

LIFE & TIMES FAMILY

From mum's helper to kitchen whiz

British-based author and food blogger Leemei Tan reminisces about her culinary journey to **Intan Maizura Ahmad Kamal**



Leemei and her mum.

It was the childhood years spent in the kitchen as "mum's little helper" that formed Kedah-born author Leemei Tan's love for cooking and creating new dishes. The British-based author's vibrant culinary tome, *Lemongrass And Ginger*, containing a wonderful collection of traditional Asian recipes with a modern twist, is testament to her culinary journey and skills honed over the years.

From mouth-watering dumplings to sushi, crisp tempura to rich creamy curries, the book makes for a wonderful kitchen companion, whether you're a seasoned cook or a novice to cookery. There are recipes from all over Asia — from Japan to Korea, China, the Philippines and Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, Thailand, Cambodia and Vietnam, and India and Sri Lanka.

The kitchen, confides Leemei, who's also behind the popular food blog, My Cooking Hut, was her "first school" — the place where she learnt about different fresh roots, spices and other important ingredients in an Asian kitchen.

"Mum got me to help with the chopping, grinding, pounding and slicing. I observed keenly when mum gutted the fish and prepared fresh poultry before cooking. These experiences definitely formed my appreciation of fresh produce and love of experimentation. s."

Food, she shares, was an important part of her upbringing. "It wasn't until a few years later that I realised

just how priceless the time was."

Despite being a willing little helper, Leemei recalls that there were also times when she would moan about being given chores that were predominantly related to food preparation. "I wanted to start cooking a dish," she says. "But mum would always say, 'You have plenty to learn before I let you handle the wok!' And of course, I'd sulk, without realising that she wanted me to have a solid base in cooking. Back then, I could only observe how to do proper stir-frying, braising and steaming."

ture," confides Leemei. "I had one hand clinging onto my small straw bag; the other, onto mum's hand. I was mesmerised by the sights, sounds and smells around me. There were traders and farmers vying for each customer's business; displays of fresh fruits and vegetables; and massive boxes of crushed ice covering fresh seafood and fish shipped in daily from the two main shipping ports — Kuala Perlis and Kuala Kedah. It was captivating."

FORMATIVE YEARS

It was during her college years in Kuala Lumpur that Leemei really embraced the "eating-out" lifestyle. There were street food hawkers almost at every corner and it didn't take her long to get enthusiastic about the food scene, remembers Leemei.

"Along with eating street food, I also ate regularly at restaurants. But it was always home-cooking that I found most special. I had a wonderful landlady who was a great cook and she often spoiled me with her home cooking."

From Kuala Lumpur, Leemei moved to Perth, Australia, for two years for her university degree. Leaving her family and friends was tough, she recalls, but the thrill of a new adventure quietened the murmurs of worry.

"This period turned out to be one of the important milestones in my life — it was also a time where my cooking skills were put to the test."

She ended up sharing a house with three friends. "There was Peh-Ling, who was not confident in her cooking skills so was put in charge of chopping the vegetables. Then, there was Huey-Mein, who cooked a little but everything looked dark and tasted sweet because of her fondness for dark and sweet soy sauce. Finally, there was Cathy, who had a lot more

FOOD IN THE FAMILY

Growing up, Leemei, who is also a food stylist and photographer, had plenty of opportunities to sample a diverse range of food. Her parents encouraged their daughter and her two siblings to be bold and adventurous in their food choices.

"I grew up in a town where the street was lined on both sides with a collection of shops and homes, and this is where we lived. Dad ran his retail business downstairs, and we lived upstairs," recalls Leemei.

They had a large backyard where her mum grew chilli bushes, pandan plants as well as mango, papaya and calamansi trees. They even raised free-range chicken.

"Mum was particular about serving fresh, healthy and scrumptious meals to her family," says Leemei. "Each day, once the kids had left for school, she'd head to the nearby markets to look for the freshest ingredients that she could use for the evening's dinner."

Leemei recalls that she had always yearned to accompany her mother on her many sojourns to the market and was terribly excited when, after what seemed like years of waiting, she finally got the opportunity.

"My first outing was a real adven-

experience in the kitchen. So it was no surprise that it was Cathy and I that ended up doing the bulk of the cooking."

As was the norm in her parent's house, the girls would sit together over a bowl of fluffy white rice, which they would eat with different meat, fish and vegetable dishes presented in the centre of the table. "It was our home away from home," says Leemei. "During those few years, cooking without any guidance from mum, I learnt to improvise. This made me a keener and more confident cook."

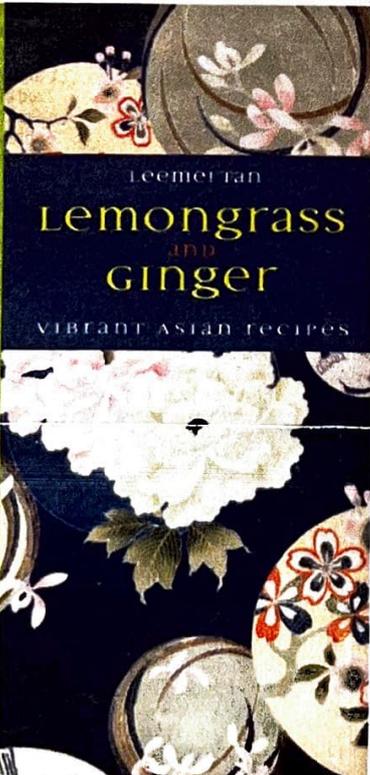
THE FOOD JOURNEY CONTINUES

After Perth, it was back to KL. But it wasn't long before Leemei had itchy feet again. About seven years ago, she decided to pursue her dream of travelling and experiencing the world. She headed to London (where she remains based today).

"My first year in London flew by and I cooked more than I used to back home," confides Leemei. "And every time I called mum across the miles, there'd always be a discus-

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sion on food of some kind. There'd be questions like, 'How do you...?' to '...Do you remember that dish you made...?' and so on. It was during this year that I realised just how much I had taken for granted during the cooking sessions in my parents' kitchen."

The next stage of Leemel's food journey started when she met her (now) French fiancée, Arnaud, during her second year in London. He also shared her passion for food and travelling. "We made many trips to France," shares Leemel. "And it was through the many visits to the country that I was gradually introduced to a different style of cooking from the many different regions of France, and many new and wonderful ingredients."

Arnaud's mother, Nelly, says Leemel, also loved to cook and enjoyed good food. Just like the author, Nelly, too found cooking relaxing and therapeutic. "When I first met Nelly, I didn't speak French, and she didn't speak a word of Mandarin or English. It was food that helped us

to connect with each other."

Nelly's impeccable skills, adds Leemel, inspired her. "I loved her home cooking. It was meeting Arnaud and subsequently, Nelly that got me wondering whether working with food was really my destiny."

It was the travels through the different regions in France and other countries with Arnaud, the experiences they shared of the wonderful diversity of culture and styles of cooking that eventually influenced Leemel's own cooking. "Each place I visited I'd come away with a handful of recipes and a new appreciation of what authentic cooking meant. I was inspired to learn new cooking techniques and to develop my cooking style."

The most memorable dish she has ever eaten?

"Something that's prepared home-style — simply presented and yet bursting with flavour. And when I get home and recreate these dishes in my own kitchen, I derive great satisfaction from this approach."

PRESERVING AUTHENTICITY

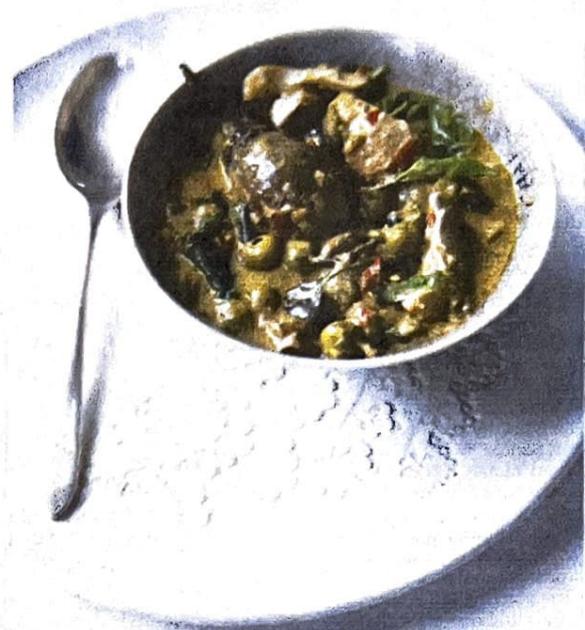
All the travelling she has done has given Leemel a greater appreciation of local foods and a country's culture. "I've enjoyed many special experiences, and spent time really talking with local people to understand their culture, which especially in Asian countries, has often evolved through food and, in particular, spice trading," she says.

These conversations and observations have made her realise just how important, if not essential, it is to "... preserve the authenticity of recipes however much you adapt and modernise them," shares Leemel.

It was this realisation that was partly responsible for driving her to start her own food and travel blog, MyCookingHut, in 2007. "I wanted to do my bit to spread the love of food, and its heritage, to other people around the world."

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Follow Leemel at her blog <http://mycookinghut.com>



THAI GREEN CHICKEN CURRY

Serves 4

Preparation time 30 minutes

Cooking time 40 minutes

Ingredients

- 500g chicken drumsticks or skinless chicken thighs
- 2 tsp sunflower oil
- 1 recipe quantity Thai green curry spice paste
- 3 kaffir lime leaves
- 200ml thick coconut milk
- 100g pea aubergines
- 6 apple aubergines, cut in half
- 2 tbsp fish sauce
- 50g Thai basil leaves

To serve with boiled long grain rice

Method

1. If using chicken drumsticks, rinse them under running cold water and pat dry with kitchen paper. Remove the skin and then, using a sharp cleaver, cut each drumstick into two pieces through the bone. Remove the knuckles with a pair of kitchen scissors.
2. Heat the oil in a large saucepan over a medium-high heat. Add the spice paste and cook gently, stirring occasionally for 10-15 minutes, until fragrant and the oil starts to rise to the surface. Add the kaffir lime leaves and chicken pieces and toss the chicken until well coated with the paste, then cook, stirring occasionally for 5-6 minutes until starting to turn golden brown.
3. Add the coconut milk to the pan and bring to the boil, then add the pea and apple aubergines and fish sauce. Reduce

the heat to low and simmer for 20-25 minutes until the sauce starts to thicken, the chicken is cooked through and the aubergines are soft. Carefully scoop off any oil as it forms on the surface. Stir in the Thai basil and serve warm with boiled rice.

THAI GREEN CURRY SPICE PASTE

- 7 green chillies, deseeded and roughly chopped
- 2 red bird's eye chillies, deseeded and roughly chopped
- 5 shallots, roughly chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, roughly chopped
- 3cm piece of galangal, peeled and roughly chopped
- 3 kaffir lime leaves, roughly chopped
- 1 tsp roasted shrimp paste (see below)
- 3 coriander roots with stalks and leaves, roughly chopped
- 5mm piece of fresh turmeric, peeled and roughly chopped (or quarter tsp ground turmeric)

Method

Put all the ingredients, except the ground turmeric, if using, in a food processor and blend to a smooth paste. Add the ground turmeric and mix well.

ROASTED SHRIMP PASTE

Put the recipe quantity of shrimp paste in the middle of a square piece of foil and break it into pieces with a spoon. Fold the edges to form a small package and roast in a preheated oven at 200°C/Gas 6 for about five minutes. Remove and leave to one side to cool. The roasted shrimp will smell aromatic and be a darker-coloured dry powder.