



The
Multicultural
Performing Arts,
Crafts, Festivals
and Food
of Penang

Edited by Tan Sooi Beng

THE MULTICULTURAL PERFORMING ARTS, CRAFTS, FESTIVALS AND FOOD OF PENANG

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The Multicultural Performing Arts, Crafts, Festivals and Food of Penang

Introduction

As Penang port developed in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the trading of spices and the export of tin and rubber attracted settlers from the Malay Archipelago, Thailand, Burma, Hadhramaut, India, China and Europe. Penang was also an important stopover for pilgrims going to Mecca. The multiethnic nature of early Penang can be seen in the population census of Georgetown in 1835 which included Europeans, Armenians, Malays, Acehnese, Batak, Chinese, Chuliahs, Bengalese, Siamese, Burmese, Arabs, Parsees, Native Christians and Caffrees (Africans).

The meeting of different peoples in Penang is manifested in the multiple places of worship situated near each other in the inner city, eclectic food and architecture, languages spoken, street names, festivals and performances. Cultural borrowing and mixing occurred as the diverse communities lived together in close contact and interaction. Penang street food is an eclectic mix of Chinese, Nyonya, Malay, Indian and Thai influences. The city is also enlivened by performances, celebrations and festivals organized by the various communities throughout the year.

Some of the main multicultural performing arts, crafts, festivals and food are featured in this booklet as a pilot documentation project which received support from the Research University Grant, Universiti Sains Malaysia. DVD's of selected forms of Performing Arts and Festivals are available for purchase at the School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia. Information, photographs and video clips about the multicultural food, crafts, performing arts and festivals have been uploaded in the School of the Arts' website (<http://art.usm.my/penangculture>).

Tan Sooi Beng (Editor)

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Local Penang Street Food

Penang is known as the Food Capital of Malaysia. Food lovers from all over the world come to sample the island's unique cuisine. TIME magazine has nominated Penang as the place with Asia's Best Street Food in 2004.

Penang street food or hawker food refers to the variety of snacks, noodles and dishes that are served at roadside stalls and coffee shops or kopitiam. Penang street food demonstrates strong influences from Chinese, Peranakan, Malay, Indian and Thai cuisine. The mixture of cooking styles and ingredients is unique to Penang. The 10 dishes selected here represent multiculturalism in Penang. They are enjoyed by all Malaysians. Video clips and descriptions can be found in the USM website (<http://art.usm.my/penangculture>).



Local Penang Street Food

Ais Kacang

Text and photos: Goh Chu Hiang and Beh Pei Pei

Ais Kacang



Ais Kacang with fruits and ice cream topping.

Background

One of the best loved local Penang deserts is the *Ais Kacang* or *Ang Tau S'ng* (Malay and Hokkien terms respectively meaning 'Ice Red Bean'). The dish consists of shaved ice mixed with red beans and other ingredients. The Lee brothers who run a well-known *Ais Kacang* stall in Swatow Lane, say that the dessert was created by their grandfather who was inspired by the Indian Cendol seller in the 1930s. The original ingredients of *Ais Kacang* comprise red bean, grass jelly and sweet corn served with brown sugar syrup, sweet condensed milk and red rose syrup. Today, different fruits and dressings have been added to the basic ingredients. *Ais Kacang* is also known as ABC—*Air Batu Campur* (Ice Mixture) in the Malay language in other parts of Malaysia.

Location



Ais Kacang stall at New World Park.

The famous *Ais Kacang* stall in Penang which is run by the Lee brothers is located at the New World Park, Swatow Lane. The brothers are third generation *Ais Kacang* makers. Other well-known *Ais Kacang* stalls are found at Lorong Selamat, Padang Brown and Kek Seng Coffee Shop located at Penang Road.

Preparing Ais Kacang

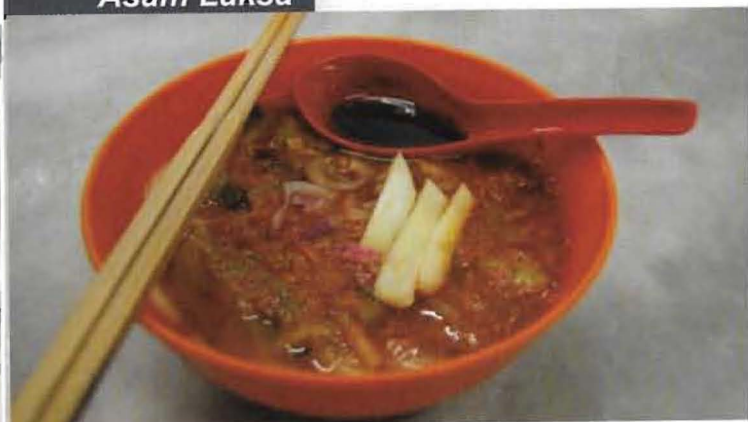


Different fruit cocktails and fruits such as banana or star fruit have been added to the original ingredients of shaved ice and red beans. To cater to the palates of the modern customers, some stalls have introduced novelty toppings such as durian, chocolate syrup and ice cream of various flavours.

Asam Laksa

Text and photos: Goh Chu Hiang and Beh Pei Pei

Asam Laksa



Penang Asam Laksa.

Background

There are different varieties of *Laksa* in Malaysia and they can be divided in two main categories: *Curry Laksa* and *Asam Laksa*. *Curry Laksa* is a type of coconut curry soup with noodles added while *Asam Laksa* is a type of sour fish soup with noodles. Most types of *Laksa* use a common staple ingredient, namely thick rice noodles also known as *Laksa* noodles.

The Penang *Asam Laksa* is considered a signature street food originally prepared by the Peranakan or Nyonya women. Flaked mackerel fish (*ikan kembung*) is added to thicken the gravy. Its main distinguishing feature is the *asam* or tamarind which contributes to the sour taste of the soup. Other ingredients that give the *Penang Asam Laksa* its distinctive flavour include lemongrass, galangal (*lengkuas*) and chilli. The dish is typically garnished with mint leaves, pineapple slices, sliced onion, cucumber, ginger flower (*bunga kantan*) and thick sweet dark prawn paste called *hei-kor* in Hokkien.

Location



Joo Hooi coffee shop near Penang Road.

One of the best places to taste the famous *Asam Laksa* is at the Joo Hooi coffee shop at Lebuh Keng Kwee, off Penang Road. Other famous *Asam Laksa* stalls can be found at Kek Seng coffee shop at Penang Road, a stall beside Air Itam Market and at Balik Pulau.

Preparing Asam Laksa



The *Asam Laksa* stall at Joo Hooi coffee shop.

Asam Laksa is a localised dish. The use of rice noodles has been inherited from Chinese cuisine while the use of local ingredients such as *asam* (tamarind) and chilli has been adapted from Malay cuisine. *Asam Laksa* is a signature Peranakan street food which merges Chinese and local Malay styles of cooking.

Char Kway Teow

Text and photos: Goh Chu Hiang and Beh Pei Pei

Char Kway Teow



Char Kway Teow served on a piece of banana leaf on a plate.

Background

Char Kway Teow is a transliteration of the Hokkien dialect meaning 'stir-fried flat rice noodle'. The flat rice noodles are stir-fried over very high heat with light and dark soy sauce, chilli, prawns, cockles, bean sprouts and chopped Chinese chives added. The noodles are usually stir-fried with egg (traditionally duck eggs were used), slices of Chinese sausage and fishcake and served on a piece of banana leaf on a plate.

Char Kway Teow is believed to be one of the popular street foods in colonial Penang and in other parts of the Strait Settlements such as Melaka and Singapore. It was mainly served to labourers especially the Chinese immigrants and became a cheap source of energy and nutrient for them. It was often prepared by fishermen, farmers and cockle-gatherers who doubled up as *Char Kway Teow* pedlars in the evening to earn an extra income.

Location



Lam Heng coffee shop at the junction of Macalister Road and Perak Road.

When people talk about Penang *Char Kway Teow*, they always refer to the famous Sisters *Char Kway Teow* in Lam Heng coffee shop located at the junction of Macalister Road and Perak Road. This famous stall is operated by Lam Geok Kee and Lam Mew Heng. The sisters have been serving their famous Penang *Char Kway Teow* for over 50 years at Lam Heng coffee shop.



The famous Sisters Char Kway Teow.

Today, *Char Kway Teow* is popular among the Chinese as well as other ethnic groups in Malaysia. The Malays even have their own halal version of *Char Kway Teow* which is fried with chicken or beef and other ingredients without the use of pork. This is an example of the adaptation of Chinese cuisine by other ethnic groups.

Lam Mee

Text and photos: Goh Chu Hiang and Beh Pei Pei

Lam Mee



Lam Mee with the pink coloured fried egg strips.

Background

Traditionally served to celebrate birthdays in Peranakan households, *Lam Mee* (Hokkien meaning 'noodles with soup poured over') is also known as birthday noodles. The Chinese community regards noodles as a symbol of longevity. Serving noodles to a birthday celebrant is a way of wishing him or her long life. *Lam Mee* consists of yellow noodles (mee), white rice noodles (bee hoon) and bean sprouts served in soup, garnished with prawns, sliced pork, fried egg strips and spring onions, and eaten with *sambal belacan* (a type of local chilli paste). Traditionally, red colouring is added to the fried egg strips (making them pink in colour) as red symbolises good luck and prosperity according to Chinese belief.

Location



Sin Teck Lee Coffee Shop at Macalister Road.

There are many food stalls serving *Lam Mee* in Penang. However, the most famous among them is said to be Ah Lim's *Lam Mee* stall at Sin Teck Lee Coffee Shop at Macalister Road.

Preparing Lam Mee



Ah Lim Lam Mee stall at Sin Teck Lee coffee shop.

During the old days, *Lam Mee* was considered a delicacy in the Peranakan family, as it was not available everyday and was only served when there was a birthday celebration (usually for the elders). However, due to its popularity and demand, it has been commercialised today and can be found in most of the major street food outlets in Penang.

Mamak Popiah

Text and photos: Goh Chu Hiang and Beh Pei Pei

Mamak Popiah



Mamak Popiah served with chilli sauce.

Background

Mamak Popiah is the local Penang version of the *Chinese Popiah*. The term *Mamak* refers to members of the Indian-Muslim community in Penang, while *Popiah* means spring roll in Hokkien. The main difference between the *Mamak Popiah* and the *Chinese Popiah* is that the former does not use crab meat as one of its ingredients. Moreover, the *Mamak Popiah* uses whole shrimps and turmeric powder as flavouring. The first *Mamak Popiah* was believed to be prepared by K. Sulaiman, who migrated to Penang from India during the 1930's.

Location



K. Sulaiman's Mamak Popiah stall at Padang Brown.

K. Sulaiman's *Mamak Popiah* stall is located at Padang Brown, along Jalan Johor. The stall is now managed by K. Sulaiman's daughter and daughter in-law after K. Sulaiman passed away in 2006. Other *Mamak Popiah* stalls can be found at the *pasar malam* or night markets around Penang.

Preparing Mamak Popiah



Mamak Popiah is a variation of the *Chinese Popiah*. It can be seen as a unique example of the adaptation of food by the multiethnic communities of Penang. Although *Popiah* was first introduced by the Chinese, the local Indian Muslim community has added local flavours and ingredients to it. It is now enjoyed by people of all races.

Mee Jawa

Text and photos: Goh Chu Hiang and Beh Pei Pei

Mee Jawa



Mee Jawa.

Background

Mee Jawa (Java Noodles) is the Penang Peranakan adaptation of *Mee Rebus* (Boiled Yellow Noodles) found in other parts of Malaysia. The dish consists of yellow noodles boiled in a spicy and slightly sweet curry-like thick gravy. While beef is the main ingredient of the gravy of *Mee Rebus*, the *Mee Jawa* gravy is made from potatoes (some use sweet potatoes to enhance the sweetness), curry paste and dried shrimps. The dish is garnished with hardboiled egg, lime, spring onions, lettuce, chillies, fried firm tofu (tau kwa), bean sprouts, and a sprinkling of ground peanuts. The origin of *Mee Jawa* is unclear but the Peranakan adapted it from *Mee Rebus* and added other ingredients to suit their tastes.

Location



Lam Heng coffee shop at the junction of Macalister Road and Perak Road.

The famous *Mee Jawa* stall can be found at the Lam Heng coffee shop at Macalister Road. Other popular *Mee Jawa* stalls are situated at the Gurney Drive Hawker Centre and Sin Yin Nam Cafe at Macalister Road.

Preparing Mee Jawa



Mee Jawa is an adaptation of the local Malay *Mee Rebus* by the Penang Peranakan. It uses a different gravy-base which is made from potatoes and sweet potatoes instead of beef. Due to religious reasons, this adaptation was necessary in the past as many of the Chinese Peranakan did not take beef.

Nasi Kandar

Text and photos: Goh Chu Hiang and Beh Pei Pei

Nasi Kandar



A plate of Nasi Kandar.

Background

Nasi Kandar is a famous Malaysian dish which originated in Penang. *Nasi Kandar* is a Malay word referring to the way of selling curry rice (*nasi*) in the past in Penang. Pedlars back then balanced a pole on their shoulders (*kandar*) as they carried huge containers of rice meals and sold them from street to street. *Nasi Kandar* was made popular by the Indian-Muslim (Mamak) community. *Nasi Kandar* consists of plain rice with spicy curry dishes added. The choice of dishes include curry fish, hard boiled eggs, curry beef, prawns, mutton, curry shrimps and curry sotong (cuttle fish), fried fish and chicken.

Location



The famous Line Clear Nasi Kandar stall at Penang Road.

There are many famous *nasi kandar* stalls/restaurants in Penang. Among them are the Kassim *Nasi Kandar* at Gurdwara Road, Line Clear *Nasi Kandar* at Penang Road, Kassim Mustafa *Nasi Kandar* at Chulia Street and Kayu *Nasi Kandar* at Lebuh Nipah, Bayan Baru.

Preparing Nasi Kandar



The Line Clear Nasi Kandar Stall serves a variety of spicy curry dishes.

Nasi Kandar has flourished over the past few years. Many traditional pedlars and street side *Nasi Kandar* stalls have moved into 24-hour air-conditioned restaurants, and some have developed franchised food chains across the country. This is due to the popular demand for the spicy food by the diverse Malaysian communities.

Otak-otak

Text and photos: Goh Chu Hiang and Beh Pei Pei

Otak-otak



Otak-otak wrapped in banana leaf.

Background

Otak-otak is a famous Peranakan dish in Penang. Although *Otak-otak* can be found in other areas of Malaysia, the *Penang Otak-otak* is still the favourite because of its unique way of preparation. Wrapped in banana leaf, the *Penang Otak-otak* is a steamed spicy fish custard with wild pepper leaves called *daun kaduk* added. The southern version of *Otak-otak* is wrapped in a palm leaf and char grilled.

Location



Coffee shop at Swatow Lane.

Delicious Penang *Otak-otak* stalls can be found in the coffee shop at Swatow Lane and other popular Hawker Food Centres throughout Penang.



Steamed Otak-otak at the food stall.

Otak-otak has changed from a household dish to a commercialised trade. There are many supply chains of *Otak-otak*. The packets of *Otak-otak* are produced in factories and distributed to hawker food outlets across the country.

Pasembur

Text and photos: Goh Chu Hiang and Beh Pei Pei

Pasembur

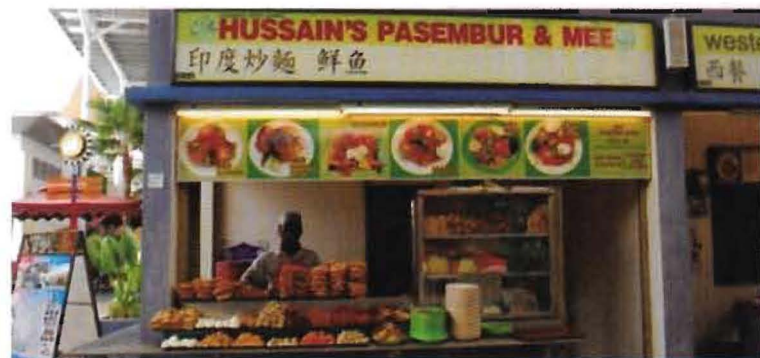


A plate of Pasembur.

Background

The term *Pasembur* is distinctive to Northern Peninsular Malaysia, especially Penang. In other parts of Malaysia, the dish is commonly known as *Rojak Mamak*. *Pasembur* is an Indian-Muslim (Mamak) salad consisting of shredded cucumber, Chinese turnip (*sengkuang*), potatoes, bean curd, bean sprouts, hardboiled egg, prawn fritters, spicy fried crab, fried octopus and other seafood served with a sweet and spicy nut sauce. Similar to *Nasi Kandar*, it was traditionally sold by pedlars who walked from street to street carrying their food containers with a pole over their shoulders. It is a famous snack in Penang. Most of the *Pasembur* stalls today also sell other Indian-Muslim dishes such as *Mee Rebus* and *Mee Goreng*.

Location



Pasembur stall at New World Park.

The famous *Pasembur* stall can be found at the Gurney Drive Hawker Centre which is a popular eatery spot for tourists. Another popular *Pasembur* stall is located at New World Park at Swatow Lane.

Preparing Pasembur



Over the years, new types of *Pasembur* ingredients have been added according to requests by customers. Today, Japanese crabsticks and Chinese fried fish balls are popular additions to the *Pasembur*.

Penang Rojak

Text and photos: Goh Chu Hiang and Beh Pei Pei

Penang Rojak



A plate of Penang Rojak.

Background

Rojak is a popular fruit and vegetable salad dish in Penang. The term *Rojak* in the Malay language means mixture. *Penang Rojak* is a type of fruit and vegetable salad tossed in a mixture with prawn paste and *sambal* (local chilli paste), and topped with roasted peanuts and some sesame seeds. The *Penang Rojak* tastes sweet, sour, salty and hot. The fruits and vegetables such as unripe mango, guava, pineapple, cucumber and Chinese turnip (*sengkuang*) are added.

Location



Stall at Gurney Drive Hawker's Centre.

Famous *Penang Rojak* stalls can be found at Gurney Drive and the New World Park at Swatow Lane.

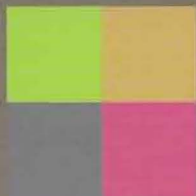
Preparing Rojak



New types of fruits have been added by individual hawkers to suit the tastes of the customers. Blanched cuttlefish, crispy Chinese crullers and bean curd are important ingredients of the *Penang Rojak* today.

Reference:

Kim Ying, Pung (Ed.). (2006). *Famous Street Food of Penang: A Guide and Cook Book*. Petaling Jaya: Star Publications.



The Multicultural Performing Arts, Crafts, Festivals and Food of Penang

Penang is a meeting place for diverse ethnic communities. This is manifested in the multiple places of worship situated near each other in the inner city, eclectic architecture, languages spoken, street names and cultural mixing that has occurred. Penang street food is a mix of Chinese, Nyonya, Malay, Indian and Thai influences. The city is also enlivened by street performances, celebrations and festivals organized by the various communities throughout the year.

Some of the main performing arts, crafts, festivals and food of multicultural Penang are featured in this DVD set, book and website (<http://art.usm.my/penangculture>) as a pilot documentation project.



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