



NONYA NOSH

The popularity of Peranakan food in Singapore continues with the opening of more new restaurants specialising in the cuisine. DESIREE KOH goes for a taste test.

Long before fusion became the cuisine du jour, there was Peranakan culture, which evolved when South-east Asian Malays married Chinese immigrants. Out of this wedded bliss came a lip-smacking matrimony of indigenous spices and herbs, and Chinese cooking techniques.

Also known as Straits Chinese cooking, this colourful cuisine is part of Singapore's culinary heritage. Most Peranakan dishes are tedious endeavours needing days of preparation work and slow stewing to coax out rich, complex tastes. Fortunately, great kitchen maestros love sharing – here are three places to explore the world of Peranakan cuisine.



VIOLET OON'S KITCHEN

The doyenne of Peranakan cuisine, who made her name as a food writer, Violet Oon's exacting and modern interpretations of Nonya dishes are now presented in vivacious glory at her new restaurant in Bukit Timah.

"As the world eats differently, your country's food has to change," says Oon (left) on why she has updated certain ingredients and presentations in her dishes, such as a hae bee hiam (spicy dried shrimp) panini. "However, a Nonya meal must have something crispy, something sour and hot, something creamy and a vegetable dish." **Don't miss:** Ngoh hiang (spiced meat beancurd-skin rolls; above), babi pongteh (braised pork) violetoonskitchen.com



PERAMAKAN

Owner-chef Kathryn Poh Neo (left) recreates the Nonya cooking of her childhood in homage to a lineage of Peranakan cooks who take great pride in cooking with fresh ingredients. Featuring comfort food served in generous portions, a PeraMakan meal buzzes with the communal conviviality of a typical Straits Chinese rumah (home), where waiters cheerily introduce dishes and make spot-on recommendations.

"I was fortunate to have a doting grandmother and a fastidious mother who trained me in the culinary arts," says Poh Neo. **Don't miss:** Ayam buah keluak (chicken fried with the paste scraped from a seed native to Indonesia and Malaysia; above), assam (tamarind) fish head curry peramakan.com



IMMIGRANTS - THE SINGAPORE GASTROBAR

Nestled in a shophouse in Katong, Singapore's Peranakan enclave, Damian D'Silva (left) wants to bring the romance back into Singapore eating by preserving the authenticity of makan kecil (Malay for small bites). Recently-opened, Immigrants has a bar setting (below) that's reminiscent of how D'Silva's grandparents entertained in the 1940s and 1950s – serving snacks, many of them Peranakan, to accompany hours of conversation fuelled by whiskies and other liquors.

Don't miss: Grilled otah (a spicy seafood paste grilled in banana leaf), sambal buah keluak fried rice immigrants-gastrobar.com



THE SPICE OF LIFE

Peranakan cooking is inspired by ingredients and techniques that hail from all over Asia. Here, our guide to help you feel at home while savouring the complex cuisine.

BUAH KELUAK

Cooking this seed, native to Indonesia and Malaysia, takes considerable effort – two days of preparation are needed to bring it to the dinner table, from tediously scrubbing its poisonous coating off to cracking the tough shell to mine its velvety "meat". Ayam buah keluak is made by slowly steeping the main ingredients in a richly piquant sauce with at least eight different spices. Connoisseurs lovingly refer to the dish as black gold.

REMPAH

Rempah is a mixture of spices that have been pounded or blended into pastes that form the hearty basis of most Peranakan stews. A basic rempah usually consists of chillies, shallots, dried shrimp and lemongrass.

ASSAM FISH HEAD CURRY

This is often the centrepiece of a Peranakan meal – the head of a large red snapper that has been simmered in an enticing cavalcade of assam, turmeric, curry

powder, chillies, coconut, galangal, and a variety of vegetables, is usually presented in a large clay pot.

SAMBAL

Peranakans love spicy food and sambal (a chilli-based condiment) is a common offering at the dining table to warm the palate.

BABI PONGTEH

This signature Peranakan dish comprises pork belly that has been stewed till it melts in the mouth. The fermented soya bean used for the luscious gravy forms a hearty backdrop to this decadent dish.

PHOTOS COURTESY IMMIGRANTS - THE SINGAPORE GASTROBAR / VIOLET OON'S KITCHEN / PERAMAKAN