



From the ancient trading port of Melaka to the swish food courts of Kuala Lumpur and the rainforests of Borneo, Malaysian cuisine never ceases to surprise, as **Tamara Thiessen** discovers

MALAYSIA

A taste of

ON MELAKA'S JALAN HANG JEBAT, GAUDY PAINTED CAFES STRUNG WITH BAUBLES AND SILK LANTERNS ARE COOKING UP A STORM OF NOODLE, RICE AND CURRY DISHES.

The buzzy strip, once known under the more colonial tag of Jonker Walk, is animated by flamboyantly festooned *beca*, or trishaws, and ambulatory kitchens.

One of the most ubiquitous foodstuffs here is nasi lemak – literally, 'fat rice' – a delicious concoction of rice flavoured with coconut and pandan leaf, garnished with fried anchovies, cucumber, peanuts and hard-boiled egg.

Though not nearly as fatty as it sounds, it is wickedly irresistible, which no doubt explains why the former kampung breakfast in Malay villages has become a day and night favourite for all Malaysians - Muslim, Chinese, Hindu, Iban and Kadazan.

In Malay *restoran* (restaurants), nasi lemak is served on a banana leaf with a piece of chicken, curried beef or tamarind-marinated prawns. At night markets, or *pasar malam*, it comes in banana leaf

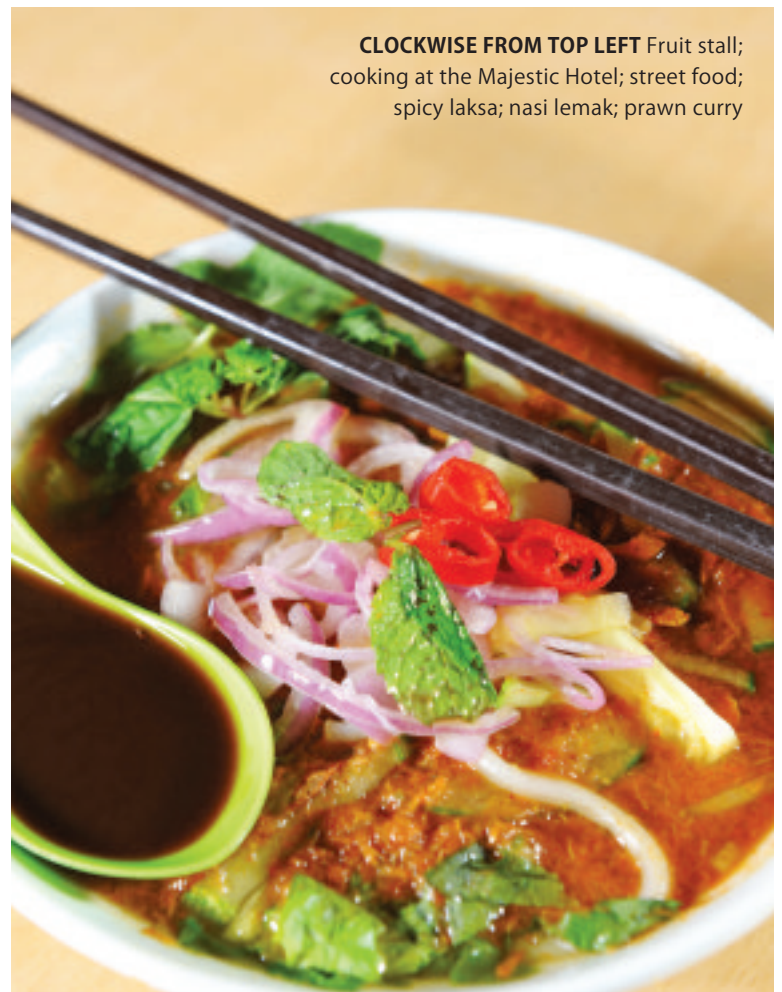
or paper-wrapped pyramids. The *pasar malam* are a great place to lap up Melaka's melting pot flavours - a compelling cocktail of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Portuguese colonial vestiges. Or take the plunge into one of the rowdy local restaurants; in Teo Soon Loong Chan on Jalan Hang Kasturi, the chefs are famously rude but the soft shell crab legendary.

The signature Nyonya or 'grandma cuisine' is a hybrid of Chinese, Malay and Dutch flavours and Melaka is the place to try it. Along the pavement, laminated tables flaunt bowls of weird looking 'green worm' Nyonya cendol. The noodles of pandan-tinted mung bean flour are smothered, like many things here, in gula melaka palm sugar. Sago Gula Melaka, a pearly tapioca dessert floating in coconut milk and syrup, is found on menus from Kuala Lumpur to Kota Kinabalu. ▶

the tropics



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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Fruit stall;
cooking at the Majestic Hotel; street food;
spicy laksa; nasi lemak; prawn curry





ABOVE Colourful stalls selling fresh street food are to be found all over Malaysia

Glutinous, golf ball-shaped Hainanese chicken rice balls are a local adaptation of a traditional Chinese recipe. “This dish is eaten the same way as Hainanese chicken rice,” the owner of Hoe Kee Chicken Rice tells me, “making sure you get a portion of chicken, rice, and soy and chilli condiment with each mouthful.

“Some older cooks claim the rice was originally shaped like this to keep it warm from the time it was prepared mid-morning until mealtime, others because rice balls were easier for labourers working on plantations to carry to work.”

Dipped in chilli sauce, they will have you firing on all cylinders ready for the Heritage Trail and climb up St. Paul’s Hill via the Sultanate Palace, whose last resident ruler was ousted by the Portuguese in 1511. Cool off in The Majestic Hotel, a wonderful old 1930s mansion that’s been turned into an hotel; if you stay here, there are even free Peranakan cooking lessons with the chef (majesticmalacca.com).

Malaysia’s major ethnic groups have been fermenting together for centuries and have produced several iconic national dishes and enticing fusions that are never quite the same from region to region. In

Penang, which does its best to maintain its reputation as the country’s foodie capital – a crossroads of Asian, Indian, Middle Eastern and European flavours – I get another taste of Peranakan or Nyonya specialities with my Malay friend Tulipe. The public food fest adds extra spark to George Town’s frenetic pack of motorbikes and trishaws.

WALL-TO-WALL NOODLES

On one side of Jalan Burma we encounter wall-to-wall noodle shops, on the other, an Armenian café where a man is sculpting dough into triangular potato-filled boreg, ready for deep-frying. Between Chinese temples and brightly painted wooden *kopitiam* – Chinese coffee shops – several main thoroughfares morph by night into a vast outdoor restaurant.

Off Jalan Johor, we wind up at the alfresco tables of Padang Brown evening market, where a flotilla of pushcart cooks is whipping up rice and chicken dishes galore: nasi ayam - steamed rice with fried chicken; Persian style nasi biryani, nasi kuning - yellow rice with egg, coconut and cucumber; fried nasi goreng; and mixed nasi campur with its potluck ingredients. ▶



Photography: Shutterstock; Malaysia Tourism Board; Majestic Hotel Melaka; Thinkstock

Topping Penang’s parade of culinary pleasures is the local laksa. Tulipe salivates her way to a stall where bowls of rice noodle, mackerel and vegetables are being topped off by a steaming ladle of spicy soup. “Locals eat it for breakfast, lunch and dinner,” the vendor tells me, “either traditional, sour Assam laksa, with tamarind and fish paste, or creamy, coconut-based Nyonya laksa.” Both are garnished with onion, cucumber, chilli, crisp lettuce, mint and ginger.

FISH HEAD CURRY

Another local favourite is ayam percick – ochre-coloured kebab chicken marinated in tamarind, ginger, garlic and chillies. At Mama Nyonya Cuisine and Ivy’s Nyonya Cuisine, we sample typical home cooking delicacies, including fish head curry and Teochew style steamed fish with sour plum and pickled mustard. Or for the vast daily buffet, try Sarkies at the colonial-style Eastern & Oriental Hotel, a favourite hangout for locals.

Back in Kuala Lumpur, after a trip to Central Market, I find myself at the Old China Café, a teak- and antique-filled den of Malay Chinese heritage, where I wrap my culinary lexicon around lemak nenas (pineapple prawn curry) and bubur

FROM TOP LEFT Spicy prawns; Melaka by night; bubur cha cha, a potato and sago sweet dish **BELOW** Palm sugar

cha-cha, a sweet potato and sago dessert in coconut milk.

As Kuala Lumpur’s dining scene becomes increasingly international, places like this are bastions of authenticity, as are the no-frills coffee shops and street food. Strung with roast duck, durians and jackfruit, Jalan Alor in KL’s CBD has over 50 makeshift kitchens and stalls, selling grilled meats and fish, rice and noodle dishes.

Among the best spreads of Malay-wide dishes I encounter are the breakfast buffets of some of the top hotels: Gobo Chit Chat at Traders Hotel, the Lemon Garden Café at the Shangri-La in Kuala Lumpur and the award-winning Nipah Coffee Shop at Hotel Equatorial.

As well as steamed meat-filled pau buns, rice porridge, roti canai and curry, their kitchens pride themselves in Malay kuih (cakes) and little onde-onde, lurid, green glutinous rice balls rolled in sesame seeds which spray your mouth with their filling of mung bean paste and runny palm sugar.

Food courts are another unbeatable part of Malaysia’s daily culinary culture and are where even the most sophisticated shoppers will happily meet for lunch. Those ►

Strung with roast duck, durians and jackfruit, Jalan Alor has over 50 makeshift stalls selling grilled meats, fish, rice and noodles





CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Onde onde; nyonya cendol dessert, martabak, Sarawak noodles

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at the Pavilion in Bukit Bintang, the main shopping district of KL, and on the fifth floor of Suria KLCC in the Petronas Twin Towers offer a fantastic array of high quality dishes as well as convenient, casual (and air-conditioned) lunch grazing, in between shopping for Gucci and Versace.

Two hours' flight east of the capital, in Kota Kinabalu, capital of Sabah, I am drawn down like a firefly to the waterfront night market, unfurling under a rainbow of glowing umbrellas on Jalan Tun Fuad Stephens.

STREET FOOD

In billows of barbecuing fish, chicken and corn cobs, the murtabak man twirls his unleavened roti canai through the air. Filled with chicken, beef or spinach, curry, onions and egg, the dough parcels fried on a hotplate are a typical *mamak*, or Indian Muslim street food. I immediately fall prey to murtabak and kuih kacang - a kind of Malay pancake filled with crushed peanuts, raisins and condensed milk, cut in thick sticky wedges.

Nowhere in Malaysia am I served better as a vegetarian than here in Borneo. On top of the copious *sayur campur* (mixed vegetables) that surge from the rich soils of Kundasang on the slopes of Mount Kinabalu, are restaurant dishes of succulent local vegetables – jungle sourced roots and fern tops, pucuk paku.

My trip winds up in Kuching, Sarawak's biggest city. At Chong Choon, a quaint breakfast institution in Jalan Abell,

diners have their heads dipped towards newspapers and bowls of steaming kolo mee - egg noodles with sliced roast pork.

Sarawak's Chinese communities run restaurants according to their regional roots - Cantonese, Szechuan, Teochew and Hakka. Curry- and prawn-based Kuching laksa, charred kway teow rice noodles prepared with bean sprouts, egg, chilli, chicken or prawns, and mee suah with fish balls or pork have all been elevated to national lunching musts. Try the local Dayak cuisine, too; Dyak (in the commercial centre on Jalan Simpang Tiga) specialises in dishes made from native plants; expect tapioca leaves, sweet potato leaves, durian fruit and ice cream doused with tuak, or fermented rice wine. It's an acquired taste – but all part of this amazing, multicultural Malay experience. 🍲

WAY TO GO



Selective Asia runs package tours to Malacca, Kuala Lumpur and Penang, starting from £1,006. **Intrepid Travel** offers 10-day, Real Food Adventure tours year-round from £980, including two nights in a homestay (0808 274 5111 / intrepidtravel.com), while **Tripfeast** has tours in April and September featuring cooking classes and market visits (020 7183 5153 / tripfeast.com). **Regent Holidays** runs tailor-made adventure tours through Borneo, Sabah and Sarawak from £1955, flights included (020 7666 1244 / regent.holidays.co.uk).