

# JAWI FEAST

Peppered by influences from faraway and exotic lands, the culinary heritage of Malaysia's Jawi Peranakan community is enriched by a tapestry of cultures.

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Flavoured with the leaves of the lemuni plant (*vitex trifolia*), *nasi lemuni* is believed to restore vitality, and is mainly eaten by women in confinement. The Jawi Peranakan use butterfly pea flowers to give the grains a blue tinge.

**A**s a Malaysian, I'm utterly spoilt for choice when it comes to food. Malaysia's cuisine, a marriage of flavours inspired by the communities that call this land home, mirrors the cultural diversity of a nation populated by a multi-racial melange. Iconic dishes like *nasi lemak* (rice cooked in coconut milk and served with condiments), *laksa* (spicy noodle soup), *roti canai* (flatbread), chicken rice and *char kuey teow* (stir-fried rice noodles) are famous the world over, and largely attributed to Malaysia, as well as neighbouring Singapore, which shares a similar culinary heritage.

Many of the culinary creations that Malaysia is known for are credited to the country's larger communities – the ethnic Malays, Chinese and Indians. But Malaysian food is much more than the basic medley of Malay, Chinese and Indian cooking styles. From the food rituals of the indigenous people of Borneo and Peninsular Malaysia to the distinct culinary traditions of the Straits Chinese whose roots in the country date back to the 16th century, Malaysian cuisine is truly a melting pot of multi-layered flavours.

Its evolution, which includes hybrid cuisines spawned from migration, intermarriage and trade, goes back centuries. Between the 10th and 18th centuries, the trade of spices, perfumes and cloth lured seafarers and merchants

from Europe, the Middle East, China and the Indian subcontinent to this part of the world. Many adventurous souls, besotted by the charms of the land, settled on her shores and forged new lives for themselves.

Intermarriage between these foreigners and local women were inevitable, and gave birth to mixed race communities whose descendants still proudly carry on the traditions and customs of their ancestors. During a recent trip to George Town, the capital of the northern Malaysian state of Penang, I discovered one such hybrid community – the Jawi Peranakan, whose ancestors hail mainly from northern India, Persia and the Middle East.

Peranakan in Malay literally means 'locally born' and refers to coastal or port city migrants who have assimilated into Malay, Pattani (southern Thai) or Indonesian culture, through intermarriage with the locals. Being a larger community, the Straits Chinese of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, who are of mixed Chinese and Malay heritage, are often widely referred to as Peranakan, although the term is not exclusive to this one community.

The word *jawi* is derived from the centuries-old Arabic term used in reference to the Muslims who inhabited the port cities and trade centres of the Malay Archipelago. Culturally distinct from their Straits Chinese neighbours,

Jawi Peranakan communities are largely based in Penang, Melaka and Singapore, where their forefathers once docked in search of the riches of the Far East.

While the history of the Jawi Peranakan people offers an intriguing insight into the melding of cultures, what piqued my interest even more was their cuisine, in itself a fusion of flavours peppered with exotic influences.

**A FLAVOURFUL UNION** To better understand the community behind this unique cuisine, I sought the expertise of Dato' Dr Wazir Jahan Karim, an economic anthropologist and author of *Feasts of Penang – Muslim Culinary Heritage*, an informative tome that celebrates the cuisine of Penang's Muslim communities, which include the Malays, Tamil or Southern Indian Muslims, and Jawi Peranakan.

"Jawi Peranakan is a complex cultural definition of a hybrid Muslim community. A century ago, Jawi Peranakan would have included descendants of Armenian Muslims and Persians.

**BELOW** *Ayam ros* is often served at Jawi Peranakan weddings.

**OPPOSITE PAGE** *Khaila* is a stir-fried vegetable dish commonly eaten in Jawi Peranakan households.





## SWEET TEMPTATIONS

**BENKANG SUJI** A baked pudding-like cake, *bengkang suji* contains *suji* or semolina, which is predominantly used in Northern Indian and Middle Eastern cakes and desserts. Made with semolina, coconut milk and eggs, flavoured with a trio of sweet spices (cinnamon, cardamom and cloves), and studded with cashews and raisins, this sweet treat is often served at *kenduri* (feasts), garnished with gold and silver leaf.

**SERABAI** A breakfast favourite, *serabai* are tasty crumpets enjoyed by the Jawi Peranakan. The base of the pancakes is a paste made from fermented raw rice. To prepare the batter, yeast, which lends the *serabai* a slightly sour tang, is used as a rising agent, and lashings of coconut milk are added for flavour. The cakes are cooked in a special mould that gives them a slightly-domed shaped appearance. *Serabai* are always enjoyed with *seri kaya* (coconut jam).

**HALWA MUSCAT** Time-consuming to prepare, as it takes at least four hours to whip up a batch, *halwa Muscat* is a rare treat. Said to originate from the Middle East, this sticky sweet is made from boiled and grated sweet potatoes or pumpkin, ghee, coconut milk or cream, and a whole lot of sugar! Sweet spices are used to flavour the *halwa*, and the mixture is cooked over a low heat in a heavy-based wok until it thickens and glistens!

The heirloom fabrics, cooking utensils and chinaware used for the staging of this photo shoot was loaned to *travel 3Sixty*™ by Dato' Dr Wazir Jahan Karim and Puan Mariatul Kabtiah.



*Bubur asyura* is a sweet rice porridge spiced with nutmeg, and decorated with candied ginger and melon, glacé cherries, as well as almonds and cashews. The dish is usually eaten by the Jawi Peranakan during Awal Muharram, the first day of the Islamic calendar year. The porridge also has a savoury counterpart.







**ABOVE** Chef Nurilkarim Razha and his mother, Dr Wazir Jahan Karim, are passionate about the preservation of the heritage and culture of the Jawi Peranakan community.

**OPPOSITE PAGE** *Nasi biryani*, a rice dish first introduced to India by the Moghuls, was brought to Penang more than 600 years ago by Indian Muslim merchants and traders. The dish, said to be fit for a king and queen, is served at wedding feasts and other festive occasions.

The present day community is mostly the offspring of Punjabi or Bengali Muslims, and local Malays.

“These mostly single men, who were wealthy, conversant in languages such as Arabic, Persian and Bengali, and in possession of dashing good looks, captivated the hearts of the local Malay women, and a hybrid community was soon born,” she said.

Over the course of centuries and through assimilation, the lines that define the community have been slightly blurred, but cultural distinctions still remain, and through these nuances, the community is still able to differentiate themselves.

According to Dr Karim, who is a Malaysian of Punjabi Muslim heritage, outsiders can rarely tell the Muslim communities of Penang apart, despite the diversity of ethnicities.

“In Penang, where there is a large Southern Indian Muslim community, people often confuse the two, as most Jawi Peranakan also have an Indian heritage,” she said.

“But you can still tell a Jawi Peranakan by their food. In fact, food is the last retaining factor in any culture. Through the generations, the community has held on to their culinary traditions,” she said.

The Jawi Peranakan table is mainly coloured by Indian, Arab and Persian influences. During the pre-colonial era, the cuisine, rich in spices and exotic ingredients like rosewater, nuts and raisins, was synonymous with lavish feasts.

The cuisine is milder when compared to the fiery fare of the Southern Indian Muslims, and relies on aromatics like onions and garlic for flavour. Pureed tomatoes, a paste of ground almonds and cashews, and cream are used in sauces, and an assortment of nuts and dried or candied fruit are also liberally sprinkled in everything from rice to desserts.

Dr Karim considers *nasi kenduri*, a must at Malay wedding feasts today, an integral part of Jawi Peranakan cuisine. Literally meaning festive rice, the term refers to the array of aromatic rice dishes synonymous with celebratory meals. Among the fragrant selections is *nasi minyak* or ghee rice. The dish begins with the frying of aromatics such as shallots, garlic and ginger, together with

spices that include cloves, cardamom and cinnamon quills, in ghee (clarified butter). Long grain rice, usually of the basmati variety, and water are then added to the mixture, and the rice cooked until the grains are al dente (soft on the outside but with a little bit of bite).

*Korma*, a creamy spiced gravy thickened with almond and cashew nut paste, is another dish that is relished at Jawi Peranakan feasts. Like their Muslim brethren, the Jawi Peranakan commemorate happy occasions such as weddings and the birth of a new born with grand thanksgiving feasts. Goat *korma* is a must-have for *aq-iqah*, a feast held to celebrate a baby’s birth. True to their waste not, want not mantra, a whole goat is used; choice cuts and organ meats would be selected for *korma*, while the bones would go into *dalca*, a flavourful lentil broth.

During the holy month of Ramadan, when Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset, Jawi Peranakan families are known to break their fast with a daily serving of *bubur gandum daging*, a meaty whole wheat porridge cooked with ghee, and flavoured with ground spices like coriander and cumin. Beef or lamb is usually used in the porridge.

Festive occasions would also be incomplete without *semiya*, a sweet vermicelli pudding fragranced with cardamom, cloves and cinnamon. While the other Muslim communities of



Malaysia have versions of these dishes, the way in which they are prepared, and the ingredients used – cream, exotic spices, choice cuts of meat – make them quintessentially Jawi Peranakan.

In Jawi Peranakan households, the kitchen is the domain of women. Jawi Peranakan women are known for their sumptuous feasts and gracious hospitality, twin attributes that they are tutored in from a young age. In wealthier Jawi Peranakan households, attention is paid to table manners, food presentation and decorum – the legacies of a colonial past.

Dr Karim who grew up with colonial traditions – English was the lingua franca of her childhood, and breakfast was marmalade on toast – understands the value of preserving heritage for future generations.

“Brought up with colonial traditions, and coming from a Punjabi Muslim background, I often felt unsure as to where I belonged. You begin to appreciate your heritage as you grow older or when you marry into a different culture.”

**FUSION IN ESSENCE** While the Jawi Peranakan of old could trace their mixed heritage back centuries, there is still a large number of Jawi Peranakan whose families are first or second generation.

Dr Karim, whose husband is a Malay, has three children, all of whom are considered first generation Jawi Peranakan due to their parents’ lineage. Her youngest, Nurilkarim Razha, is the head chef of Jawi House, a cosy restaurant that serves Jawi Peranakan dishes, alongside café standards such as sandwiches and cheesecakes.

Proudly Jawi Peranakan, 27-year old Nuril has incorporated the flavours of his childhood in the food he dishes up at Jawi House. Growing up, Chef Nuril remembers being intrigued by his mixed heritage and the different flavours of the food he was exposed to. “From my father, I learnt the finer points of Malay cuisine and an emphasis on fresh produce, while my mother passed on to me her family’s Punjabi Muslim recipes.”

Trained in the classical style and a frequent participant in international food expos, Nuril had envisioned a career in haute cuisine, and followed his schooling with a stint at a renowned upscale restaurant in Kuala Lumpur. But when the opportunity to head his own kitchen arose three years ago, he jumped at the chance.

At the time, his mother was overseeing restoration works to the Jawi House building and

toying with ideas to rejuvenate interest in its heritage. Nuril struck upon the notion of starting a café, an outlet for the fusion flavours he loved so well.

**PERANAKAN ON A PLATTER** While the menu at Jawi House currently caters to a broader palate and features tweaked versions of popular Jawi Peranakan fare, Chef Nuril’s passion for the food of his childhood is certainly obvious.

Patient with my every query, the young chef rattled off names of ingredients I’d never heard of, and filled me in on the history of some of his favourite Jawi Peranakan dishes. To my delight, he also prepared a selection of dishes for me to sample.

To start, I had *ayam ros* or rose chicken, a mainstay of the Jawi Peranakan. The sauce, subtly flavoured with cinnamon, cardamom and nutmeg, derives its rosy hue from ingredients that include red onions, cream of tomato soup, as well as tomato puree, and is thickened with a paste made from almonds, cashews and candlenuts. A final flourish of rosewater to the dish adds depth of flavour to the already rich offering. *Ayam ros* is often the accompaniment of choice for nasi kenduri.





**ABOVE** *Bamieh*

**RIGHT** Arabian sherbet, is a refreshing iced beverage flavoured with a spice-infused rose syrup, and topped with jelly-like basil seeds, malva nut, and *katira* (gum resin). Sherbet, which has Persian origins, is a popular thirst quencher during iftar, or the breaking of fast in the holy month of Ramadan.

**OPPOSITE PAGE** *Paruppu teloa*

The chicken was followed by the simple yet hearty *paruppu teloa* (lentil and egg curry). But this was no ordinary watered down lentil curry. Thick and creamy, the curry is prepared by cooking yellow lentils till tender in a mildly spicy broth flavoured with turmeric, onions, garlic, ginger and lemongrass. Just before the curry is taken off the heat, eggs are broken into the sauce and left to poach lightly. Served on a bed of hot rice, and accompanied with just a piece of fried salted fish, this unassuming entrée is a definite crowd pleaser.

I also savoured *khaila*, a dish of French beans, carrots and chicken liver, coated in a light sauce spiced with *garam masala* (blend of ground spices), and *bamieh*, a Middle Eastern-inspired okra and lamb stew. At Jawi House, the

*bamieh* is served with hunks of *roti Benggali*, a locally made bread known for its crusty tops and soft crumb.

To go with the dishes, Nuril served two types of rice, the slightly bitter *nasi lemuni*, a Malay-influenced herbal rice cooked in coconut milk with the leaves of the *lemuni* plant (*vitex trifolia*); and *biryani*, basmati rice cooked with a paste made from ground spices, tomatoes, onions, mint, coriander and green chillies. The rice is layered with the spice paste, studded with cashews and raisins, and then drizzled with milk and saffron-infused water.

**FOOD FOR THOUGHT** As the son of anthropologists, Nuril understands first-hand how the cuisine he inherited is a big part of his identity.

“I remember queuing up for *bamieh* at the mosque on the eve of Eid ul Fitr, the feasts we’d enjoy on Friday afternoons after prayers, as well as the decadent desserts decorated with gold and silver leaf, which would be served in Jawi Peranakan households. In school, I had wanted to cook modern or European cuisine and didn’t envision myself recreating the dishes of my youth. But somehow, I have come full circle and back to my roots.”

Without appreciation and cultivation, the recipes, customs and traditions of our forefathers often slip through the cracks, and are forgotten through the passage of time.

In this day and age, it is indeed a joy to discover people like Dr Karim and Chef Nuril who are passionate about the preservation of time-honoured rituals in celebration of their heritage. Without people like them, we Malaysians would be at risk of losing what is essentially a part of our shared culture.

A taste of Jawi Peranakan food is almost like a journey across continents. The different influences that flavour the cuisine – rosewater from the Middle East and India, almond and cashew nut paste from Persia, the liberal use of nuts and raisins – a legacy of Middle Eastern and Mughal cuisine, and *lemuni* leaves favoured by the Malay community – trace the history of the Jawi Peranakan, a hybrid community who few know about.

As Malaysians, we are linked by our multicultural history and shared love of food, which ultimately unites us all. ☺

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