



the ultimate banquet

Discover the colourful cuisine of Pekanbaru

At the Pasar Bawah, the undercover market of Pekanbaru, baskets are piled ceiling-high with the spices that make up the local Padang cuisine famous to West Sumatra: ginger, galangal, turmeric, lemongrass, cassava chips, garlic, shallots, shrimps and chilli. Together, they spice up the most iconic dishes of *masakan Padang*: *rendang daging* or *ayam* (beef and chicken dishes); *gulai ayam* (chicken curry); *asam pedas* (sour and spicy fish stew); *ayam bakar* (grilled spicy chicken); and, not for the faint-hearted, *gulai kepala ikan* (a fish-head curry made with red snapper).

On top of the feast of Padang flavours on offer, Pekanbaru is a culinary crossroads shaped by Malay culture and ocean migrations. Located on the Siak River, which drains into the Strait of Malacca, its name *pekan* (market) and *baru* (town) links to its past as a trading port. Typically served as a banquet, a Padang spread – with its peacock-plume-coloured diversity of dishes – reflects the vivid culture of the Minangkabau people, who are West

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Sumatra’s biggest ethnic group.

Considered one of the best cuisines not only in Indonesia, but also in the world, restaurants all the way from Jakarta to New Zealand flaunt Padang specialties. In fact, *Indonesia Expat* magazine refers to it as “Indonesia’s most-wanted food”.

Best known is the ubiquitous *nasi Padang* – steamed rice served with a multitude of ‘Padangnese’ side dishes. These dishes can be sampled at the *rumah makan Padang* restaurants, as well as cafés and stalls around the city. Some display the dishes out front, piled high in the windows. In Pekanbaru, as throughout West Sumatra, it is common to get stuck into Padang or Minangkabau cuisine with your hands – and to make a feast of it.

Eating Padang-style also means watching the spectacle of waiters navigating through tables with a mountain of precisely stacked white platters on their arms. See it for yourself at Pondok Patin H.M. Yunus (Jl. Kaharuddin Nasution No.1, Simpang Tiga, Riau; +62 761 674796), or in the town centre at Pondok Asam Pedas Baung (Pondok Asam Pedas Baung).

As with all Malay cultures, from Kuala Lumpur to Singapore, *sambal* (a red chilli-based condiment) reigns

supreme. Eat it with barbecued satay, whole grilled *ikan* (fish) and *ayam bakar* (charcoal chicken) as you wander the markets and food stalls. Pyramid shaped *ketupat*, coconut-leaf wrapped rice cakes, are served with boiled egg, cassava chips and spicy soup, or with beef *rendang*.

The Chinese-Malay influence translates into the sweets and soups on offer in Pekanbaru, too. At bustling open-fronted *kopitiam* (coffee shops), tuck into *kaya* toast (coconut jam) and sweet *kopi susu* (white coffee) for breakfast, finished off with glutinous *Nyonya kue* cakes, which are tinted pandan-plant green.

A little bit off centre, but well worth the distance, Nasi Ampera Ajor (8km north of the city centre) in Jalan Delima serves up *mee soto ayam* (chicken noodle soup) and other *mee* – Chinese-style noodle soups, such as laksas – that are common to Singapore, as well as to Indonesia and Malaysia.

But, it’s the Malay-style *ikan bakar* (grilled fish) that really draws the crowds in, says the owner.

“We use a pervasive, yet secret, mix of spices before grilling the fish, and just as in Malaysia it’s that which adds the fuel to the flavour,” he says.

Many of these typical Chinese and Malay dishes have migrated to both sides of the strait, with just small variations in spelling.

The Pasar Bawah market is also one of the best places to see Pekanbaru’s cultures in action, with its medley of carpets and clothes, household goods, food and fruits. Rainbow-toned lanterns, batiks and silk, Muslim headdress; gilded vases and lion statues collide in a true bazaar atmosphere – creating an experience as pungent and uplifting as the Padang food is in taste. ★



A TASTE OF THE TOWN

Left: A Padang restaurant spread. Clockwise from top this page: rosewater-flavoured drinks at a street stall; Padang waiters are known for their plate-carrying skills; chicken and lamb satay with *ketupat* rice cakes; *kue* cake (inset).

