

featured
restaurant

by
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Cultural

Flavours From Memory Past

It's commonly acknowledged that flavours and smells invoke memories from our past – thoughts long buried in the bric-a-brac of the present. Kept too long, these memories fade, and in time, so too do the tastes, the flavours, and the recipes that evoke them.

That is precisely what Nurikarim Razha and his mother, Dato Datin Dr. Wazir Jahan Karim, are fighting against.

Due to a longstanding history of international trade, Penang is home to a great collection of cultures and traditions. Georgetown itself is testament to the diversity of its past inhabitants. Colonial buildings intersect with Chinese-style temples and clan houses, and narrow streets showcase Peranakan heritage both structural and architectural. Penang is a melting pot of heritage, abundant in quaint little nuances that pay homage to the ancestors of the island's modern inhabitants. And if, by design and architecture, the Pearl of the Orient is so varied, what else could one say or think of its cuisine?

The only apt word to describe the cuisine of Penang, then, is *diverse*.

Currently the third generation of women cooks, with both her mother and grandmother being well-known in the island for their cuisine, conservation anthropologist Wazir has spent much of her life championing the preservation of cultural heritage in Georgetown, maintaining the importance of the past. This line of work reflects itself in humble flair.

Tucked away in Armenian Street, Penang, Jawi House is at a first glance, a humble establishment. The interior is beautifully embellished, rendering an authentic vision of Peranakan heritage. And whilst it was initially meant as an art gallery featuring early Penang paintings, Jawi House has since come into its own as a restaurant highlighting recipes from Wazir's book, *Feast of Penang*. She forms one half of the dynamic duo that heads the highly-rated establishment – the other half being her son, Nuril.

Trained in French cuisine, Nuril has had plenty of experience in a Peranakan kitchen, having grown up with two parents who cooked. Coupled with his own learning in Kuala Lumpur, where he spent some time working in Cilantro Restaurant and Wine Bar, Nuril takes both childhood experiences and culinary education, and alongside the infinite wisdom of his mentor-mother, serves up Jawi House's fantastic menu.



It's not difficult to see that what others do for sheer profit, the mother-son duo do for love. "Coming back to open a restaurant was always part of the plan," Nuril says. "Only I didn't know exactly when it was going to happen."

To their credit and for their efforts, it's paid off. Jawi House has garnered much attention, both online and in local publications. They've been featured in many local papers, and are highly rated on Tripadvisor. "People appreciate the fact that it's not just a café," Nuril remarks. "There's history behind our food, and why certain foods evolved this way, and why they're only found in Georgetown."

"Our food is Peranakan mostly, because the book is about Jawi Peranakan, and that's the most interesting part for us, because people know about Peranakan Chinese, Baba Nyonya – and they ask us, are your spices the same, are your recipes the same, because those are so well advertised. There are so many Nyonya restaurants." Says Wazir, in illustrating the differences between Jawi Peranakan and its various other counterparts. "And we have to tell them, Nyonya spices are Chinese and Malay mixed, and that our spices are a Malay, Indian, Arab and Persian mix. We don't use a lot of chillies in our food. You could say Jawi Peranakan cuisine is similar to Northern Indian, but not really, as we use pandan leaves and such. Just imagine Northern Indian food with Malay herbs."

Jawi Peranakan then, in terms of flavour and balance, works very well on the palate. Nuril goes on to further elaborate, "It could be internationally accepted, because it's not too spicy or too overpowering."

Essentially, then, Jawi House strives to tell a story, weaving a wonderful tale that spans the ages with spice and flavour, and food that binds together a close-knit community while simultaneously teaching those of differing heritage.

It is a story told through the food of the ancestors of Penang's Jawi Peranakan community.

As President of the Jawi Peranakan Heritage society, Wazir is also on a mission, backed with food and history, to encourage the all those with Jawi Peranakan blood insofar as cultural identification goes. As one who is most certainly proud of who she is, where she comes from, and the culture and traditions that define her, Wazir has kick-started a movement that strives for those of Jawi Peranakan descent to define themselves through their history as being unique in Penang. It's most certainly a beautiful sentiment, and one that keeps traditions alive, preserving them for our future generations to come.

Today, Jawi House is closing in on its second year in operation. As with anything beautiful, Jawi House and the intricacies of its cuisine, are on the road to expansion. Wazir and Nuril are most certainly looking to bring their heritage further, to share their food, history and experiences with those who would appreciate it.

And while Penang, as well as its Jawi Peranakan community has most certainly benefitted from Jawi House, this humble writer truly believes that it would be nothing short of a tragic shame, if the rest of the nation – and the rest of the world, remained in the dark about this gem of a culture.



Jawi House's foods feature an authentic taste of Jawi Peranakan cuisine, something Wazir and Nuril strive to share with all who are interested. Here, they share their recipes, tried and tested, for herbal lemuni rice, served with jawi peranakan chicken curry.

Chicken Curry - Jawi Peranakan Style

INGREDIENTS:

half a chicken
500 g red onions, chopped
30 g ginger, sliced
30 g garlic, chopped
2 fresh tomatoes
120 g meat curry powder
1 stalk lemongrass
50 ml coconut cream
50 ml cooking oil
100 ml water
carrots and potatoes (optional)
dry spices
2 sticks cinnamon
3 – 4 cloves cardamom
1 tsp coriander seeds
1 tsp cumin seeds
1 – 2 star anise

METHOD:

1. Remove the skin from chicken and clean any excess fat which may add impurities to the dish. Cut the chicken into equal portions and set aside.
2. Heat oil in a large pot and sauté the onions. When onions start to caramelise, add the garlic and ginger, then tip in all the dry spices and fry gently.
3. When the aromatics start to melt down, quarter the tomatoes and add them in. Mix half of the water with the curry powder to form a paste and pour into the pot.
4. Spices must be fried gently till most of the water evaporates and the oils float to the top. This will take at least 10 minutes.
5. At this stage, add the chicken and remaining water. Bruise the lemongrass and if you have carrots and potatoes, cut them into chunky pieces and simmer for 25 minutes, or until the chicken is tender.
6. Finally, add the coconut cream and season with salt and a sprinkle of sugar.
7. Garnish with some fresh coriander and red chillies.



Herbal Lemuni Rice (Serves: 5 – 6)

INGREDIENTS:

3 cups rice
2 shallots
one clove garlic
20 g ginger
one stalk lemongrass
5 – 6 lemuni leaves
5 cups water
1 cup coconut milk
pandan leaf
salt to taste

METHOD:

1. Soak the rice for at least 20 minutes.
2. Grind the lemuni leaves in a blender with a cup of water.
3. Slice the shallots and ginger thinly and chop the garlic. Pound the lemongrass and knot the pandan leaf.
4. Combine rice, coconut milk, lemuni puree, the rest of the prepared ingredients and the water in a rice cooker. Add salt to taste, then cook until done.