

he spice is right

Darcy Thong's passion for spicy Peranakan food sparked off a love affair with Nonya cooking that has lasted for decades

Singapore Cooks

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Mrs Darcy Thong is a Teochew who loves the robust flavours of Peranakan food.

Her passion for the cuisine was sparked when she was studying accounting in London in the mid-1970s.

The freelance accountant, 51, says: "I love the use of spices in Peranakan food. It makes the dishes so fragrant and colourful."

"Growing up in Kuching, Malaysia, I ate only home-style Teochew dishes such as steamed fish and braised duck."

She was introduced to Peranakan cuisine by her Singaporean lecturer in London, who regularly invited foreign students to home-cooked meals.

She says: "My lecturer wasn't a Peranakan but being Singaporean, her cooking had Straits influences, and that was how I fell in love with food such as Nonya ter kah (pig's trotters) and assam curry."

An avid cook and baker, she began whipping up Peranakan food based on her lecturer's recipes, and enjoyed success with dishes such as Nonya chap chye (mixed vegetables) and achar (pickled greens).

The only mishap she recalls was her initial attempt at baking kueh lapis, a multi-layer cake.

She says: "I was curious about how the cake was baked but I didn't have a recipe for it, so I decided to improvise."

"I used the recipe for butter cake and alternated a layer of batter with a layer of spices before baking it all at once. I ended up with a spicy marble cake."

Her appreciation for Peranakan food also grew with help from her then boyfriend, Mr John Thong, whom she eventually married.

They met through her lecturer, who happens to be Mr Thong's older sister. He was doing his articleship in chartered accountancy in London at the time.

She says: "John is very good at cooking Peranakan food. For my 21st birthday, he cooked a spread of Nonya favourites, including his signature beef rendang."

"His beef rendang is very fragrant. After having eaten so many versions of the dish over the years, his is still the best I've tasted."

Mr Thong runs his own audit company and they have two grown-up sons.

Mrs Thong continued to refine her Peranakan cooking by tweaking her recipes constantly, adding a pinch of this and a teaspoon of that.

Her quest for perfect Peranakan recipes ended in the mid-1980s, when she met a close friend's mother, Mrs Lily Lim, who is a Nonya.

Mrs Lim, moved by her enthusiasm for Peranakan cooking, passed her a number of authentic recipes. She also became Mrs Thong's godmother.

On the most important thing she learnt from the septuagenarian, Mrs Thong says: "Patience. It plays a big part in Peranakan cooking. You can't hurry when you fry the rempah (a spice paste commonly used in Peranakan dishes)."

"You need to wait for the flavour and aroma of the spices to be released during cooking for the dish to be fragrant."

Among the new recipes she picked up from Mrs Lim is one for otak otak telangjang, which she shares below.

Meaning naked otak otak, the fish paste dish is so named because unlike the common grilled version, it is not wrapped in banana leaf.

Instead, it is cooked in a silky, piquant coconut gravy.



PHOTOS: JOSEPH NAIR FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

She may have grown up on Teochew dishes such as steamed fish and braised duck, but Mrs Darcy Thong's Peranakan dishes such as otak otak telangjang (above) will have you panting for more.

She says: "It might not look like normal otak otak, but the essence of its taste, which comes from the turmeric leaf used to flavour the dish, is retained in this recipe."

"I often serve this dish at gatherings and parties because it always gets people excited and talking. They can't believe it's otak otak."

She adds that the unusual dish is a hit among her friends because it can be enjoyed without the hassle of unwrapping banana leaves, and the gravy goes well with rice.

On why she is making the recipe public, she says: "Lily is very generous with her recipes and I feel that good recipes should be shared so that they get passed on and others get to enjoy them."

Indeed, she contributed her recipes for dishes such as ayam sio (chicken with coriander and fermented bean paste) and chap chye to the cook-

book *Sharing From Our Hearts*, published by the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) last year. She is a YWCA board member.

Her recipes for sweet treats such as apple crumble pie and fresh fruit tartlets are also found in the non-profit organisation's 2009/2010 calendar.

And in the spirit of sharing, she will be baking festive foods such as gingerbread man cookies for sale at the YWCA Christmas bazaar at the Fort Canning Lodge on Dec 13.

Proceeds from the bazaar, as well as sales of the cookbook and calendar, go towards funding the various community services run by the YWCA.

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Sharing From Our Hearts (\$30) and the YWCA 2009/2010 calendar (\$12) are available for sale. Call 6223-1227 for details.

MAKE IT YOURSELF: OTAK OTAK TELANGJANG



INGREDIENTS

300g minced pork
600g minced fish paste, unsalted
1 1/2 tsp salt
1 tsp pepper
300g young galangal
4 buah keras (candlenut)
1 Tbs white pepper seeds
15g belacan (fermented shrimp paste)
8 shallots
1 Tbs turmeric powder
8 Tbs cooking oil
6 Tbs water
1l coconut milk
1 turmeric leaf, finely sliced

METHOD

- Mix the pork, fish paste, 1/2 tsp salt and pepper together thoroughly to form the otak otak paste. Set aside when done.
- Blend the galangal, buah keras, white pepper seeds and belacan in an electric blender on high for about two minutes until a fine paste forms.
- Add shallots to the paste and pulse the mixture in the blender for another 10 seconds, making sure not to blend the shallots too finely.
- Pour the paste into a bowl and stir in the turmeric powder thoroughly.
- To a hot wok, add cooking oil and fry the seasoning paste on medium heat. Stir continuously and add water periodically to prevent the paste from burning. (photo A)

- When the seasoning paste turns aromatic after some 15 minutes of frying, turn the heat down to low and add the coconut milk slowly. Stir the mixture continuously for about four minutes until the coconut milk is well incorporated. (photo B)
- To the gravy, add 1 tsp of salt.
- Scoop a spoonful of the otak otak paste, shape it roughly, and add to the gravy. Repeat with the rest of the otak otak paste. (photo C)
- The otak otak is cooked when the gravy starts to bubble gently after about 10 minutes of cooking.
- Stir thinly sliced turmeric leaf into the dish when it is served.

Serves 8 to 10 people.