

from BLOG to BOOK



From blogging to photography and food styling, and now, cookbook author, Leemei Tan shares her journey and tips with Flavours.

TEXT julie wong • RECIPES leemei tan



Born and raised in Malaysia, Leemei studied in Australia before deciding to live and travel in Europe, and finally setting up base in London. She was back in Malaysia recently, to exchange vows with her French beau on the beach in Langkawi! (Pictured above.)

Blogging since 2007, Leemei has taken MyCookingHut, a blog started on the simple wish to share her love for cooking with others, to heights she has not imagined. Her virtual life has led her along a path that now looks like a career. The blog has also led the world to her front door. She has been interviewed by *The New York Times* and was featured in *Grazia* magazine as one of the best female food bloggers in the world.

The largely self-taught photographer and food stylist is now sought after for freelance jobs. Her first cookbook, *Lemongrass and Ginger: Vibrant Asian Recipes* has been published in April 2012.

How did this book come about?

I have always wanted to author a cookbook. At the end of 2010, I wrote a Malaysian cookbook proposal and sent it to major publishers in the UK. Duncan Baird Publishers responded by asking if I was interested to author an Asian cookbook instead, to target a wider audience. I couldn't be more happy!

Are you involved in the food styling or photography for the book?

Though I have accepted the offer solely as author, being a food stylist and photographer, I got greatly involved in giving advice and discussions about photography angles – whether a dish should be shot from overhead, front or side. We also discussed the ingredients of the dish to make sure that all the captured dishes clearly display the main ingredients used in the recipes. The image for each opening chapter has been carefully considered and

suggested to the team to make sure it reflects the country of each chapter.

Tell us how you started in photography.

I was a member of a photography club when I was younger but took it up more seriously a few years ago when I started food blogging. I am a self-taught photographer and stylist, and learn by reading resources on the Internet and books. Of course, it involves a lot of practice too. Every project is a learning curve and you have to take it seriously to be even better.

What cameras do you own and which ones are you using for food photography, travel, etc.

I own a Nikon D800 and Fuji X100. I use the Nikon D800 for food photography and the lightweight Fuji for travels and it is great for portrait and food photography, too. I love its retro look!

What sort of lenses and lighting do you use for food photography?

I own a 50mm F1.4, an 18-200mm F3.5-5.6 and a 24-70mm F2.8. For food photography, I mainly use 50mm F1.4 and 24-70mm F2.8 lenses. I mostly shoot with natural lighting; when the weather doesn't permit, I use soft boxes that provide a constant fluorescent lighting.

How would you describe your food styling style?

Clean, simple, elegant and modern. My motto: less is more.

How did you start in food styling?

When I started food photography, I realized that to move people to try out a recipe, the photo has to look really good and fresh as many people are visually influenced. That is when food styling comes into the picture. Well-thought out, and well-defined styling is so important to making the food look 'smart' and yummy to eat!

Explain your food styling process from start to finish.

The first thing is to establish the type of cuisine a recipe belongs to. Then I will read the recipe to identify the main ingredients and see if any garnishes are used. From there, I will decide either to go with classic/ traditional or modern styling. At this stage, I usually visualise the colour scheme, ambience, shooting angle, background, and props.

To style a dish according to the shooting angle is really important – a dish that is styled for an overhead shot may not be suitable or look nice for a front angle shot.

Once I have decided on the style, I check the suitability by gathering all the props and setting up the scene/background. Then, I will decide on lighting and composition – placement of plate/bowl, cutlery, other props, and ecetera. I will take sample shots of the set-up and then visualise the set-up with the cooked dish.

The direction of light also plays a very important part, as it affects the overall look and feel. So, this is what I normally decide on after I have set up the scene. At this stage, I will see if the lighting needs to be diffused further or highlights need to be added on certain parts of the dish. Also, I have to decide on whether the lighting should come from the left to the right, vice versa, or whether it should be backlit.

Sometimes, tweaks and changes are required during the shooting session. However, they are mainly minimal, such as omitting some props, changing the tableware, adding cutlery by the side, etc.

I always have a small tray that contains chopsticks, water spritzers, kitchen paper, bamboo sticks, a pair of scissors, and squeeze bottles, nearby when I style a dish. These tools help me to tweak the dish to make it look clean, fresh and nice.

What is the single most useful trick that you have learned in food photography/styling?

Familiarise yourself with the available natural light at home – you'd be surprised that sometimes the most unexpected spot in your home might give you the best lighting for food photography. Go for simplicity when styling food as it gives the best visual effect and draws attention to the food itself; you don't want to distract people's attention with too many props. I also like to spray water or olive oil on the main ingredients to make them look even more delectable.

Do you consider that you now have a career in food photography/styling?

I am doing both on a freelance basis now and would like to go full time.

What has blogging done for you?

It connects me to like-minded people and those in the food industry, and gave me my first steps in this field. It also opened the door for my first cookbook to be published. It lead magazines to me. So, it has given me great opportunities. Besides, blogging is the best way to record recipes – those that have been passed down from my family, and recipes that I have developed or recreated.

How has blogging changed your life?

Through blogging, I discovered my talents in writing and photography.

How much time do you spend blogging?

About twice a week – I am careful to strike a balance between blogging and spending quality time with loved ones.

Where do you hope to go from here?

A second cookbook and perhaps a cooking show too! ■

steamed rice cakes

(makes 12)

Steamed rice cakes, known as *puto*, are a traditional Filipino dessert. The most popular natural colouring for these is extract of pandan leaves, which is usually used for its bright green colour and its sweet fragrance. However, I've used green tea powder because it is much easier to prepare. Usually eaten as an afternoon snack with a cup of tea or coffee, it is also often served during breakfast.

300g rice flour
150g self-raising flour
1 tablespoon baking powder
1 teaspoon instant yeast powder
190g caster sugar
a pinch of sea salt
400ml coconut milk
1 1/2 teaspoon green tea powder, for colouring
2 tablespoons freshly grated coconut or desiccated coconut, to serve
grated palm sugar or soft light brown sugar, to serve (optional)

Combine the rice flour, self-raising flour, baking powder, instant yeast powder, sugar and salt in a mixing bowl. Add the coconut milk and 3 tablespoons water and stir until the sugar is dissolved. Pour half of the mixture into a separate bowl, add the green tea powder to it and mix well. Leave both the green and white mixture to stand at room temperature for 30 minutes.

Divide the white mixture into six individual muffin moulds or 100ml ramekins. Repeat with the green mixture to give a total of 12 rice cakes.

Arrange the moulds in a bamboo or electric steamer and steam for 15 minutes, or until the cakes are nicely risen. Depending on the size of the steamer, you may need to cook the rice cakes in batches. Serve hot or cold with the coconut scattered over and a sprinkling of sugar, if you like.



sweet peanut & sesame balls (makes 20-22)

These little gems are generously coated with sesame seeds and have a gorgeous crispy base. The texture of the pastry is slightly chewy and the filling is smooth, with crunchy bits from the peanuts. A classic sweet that is still a family favourite.

70g caster sugar
320g glutinous rice flour, plus extra for dusting
100g raw skinless peanuts
80g granulated sugar
60g sesame seeds
500ml sunflower oil, for deep-frying

Dissolve sugar in 250ml water, stirring. Put the rice flour into a large mixing bowl and make a well in the centre. Slowly pour in the sugared water and combine with the flour to form a soft dough. Turn the dough out onto a lightly floured surface, roll it into a cylinder and divide into 20–22 equal portions.

Heat a frying pan over a medium-high heat, then add the peanuts and dry-roast until fragrant and starting to brown. Remove from heat and roughly grind in a food processor – you want a fine powder with some chunky bits. Tip the ground peanuts into a bowl and add the granulated sugar, 2 tablespoons of oil and 3 tablespoons water. Stir into a rough paste and set aside.

Fill a small bowl with water and pour the sesame seeds onto a small plate. Take a portion of the dough, shape it into a ball and then press into

a 8cm disc. Flatten the edges so the centre of the disc is slightly thicker. Spoon 1 to 2 heaped teaspoons of the peanut paste into the centre of the pastry, gather up the edges and shape into a ball. Repeat for the remaining peanut balls, then dip each ball in the water and coat with the sesame seeds.

Heat the oil in a deep, heavy-based saucepan to 170°C, or until a small piece of bread turns brown in 20 seconds. Slide 3 to 4 sesame balls into the oil and fry for 3 to 4 minutes until golden brown. Make sure the oil doesn't get too hot so the sesame seeds don't burn and use a slotted spoon to push the balls down into the oil so they cook evenly. Using the slotted spoon, remove the sesame balls from the oil and drain on kitchen paper. Repeat until all the balls are cooked. Serve hot or cold.

soy & mirin tuna on soba noodles

Soba means 'buckwheat' in Japanese, and there are two types of *soba* noodles – the normal dark brown noodle with the natural colour of buckwheat and the green-coloured 'green tea' *soba*. You can use either, but the green tea version looks very pretty and gives a fresher, lighter taste to the dish. (4 servings)

400g skinless tuna	discarding the pulp
125ml shoyu	350g cooked soba
100ml mirin	noodles
1 tablespoon granulated sugar	1 teaspoon sunflower oil
1cm piece of ginger, peeled, grated, and juice squeezed,	1 tablespoon sesame seeds, toasted
	finely chopped spring onion, to serve

Bring a saucepan of water to boil, then poach the tuna loin for 25 to 30 seconds. Remove the tuna, pat dry and transfer to a plate to cool for about 5 minutes.

Meanwhile, mix the shoyu, mirin, sugar and ginger juice in a large bowl. Add the seared tuna and thoroughly coat with the marinade. Cover with cling film and leave to marinate in the fridge for 30 minutes.

Remove the tuna from the marinade and strain the marinade into a small saucepan. Simmer the marinade over medium heat for 2 to 3 minutes until slightly thickened. Remove from heat and keep warm.

Heat the oil in a large frying pan over high heat, and sear the tuna for 1 to 2 minutes on each side. The outer layer should be cooked and golden brown but the inside should remain raw. Transfer the tuna to a chopping board, angle a sharp knife at 45° to the surface and slice against the grain into 5mm strips.

While the tuna is searing, plunge cooked soba noodles into hot water for a few seconds to heat through. Drain and divide the noodles into deep soup bowls, then top with the tuna. Drizzle the reduced marinade and sunflower oil over the tuna and sprinkle with toasted sesame seeds and spring onion. Serve hot or cold.



korean spicy seafood noodle soup (4–6 servings)

500g mussels, scrubbed and debearded

1 tablespoon sunflower oil
1 onion, sliced
3 garlic cloves, finely chopped
1cm piece of ginger, peeled and finely chopped
4 dried shiitake mushrooms, soaked, drained, and cut into thin strips
1 tablespoon Korean red pepper powder or cayenne pepper
1 litre chicken stock
1/4 Chinese cabbage, cut into bite-sized pieces
1 tablespoon light soy sauce
1 tablespoon chilli oil
300g large king prawns, peeled, deveined, with the tails left on
400g squid, scored with a crisscross pattern and cut into bite-sized pieces

500g cooked fresh fine egg noodles (or 350g dried fine egg noodles, cooked according to packet instructions)

15g dried wakame, soaked in warm water for 10 minutes, rinsed and drained

2 spring onions, finely chopped
1 tablespoon sesame seeds, toasted

Tap any mussels that are only partly opened and discard any that don't shut. Put the mussels in a saucepan over high heat and steam for 3 to 4 minutes, or until the shells open. Discard any that don't open fully. There is no need to add any additional liquid to the pan, as the mussels will release their own liquid to steam in. Remove the mussels from their shells and set aside.

Heat the sunflower oil in a large saucepan over medium-high heat. Add onion and cook for 2–3 minutes until soft, then add the garlic and ginger and cook for 2 minutes, or until fragrant. Add the shiitake mushrooms and Korean red pepper powder and cook, stirring, for 1 minute.

Add chicken stock and bring to boil. Add the Chinese cabbage and cook for 3 to 4 minutes until tender. Add the soy sauce and chilli oil and then add the prawns and squid. Bring to the boil for a few seconds, then lower heat, cover, and simmer for 5 to 6 minutes, or until the prawns turn pink and are cooked through and the squid is tender. Three minutes before the end of cooking, add the mussels to heat through.

Divide the hot, cooked noodles into deep soup bowls, then spoon the prawns, squid, cabbage and mussels into the bowls. Add the wakame and spring onions to the bowls. Bring the soup to a vigorous boil, then ladle into the bowls. Sprinkle over the toasted sesame seeds and serve immediately.

