StarLifestyle FOOD

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Preserving our food legacy

Datin Kalsom Taib and her cousin Datin Hamidah Abdul Hamid have put together a remarkable cookbook that celebrates 230 traditional Malaysian dishes.

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IT is a cold, balmy evening ... one of those gloomy, overcast days when the rain has cast a miserable pallor over the sky. But in 78-year-old Datin Kalsom Taib's cool patio overlooking a fecund, foliage-laden garden, the howling of the wind and the drip-drip patter of rain are drowned out by the animated conversation taking place between Kalsom and her 70-year-old cousin Datin Hamidah Abdul Hamid.

"I am not happy with this, the inside is okay but the outside is not nice," says Hamidah, frowning at a disc-shaped kuih, the famed Borneo sweet treat, kuih penyaram (also known as cucur Jawa or cucur topi).

"But it's delicious," says Kalsom, pointedly munching on her second piece.

"Yes, but it just doesn't look right – *tak jadi lah* (it didn't turn out well)," says Hamidah.

The two continue to debate the merits (or lack thereof) of the kuih, which is admittedly delicious.

In many ways, the closeness between the cousins is the result of a childhood spent together during school holidays and Hari Raya breaks in their grandparents' home in Muar, Johor.

"We would always sleep over and spend a few days together during Hari Raya as the family was very close. When we went to Johor Bahru, we would always stay in Adek's house (pet name for Hamidah)," says the gregarious Kalsom, a retired human resources practitioner, who worked in corporations like Shell and Nestle.

A few years ago, the cousins forged an even closer bond when they spent nearly three years working together on their debut cookbook *Johor Palate: Tunjung Puteri Recipes* – with talented home cook Hamidah doing all the cooking and recipe-testing and accomplished writer Kalsom writing the book.

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Kalsom (left) and Hamidah researched, documented and compiled 230 traditional Malaysian recipes, all deemed national heritage dishes. — ART CHEN/The Star

Kalsom has been collecting recipes and cookbooks since she was a child and now has an extensive collection for reference. — Photos: ART CHEN/The Star

Hamidah (left) took charge of the cooking and recipe-testing while Kalsom formatted the recipes and wrote about the dishes.

A rich local culinary heritage

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Incidentally, Kalsom is an experienced author who has written books on the life and times of her husband Datuk Shafee Yahaya (the former head of the Anti-Corruption Agency), father Tan Sri Taib Andak (former Felda and Maybank chairman) and mother Puan Sri Zainab Ahmad.

Johor Palate documented many of the state's traditional and often hard-to-find delicacies and eventually saw Kalsom and Hamidah bagging first prize in the culinary heritage category of the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards 2016.

With their latest cookbook, the aptly named *Malaysia's Culinary Heritage: The Best of Authentic Traditional Recipes*, the duo have employed their considerable talents to a more pressing national issue: documenting and preserving recipes that encompass the vast repository of local traditional food.

Indeed, the cookbook catalogues the recipes for all 213 of the National Heritage Department's gazetted traditional Malaysian foods as well as an additional 17 recipes that the authors felt ticked all the right boxes and were worthy contenders for the title.

"After the dust had settled on *Johor Palate*, I thought, 'Let's do another cookbook.' So we thought we'd do a simple cookbook on everyday meals, until I read about the Heritage Food Congress which took place in April 2019. That's when I discovered that the National Heritage Department has a list of 213 gazetted traditional foods.

"So I looked around to see what books they had on the subject and I couldn't find any. So I went to the department and said, 'Have you got any books on the 213 traditional foods – the recipes and all that?

"The book they had was more on endangered Malay food. So then I asked if anyone was doing a book on the gazetted food list, and when they said 'No', I said, 'Can I do a book on it?' So that's how it started – they gave me a letter allowing me to do the book," explains Kalsom.

One of the dishes in the book, Gulai Lemak Umbut, is made using the crown of a young coconut palm. It is becoming increasingly rare these days. — Filepic

Masalodeh has Indian origins but in Johor, it is called Magelek and eaten with a sweet dipping sauce called Asma Rojak as well as chives and green chillies.

The recipe for Ayam Pongteh, a Kristang dish, is included in *Malaysia's Culinary Heritage*.

The making of the book

Kalsom and Hamidah compiled the information and recipes for the cookbook within the span of just seven months, a feat they say was only possible because they had the benefit of experience on their side.

"For our first cookbook, our editor rejected all the recipes we sent her. We thought we just had to write the recipes down – we didn't put precise measurements or standardise everything – we were writing things like 'a handful of onions' without having weighed it. So it took us almost a year after that to fine-tune the recipes and retest them with measurements. It was very stressful for both of us.

"But by the time we did *Malaysia's Culinary Heritage*, we were seasoned already so we knew how to format the recipes. That's why we did it very fast," says Kalsom.

Still, there were challenges aplenty in putting together the final product. Kalsom realised that the list of 213 gazetted local traditional foods was just that – a list. There was no categorisation of any sort, which meant they had to do this themselves.

"We had to sieve it and sort it by categories – noodles, rice, sweet cakes. And I was fortunate that I had my grandson who had just come back from the US. He had no job yet, so I told him to sort it out into categories and then put it into alphabetical order. So, he was able to do that in two weeks," says Kalsom.

Once that was done, Kalsom discovered there were many dishes missing from the gazetted list – some too important for her to ignore, which is why she added 17 more dishes that she felt absolutely needed to be represented.

"When I looked at the dishes, I found that they were mostly Malay, there were not very many other foods, so I felt that it should have these multi-ethnic, diverse additions to make it complete. Like bak kut teh and lor bak that are very popular, those were not in, so I decided to put that in. Briyani gam was not in and it's from Johor and well-known. Mee rebus and laksa Sarawak were not there. I believe these recipes should be preserved, that is why I felt strongly that they should be included," she says.

The next challenge was in finding recipes for all the dishes in the cookbook. Luck was on their side, as the two had already documented 30 recipes in *Johor Palate* that were on the gazetted list. Additionally, Kalsom is a huge collector of cookbooks and has hundreds of cookbooks in her arsenal, some of which proved useful

CUCUR JAWA/CUCUR TOPI/KUIH PENYERAM

Makes 10

100g rice flour
500g all purpose flour
650ml water
500g palm sugar, shaved
4 pandan leaves, knotted
1/2 tsp salt
2-3 cups of cooking oil, for deep-frying

Sieve the rice flour and all purpose flour into a mixing bowl, whisk to mix and set aside.

In a pot, bring to boil 200ml water (from the 650ml). Add the palm sugar and pandan leaves and cook over low heat until the sugar dissolves. Stir in the remaining water.

Pour the syrup into the mixing bowl with the flour, add salt and stir to form a batter. Strain the batter into a bowl, cover with cling wrap and leave to rest for 1 hour. Uncover, stir the batter for 5 to 10 minute until it becomes elastic and springy.

Heat the cooking oil in a wok over medium to low heat. Gently ladle the mixture into the wok and slowly remove the ladle, leaving the fritters to fry. They will cook from the edges inwards to the centre. If any of the mixture oozes out of the centre, spoon over some hot oil until it dries.

Flip over the fritter and fry the other side until cooked. Remove from the wok with a skewer, slotted spoon or mesh wire spoon.

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in terms of source recipes.

"I didn't have to go to the Internet. I have Chinese, Indian, Malay, Kristang, Bugis and Sabah cookbooks, so plenty of books to refer to. We used that as a base, then it was up to Adek to choose and reformat," says Kalsom.

But there were some recipes that they simply couldn't find. When faced with roadblocks of this nature, Kalsom cast her net wide and sought the help of anyone she could think of – friends, acquaintances and even total strangers!

"Kek lapis Sarawak – we are unfamiliar with it. So I decided to take a recipe from a book which is on kek lapis, but it was rejected by my editor. She didn't understand the recipe.

"So then I searched on the Internet and found a lady who makes homemade kek lapis. Her name is Azah Hassan. I called her and asked if she could share the recipe and process of making it with me and she said 'Yes'. So I credited her in the book.

"Also, we don't cook things like bak kut teh – but I have a friend who is Chinese and married to a Malay and she loved that dish, but changed the pork to chicken. So I asked her if she could share the recipe with me. And she said, 'Of course!' So I acknowledged her in the cookbook. So there were some dishes that we didn't know how to make, but we gained knowledge from others," says Kalsom.

The final product

The resulting cookbook is a true testament to Malaysia's varied culinary topography. In the book, you'll discover the full list of 213 gazetted traditional foods like masak ikan tanah liat, acar buah, bubur asyura, Penang assam laksa, nasi ulam, sambal gesek ikan bilis, lempeng, onde-onde and seri kaya, among a long list of dishes as well as the additional 17 new entries, like mee bandung, nasi ambang and ayam goreng Palembang.

Perhaps the best thing about the book is there is so much information about each of the dishes. For example, did you know that nasi ulam once used to include 44 different kinds of herbs? Or that emas sejemput is a royal sweet delicacy in Pahang and Kelantan?

Kalsom prefaces each recipe with short, well-written introductions, which serve to bolster understanding of the meals, some of which may be completely foreign to most Malaysians – think kasui, kuih getas and ganti tandan jagung.

As all the meals were photographed in Kalsom's home (they sometimes photographed up to 30 recipes a day!), there is a home-spun quality to the dishes that will likely endear them to everyday users. The recipes have also been organised in a digestible manner, which makes them incredibly easy to understand and execute, even for neophyte cooks.

The cookbook also includes an additional 20 "sub-recipes", as Kalsom calls it, designed around gazetted foods which typically serve as base ingredients, like cincalok, tempoyak, durian and tofu.

"Some of the gazetted traditional foods are things like tofu and tempeh, so we wanted to include recipes that highlighted these ingredients," says Kalsom.

There is clearly a lot of thought that gone into this labour of love, which is deserving of its place in the archives of everyday Malaysians looking for a slice of culinary heritage.

Which is why Kalsom actually believes that *Malaysia's Culinary Heritage* is a much better effort from her and her cousin than their first cookbook.

"I want to submit it for the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards in August. I hope it will win an award – I feel that this is a slightly better book than *Johor Palate* because we are more experienced now," she admits.

Moving forward, Kalsom and Hamidah are going to be hard at work producing Bahasa Malaysia edition of *Malaysia's Culinary Heritage*. Kalsom has also submitted the additional 17 recipes that they inserted into the cookbook to the National Heritage Department to be considered as traditional dishes for next year, something she is hopeful will come to fruition.

"I have submitted it for next year's list and they told me it would be included so that this would be a complete book of gazetted traditional dishes," she says.

But ultimately, the main reason the cousins think the cookbook makes for important reading (and cooking) is for the sheer value of preserving the culinary identity and roots of traditional food.

"History is no doubt from the past, but it is from the past that we know our roots. So this cookbook is for posterity – for future generations.

"That's why I always tell people 'You cannot be selfish with your recipes. When you die, you can't take it with you, but if you leave something behind, when people cook, you will also get some reward.

"So for both of us, it is about leaving something behind – that is the main objective," says Kalsom.

***Malaysia's Culinary Heritage* is priced at RM185 and available at local bookstores.**