



ST PHOTOS: SHAHRIYA YAHAYA

Have it with bread or rice, and a bit of patience, because Mrs Estrelita De Silva-Rufus' Devil Curry takes on a richer flavour if you let it sit in the fridge overnight.

## Devil may care

For Eurasians, nothing says mum's cooking more than that magical stew, Devil Curry

**Singapore Cooks**  
Huang Lijie

**M**ake-believe baking is a favourite pastime of children who, with a pinch of sand and plasticine, create fantastical cakes that always rise perfectly.

As a kitchen-savvy seven-year-old, however, Mrs Estrelita De Silva-Rufus knew that true magic lay in her mother's jars of flour, sugar and baking powder.

After all, she grew up tailing her Eurasian mother around the kitchen, watching intently as she whipped up delicious ethnic treats including sugée (semolina) cake and Devil Curry.

So while her housewife mother was napping one afternoon, she stole into the kitchen to bake her first real chocolate cake, one that she hoped would earn the praises of her food-obsessed Eurasian family, whose ancestors hail from Malacca in Malaysia.

Her late father was a police officer and her younger brother, now 51, is a senior Customs officer.

Unfortunately, her Betty Crocker dreams went up in flames in the gas oven because the fire was too strong. The smouldering chocolate cake, though, did impress on her mother her eagerness to learn the secrets of baking and cooking.

The 53-year-old housewife says: "After that in-

cident, my mother began to let me help in the kitchen, starting with simple tasks such as washing and cutting ingredients. She would also make me stand on a chair beside her so that I could see what she was doing on the kitchen counter."

A fast learner, she quickly mastered and committed to memory her mother's repertoire of about 40 Eurasian dishes such as ambila, an everyday dish of pork and long beans in curry, and feng, a spicy curry of pig entrails eaten on special occasions including Christmas.

She is particularly fond of her mother's singang cocu, a coconut milk-based curry fish stew, as well as her threadfin fish pickle, an appetiser that "goes perfectly with steaming hot rice".

She says the secret to her tasty cooking lies in not stinting on any ingredient, a habit instilled by her mother.

She adds: "I won't cook a dish unless I have all the ingredients required because if it's missing anything, it just won't taste the same."

Married at 21, she started a family and turned housewife after quitting her job as a receptionist at a pest control company.

Word of her tasty Eurasian food quickly spread among friends and she soon found herself catering for birthday and wedding celebrations.

Her fifty-one-year-old husband, also a Eurasian, is a music teacher at an international school here, while her daughter, 31, manages a gym in a country club.

She ran a thriving catering business from home for a few years in the 1970s until such home-based food businesses were disallowed by the health authorities.

She says: "Friends have asked me to open an eatery but I'm not interested. The food business is very competitive and the stress of running a profitable stall might kill the joy of cooking for me."

She still bakes and cooks for intimate home parties organised by friends, although not more than two to three times a month.

Her repertoire of dishes is also limited to Eurasian food. The affable cook is also skilled in Peranakan cuisine and makes a mean French onion soup, which she learnt by trading recipes with colleagues and foodie friends.

Indeed, it is by swopping recipes that she managed to come up with her own Devil Curry recipe.

Devil Curry, or debal as it is known in the Malacca-Portuguese Eurasian patois, Cristang, is so named for its hot-as-hell spiciness.

As it is for many Eurasians, no Christmas and birthday celebration for the De Silva family is complete without the dish.

The recipe she shares below is adapted from her mother's recipe, as well as a recipe from a Eurasian aunt, resulting in a stew that has a thicker, drier and mildly spicy gravy. It also calls for less oil than other recipes.

She admits to substituting roast pork belly, which is traditionally used, with chicken luncheon meat in her recipe because she does not like mixing the taste of two different types of meat.

On whether her 75-year-old mother can stomach her non-traditional recipe, she says: "She likes it a lot. Tradition is important, but recipes are also personal. What matters most to me is that the food tastes good."

She adds that those looking to turn the dish into a truly magical stew should let the curry sit in the fridge overnight to allow the richness of the spices to completely seep into the meat.

So, if you are looking to stir up some magic mischief in the kitchen this weekend, here is a grown-up recipe to keep you occupied.

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### MAKE IT YOURSELF: DEVIL CURRY



#### MARINADE (photo A)

20 shallots, peeled  
8 cloves garlic, peeled  
5cm piece fresh ginger, cleaned and peeled  
5cm piece galangal, cleaned and peeled  
2 stalks lemongrass, bruised and sliced  
3 Tbs mustard seed  
4 Tbs coriander seed  
5cm piece turmeric, cleaned and peeled  
10 candlenuts  
3 Tbs chilli paste  
1 Tbs light soya sauce  
2 Tbs dark sweet soya sauce  
3 Tbs white vinegar  
250g tomato, coarsely diced

5cm cube shrimp paste cake  
1/2 cup of water

Blend all the ingredients together to form a smooth paste.

#### INGREDIENTS

800g chicken drumstick, skin removed  
4 Tbs oil  
1 tsp salt  
4 cups water  
750g potato, peeled and halved  
150g carrot, peeled and thickly sliced  
1 can chicken luncheon meat, thickly sliced (photo B)



#### METHOD

1. Marinate the chicken and leave it overnight in the fridge.
2. Heat pot, add oil, marinated chicken and marinade. Stir-fry for 10 minutes until fragrant (photo C).
3. Add salt and water. Cover the lid and cook on low fire for 25 minutes until it boils.
4. Add potatoes and carrots (photo D) and cook on low fire for another 10 minutes.
5. Add the chicken luncheon meat and cook for another three minutes till the curry boils (photo E).
6. Allow the curry to sit for two hours before serving with baguette or rice. If possible, let the dish sit in the fridge overnight before serving as the flavours penetrate the meat further.



**Eater's Digest**  
Tan Hsueh Yun

Cookbooks for charity present an opportunity to do good. But can you cook well from them too?

This is the most polished of the three cookbooks reviewed this week.

The photographs are lovely, the shots of the contributors suitably glamorous and, better yet, the recipes list ingredients in the order they are used. This is the way all recipes should be written to prevent cooks from being driven mad.

The 72 recipes come from members of the 93-year-old Chinese Women's Association, many of whom are society women and wives of captains of industry.

The money raised from the sale of the books benefit the Henderson Senior Citizens' Home, which the association manages.

The flow of recipes seems jumbled at first, with side dishes cheek by jowl with main dishes and desserts. Then I realise they are arranged alphabetically by contributors' names.

Strange, but this is just a little quirk. I was more interested in the recipes, which are mostly family-style favourites.

I made the Tau Yu Bak contributed by Pamela Lee, senior consultant to the Singapore Tourism Board. The dish of pork belly braised in dark soya sauce was easy to assemble and I liked the results too, although I'd use less sugar next time.

The recipe for Sugée Cake by Mrs Chan Sze Onn, wife of Singapore's first accountant, required three mixing bowls, 15 eggs, 450g of butter and a rather long loaf tin. I used one half as long and it turned out fine – rich and dense. It was also done way before the baking time indicated.

What gives this book an edge over the other two is this: It satisfies the kaypoh or busybody in all of us. Readers get a tantalising look at the sort of food these hostesses with the mostest serve at home.

Rather more earnest is this book of 80 recipes by the Young Women's Christian Association, with sale proceeds going to fund the group's community and welfare programmes here.

The recipes come from association members but apart from their names, no other details are given about them. What a pity.

Still, I was inspired enough to test three of the recipes.

I could not resist making Dorothy Tesensohn's Sugée Cake, more streamlined than Mrs Chan's from The Chinese Women's Association Cookbook. This is to say it called for only eight eggs and 255g of butter. I preferred the results too, even though the baking powder called for in the ingredients list is nowhere to be found in the Method section.

Spaghetti With Salted Eggs And Prawns from June Low was easy and delicious. I found the Yellow Ginger Chicken from Judy Lee unbearably peppery – it called for one tablespoon of whole peppercorns – but three colleagues liked it so I'm going to fiddle with it a little more.

What makes this cookbook special is the Heritage section, with selected recipes from YWCA's 1932 and 1986 cookbooks.

Reading them is like stepping back in time, when prawns were weighed in katis, and you could go to a shop and ask for two cents of belacan.

\*Get a 10 per cent discount off the book if you buy it before Sept 30 from the YWCA National Office, 254 Outram Road, and at Level 1, YWCA Fort Canning Lodge, 6 Fort Canning Road. Or order it online from [www.ywca.org.sg](http://www.ywca.org.sg). Call 6223-1227 for more information.

The effort that went into putting this book together was considerable.

Volunteers from Nanyang Technological University's Welfare Services Club fanned out to get and translate recipes from senior citizens in Singapore. Their goal was to preserve these recipes for posterity and raise money for charity organisations here.

And there are some gems in this book of 38 recipes too, including the recipe for the famous Chen Fu Ji Imperial Golden Fried Rice, from the sisters who used to sell it in Erskine Road before they sold their business.

But cooking from the book is no easy task. The directions for many of the recipes are not clear and some are downright funny. A recipe for Baked Codfish calls for "two huge chunks codfish" and for the cook to "Preheat microwave oven at 200 deg C". Really?

I wanted desperately to make Prosperity Cakes but could not decode the recipe.

The one recipe I did try, Minced Beef Curry, turned out okay but I do think three tablespoons of curry powder is too much for just 200g of minced beef.

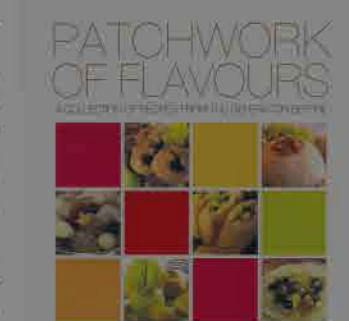
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**The Chinese Women's Association Cookbook**  
Marshall Cavendish/2007/  
152 pages/Paperback/  
\$32.10/Books Kinokuniya



**Sharing From Our Hearts**  
YWCA of Singapore/2007/  
130 pages/Paperback/\$30/  
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