



DATIN KALSOM TAIB & DATIN HAMIDAH ABDUL HAMID

Food for thought

The JOHOR PALATE: Tanjung Puteri Recipes explores the relationship between culture and cuisine.

Words by RUBIN KHOO

"FAMILY RECIPES THAT are handed down through generations are often fiercely protected and are cooked for exclusive enjoyment of family members," writes DYMM Raja Zarith Sofia binti Almarhum Sultan Idris Shah, the Permaisuri of Johor in the foreword of *Johor Palate Tanjung Puteri Recipes*. Which is why the Permaisuri, who also launched the book, finds it a "pleasant surprise," as it shares a wealth of family secrets.

Authors Datin Kalsom Taib and Datin Hamidah Abdul Hamid take a no-holds barred approach as they willingly divulge recipes that date back four generations. Perhaps it is because the first cousins wanted to share the many fond memories they had of growing up savouring traditional fare at their maternal grandmother's house in Muar or it could be that they decided it was time to document what till then had only been passed on orally.

Interestingly both had begun compiling the recipes independently. Haslom, who admits to not being a good cook, had done it for her children who were studying abroad. Hamidah, because she continued to cook in the tradition of her grandmother. Once they discovered what the other was doing, the idea for the book was conceived.

"We were like the right hand and the left hand working together," says Kalsom. "Hamidah did the cooking, trying to re-create the exact tastes that



we remembered from the past while I did the research into the recipes"

It proved to be a challenging task. Some of the recipes had never been recorded and had only been passed on through word of mouth. Ingredients and measurements were hardly accurate and instead followed the instinctual "agak-agak" style.

"Some of the ingredients were measured by a handful or the length of thumb," says Hamidah. "But you can't do that in a book. It has to be accurate."

Others were of no relevance, such as 50 cents dried chillies (priced in 1965), one bowl chilli puree (big or small?). "Our ancestors simply threw the ingredients into a pot or added more if they felt the consistency or taste was not right," write the authors.

That meant having to embark on a trial and error exercise to ensure that accurate measurements, using cups, bowls, tablespoons and teaspoons, be ascertained to enable these recipes to be easily replicated.

This proved to be a mammoth task as the book contains 240 recipes. Furthermore, it encompasses a range of recipes



from typical Johorean fare like Briyani Gam and Laksa Johor to Shepherd's Pie and Fruit Cake. Even Bandung Syrup has been included. What is Shepherd's Pie and Fruit Cake doing in a book that is about authentic Johorean recipes, you may ask. That is because Johor cuisine is a reflection of its rich history.

"There is certainly Johor food, relished by generations of the Javanese, Bugis and Middle Eastern people who came and settled in Johor," write the authors. "Johor cuisine however is much more varied than this. It is a combination of richly varied cuisines from not only the Middle Eastern countries but also from China, India, Indonesia and Europe, reflecting the multi-ethnicity of the Johor people. Johor food is an astonishing blend of past and modern influences."

The book, sponsored by Johor Corporation, proves to be beneficial not just for those who want authentic recipes. Instead, it serves as a valuable resource for those interested in the history of Johor. That is indicative in the title of the book which contains the name Tanjung Puteri. Modern-day Malaysians may not even be aware that Tanjung Puteri was the original name

of Johor's capital, before it was renamed Johor Baru by the "father of modern Johor," Sultan Abu Bakar.

The cousins have a legacy that date back to the reign of the Sultan, hence the title. Though there are versions of the delicacies found in other states, the Johor recipes are unique. For example, Johor Laksa used spaghetti as its main ingredient. The reason being is that Sultan Abu Bakar had been exposed to the pasta during his frequent trips to Europe.

Though the book may have begun as a pet project between the cousins, it has gone beyond our shores gaining international recognition. Whilst participating at the Frankfurt Book Fair, the authors were asked to submit the book for consideration for the Gourmand Awards, becoming a finalist for the 2016 Gourmand Award in the Culinary Heritage category. ■

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