converge to glut out on fried noodles, *chee-ham*, *rojak* and *satay chelop*. Republic Cinema was later built there on reclaimed land and subsequently demolished to make way for other developments. Joyce has just turned a fit and spry 88 years this year.



Post-War Life

GROWING UP
IN PEACETIME
SINGAPORE

AFTER THE WAR was over, Baba Kong Hai moved his family to a semi-detached house at 29 Kuo Chuan Avenue which is still there. He devoted his time to family. He loved driving and motorbiking but had a fear of flying: "If the ship capsizes, I can try to swim for shore. But if the plane goes down, I cannot fly!" Apart from the air shows, he would not go near the winged steel beasts, recalls Maureen. They went on frequent driving trips to Malaysia.

Young children then wore clothes mostly sewn by their mothers. Many played barefooted on the dirt tracks before asphalt roads were built. Maureen says, "There was plenty of space to run around. If anyone found a trail of red ants or *semot api* or *kerengga*, old newspapers were

twisted into scrolls and set alight to burn the ants right up to their nests!" In large families, when one child was caned or *kena rotan*, the rest would be punished equally. "It was a strange kind of justice."

Playground equipment after the War (photos on right) was made of metal and "the slides were the tallest ever." If it rained earlier "I had to be prepared to jump off before landing in the muddy puddle at the bottom". "The swings were exhilarating, plank seats attached to iron chains. If one was pushed hard enough, one could literally fly up to an almost horizontal position."

As a little girl, Maureen remembers walking out to the beach and collecting *remis* and other edible shellfish at low tide. The beach was often the site for filming local Malay language films produced by Cathay Keris Studios at Jalan Buloh Perindu, now the site of the Ocean Park condominium and landed houses. She had a front row preview of the filming of the latest Malay movie from the verandah of 159 Marine Parade: "The glamorous stars like P Ramlee and Saloma would be acting out their seaside courtship right before our eyes. The best part was watching the movie itself in the cinema and hoping to catch a glimpse of ourselves in the film." Roxy cinema in Katong screened Malay movies without subtitles. "Who needed words to be scared out of our wits by the long-haired *Pontianak*?"



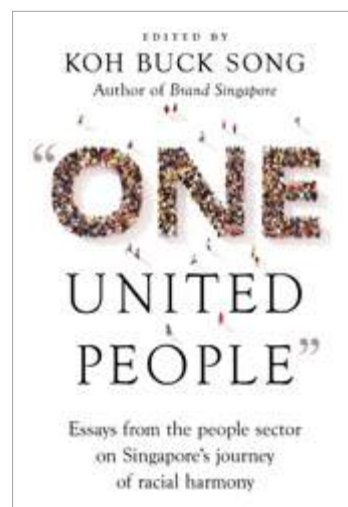
1951 **Around the Lunar New Year**, at a playground at Katong Park, with a modest wooden see-saw. The very high metal slide was supported by a pole. The concrete houses were probably lodgings for the park keepers. *Atap* shacks nearby were probably lived in by squatters.



1966 **Kallang Park** where the Tai Thean Kew Circus set up tent. Baba Kong Hai is holding his Bell & Howell 8mm cine camera which recorded many family parties and holidays, all silent of course. His children here, Mildred (front), Maureen and little Alan.

Baba Colin Chee | reviews | SIX RECENT BOOK TITLES

PROBING THE Singaporean SINGAPORE



teachers and students. I would also include my fellow Singaporeans and foreign guests living and working here.

It could not have been published at a better time. Especially when we have witnessed several random but uncomfortable race-tainted incidents in recent months. Many of us have attributed these to distress wrought by COVID-19 and others to the reckless amplification of social media. But in all, just an aberration.

Is it really? others have asked. Are these incidents instead, symptomatic of a fracture that has always been lurking just below the surface despite half a century of painstaking nation-building? It has been said, race is skin-deep like a rash that can flare up.

As a Chinese Peranakan in a Chinese majority society, I have never felt any overt discrimination during my early years of race consciousness - except when Chinese market vendors wondered and still wonder why I do not speak any dialect or Mandarin. I happen to have been raised in an English-speaking home.

But my good mix of life-long especially Malay and Indian friends, a few 60 years long, have suggested to me that they have felt the undercurrents especially when seeking employment in small local Chinese-owned companies.

I remember that as a child growing up during these early decades, I played with friends of all races - such as Jews, Eurasians, Malay-Filipinos, Bengalis, Tamils and Chinese of different dialect groups including Chinese Peranakans - in our SIT (Singapore Investment Trust) housing estate at Hillview. Singapore has today reached an enviable state

of harmonious racial integration that has kept the peace since the race riots of 1969 by dint of sheer hard work among the races and conscious policy-making to ensure the mix binds.

The rise of inter-racial or mixed marriages among Singaporeans has also helped to blur otherwise stark racial and cultural lines. Universal education has also been a blessing to ensure this.

Several of the essayists have raised the point whether Singapore's CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) categorisation policy should continue, especially in light of this blurring of racial and cultural lines.

For Saleemah Ismail, what is more important now is to start with conversations of who we are. "Only with conversations can there be understanding. Only with understanding can there be fellowship. Only with fellowship can there be feelings of love. And only with love can there be unity."

Alexius Pereira recalled a conversation first-generation PAP Law Minister Edmund Barker, a Eurasian, once had with then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew about running a Eurasian in an electoral ward. Mr Lee had said: "No. We don't have Eurasians in Singapore now. Only Singaporeans."

Like the Eurasians, the Peranakans enjoy a hybrid culture many centuries old and are themselves generally the offspring of mixed marriages since the 15th and 16th centuries.

Nyonya Linda Chee, editor of *The Peranakan* magazine, is another contributor to the book. Her deeply personal observations and experiences of her Peranakan upbringing have led her to believe that Singaporeans are together "...Same same, but different. Our differences and varied cultures have made us coherent as a country, and given us a unique identity which in itself, is a cause to celebrate our unity."

If we, as Singaporeans, can agree that our differences and varied cultures have made us coherent as a nation and can re-commit to this ideal, then surely we will return to the halcyon days of Singapore's very unique multiculturalism, if we are not already there! Go grab this book! ♦

ONE UNITED PEOPLE IS PUBLISHED BY MARSHALL CAVENDISH EDITIONS AND IS AVAILABLE AT MAJOR SINGAPORE BOOKSTORES.

Wildly Imaginative & Compelling



EMMAN. TIME TRAVELLER
— THE REDHILL TRAGEDY IS AN EXCITING NEW WORK OF FICTION SKILFULLY WOVEN BY NYONYA JOSEPHINE CHIA.

IT WAS HARD for this 72-year-old child (the reviewer) to drop the book from the word go. It brought back memories of children's adventures immortalised in books by Enid Blyton.

Except that Emman is a wildly imaginative mesh of 14th century Singapore geography, history and legends, yoga, telepathy, third eyes, time travel and scintillating adventure. Who knows, it may well be the start of a series of books aimed at our young Singaporeans with Emman as its hero - to bring history alive?

The style is so intimately Josephine and entertaining. And I can empathise with her - she named the book's protagonist after her grandson Emmanuel Ng who requested a story in his name.

Emman in the book is a Primary Five boy in 21st century Singapore with a paternal Peranakan grandmother and a maternal Hainanese grandmother. From his paternal lineage he enjoys a very mixed-up Chinese, Malay, Portuguese and Dutch ancestry and therefore his looks are "hard to place".

It was during one of those Cultural Appreciation Days in school that Emman had a momentary

spectral meeting for the first time with a very special Malay-looking boy. He had appeared from out of nowhere at the entrance of Emman's school hall and only Emman could see him. "It was as if there was an electric flow of energy from the stranger to him (Emman). He was standing there sheepishly, as if he did not belong. The boy was about Emman's age..." And, he seemed to be beckoning Emman to help him.

As it turned out, the strange visitor's name was Nadim, the child hero in a Singapore legend.

It is only later in the book that we learn that Nadim is the little boy hero who saved, with a simple idea, his community in Bukit Merah or Red Hill from the fatal attacks of swordfish but who was himself killed by the community's jealous headman.

Nadim was trying to reach out, across time, to Emman to travel back in time to save him from a nasty end. ♦

EMMAN. TIME TRAVELLER - THE REDHILL TRAGEDY IS PUBLISHED BY PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE SEA AND IS AVAILABLE AT MAJOR SINGAPORE BOOKSTORES.

More Than Meets The Eye



THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A SKINNY BIBIK, IS AN ENTHRALLING FIRST-TIME NOVEL BY NYONYA SANDRA CHUA.

SKINNY BIBIK is not just about one day in the life of a demure nyonya. It is more than that. In a way, the simple illustration by Kimberly Wee cleverly suggests there is something more than meets the eye.

And it is what the book is about. Rookie writer Sandra has somehow managed to stitch into her 316 pages a cloak-and-dagger element, several love interests around the young heroine Nyonya Charlene Neo aka Charlie, and hysterically scandalous Peranakan family stories with their twists and turns that only bibiks can whip into high hysteria over a game of *cherki*.

Then, after all is said and done, Sandra goes on to cheekily disclaim, "To my Peranakan relatives who think they recognise themselves in these pages, it's not about you."

I managed to catch up with Sandra who is a former magazine editor. She said she was inspired by her three millennial daughters. And she finished writing the book in four solid months during the lockdown simply because her husband David Chua challenged her.

Babas should never ever challenge their wives. But, then, maybe we should since *Skinny Bibik* is a highly readable and entertaining book. Let me share the novel's ending with you:

Charlie took out the cheapo hand phone. She had not turned it on for a while and expected the usual radio silence when she did. To her amazement, it buzzed with a new message. It came from an unfamiliar local number. Spam? she wondered.

UNKNOWN CALLER: Princess Her breath caught in her chest. Sheng? Is he out of prison? It was so unexpected that she was at a loss for words for a few minutes. How to respond?

SCARY SHE-DEVIL: I'm angry with you. You know I don't like being called Princess.

MY HANDSOME HERO: Please forgive me. If it is not too late, can I come see you?

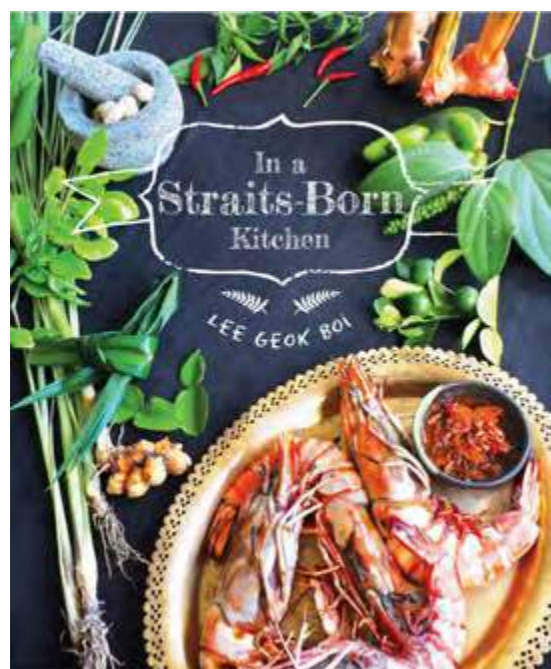
Charlie's heart gave a hop, skip and jump. Did she dare hope for happiness?

Maybe Kimberly should start preparing another illustration. ♦

THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS A SKINNY BIBIK, IS PUBLISHED BY EPIGRAM BOOKS AND IS AVAILABLE IN MAJOR SINGAPORE BOOKSTORES.

ONE UNITED PEOPLE, A RECENTLY PUBLISHED COLLECTION OF 23 ESSAYS ON RACE, NATIONAL IDENTITY AND NATIONHOOD, WILL LAUNCH ITS READERS INTO THINKING ABOUT SOMETHING THEY MAY BE TAKING FOR GRANTED — RACIAL HARMONY & THE SINGAPORE IDENTITY.

Rich Veins of SOUTHEAST ASIAN Cultures



IN A STRAITS-BORN KITCHEN REVEALS NYONYA LEE GEOK BOI'S COMMAND OF STRAITS-BORN COOKBOOK HISTORY AFTER HAVING WRITTEN SIX ASIAN COOKBOOKS

You might exclaim: It's quintessentially Singaporean! It also explains the title emphasis of this book - Straits-born.

Having quietly tucked six other books under her nyonya silver belt, so to speak, this former Straits Times journalist with a Masters' degree in philosophy from the University of Singapore finally decided to share her family's Peranakan

culinary heritage along with those from the other communities.

The other six of Geok Boi's cookbooks are centred around Asian seafood; Asian noodles; Asian soups, stews and curries; Asian one-dish meals; classic Asian rice; and classic Asian salads.

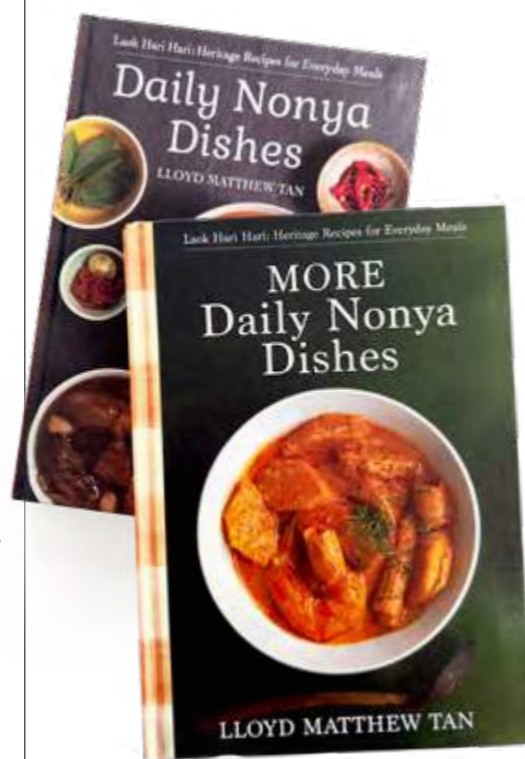
The Straits-born recipes reflect the rich veins of culinary cultures that run thick in Southeast Asia's mixed communities: *nasi ulam*, Chetti *nasi kemuli*, *nasi kunyit*, Singapore *char kuay teow*, Penang birthday *mee sua*, *laok pindang*, *asam* fish head curry, *sambal hae bee*, grilled stingray, *buah keluak* chicken and pork, *too kar sui*, devil curry, *mutton kurmah*, beef *rendang*, duck *vindaloo*, *roti jala*, *kee chang*, *kueh ee*, *kueh salat*, *java jades*, *kaya*, Indonesian *kueh lapis*, and Christmas fruit cake. There is much to mine indeed! ♦

IN A STRAITS-BORN KITCHEN IS PUBLISHED BY MARSHALL CAVENDISH CUISINE AND IS AVAILABLE IN MAJOR SINGAPORE BOOKSTORES.

COOK YOUR OWN EVERYDAY FOOD

AFTER A WAIT of four years, this twin to the first cookbook by Lloyd Matthew Tan, *Daily Nonya Dishes*, published in 2017, is finally out in the bookshops.

It coincides with the debut of Matt's own home dining business showcasing these recipes! "Oh we thoroughly enjoyed Matt's dinner. He served up some of his heritage family recipes



MORE DAILY NONYA DISHES, OR MORE HERITAGE HOME RECIPES FOR EVERYDAY MEALS, IS HOW BABA LLOYD MATTHEW TAN DOCUMENTS DISHES THAT PERANAKANS NORMALLY TAKE FOR GRANTED.

that we've not had before," said a dear friend to me recently when we were midway through a dinner cooked by another Baba chef.

Matt has unabashedly and courageously brought simple everyday Peranakan dishes to the fore. These are dishes that we would normally take for granted and, if undocumented, might get lost in memory. Peranakan food culture is very much a part of the community's heritage. I am so glad we have begun to throw some stardust at the ordinary and make them extraordinary!

Matt says as much in this second book of 83 recipes: "In years to come when you seek it out (food memory), will you be able find the dish again? So much of our culture lives in our food, that is why we need to cook the dishes we remember to keep our cuisine alive."

These recipes add to the 76 recipes in Matt's first cookbook making a grand total of 159 everyday dishes from simple sambals to soups and mains, and tons of cooking tips and how these dishes are prepared. They are recipes handed down from both his maternal and paternal grandparents and grandaunts, his parents and aunts.

In writing this review I asked Matt to highlight the more unusual and less known dishes to be found in Peranakan homes these days, or likely forgotten.

He mentioned several dishes but I have chosen a few that resonate with my childhood meals cooked by my Sarawak nyonya mum and meals at my wife Linda's home prepared by her nyonya mother from Melaka.

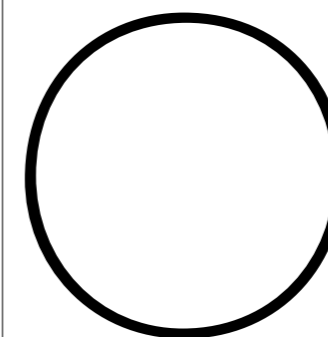
These include *sambair lengkong* or fish floss, *sambair buah keluak*, *sambair penchurik*, *ayam chow* (which seems to be a spicy version of a dish that my paternal Fuzhou aunts would prepare for Chinese New Year), *telor terubok asin* or salted *toli shad roe* and accompanying dip *chili sama chuaka*, and of course the delicious *ikan terubok panggang* which can be wrapped in *mengkudu* leaves or *pandan*. ♦

MORE DAILY NONYA DISHES IS PUBLISHED BY LANDMARK BOOKS AND IS AVAILABLE IN MAJOR SINGAPORE BOOKSTORES.



EDIBLE MEMORIES, A RECENTLY RELEASED E-COOKBOOK BY US-BASED PERANAKAN, BABA ALEXIUS WONG ON RECIPES HANDED DOWN BY HIS NEK MOYANG

A Family's Kitchen Heritage



ONE WOULD BE MISTAKEN to think that this is a simple collation of recipes by a native Malaysian Peranakan living in the United States who is trying to make do with what he has in a 'foreign' land and therefore might be losing the 'traditional' essence of everyday Peranakan cuisine. First of all, there are some shortcuts, yes. Recipes have been "upgraded to include the use of the electric pressure cooker and air fryer, as well as quicker and more efficient ways to reproduce these favourites of yesteryear and

today." But, most certainly, authenticity is also something Alex has clearly been striving for, just looking at the recipes - both in the preparation and cooking of the end-product. Secondly, however, the e-book is certainly more than about Peranakan dishes that he has grown up eating at home.

In Alex's own words: "It is a collection of 120 Malaysian favourite dishes of yesteryear and today that covers Nyonya, Chinese-Malaysian, Malay and Indonesian cuisines. They are recipes handed down by the author's grandmothers and aunts who were prodigious cooks who produced amazing meals."

They are not just recipes for our daily meals and snacks but also dishes prepared during special festivals. On top of this, inevitably I suppose, the e-cookbook records dishes that are rarely cooked these days like *kau yok*, *kueh lepat kacang*, *kueh pulot rempah udang*, *kueh pulot tekan/pulot tatai*, *yeong yue*, *yim kook kai*, *hai cho* and more.

One cannot go wrong with this expansive documentation of a family's kitchen heritage. I am so looking forward to savouring them on a daily basis. ♦

EDIBLE MEMORIES COOKBOOK IS AVAILABLE HERE:



The Baba Nyonya Literary Festival

19 & 20 March 2022

AN EVENT BY
THE PERANAKAN
ASSOCIATION
SINGAPORE

no.

The world's smallest literary festival returns successfully as the Association's first-ever cross-border event despite COVID-19 constraints, much to the relief of festival producer *Nyonya Ngiam May Ling*

PANELLIST PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSEPHINE TAN, ALL OTHERS BY CARLOS MONFORTE UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED. MELAKA PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE BENDAHARI.

TWO YEARS OF ASSIDUOUS PLANNING and resolute determination finally culminated in the Baba Nyonya Literary Festival that took place on 19 and 20 March 2022. Originally slated for 11 and 12 December 2021, the event was reluctantly deferred to early 2022 due to uncertainties arising from the COVID-19 resurgence.

The festival, purportedly the world's smallest literary festival, returned to much fanfare. Thanks in large part to a grant from the National Arts Council, we were able to livestream the event over two half-day afternoons, allowing us to reach a much larger audience beyond

our borders. We were honoured to count as partners our sister associations in Melaka, Malaysia Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) and Persatuan Peranakan Baba Nyonya Malaysia. Also partners in Melaka, the Baba & Nyonya Heritage Museum and the Bendahari, a cultural and creative hub.

The festival in Singapore witnessed the gathering of some of the best and brightest creative talents from within and without our community to celebrate the unique fusion of Peranakan culture with the written word. It was held at The Pod in the National Library

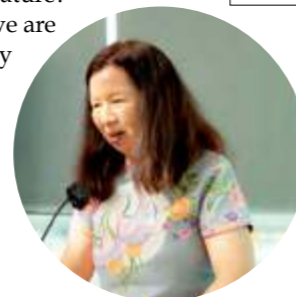
building thanks to our generous sponsor, The National Library Board.

The first day saw a reunion of cookbook writers debate long and hard over the perfect recipe for *sambal belachan*. On the second day, the writers and the audience elevated the age-old debate on identity to unprecedented levels. Our community's predilections for *sarong kebayas* and jewellery were also much indulged in.

We were not without our share of mishaps – on Day One, the online audience experienced terrible disruptions in the streaming for the first one and a half hours. We did not hesitate to refund all tickets.

Regrettably, General Winston Choo had to withdraw as guest-of-honour because of unforeseen personal commitments. In his place, we were privileged to have multi-hyphenate Violet Oon who charmed us with her immense wit.

At last November's 33rd Baba Nyonya International Convention, historian and author Kwa Chong Guan had asked: "Can the Baba Nyonya Literary Festival...inspire a new genre of Peranakan drama and literature?" The dust has barely settled; we are heartened that there is already talk of small groups being formed to read plays written in Baba Malay by foremost Peranakan playwrights such as Felix Chia. ♦



WE HOPE THAT THIS FESTIVAL WILL SPAWN ALL MANNER OF CREATIVE PURSUITS.

NYONYA NGIAM MAY LING,
BABA NYONYA LITERARY
FESTIVAL PRODUCER

BOOK BAIT



THE BIGGEST UNSUNG HERO OF THE FESTIVAL

would surely have to be the independent bookseller, **Mavis Siregar** of Book Bait (right) with her friend, **Kumari Devi**. The sharp-eyed amongst you would remember 81-year old Mavis from the inaugural festival in 2019. Mavis took great pains to curate Peranakan-themed texts to sell at the festival.

Thanks to her efforts, the book sales shot through the roof, much to the delight of the writers!

The Festival was held at The Pod with a wraparound panoramic view of the city. It had a much smaller physical presence because of safe distancing restrictions, and was livestreamed to a global audience.



(Extreme left) Guest-of-Honour Nyonya Violet Oon, seen here with TPAS President Baba Colin Chee, captivated the audience with vignettes of her culinary exploits. Questions came in quick succession from the audience.



The five panel sessions kept the audience captivated over the two days.

FOR THE TWO COUNTRIES TO COLLABORATE SUCCESSFULLY WITHOUT THE OPENING OF THE BORDERS WAS SOMETHING TO CELEBRATE AFTER TWO VERY TOUGH YEARS OF ENDURING THE PANDEMIC.

NYONYA MELISSA CHAN, STEWARD OF THE BENDAHARI IN MELAKA



Readings were made by renowned writers, from left: Kenneth Chan, Sanjay Kuttan and Desmond Sim.

BONDING INSPIRATION



By all accounts, the festival was a resounding success. **Dr Tan Kuan Khoon**, who attended both days, would heartily attest to that. As someone whose penchants are food and jewellery, Kuan Khoon felt an impetus after the festival to have his mother bring out her *kebaya* and jewellery collections and share the stories behind them with him and his young daughter, which proved to be a wonderful bonding session for all three generations. He hopes that by the time the next festival rolls around, the safe distancing measures would be relaxed enough so that the audience may enjoy a hands-on cooking lesson and perhaps even food-tasting!

IN MELAKA



Members from festival partner Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM) makan puas after the tok panjang feast.



Baba Daniel Ang (left) from sister association, Persatuan Peranakan Cina Melaka (PPCM), singing with Tok Bahrain, a local master of *dondang sayang*.



Our Melaka kawan kawan watching the festival from the Bendahari venue.

TEDx-ers visit NUS Baba House

Baba Benedict Khoo reports on the TEDx visit to NUS Baba House

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BENEDICT KHOO.

ON 26 JUNE 2022, a 40-strong group of TEDx-ers converged at the NUS Baba House where five of our Association members - Jasmine Adams, Mabel Long, Gwen Ong, Ronney Tan, and Raymond Wong - hosted them to a showcase of nyonya baba culture. ♦



Together with NUS Baba House manager Clara Ang, Baba Raymond Wong described Peranakan culture, drawing references from furniture located around the ancestral hall and airwell.



Peranakan history and genealogy enthusiast, Baba Ronney Tan had a hilarious engagement about arranged marriages within the Baba community, with stories about tenongs and wedding baskets.



Nyonya Gwen Ong showed her collection of antique nyonya jewellery including depictions of motifs and the use of coins as jewellery.

金珠肉粽
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Manyak Khabair!

30 APRIL

Nyonya Gwen Ong reports on the varied activities organised in 2022 to date

As part of the run-up to **THE REOPENING OF THE PERANAKAN MUSEUM** in early 2023, The Peranakan Association Singapore collaborated with the Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) on programmes for the **APA KHABAIR - PERANAKAN MUSEUM IN THE MAKING** pop-up special exhibition. The Association also organised a **LANTERN PAINTING COMPETITION** for *Anak Peranakan* or junior members to decorate lanterns to celebrate the Lunar Year of the Tiger.



The highly absorbing cherki game. Photo courtesy of Benita Fong.

Cherki Time!

CHERKI WORKSHOP FOR BEGINNERS

The card game that was once banned during colonial times proved to be just as popular now as a recreational pastime. Nyonya Benita Fong taught the rules and how to play the game to participants young and old, in a good mix of ages ranging from the late 20s to 60s.

26 MARCH 30 APRIL 28 MAY



Our volunteers from TPAS and PIA. From left: Merlin Pillay, Ronney Tan, Tanya Pillay-Nair and Mathew Ho. Photograph courtesy of Ronney Tan.

Khabair Baik!

SATURDAYS AT THE ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

Tours of the Apa Khabair pop-up exhibition at ACM were conducted by Peranakan docents who are from our association, as well as our Chitty Melaka counterparts from the Peranakan Indian Association. The baba and nyonya docents imparted their personal experiences of being born a Peranakan and shared on their culture and heritage. These were fun sessions where conversations, stories and memories were recalled.

24 MARCH



Baba Mathew Ho shows how to prepare ingredients for the sambal belachan. Photographs courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Masak Masak

SPICE POUNDING (TUMBOK) AND GRINDING (GILING) WORKSHOP

Association member Baba Mathew Ho demonstrated the skill of pounding fresh chillies and other ingredients for the quintessential *sambal belachan* appetiser using the *batu lesong*, or mortar & pestle. Nyonya Tanya Pillay-Nair, a Chitty Melaka member of the Peranakan Indian Association, showed the method of using the heavier *batu giling*, or grindstone slab.

26 MARCH



All dressed up by Raymond Wong. Photographs courtesy of the Asian Civilisations Museum.

Peranakan Style

SARONG-KEBAYA WORKSHOP

Baba Raymond Wong showed the 20 participants, ranging from 13 to 80 years old, how to match differently coloured outfits with suitable jewellery. Participants could dress up in Peranakan-style clothing, with tips from Raymond, and took photographs to commemorate the occasion.

24 MARCH

Lantern Painting

COMPETITION

Because of safe distancing restrictions, this competition organised by TPAS was not held as a physical group activity. Our *Anak Peranakan* junior members under 18 years who signed up each received a lantern at their home to decorate for the Tiger new year. Book vouchers were presented to the winners.

WINNERS

- 1st prize Ms Tay Kye Lin, 14
- 2nd prize Ms Amelia Ng, 10
- 3rd prize Master Emmanuel Ng, 12





Authentic Peranakan Tiles

ASTER BY KYRA RECOVERS ORIGINAL PERANAKAN TILES FROM OLD BUILDINGS AND RESTORES THEM TO BE SOLD INDIVIDUALLY OR AS WALL FEATURES. CUSTOMIZATION OF THESE TILES ARE ALSO WELCOME!

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Annual General Meeting



Photograph by Linda Chee.

THE ASSOCIATION'S ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM) was held at 2.30pm on Sunday, 12 June. As with the last two AGMs, this meeting retained a strictly virtual format, with members sending in questions and voting for the next

President and General Committee (GC) in advance through mail.

Outgoing President Baba Colin Chee addressed the highlights of his term, in particular how COVID-19 meant a pivoting of typical in-person events. The 2020 - 2022 GC deftly organised hybrid and virtual editions for the fundraising Peranakan Ball (September 2021), the 33rd Baba Nyonya International Convention (November 2021), the Literary Festival (March 2022) and no less than nine webinars featuring talks by cultural experts. He also announced the upcoming change in format of The Peranakan magazine from a hard copy to a digital publication. Outgoing Treasurer Baba Ronney Tan then summarised the Financial Statements.

Turning to the election of the next GC, it was announced that **NYONYA GENEVIEVE PEGGY JEFFS** is elected

as our 17th President. Peggy is the Association's first female President in its 122-year history. She was TPAS' First Vice-President from 2020 to 2022.

In her address, Peggy thanked Colin and the outgoing GC for their dedicated service and support, most of who will continue to serve on the new GC for the 2022 - 2024 term. She also teased members with a list of upcoming events, including a New Year's Eve gala dinner.

THE TPAS GENERAL COMMITTEE 2022-2024

PRESIDENT | GENEVIEVE PEGGY JEFFS

FIRST VP | EDMOND WONG

SECOND VP | THERESA TAN

TREASURER | RONNEY TAN

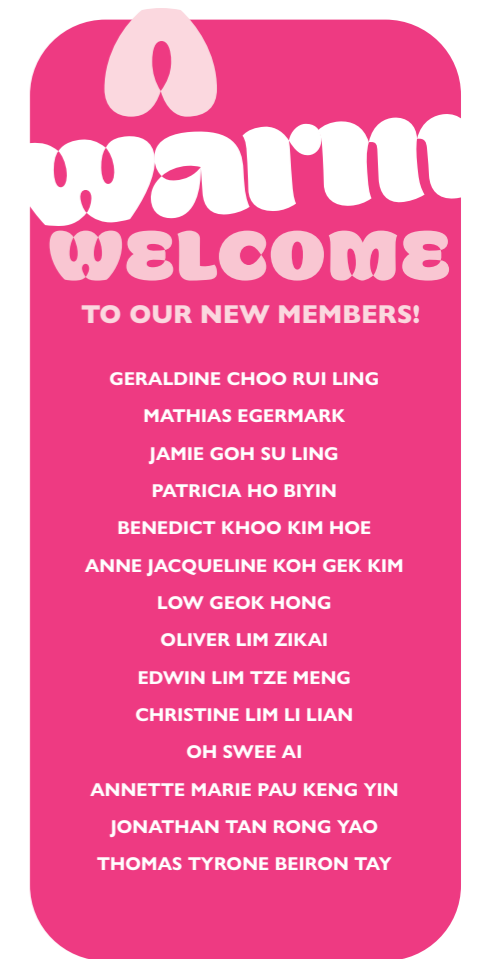
ASST TREASURER | RAYMOND WONG

SECRETARY | YIP WAI KUAN

ASST SECRETARY | TONY TAN

MEMBERS | ELIZABETH NG, NGIAM MAY LING, BRYAN TAN, JOSEPHINE TAN, ANNE THAN, STELLA CLARE WEE, PHILIP YEO

We thank all our members for their continued support. 🍷



warm WELCOME TO OUR NEW MEMBERS!

- GERALDINE CHOO RUI LING
- MATHIAS EGERMARK
- JAMIE GOH SU LING
- PATRICIA HO BIYIN
- BENEDICT KHOO KIM HOE
- ANNE JACQUELINE KOH GEK KIM
- LOW GEOK HONG
- OLIVER LIM ZIKAI
- EDWIN LIM TZE MENG
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- OH SWEE AI
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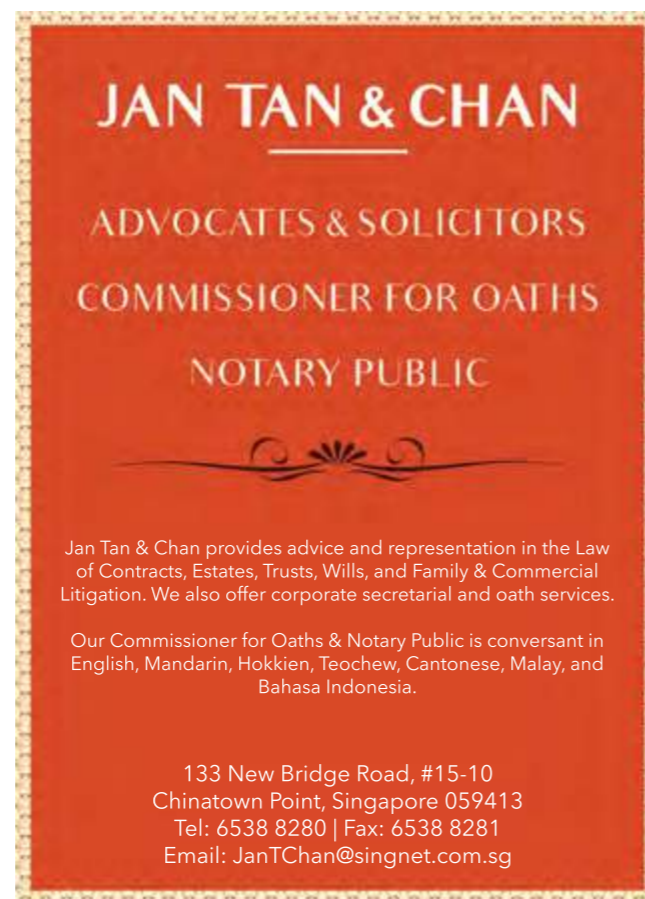


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NEW YEAR'S EVE GALA DINNER MASK-QUERADE

Mari taqiat!

BOOK YOUR TABLES NOW!

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of Rumours

In the final episode, *Baba Bryan Tan* quivers in anticipation of the grandest party on Heeren Street

ILLUSTRATION BY EILEEN CHAN.

SOH BEE NEO had ensured that only the most pedigreed of the Melaka elite were invited to her Christmas dinner party, planned to be the grandest Heeren Street had ever known.

She was dressed to impress, decked out in glittering jewellery and greeting her guests with the most magisterially beatific smile. She spotted her niece Molly looking uncomfortably out of place and ignored her pointedly.

"You know you can't fool them completely," puffed Thiam Hin, her husband, catching up with her as she socialised around. He had the usual ruddy glow of too much whisky and was clutching a Gurkha Black Dragon cigar. "If you hadn't conspired with *Ah Ko* (Peter Soh) to remove me as a beneficiary from Papa's trust, I wouldn't have had to make such a spectacle of a party," hissed Bee Neo. "*Lu sua gila ka* (Have you gone completely insane)? Is this your way of asking for a divorce?"

Thiam Hin guffawed heartily, choking slightly on his cigar. "Divorce? I paid for this ridiculous farce of a party. You want to be the laughing stock of all our neighbours when you pack your things and leave the house? *Lu homia tapi mau cari pasal, eh?* (Your life is great but you still want to look for trouble)? Be my guest, dear." He waved his cigar dismissively and made a beeline for the *babi tohay*** dish at the *tok panjang*. Bee Neo scowled darkly, brusquely

waving away the lingering curl of smoke in her husband's wake. Through the curtained window, she spied a massive golden palanquin making its slow procession into her courtyard. That old dried prune Ong Poh Geok is here, people will start whispering now given our family rivalry and history. Let them talk, she thought.

Bee Neo's youngest son Jimmy stood fidgeting by her side, nervously twirling his goblet of fine wine.

Nudging him, she commanded: "Come Jimmy, let's put some old rumours to rest once and for all. It's time to announce your marriage to the



Ongs and prove that the Soh family hasn't completely lost our teeth and are still the most powerful family on Heeren Street."

The elderly widow of Sir Francis Soh, Soh Cheng Kim, a frail figure clad in the darkest sable, emerged from the shadows, where she had arrived discreetly before anyone else. Bee Neo and Jimmy both escorted her into the *tok panjang* room where the ostentatiously garbed guests had already gathered in suspenseful anticipation. Before Bee Neo could open her mouth, Cheng Kim swept in front of her. The frailness seemed to fall away, returning the majestic nobility that she once commanded before the death of her celebrated husband.

"I would first like to congratulate Bee Neo for this splendid party, which you all have attended without any shame, seeing as how much I've heard all of you gossip about the Soh family and my younger sister-in-law."

She let the silence sit. Murmurs of disquiet were followed by the downward casting of eyes and uncomfortable fidgeting. "Before Bee Neo can embarrass herself any further, rest assured that I am here to put any rumours to rest and to resolve this matter once and for all."

Bee Neo had frozen into a pillar of salt, mouth agape and petrified disbelief plastered on her face.

"I know the talk about my grand-niece Molly and her daughter who married a *mat salleh*. *Tapi nasi sudah jadi bubor* (there is no turning back). I give her and her grandson my fullest blessing as the wife of the late Sir Francis Soh, may he rest in peace."

"My husband would not have opposed the union, given his magnanimous nature. He would have fully embraced Molly's British son-in-law." There were nods and echoes of "hear, hear". "So, to honour his loving memory, I cannot sit by idly when my younger sister-in-law is plotting to give away her son to a rival family."

Cheng Kim stared daggers at the corpulent Ong matriarch who flinched and sidled away hastily, dabbing at her sweaty forehead with an embroidered handkerchief.

The noble elder turned to Molly and smiled warmly. "To all of you here, I announce proudly. Molly Tay Bok Neo and her family will inherit all the wealth that I have. It is her due for unwittingly bearing all the injustices thrown at her. It is also written in the will of my late husband," she said, beaming with pride.

With that, Cheng Kim declared: "Let the festivities continue!" ♦

& Rivalries

*NOW JALAN TUN TAN CHENG LOCK.
**AROMATIC PORK IN FERMENTED BRANDY SAUCE

THE PERANAKAN GUIDE SINGAPORE



LANDMARKS

THIAN HOCK KENG

The oldest Hokkien temple in Singapore was founded in 1821 although the present structure, built without nails, was completed only in 1841. The temple is dedicated to Mazu, the Daoist goddess of the sea and protector of all seamen. Many of the temple's patrons were Peranakan pioneers, such as Tan Tock Seng, who donated \$30,000 for renovations. He also founded the hospital named after him. The Hokkien Huay Kuan, a community organisation for Hokkien people in Singapore was housed at the temple and also helmed by Peranakan pioneers.

Address • 158 Telok Ayer Street Singapore 068613
Tel • 6423 4616

MUSEUMS

The Peranakan Museum is closed for renovation and will re-open in 2023.

PERANAKAN MUSEUM

Address • 39 Armenian Street, Singapore 179941
Website • www.peranakanmuseum.sg
Email • nhb_pm_vs@nhb.gov.sg
Tel • 6332 7591



AMOY STREET & TELOK AYER STREET

One of the first Peranakan enclaves, now occupied by restaurants and offices. Many Peranakans from Melaka moved to this area as soon as the East India Company began to lease out land for sale.



ASIAN CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

The first museum in the region to display a wide range of artefacts from across Asia, the ACM not surprisingly has some important Peranakan treasures. The Mary and Philbert Chin Gallery has some lavish examples of gold jewellery, siren boxes and some paraphernalia, some encrusted with diamonds, and fine batik textiles from the north coast of Java, all made for the Peranakan market.

Address • 1 Empress Place, Singapore 179555
Website • www.acm.org.sg
Tel • 6332 2982

BABA HOUSE

Formerly owned by the Wee family (whose ancestor Wee Bin was a mid-19th century shipping magnate) since 1910. This heritage house goes back in time to 1928. Experience what a grand Peranakan terraced house would have been like.

Address • 157 Neil Road, Singapore 088883

Website • www.nus.edu.sg/museum/baba/index.html
Tel • 6227 5731

Visits are by guided tours. Please call the house for details.



SUN YAT SEN NANYANG MEMORIAL HALL

The old Sun Yat Sen Villa reopened in October 2011 after extensive renovations with a new name. Fitting tribute is given to the former owners of the house especially Teo Eng Hock, a son of Teo Lee, one of the pioneer Teochew merchants in Singapore, together with his nephew Lim Nee Soon, were among the loyal supporters of Sun Yat Sen's bid to overthrow the Qing government. The exhibits show how Singapore and the Chinese community here played an important part in this pivotal moment of world history. Intimate photos of the family life and of Teo Eng Hock's nyonya mother, Mrs Teo Lee née Tan Poh Neo (granddaughter of the kapitan of Muntok), add charm and a Peranakan angle to the experience.

Address • 12 Tai Gin Road, Singapore 327874
Website • www.wanqingyuan.org.sg
Tel • 6256 7377



EMERALD HILL ROAD

Another interesting residential district showcasing the best of eclectic Peranakan residential architecture, just off Orchard Road.

BLAIR PLAIN

A typical Peranakan residential area around Spottiswoode Park, Blair Road and Neil Road which is worth a stroll. Visit Guan Antiques nearby at Kampong Bahru Road, a treasure trove of Peranakan heirlooms.

Address • 66 Spottiswoode Park Rd Singapore 088655

TAN SI CHONG SU

Built in 1878, Tan Si Chong Su is the ancestral temple of the Tan clan, and was founded by prominent Baba philanthropists Tan Kim Ching, son of Tan Tock Seng, and Tan Bee Swee, the son of Tan Kim Seng. The first president of the temple, Tan Kim Tian, was a well-known Baba shipping tycoon. The temple consists of shrines for the ancestral tablets of Tan clansmen, as well as altars to the clan deities. The elaborate stone and wood carvings as well as the swooping ceramic roof finials makes this one of the most elaborate Chinese temples in Singapore, quaintly located amid the gleaming towers of the financial district.

Address • 15 Magazine Road Singapore 059568



KATONG & JOO CHIAT

Once the nerve centre of Peranakan life in Singapore. In its heyday it was the site of nearby grand seaside villas and elaborate Peranakan terraced houses. The latter can still be seen in a walk along Koon Seng Road. Other Katong attractions include Peranakan icons such as Katong Antique House (208 East Coast Road), Rumah Kim Choo (109 East Coast Road), Rumah Bebe (113 East Coast Road), Straits Enclave (318A Joo Chiat Road) and The Intan (69 Joo Chiat Terrace). Google the names for more information and walk along this route to sample the great variety of food in the neighbourhood.

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