



THE NOODLE MASTER OF PENANG

IN PENANG, EVERYONE HAS AN OPINION ON WHERE TO GET THE BEST CHAR KWAY TEOW. ONE CONTENDER IS THE LEGENDARY LORONG SELAMAT STALL, WHERE MADAM SOON SUAN CHOO IS AS WELL KNOWN FOR HER BRUSQUE MANNER AS SHE IS HER NOODLES.



A mobile vendor on Kimberley Street, George Town, cooking over a charcoal fire. Right: char kway teow at Kafe Ping Hooi, George Town, another favourite stall for this classic hawker dish.

WORDS SB TANG &
ROBYN ECKHARDT
PHOTOGRAPHY
DAVID HAGERMAN



IN PENANG,

there is a legend of a lady hawker whose char kway teow (Hokkien for 'stir-fried flat rice noodles', also commonly spelled *char koay teow*) is as delicious as her manners are curt. Serious eaters talk about her in tones of hushed reverence. They say that her char kway teow is so good she can afford to tell prospective customers, "Cannot wait? Then don't eat!" I am here to taste from this legend the finest specimen of the dish that stands first among all the honoured Malaysian street foods.

Her hawker stall, based at Kafe Heng Huat, a coffee shop in Lorong Selamat (*lorong* is the Malay word for lane), is colloquially referred to by locals as Lorong Selamat char kway teow. Having grown up in Australia in the 90s when *Seinfeld* was in its prime, I can't help but refer to her as 'the Char Kway Teow Nazi' – an effusive compliment on the delectability of her food and the seriousness of her craft, rather than a comment on her political beliefs.

This purveyor of umami (her real name is Madam Soon Suan Choo) is famed for her fire-engine red hair net, irresistible food and premium pricing: a large plate of her char kway teow with all the trimmings will set you back up to MYR10 (about \$3.50) – about three times the average Penang hawker price in a country where the average monthly household income is a mere MYR5000 (roughly \$1650).

But Madam Soon is perhaps most famous for her brusque manner and strict ordering rules. In 2010 she became the target of a concerted boycott campaign. An email did the rounds, supported by a cartoon of the now famous incident whereby she allegedly barked at a little old lady: "My kway teow very expensive! People like you can't afford!" As of publication, the 'Banned Lorong Selamat Char Koay Teow' Facebook page has 1074 likes.

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In a country where eating only narrowly shades watching English Premier League football on TV as the national pastime, Penang, an island off the north-western coast of Peninsular Malaysia, is acclaimed above all other destinations for its food.

Originally called Pulau Pinang in Malay – literally 'Island of the betel nut' in reference to the betel nut palms which were abundant on the island – Penang was contractually acquired by Captain Francis Light on behalf of the British East India Company in 1786 from the Sultan of Kedah in exchange for British protection from his enemies, and was the British Empire's first major commercial and naval



foothold in a region that it would soon come to dominate. Captain Light established the capital George Town, named after King George III.

Sparsely populated at the time of its acquisition by the British, Penang developed into a busy commercial centre and a cultural and ethnic melting pot in the centuries that followed under British rule. The British, the Chinese, Indians, Eurasians and Malays all came to Penang and all (yes, even the British) brought with them their food.

So it was that Penang developed true, unaffected fusion food decades before 'fusion cuisine' became a culinary buzz phrase. Take, for example, one of Penang's signature dishes, known throughout the rest of Malaysia as *asam laksa*, but referred to in Penang as simply laksa, which deftly combines staples of Chinese cuisine such as rice noodles, bean sprouts and soy sauce with Indian turmeric and Malay *belachan* (dried shrimp paste), as well as local South-East



Madam Soon Suan Choo works her charcoal-fired wok. Clockwise from bottom left: *loh mee* from Lean Thye Loh Mee, a thick noodle soup dish typically served with chili sauce and crushed garlic; lanterns hung in preparation for Chinese New Year; sliced green chillies, which will be pickled in vinegar and served with various noodle dishes.



I ASSUME THAT, LIKE MOST HAWKERS ON AN ISLAND WHERE BASIC ENGLISH IS WIDELY SPOKEN, SHE WOULD ACCEPT THE USE OF TWO ENGLISH WORDS TO PLACE AN ORDER. I AM WRONG.

Asian fruits (pineapple) and herbs (ginger flower, lemongrass and shallots). Even the humble piece of toast has been transformed beyond recognition by its marriage to *kaya*, a jam made from coconut milk, eggs, pandan leaves and sugar.

The fusion of cultures found in Penang's food is equally evident in George Town's architecture. Little wonder then that in 2008, the UNESCO World Heritage Committee added George Town and Melaka, Historic Cities of the Straits of Malacca, to the World Heritage List, stating that they "reflect the coming together of cultural elements from the Malay Archipelago, India and China with those of Europe, to create a unique architecture, culture and townscape."

My Mum was born and raised in Penang. As were her two sisters, brother, father and mother. Ever since I was a boy, I've loved going back there for family holidays. I'd like to say that this was because of some deep, profound connection with my ancestors. But that would be a lie. In truth, it was always about the food.

Over the years, I've invested countless kilojoules exploring the delicate balance of laksas, the cossetting comfort of *curry mees* (spicy curry noodle soup) the textural delights of *ban chan kuihs* (pancakes) and the elegant simplicity of *wan tan mees* (wonton noodles). The location of my grandmother's house was marked not by a number, street or suburb, but by the roadside residence of my favourite wan tan mee hawker in the morning and my favourite ban chan kuih hawker in the afternoon. If I was ever in any doubt, all I had to do was keep an eye out for one of my portlier cousins who wiled away his afternoons by surgically attaching himself to the ban chan kuih hawker's cart and inhaling the warm pancakes the hawker kindly gave his number one fan.

On this particular day, though, I am in George Town with my family for one reason alone: to eat Madam Soon's char kway teow. We arrive at her hawker stall at noon – just in time for rush hour. The *kopitiam* (the local word for coffee shop, a portmanteau of the Malay word for coffee, *kopi*, and the Hokkien word for shop, *tiam*) at which her stall is based is a typically Malaysian affair. The high-ceilinged, open-air shop occupies the ground floor of a two-storey building. The full-width folding doors are thrown open, allowing the heavy tropical air to circulate and the waiters easy access to the verandah crammed with tables. The place is, as usual, overflowing with customers.



An alleyway coffee shop in George Town serving curried noodles, George Town. Top left: loh mee (top) and Hokkien mee, noodle soups on offer at Keo Thau, George Town. Top right: asam laksa at Mt. Erskine Food Court.



Upon our arrival, the first thing I hear is Madam Soon saying loudly in Hokkien (the dominant Chinese dialect in Penang): "Europeans do not know how to eat char kway teow." I peer into the back of the kopitiam and notice a Caucasian male dining with a female Asian companion. I assume that he's made the mistake of ordering himself rather than letting his local-looking companion do so. I hope for his sake that Madam Soon deigned to fulfil his order with the real thing, rather than some hastily assembled, watered-down substitute.

Being the eldest of three brothers, I take it upon myself to place our order. I saunter up to Madam Soon's stall, pausing only briefly to inhale the intoxicating fumes rising from her wok – it is the smell of the elusive 'breath of the wok' prized by Chinese gourmands since time immemorial. I utter five words to place my order: "four char kway teows please." I assume that, like most hawkers on an island where basic English is widely spoken, she would accept the use of two English words to place an order. I am wrong.

Her reply comes in Hokkien. "Do not speak to me in English." Problem: my Hokkien, acquired through a lifetime of exposure to scurrilous family gossip uttered by aunties in my presence, does not extend to numbers. So while I am perfectly capable of understanding and translating the bulk of a parent's complaints about their children in Hokkien (an enduringly popular conversation topic in kopitiams), I haven't the faintest clue what the Hokkien word for 'four' is.

I pause momentarily to take stock (and leisurely enjoy more than a few deep gulps of the wok's aroma). I briefly contemplate the prospect of lunch without her char kway teow, before deciding to initiate plan B: letting my dad order.

It turns out that Madam Soon's customers are required to follow an unwritten but strictly enforced ordering procedure. The account that follows is a mere induction based on my own empirical observations. As a general rule, all communication must take place in clear and loud Hokkien. If you cannot speak Hokkien, ask a friendly local to place your order for you. Enter the kopitiam and secure a table. Note your table number – you will need this later. Approach the stall and state



Breakfast of *koay teow th'ng*, a rice noodle dish with a clear broth. Clockwise from left: detail from a family temple in George Town; tourists riding a rickshaw on Armenian Street, George Town; Poh Lay Koay Teow Th'ng, a stall on Kimberley Street, George Town.



THE CHARCOAL AROMA IMBUES HER CHAR KWAY TEOW WITH AN EXTRA LAYER OF FLAVOUR AND THE HIGHER WOK TEMPERATURE UNLOCKS TASTES AND TEXTURES GAS-POWERED WOKS SIMPLY CAN'T ACHIEVE.



tastes and textures gas-powered woks simply can't achieve. Of course, such improvement comes at a price that not everyone is willing to pay: charcoal fires require constant, laborious manual feeding. Madam Soon is one of the few left willing to pay that price. That is why she is one of the few hawkers still able to create the breath of the wok.

After my dad orders, a distinguished-looking lady approaches Madam Soon's stall. She is ethnically Chinese, elegantly dressed and impeccably coiffed. She attempts to order in fluent English. She receives the same response that I had earlier.

But the distinguished-looking lady repeats her attempts to order in English. She must be Singaporean, I think to myself (nowadays, most Singaporeans cannot speak Hokkien). Her subsequent ordering attempts meet with no response from Madam Soon. The woman is left standing in front of the stall, perplexed and flustered. My dad gets up to help her but a local beats him to it, placing her order in Hokkien.

Thirty minutes after my dad places our order, our food arrives. Eating a plate of char kway teow this good is a wide-ranging sensory experience: even before it arrives, my ears are filled with the crisp, sizzling sound of a well-fed, charcoal-fired wok at work. When it lands on the table, the first thing that hits me is the divine fragrance – I bow my head and let it wash over me.

Only then do I actually lay my eyes on the dish. The thin, luminescent noodles glisten in the bright afternoon light, but – unlike so many examples of char kway teow found outside Penang made with wide noodles – they are neither gluey nor greasy. Crucially, the noodles are visibly charred at the edges without being burnt. Like all proper Penang-style char kway teows, the dish is an appetising light brown in colour, not the ink-cartridge black of the char kway teows typically found in the rest of Malaysia and Singapore.

Then there is the taste. The many disparate flavours – the sweetness of the prawns and cockles, the richness of the Chinese sausage and pork lard, the bite of the chives and chillies – are seamlessly fused together by the breath of the wok, creating something new and whole and infinitely greater than the sum of its parts. Before long, the dish is gone; lost in the ephemeral pleasure of the moment, I have devoured the char kway teow almost without realising it. And I am left craving more. Now, if only I knew the Hokkien phrase for 'seconds please'.

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your order, remembering to specify what size plate and which, if any, of the optional extras you would like. She will then advise you of the approximate waiting time and ask you whether you are willing to wait. Say "yes". She will then ask you for your table number. State your table number; if you do not have one, your order will be declined. Return to your table and commence waiting.

My dad, fluent in four Chinese dialects, experiences no problems following her ordering procedure. He returns to our table and tells us she has informed him it will be a 45-minute wait for our four large servings of char kway teow. Better still, he has managed to place our order just before the height of rush hour.

I sit back and wait. Newly arrived pilgrims to this smoky altar to street food are informed they will have to wait an hour to receive their food. They all happily agree to do so. Whatever Madam Soon's faults may be, dishonesty is clearly not one of them – she is upfront with all her customers about both her premium pricing and the lengthy waiting times for her product. Still, the people pour in.

I watch as Madam Soon constantly feeds more charcoal into her stove. There, laid bare in broad daylight, is the prosaic secret behind much of her success: unlike the vast majority of her contemporaries throughout Malaysia and Singapore, she has stuck with the old-fashioned charcoal fire rather than switching to a modern, easy-to-maintain gas flame. The charcoal aroma imbues her char kway teow with an extra layer of flavour and the higher wok temperature unlocks



From top: koay teow th'ng; booth seating at Kafe Ping Hooi, George Town; hot chillies await customers at a George Town food stall.



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EAT

Kafe Ping Hooi

You'll smell the char kway teow served by a vendor at this corner coffee shop (mornings only) before you see it. On weekends expect to wait up to 30 minutes, but your plate will be served with a smile. **179 Carnarvon St, George Town.**

Keo Thau Hokkien Mee

This family-owned coffee shop has been serving Penang *Hokkien mee* – noodles, bean sprouts and prawns in a fragrant broth made with pork bones, prawn heads, and dried chillies, served with sambal – for more than 25 years. Do as Penang-ites do and ask for a mix of *mee* (yellow noodles) and *bee hoon* (rice vermicelli). **533 Beach St (next to Anson Bridge), George Town.**

Penang Asam Laksa Stall

At a hawker food court about 15 minutes by taxi from George Town, two sweet-natured septuagenarian sisters dish up Penang's other iconic noodle dish: *asam laksa*, a sour and spicy tamarind fish soup with chewy rice and tapioca flour noodles. The soup is garnished with mint leaves, shredded pineapple and cucumber, and slivers of hot-pink torch ginger flower, and a spoonful of *hae ko*, sweet black shrimp paste made in Penang. **Mt Erskine Hawker Centre, Jalan Mt Erskine, Tanjung Tokong.**

Mee goreng cart

The Mamak (Indian Muslim) answer to char kway teow is *mee goreng*, a glorious tangle of yellow noodles fried in chilli sauce with bean sprouts and squares of potato and bean curd, garnished with shredded lettuce, deep-fried shallots, and served with lime. This elderly vendor serves one of George Town's

best versions from a mobile cart (weekdays only). **Armenian St at Cannon St, George Town.**

Lean Thye Loh Mee

Loh mee is a hearty dish of yellow noodles, sliced pork, and half a hard-boiled egg swimming in dark, thick pork broth gravy flavoured with five-spice powder. Prepared by the sons of the original vendor, Lean Thye's version is especially fragrant with cinnamon. Be sure to add vinegary chilli sauce and mashed garlic. **Ah Quee St, half a block from Beach St, George Town.**

Koay Teow Th'ng cart

This dish of rice noodles in duck or pork broth is common breakfast fare. At this stall, which supplements duck meat with fish balls and pork-filled wonton, order your version 'wet' (noodles and accompaniments served in soup) or 'dry' (tossed in dark soy sauce) with soup on the side. **Kimberley St, between Jalan Pintal Tali and Carnarvon St, George Town.**

STAY

Seven Terraces

Eighteen luxurious suites with large bathrooms, lap pool and peaceful courtyard, a modern Nyonya restaurant and a classic bar all housed in converted 19th-century Anglo-Chinese terraces behind the 1810 Goddess of Mercy Temple. **Stewart Ln, George Town, +604 264 2333, www.seventerraces.com.**

Ren i Tang

A former Chinese medicine hall beautifully refurbished by two Kuala Lumpur conservationists into a boutique hotel with 17 individually decorated rooms and suites. **82-A Penang St, +604 250 8383, renitang.com.**