

East west fusion

When Leemei Tan, fresh off the plane from Malaysia, met her French boyfriend it was the beginning of a culinary adventure

I am Malaysian, Chinese by ethnicity, born and bred in a small town in Kedah, one of the thirteen states in northwest Malaysia. My love of food started when I was a child as I enjoyed watching my mom and aunts cooking. From them I learnt how to make a lot of dishes such as Malay-style red chicken curry (Ayam Masak Merah), stir-fry water spinach with shrimp paste (Belacan Kangkung), North Malaysian-style stir-fry egg noodles, and more. I also learned how to recognise spices, to chop, slice, steam and grind them in mortar and pestle. For me, Malaysian food is not one particular type of food but a rich culinary diversity that is found through its multi-ethnic population of Malay, Chinese, Indian, Eurasian, the indigenous people of Borneo and Peranakan (Chinese-Malay). Eating out is part of our lifestyle. Street food and hawkers' stalls can easily be found at any corners, and during the four years that I later spent in Kuala Lumpur working as a software engineer, I discovered other cuisines such as Japanese, Korean, Italian, and Mexican. French food, however, was a mystery to me.

Then one hot humid day in Kuala Lumpur I decided to leave my job to travel and work around Europe. Some months later I was in London and there, at a soirée one chilly summer's evening, I met someone. 'Bonsoir, my name is Arnaud,' he introduced himself. That evening my life with a Frenchman began and I started on my journey getting to know a new country, culture, and cuisine.

As Arnaud and I both have a common interest in food, much of the time was spent in the kitchen, introducing each other to food from our own countries. My first impression of French food was that it looked very filling. All that milk, cream and cheese! And I discovered ingredients that I had never seen before, such as snails. Until I met Arnaud I would never had thought that people served these creatures on a plate!

It was an interesting learning curve. Once Arnaud returned to London after a long weekend in France. He had been home just a few minutes when I started to smell something unpleasant, the stench growing stronger by the second. 'Was it his smelly socks after a long journey?' I wondered, but was too embarrassed to ask, especially as he didn't appear to smell anything



Leemei on the seafood trail on l'île de Ré

untoward himself. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. 'Have you been wearing the same socks since you left for France?' I asked. He paused for a few seconds, then turned and reached for something in his suitcase. 'I think you mean the pont-l'évêque?' Even today this memory brings a smile to my face.

Since that hilarious incident I have learnt a lot about French cheeses. I know now that pont-l'évêque is an uncooked and unpreserved cow's milk cheese produced in Normandy, and it along with Camembert, Livarot are among my favourites. The stinkier, the better!

Once I was a spectator at the famous '24 Heures du Mans'. At dinner that night, a platter of charcuterie was placed in front of me. I was clueless as to what everything was until Arnaud explained. On my plate were *pâtés aux figues*, *saucisson à l'ail*, *saucisson sec*, *andouille*, *jambonneau*, *pâté de campagne*, *rillions* and *rillettes*.

I immediately loved the texture and the flavour of *jambonneau* and today eat it either on its own or on a slice of good

baguette. *Pâtes* of any kind now come second on my list. *Andouille* is probably a strikethrough though. The texture of intestines doesn't quite appeal to me and it's kind of dense and dry.

After I first ate snails, Arnaud laughed asked whether frog legs were next. He didn't know that when I was a child my dad took us out for dinner at a restaurant that served lip-smacking Kung-Pao frog legs (stir-fry frog legs with ginger, chili and cashew nuts). It made me realise that there were similarities between the French and myself. Not just frog legs, the French eat all parts of the pig and so do the Chinese in Malaysia. These kinds of shared foods have helped bring me closer to French culture.

When I first met Arnaud's family and friends, I was speechless and lost. It was difficult for me to express myself and I felt alienated but I so much wanted to close the gap. Food came to my rescue.

Arnaud's mom has always been my best role model. Her impeccable skills inspire me, and I love her homey cooking! Food has given us a good base with

which to connect with each other and we both like to write and cook a special menu when we visit each other.

The first recipe she taught me was *petit pot de crème*. I quickly fell in love with its melt-in-the-mouth taste. I never thought such simple ingredients could have such an impact on the palate. I have since created a version of my own – pandan flavoured *petits pots de crème* served with palm sugar syrup. It has a different colour and a sweeter, exotic flavour.

Chinese-style *en papillote* was born as a result of east meets west. Arnaud was trying to impress me with his cooking skills when he made the French dish. He used salmon with a flavoured *Île de Ré* sea salt called 'special poissons', slices of lemon, a squeeze of lemon juice, drizzles of extra virgin olive oil, sweet cherry tomatoes, a few sprigs of thymes, and slices of onion. One day I decided to make *papillote*, which is like steaming in my culture, the Chinese way. And if I say so myself, created another delicious dish! Read Leemei's blog and see more recipes at: www.mycookinghut.com

Pandan Flavoured Petits Pots de Crème with Palm Sugar Syrup

SERVES 4

400ml milk
1 egg
3 egg yolks
60g sugar
2 pandan leaves, washed, dried and tied into a knot (optional)
1/2 tsp pandan paste/essence
4 tbsp palm sugar (chopped)
1 tbsp water



Pour the milk into a saucepan and add the pandan leaves. Bring the milk to the boil, then remove from the heat. Meanwhile, preheat the oven to 150°C. Mix the egg yolks, egg and sugar. Then add the pandan paste and mix. Strain the milk over the egg mixture and stir in well.

Ladle the mix into four ramekins or recycled yoghurt pots and place in a deep roasting tin or dish. Pour hot water into the tin until it reaches

halfway up the side of the ramekins. Place in the oven and bake for about 25 minutes or until firm to touch. Leave on wire rack to cool then chill in the fridge. For the syrup, melt the palm sugar in a saucepan. When almost melted add one tablespoon of water, then set aside to cool. Pour about one tablespoon of palm sugar syrup on top of each pot of crème when ready to serve.

Chinese-Style Cod en Papillote

SERVES 4

4 thick cod fillets
4 chestnut mushrooms, sliced
16 cherry tomatoes, halved
2 sprigs spring onion, julienned
1/2cm thick piece of ginger, peeled and julienned
2 cloves garlic, chopped
1 1/2 tsp oyster sauce
1 tbsp soya sauce
1 tbsp sesame oil
1 tbsp water
White pepper
2 tbsp vegetable oil
Greaseproof paper



Clean the cod fillets and dry with kitchen towel. Preheat the oven to 180°C. Meanwhile, put each piece of cod on a large square of greaseproof paper. Arrange the mushrooms, tomatoes, spring onions, and ginger over each piece. Mix the oyster sauce, soya sauce, sesame oil, water and white pepper. Drizzle the sauce equally over each piece of cod. Seal the fish by folding together the edges of the greaseproof paper. Place the packets in a baking dish, and cook in the oven for about 15 minutes depending on the thickness of the cod. While the fish is cooking, heat a pan with the vegetable oil. Add the chopped garlic and cook on a low heat until the garlic starts to brown. Remove from the heat, set aside and keep warm until needed. Drizzle the warm fried garlic and its infused oil over each piece of cod before serving.

GLOSSARY

Pandan leaves are long, narrow and dark green, and are used as a flavouring for rice and desserts in Malaysian cooking. Palm sugar is made by boiling down the sap of palm trees and is toffee-brown in colour. Most large towns will have an Asian grocery store or see www.asiamarche.fr

Fork to Fork

Eating fresh vegetables from your own garden is one of the great culinary delights, whether you live in a town or the countryside. Every month keen potager and gardener TREVOR BRIDGE suggests a vegetable to plant, plus one to harvest as well as a delicious dish to make with your just-plucked produce

MARCH

'Both the vegetable garden and the vegetable gardener stir out of their winter hibernation this month,' says Trevor. 'It's the start of the growing season and things really get going.'

SOW: Tomato (tomate)

It's a wonderful experience to savour a sweet, sun-warmed tomato picked straight from the plant on a summer's day. There's a wide range of varieties available including the 'normal' spherical tomato; cherry, the small version; beefsteak, a larger variety that takes longer to mature; plum, the firm oval ones found in Italian canned tomatoes which bottle and freeze well; marmande, a large very tasty irregular shaped tomato; and oxheart, cone-shaped, firm fleshed with good flavour. Older varieties or heirloom varieties are becoming popular now. Their flavour is quite different to the modern varieties, from those more strongly flavoured to milder as well as more tart. In France these are often labelled *légumes de tradition*.



Now is the time to sow tomatoes from seed, for germinating on a windowsill or in a propagator in the greenhouse. The same method applies to chillies, peppers, aubergines and cucumbers. Fill some small plant pots with peat-free compost, water them, then carefully place five seeds evenly in each pot. Sprinkle a thin, even layer of fine compost over the seeds, making sure they're not disturbed. Cover with cling film – this creates a

mini-propagator – then place the pot in a saucer of water on a window sill with lots of sunshine so the seedlings don't become too leggy. If you are sowing a lot of seeds a purpose made propagator is easier, and the humidity also helps the seedlings discard the seed shells (husks). If a husk stays stuck to the plant so stopping the leaves from opening, gently wet the shell with a blob of water and hopefully the leaves will open and the shell drop off. It's best not to pull it off.

Keep the room warm (around 21-25°C). When the true leaves are well established, after about seven weeks, remove the plants from the pot, gently tease each one apart, then transplant them into individual pots with the cotyledons (seed leaves) just above the soil level. Use a pencil to form the hole so that you don't damage the roots. Firm the compost around the plants then water them in. If the weather is warm enough they can be placed outside in the sun, but they must be brought indoors until all danger of frost has passed. Traditionally, the French say there is a possibility of sub-zero temperatures until after the Frost Saints days (11, 12 and 13 May) In late May

plant them out in a sheltered position with full sun. Expect to harvest them from July through to the first frosts of autumn.

HARVEST: Perpetual spinach (bette, blette or poirée blanche)

For those of you who read my article in August on sowing and growing perpetual spinach, you could now be still harvesting a succulent green crop when there is little else in the vegetable garden. You can do several sowings through the year – under cloches in February/March for a late spring crop and in April for summer, autumn and winter cropping. It's a cut and come again plant that produces tender green leaves. Harvest it by snapping off a few outer leaves at ground level from different plants, rather than completely stripping one plant. If there are too many leaves ready pick them anyway as this encourages a steady supply of young, green, gently flavoured leaves. Give away any surplus leaves (our hens love them), or wash and dry them for the freezer.

Oeufs à la florentine

A delicious egg and spinach dish topped with Mornay sauce. Hollandaise and

Béchamel sauce can also be used.

SERVES 4

8 free range eggs
1 kg perpetual spinach, washed and shredded
50cl milk
60g butter
60g flour
2 tbs crème fraîche
30g Gruyère cheese, grated
Pinch of nutmeg
Salt & pepper to taste

Poach the eggs in boiling water for six minutes then plunge them into cold water. Make the sauce by warming the milk and setting aside. Melt the butter in a pan. Stir in the flour slowly over a low heat and cook for about two minutes. Stir in the warm milk and whip it until it thickens. Remove from the heat and stir in the crème fraîche, Gruyère, salt, pepper and nutmeg. Place the spinach into the bottom of a gratin dish. Place the eggs on top of the spinach then pour the sauce over. Place under a heated grill and cook until it's bubbling and the surface has browned.