

# EATING OUT

# Heritage Peranakan fare

By **ABIRAMI DURAI**  
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A passionate chef-owner's charming new restaurant is devoted to the heirloom Peranakan recipes passed down from her 94-year-old grandmother.

ENSCONCED in an off-the-beaten-track part of Petaling Jaya in Selangor is Herba & Rempah. The sweet little restaurant is the brainchild of 45-year-old Chuah Jay Mee, a former public relations consultant who started a home delivery business during the Covid-19 pandemic and has now spread her wings with the formation of her first-ever restaurant.

Herba & Rempah is very special to Chuah because it showcases the heirloom Peranakan recipes that she learnt from the matriarch of her family, her 94-year-old grandmother Lim Chew Lan.

"When I was young, I used to live with my grandmother in Penang and she made all sorts of Nyonya food and kuih, so I learnt from her.

"For my grandmother, ingredients are very important. If you get one wrong or the ingredient doesn't seem fresh, she will say, 'No, I won't use it. Please get me the right ingredient'. She is very critical in that way.

"I developed that sense of importance in terms of the quality of ingredients and making everything perfectly," she says.

Chuah was motivated to open a physical restaurant because of the encouraging response to her online delivery business and the fact that her regular customers kept asking her when they could dine-in and enjoy her food to the fullest.

Emboldened by the many requests, she decided to venture into the unknown. She says one of her biggest supporters in navigating these uncharted waters has been her grandmother.

"My grandmother was very proud that I made a bold step forward to actually launch a new cafe. And she is very happy because it is her own granddaughter using her recipes to serve customers," she says.

The rest of her family has been just as unwavering in their support and in fact, the restaurant is truly a family affair as the herbs and greens used to make many of the dishes are planted and grown by Chuah's own father, Ricky Chuah Kean Eng, 72. Ricky started a herb and vegetable garden in his home in Taiping, Perak as he wanted to ensure that his daughter had a steady supply of greens for her restaurant.

The devoted Ricky now grows everything from daun kaduk to cekur, pandan leaves, cili padi, lemongrass, curry leaves, kaffir lime leaves, blue pea flowers, daun kunyit, lime, pineapple, bananas and galangal. He has them delivered to

Chuah makes heritage Peranakan dishes passed down from her grandmother Lim, who is immensely proud that her granddaughter is using her recipes.



Chuah's salted fish bone vegetable curry combines aquatic elements with vegetables in what proves to be a wonderful gustatory odyssey.



The perut ikan is a rich, diverse offering that celebrates the wonders of the land we live on. — ABIRAMI DURAI/The Star

his daughter's restaurant or personally sends it himself – all the way from Taiping!

At the restaurant, Chuah makes everything from scratch and is fastidious about supervising the proceedings in the kitchen.

To begin a meal here, look at indulging in the Salted Fish Bone Vegetable Curry (RM30 for a small portion). The dish features vegetables like long beans and eggplant, with tofu puffs and salted fish in what proves to be a fantastically good curry with a salted aquatic underbelly swimming through its arteries and veins, ultimately providing a very memorable quotient to the meal. It's the sort of meal that is hard to forget once you've had it.

Up next, look at indulging in the Perut Ikan (RM32) which Chuah recently introduced as she just learnt how to make it from her grandmother. This is also a very special dish because it is what spurred Chuah's father to start the family herb garden.

"Getting a con-

stant supply of daun kaduk in Kuala Lumpur is quite hard. At first, I couldn't do this dish because I didn't have this particular leaf. That is when my dad decided he would start growing it for me," says Chuah.

Perut ikan is a stalwart Peranakan recipe that – according to Chuah – calls for up to 27 ingredients, including preserved fish stomach. The other ingredients in this configuration include copious amounts of daun kaduk, pineapples, long beans and small prawns, among others.

The result is a dish that is awash in rich, contrasting flavours. The daun kaduk gives the meal rusticity and an herbaceous underbelly while the pineapples add tangy, sweet counterpoints and the other ingredients offer depth and dimension. It is a meal that is made up of so many local ingredients that it tells a compelling story of the land and its many riches. If you have only one dish at this restaurant, let it be this.

Have a sample of Chuah's Beef Rendang Tok (RM35 for a small portion). Rendang tok is notoriously time-consuming to make because it involves hours of back-breaking slow-cooking in order to gain its flavour-rich, dry consistency. In Chuah's iteration, the rendang tok is fabulous – each morsel suffused with rich coconut overtures and the spices that permeate the internal structure of this configuration, like cinnamon and cloves. It's breathtaking and utterly unforgettable.

Chuah's high standards and momentum continue with her Jiu Hu Char (RM28). This traditional Nyonya dish is mightily labour-intensive and basically features stir-fried jicama and dried cuttlefish as well as carrots and a host of other ingredients. Each ingredient has to be hand-cut to perfect dimensions and because of the manual exertions involved in producing this dish, good renditions are hard to find.

Herba & Rempah's iteration is excellent. The entire concoction is luscious – neither too wet nor



Even while paying homage to tradition, Chuah comes up with inventive new recipes like her kerabu bluepea beehoon, which is a triumphant tropical offering. — ABIRAMI DURAI/The Star



End your meal with a sweet, tropical temptation in the form of the bubur cha cha.



In his garden in Taiping, Ricky grows most of the herbs and greens that go into the dishes. — Photos: CHUAH JAY MEE

too dry – and allows for the natural sweetness of the vegetables to shine, while the cuttlefish provides brine and a journey through oceanic flavours. A dish like this hinges on symmetry and balance and Chuah has dextrously captured it all in this picture-perfect meal.

Although Chuah's business is rooted in heritage and tradition, she still innovates and comes up with recipes that combine both the old and the new. Her most recent invention is the brand-new dish of Kerabu Bluepea Beehoon (RM19.90) which was just launched a few days ago.

Here, blue pea flavoured noodles form the canvas upon which many other ingredients are layered, including prawns, fried egg strips, shallots, coriander leaves, torch ginger buds, sambal belacan, red chillies and kerisik with a lime dressing added atop.

Stir everything together and you will discover the most wonderful constellation of bright, multi-layered tropical flavours.

It's like discovering a party that combines old comforts and newfound pleasures in one hedonistic night.

End your meal on a sweet note with the Bubur Cha Cha (RM12) which features hot, cloudy coconut milk infused soup filled with yam, sweet potato, sago pearls and other ingredients in what proves to be the perfect smooth operator to ensure repeat sweet dreams after a meal here.

With her first physical restaurant, Chuah is clearly doing her grandmother's recipes justice because a meal here offers a wonderful, nostalgia-laced trip through the pleasures of home-cooked Peranakan food of yore.

**Herba & Rempah**  
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Open daily: 10am to 3pm; Saturday:  
6pm to 9.30pm