

From fasting to feasting

Tamara Thiessen takes a culinary stroll through the Ramadan markets of Kuala Lumpur and Penang



Laksa Hawker stall



George Town



Fruit stall

Wandering the aromatic streets of George Town with my friend Tulipe Noorazyze, is like making a culinary homecoming with her.

Our visit to her Penang Island birthplace coincides perfectly with the Ramadan festivities: every day of fasting throughout the Muslim holy month of August, ends in a convivial smorgasbord of public feasting. From late afternoon onwards, crowds descend upon the Ramadan bazaars for a communal buka puasa – breaking of the fast. The fasting month is ironically a fantastic time to take your taste buds on a tour of Malaysia’s culinary delights. Larger markets have as many as 300 stalls, spread along a couple of streets, on footpaths and islands, with streets entirely closed to traffic.

Located on the northwest coast of Malaysia in the Strait of Malacca, Pulau Penang – the ‘island of the betel nut’ – is a culinary crossroads of Oriental, Indian, Middle Eastern and European tastes. And these Ramadan food stalls are a showcase

for signature Penang dishes such as assam laksa – spicy and sour fish noodle soup, and hokkien mee – fried noodles with prawns, as well as traditional Malaysian fare and special Ramadan delicacies

The public food festivities take place between Chinese temples, brightly painted wooden houses and old town kopi tiam (coffee shops); several main thoroughfares of George Town have morphed into a vast outdoor restaurant. The pungent air is alive with the sound of crowds and traffic. Some stall-holders cook up a storm of noodle, rice dishes and curries, while others sell prepared, meticulously packaged portions of savoury food and sweets. Amid the Unesco classified crush of colonial mansions and old carpenters’ workshops, Tulipe takes me down a mealtime memory lane, revisiting her past by way of her most cherished Penang dishes.

“My favourite is of course the Penang laksa,” she says, almost groaning the words with delight as we come to a stall where a production line of men and women prepare the rice noodle, mackerel and vegetable dish, topped with a steaming ladle of spicy soup.

“The other dish I love is pasembur.” Tulipe ushers me to some tables where people are diving into plates of the sweet, sour and spicy Indian rojak salad, served with cucumber strips, mango, pineapple, shrimp paste, tamarind, peanuts and chilli.

I am lucky to find my friend is something of a local, gastronomic guide: not only pointing out Penang’s historic highlights, but also giving me an insight into the island’s dishes. “The ochre coloured kebab chicken, ayam percik, is a big Ramadan favourite nationwide,” she says, “marinated in tamarind, ginger, garlic and chillies.”

As with all Malaysia evening food markets, the pasar malam, there are rice, and chicken dishes galore: the ubiquitous nasi ayam, steamed rice with fried chicken; nasi lemak, rice with shrimps, egg, cucumber and peanuts; ayam madu, honeyed chicken, and aromatic nasi biryani, Persian style spicy rice served with chicken. Most meals are downed with fiery sambal, the chilli and shrimp-based condiments.

“The Penang laksa is the most loved hawker dish. Locals eat it for breakfast lunch and dinner,” a laksa vendor tells me. “There are two varieties: the traditional sour assam laksa, with tamarind and fish paste, and creamy coconut based laksa lemak or nyonya laksa: both are garnished with onion, cucumber, chilli, lettuce, mint and ginger.”

As we inch along the noisy streets, pungent smoke clouds of barbecuing meats and grilled corn cobs billow from the food stands. Some are laden with rows of skewered meats, with banana leaf wrapped dishes and take away tubs filled with rice, fish, prawns and chicken. On others, containers of mango, mauve, lurid pink and green drinks are lined up like paint pots – staple liquid refreshments



Fruit and vegetable stall

include sugar cane, soy bean, rose syrup and air mata kucing – literally ‘water of the cat’s eyes’ – although the cola-coloured beverage is made with lychee-like longan fruits.

The on-the-spot cooking is as theatrical as it is appetising: many restaurants set up stalls out front, and I am pulled into the action at an Armenian café, where a man is sculpting dough into dozens of triangular, potato-filled boreg, ready for deep-frying.

Next we come to the murtabak (stuffed pancake) man: spinning skeins of unleavened roti canai dough in the air, stretching it out on the hot plate, folding the filling into a parcel, and cooking until golden brown. Filled with chicken, beef or spinach and curry, onions and egg, murtabak is the most typical mamak or Indian Muslim food.

Ready for something sweet, we make a beeline to a stall with pyramid-piles

of kuih. Many of these cakes and confectionery are Nyonya specialities – a fusion of Chinese and Malay flavours – commonly made with rice flour, tapioca, coconut cream, pandan leaves and mung beans, and saturated in dark, syrupy gula melaka, palm sugar. Also popular are the kuih kacang: a kind of Malay pancake, filled with crushed peanuts, raisins and condensed milk, and cut in thick sticky wedges. The little onde-onde – bright green glutinous rice balls rolled in sesame seeds – pop with their sweet mung bean paste and palm sugar syrup filling when you bite into them.

Across Malaysia, every Ramadan bazaar will have its regional treats. Back in her adopted city of Kota Kinabalu in Borneo, the food stalls are both a joy and a boon for Tulipe and thousands of others who visit them. “You can go to the stalls after work and choose a few of your favourite dishes for breaking the fast without having to cook it yourself: it makes life easy for busy people like me.”



Laksa



Mosque, George Town



FACT BOX: KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

LOCATION: The capital city, this enclave is located in the centre of Selangor State in the Klang Valley, on the west coast of Peninsular Malaysia.

POPULATION: 1.6 million

LANGUAGES: Malay (Bahasa Malaysia), English, Tamil, Hokkien, Cantonese and Mandarin, to name the least!

TIME: GMT +8 hours

MONEY: Malaysia Ringgit (Currently MYR4.93 to UK£1)

WHEN TO GO: Throughout the year, this tropical city is hot and humid with possible rainfall daily.

WHERE TO STAY: Mandarin Oriental, in the heart of Kuala Lumpur, in a prime location next door to the Petronas Towers.

WHAT TO READ: *Into the Heart of Borneo* by Redmond O'Hanlon (Penguin Books); *The Soul of Malaya* by Henri Fauconnier (Archipelago Press); *The Rice Mother* by Rani Manicka (Hodder & Stoughton); *Evening is the Whole Day* by Preeta Samarasan (Penguin Perennial)

WHAT NOT TO MISS: Bukit Bintang (Starhill) – Kuala Lumpur's shopping and entertainment district with many shopping centres, al-fresco cafés, bars and restaurants, and night markets with hawker-style eateries.

BEST MEAL: Spiced crabs at Mei Keng Fatt, regarded as one of the best seafood restaurants in Kuala Lumpur and located on the outskirts of the city.

INSIDER TIP: If you plan to visit the Petronas Towers, go very early (5.30am) since only 200 visitors are allowed each day and the first 100 get in for free.

BEST COX & KINGS TOUR: 12-day *A Journey through Malaya* Private Journey from £2,995 per person based on twin sharing.

NOTE: The dates Ramadan takes place depend on the religious calendar. In 2011, Ramadan starts on August 1st and ends on August 31st. Most markets are open between 4pm and 8pm.

Kuala Lumpur is Malaysia's biggest city, and Ramadan - although a time for moderation and prayer - is also a fun time to visit, says Time Out author Joe Hizul: "Malaysian loves to eat, and at this time foods of many varieties, of various ethnicities and types, are abundant. For non-Muslims, Ramadan is a time to enjoy good Malay food with their Malay friends."

The Ramadan markets are one of the best times to soak up Kuala Lumpur's incredible cuisine and street atmosphere, together with some spiritual and cultural significance. With a population of 1.6 million, the pasar Ramadan is a big event in Kuala Lumpur, with thousands of stalls spread throughout the city. The biggest market unfurls around the Mogul-inspired marvel of Masjid Jamek mosque, not far from Central Market and China Town.

With its ornate domes and spires this was the city's main mosque from 1909 until the national mosque was built in 1965. As you wander through the market, you will be accompanied by the Muslim call to prayer, which seeps through the streets of the old city. The city's foundations lie right alongside: in the mid 19th century, Chinese tin prospectors settled at the confluence of the Klang and Gombak Rivers, giving rise to Kuala Lumpur's name, which means 'muddy confluence'. On the other side of the river, under the 100m flagpole of Merdeka Square, Malaysia's independence from British colonial rule was declared on 31st August 1957.

Back in the main commercial district of the Golden Triangle, office workers crowd the inner city market along Jalan Tunku Abdul

Rahman. And it is here that I get my first taste of something verging on the heavenly. The sweet custard centred kuih akok hail from the ancient state of Kelantan in north-eastern Malaysia: the batter is cooked in a poached egg like mould, some add pandan, coconut shreds or corn. Blogger boo_licious, author of the Malaysian food blog, Masak Masak (www.masak-masak.blogspot.com), wrote about the many temptations of last year's Ramadan markets in Kuala Lumpur. "They melt in the mouth," she said of the egg custard slice kuih bakar, "Before I knew it, I had finished the whole bag." She advises novices to "sniff around the stalls to find the best."

With a rainbow of ethnicities and pulsating street life, Malaysia is undoubtedly one of the best places in the world to partake in the Ramadan markets. As a reflection of the country's remarkable racial harmony, Chinese, Indian and other ethnic communities join Malay friends for the festivities. And it is hard to beat the atmosphere of the markets, and the foodie bargains. "Though I do not fast, I end up buying more at the markets than those breaking fast," says Theresa Goh. "Everything is so yummy and colourful and I love just being in the midst of all the gaiety".

An early-bird evening out, eating fresh cooked food outdoors will cost an average £2 to £4 per person. Though the icing on the kuih is undoubtedly the abiding Malay hospitality: between bites of kuih bakar and sips of Penang laksa, a visit to the Malaysian Ramadan markets is a feast of friendliness.