

BUSYCOOK Meals for the Family



Cooking with love

When a special dish is a dedication to the family

COOKING buah keluak is a labour of love. It's also probably why you have to pay through your nose when you order this at Peranakan restaurants. That addictive black nut is both an acquired taste and a culinary challenge.

I'm rather foolhardy when it comes to trying new recipes, but I have to admit I've never tried cooking buah keluak, preferring rather to sample the hard work of my betters and elders.

That is, until recently.

Our editorial team was sent to Bintan, and one of the trophies of that weekend foray was a nice bag of big, fat buah keluak from Tanjung Pinang. The shopkeeper was so very persuasive that I was convinced each nut would be a capsule of ambrosia waiting to be broken into.

Back at the office on Monday, I got a phone call from a nice gentleman from Horizon Books.

He'll be sending me a cookbook, he said. The Eurasian Cookbook by a lady named Mary Gomes.

Well, I love a good cookbook, but barring that classic by the late Mrs Lee, I've never yet found affinity with any recent publications on good local recipes. I'm very happy to report that

Ms Gomes hits the spot. Her recipes are a pleasure to follow and pretty easy to navigate. It was serendipity that the first recipe I turned to was Chicken Buah Keluak – not an easy recipe, mind you, and certainly not my usual Cooking 101 type.

But for this dish, I'll make the exception. This dish is so full of tradition and not a little history.

It recalls our Straits Chinese roots and is an excellent example of how we've evolved our own cuisine blending the cooking styles of Chinese, Portuguese, Malay and Indian – just like our Eurasian sister cooks.

It also reminds me of the unquestioning commitment of our mothers and grandmothers as they laboured long and hard to produce wholesome meals for the family.

As I stood an hour by the sink carefully breaking open the little black nuts with a hammer, an odd sense of impending loss came over me.

How many of our daughters, or sons for that matter, will invest this much time or care cooking for the family in the encroaching New Age of Instant Gratification?

I hope I can persuade you, at least, to try this dish. It is indeed a labour of love. For me, my reward comes when I watch the faces of those I love light up at the dinner table. What about you?



by Pauline D Loh

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TIPS & TRICKS

WHAT DO BUAH KELUAK taste like? No one's given me a satisfactory answer as yet. The closest I can get is to say it tastes like a black olive pate. And even then, I'm not sure it would be totally accurate or if it does justice to this enigmatic delicacy.

A good nut, properly soaked overnight, will yield an almost rubbery kernel which is black as ink and has a distinctive fragrance.

CRACKING THE NUT

If you have soaked it sufficiently, it's pretty easy to handle. Just have the right tools.

My instruments of choice are a small hammer with a chisel head on the other side and a pair of wire-cutters. Don't laugh. They are the most efficient by far.

Use the flat hammerhead to tap at the top end of the nut. This is easily identified by a strip of a different texture. If left alone, this is where the shoot will break out of the shell and grow into a new plant.

On a tough nut, you need the chisel head to crack the opening. Carefully pick off the broken bits of shell. I use the wire-cutter next to enlarge the opening, cutting into the shell, so it's easier to get at the nut meat.

This is especially useful if you intend to blend the buah keluak meat with minced meat stuffing. Makes it easier to eat.

PREPARING THE BUAH KELUAK

You can choose to leave the nut meat whole, but personally, I think it's tastier if it's taken out, pounded to release the flavours and stuffed back into the shell.

Remember to rinse the nut meat well so no one gets cut by a sharp bit of shell while you're enjoying your buah keluak.

STUFFING MATTERS

I find that mixing the buah keluak meat with minced chicken or pork and stuffing it back into the shell is a good alternative.

My argument is simple. The kids in the family like it better, as the buah keluak is less pungent that way, and the meat sweetens the mixture.

It also makes for better presentation. Buah keluak tends to blacken the rempah while cooking, darkening the gravy. The meat mixture helps keep the buah keluak within the shell, and you'll get a more appetising-looking red curry.

As usual, e-mail me if you have questions.

Chicken Buah Keluak from *The Eurasian Cookbook* by Mary Gomes

20 buah keluak
6 chicken wings
1/2 teaspoon salt
2 walnut-sized pieces of assam
120 ml water

Preparation:

1. Soak buah keluak overnight. The next day, brush the shells to remove any sand or sediment. Rinse a few times until water runs clear. Crack each nut with a small hammer.
2. Cut wings into two pieces. Wash and drain. Marinate with salt.
3. Mix assam with water. Strain.

4 tablespoons Standard Rempah
1 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons sugar

Method:

1. Heat a deep pot. Add rempah. Fry for 1-2 minutes or till oil oozes out.
2. Add marinated chicken and buah keluak. Fry for five minutes over high heat.
3. Add water, salt, sugar and assam water. Bring to a boil.
4. When curry boils, lower heat and simmer till meat is tender and gravy thickens.

STANDARD REMPAH:

1 kg onion
2 stalks serai (lemon grass)
10 buah keras (candlenuts)
1 tablespoon belacan
2 tablesp ground chilli
(or 5 dried chillis, soaked in hot water and blended till fine)
1 teaspoon kunyit powder (turmeric)

Preparations:

1. Peel onions. Wash and cut into chunks.
2. Remove outer leaves of serai. Slice thinly about 6 cm of the root
3. Wash buah keras and belacan.
4. Grind onions, serai, belacan and buah keras into a smooth paste.
5. In a bowl, mix with ground chilli and kunyit powder. Mix till well-blended.

1/2 cup oil

Method:

1. Heat oil in pan. When hot, fry ground rempah till brown. When thoroughly cooled, store in a dry container and refrigerate.

Mary Gomes' *The Eurasian Cookbook* is on sale at leading bookstores.
Call 732 9522
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