

Introducing Jawi Peranakan cuisine to Penangites... and the rest of Malaysia too!

■ By Opalyn Mok

GEORGE TOWN, Nov 8 – Most visitors to Penang – and even some residents – associate the Peranakan culture with the Nyonya Baba or Straits-born Chinese who adopted Malay customs and food and made it into their own.

Think of the sarong kebaya and dishes like Gulai Tumis, Otak Otak or Inchi Kabin.

But there are other types of Peranakans in Penang too; the Jawi Peranakan or Orang Tanjung being one of the most prominent.

When the Indian, Arab, Turkish and Persian migrants came here and married local Malay women, they adopted the Peranakan culture as their own.

Peranakan is after all a Malay word that means “locally born” or “indigenous.”

Throughout the heritage city of George Town, the Straits Chinese or Baba Nyonya Peranakan influence is visible in restaurants boasting “nyonya food” but sadly, there was no way for most of us to sample Jawi Peranakan or Orang Tanjung food.

For that particular cuisine, you had to be invited to lunch or dinner at the homes of the Jawi Peranakans.

That is why Datuk Dr Wazir Jahan Abdul Karim decided to open Jawi House to offer Penangites and tourists a taste of the traditional food that is a unique fusion of Arabian and Malay with a smidgen of Western influence thrown in.

An economics anthropologist and executive director and founder of the Academy of Socio-Economic Research and Analysis (Asera), a global think tank and research collective focusing on economic justice, Datuk Wazir learned to cook from her mother Begum Bismillah Karim.

But she delved further into the history and cultural traditions of Jawi Peranakan because of her anthropological research into women and gender where culinary art is a natural branch of gender studies.

She even wrote a book on this very subject – *Feasts of Penang: Muslim Culinary Heritage* – which was launched earlier this year.

Her recipes are meant to demonstrate the cultural



A mini garden within the restaurant, located at the airwell



Head chef Nurilkarim Razha

links through the spice trade between Arabia, Persia, India and South East Asia in the past.

Located within the heritage zone of George Town, along the narrow Armenian Street

which was formerly called Malay Lane, Jawi House is a quaint little café and art gallery with dining tables on the ground floor and a gallery on the first floor.

The café opened its doors



Datuk Dr Wazir Jahan Abdul Karim wants to keep the traditions and cultures of the Jawi Peranakan alive through Jawi House and Gallery

in June this year and has a small menu of fusion Jawi Peranakan fare served in a quiet atmosphere, either around a mini garden at the café’s airwell or at its main air-conditioned dining area.

Their signature dish is the Herbal Lemuni Rice where white rice is cooked in coconut milk, delicately flavoured by lemongrass and lemuni leaves and given a gorgeous hue of blue and grey by tualang flowers

(also known as butterfly pea flowers).

It is not your regular nasi lemak as the rice has the added flavours of a combination of rich coconut milk and herbs.

The rice is served with chicken curry, egg, cucumber and talang salt fish (queenfish) sambal.

Traditionally, the lemuni rice used to be a post-partum or confinement dish for Malay women

because lemuni, a herb officially known as vitex trifolia, enhances blood flow, balances the hormones and restores the digestive system to normal.

Their briyani rice set is also another must-try as theirs is unlike regular briyani found at most Indian Muslim restaurants.

Imagine multi-coloured rice used to be of orange, yellow, red and white and at the first spoonful, you get an



Balmieh - a thick, rich lamb curry served with crunchy toast



The exhibits at the gallery above the restaurant



Fluffy red velvet gallettes served with cream and icing sugar and lemon tart (background)

The Herbal Lemuni Rice (front) and lemon rice, which was the rice of the day that the restaurant changes regularly, served with chicken curry, sambal, anchovies, fruit chutney and egg

explosion of flavours that is a marriage of briyani masala, coriender, parsley, rose water, fried shallots, mint and various herbs.

The multi-layered briyani rice also has a sprinkling of raisins and cashew nuts to bring all the flavours together and add a touch of the Moghul to the dish.

The rice itself can be eaten on its own without any other side dish but to balance out the meal with some meat and vegetables, it is served with rose chicken, fruit chutney and dalcha (vegetable curry).

The briyani sets are only available from Thursdays to Saturdays but each week, it is a different style of briyani.

According to head chef Nurilkarim Razha, who happens to be Datuk Wazir’s son, there are many different types of briyani so they try to change the dish every week



The Arabian Sherbet goes nicely with their briyani rice set



They have a selection of starters, hummus with toast bread (background), roti jala with curry or Malaysian salad (right)

Sandwiches are also available for those not keen on rice dishes; here is the smoked salmon sandwich served with salad



The multi-coloured briyani rice that is layered when cooked to produce a burst of flavours complemented by rose chicken, fruit chutney and dalcha

or so.

Nurilkarim studied culinary arts and trained under his mother. “My mother is very strict about how we prepare each dish so it is still a learning process and every day, without fail, she will check the taste and flavours of each dish to ensure that all are the authentic flavours of Jawi Peranakan,” he said.

No meal at Jawi House is complete without a nice tall glass of Arabian Sherbet. This milky pink drink may look like “ais bandung” (rose syrup with milk) but this drink’s recipe dates back to more than 800 years!

“We topped the iced rose syrup with milk with basil seeds (biji selaseh), malva nut (buah kembang semangkuk) and katira (olibanum gum resin),” Nurilkarim said.

The malva nut and katira both add a jelly-like texture to the drink and give the



Perfect starter: seasonal Malayan salad of mixed fresh vegetables tossed with a light tangy sauce and seasonal fruit (pomegranate, in this case)

conventional drink a different twist.

Jawi House, which opens from 10am to 7pm daily except for Sundays, also serves sandwiches for those not keen on rice and there is also a selection of baked

desserts such as yogurt cheesecake, red velvet gallettes, lemon tart and lemon cheesecake.

Find out more about Jawi House at www.jawihouse.com or call 04-2613680 for reservations.

Pictures by KE Ooi