

HOME AND AWAY

TUCKED AWAY IN A VILLAGE IN SUNGEI PENCHALA, KUALA LUMPUR, BAYAN INDAH IS A DELIGHTFUL SURPRISE. THE DOUBLE-STOREY BUNGALOW BELONGING TO FOOD WRITER-CHEF ROHANI JELANI IS NOW A HOMESTAY. SALEHA ALI, WHO CHECKED IT OUT, FEELS LIKE CHECKING IN...

The spanking new highways that go by fancy names like the NKVE and Penchala Link have made Sungei Penchala less intimidating and should I say, totally accessible.

Why, only a decade or so ago, it used to be the locale made infamous by a religious cult and was reachable only if you had the patience to chug through a long and winding road. Even then, you would have to keep an eye on the milestones because you didn't want to unwittingly end up at the Pahang border or something.

These days, you reach the area as soon as Kuala Lumpur's Taman Tun Dr Ismail ends. Still, to arrive at Bayan Indah, the home of food writer-chef Rohani Jelani, you might need to have a map in hand or a road-savvy driver by your side.

One of Sungei Penchala's landmarks is a bright yellow mosque. You are to turn left, make a right turning slightly further ahead and look for Kampung Palimbayan Indah.

Getting some pointers here will be great as the drive in can be perplexing for a direction-challenged person but once you reach the grounds of the house, you'd relax instantly.



The calming entrance way to Bayan Indah



Long beans grow in abundance

The compound is lush with natural flora and fauna. A double-storey bungalow is nestled against the hillslope surrounded by tropical rainforest on the far end. A quick glance tells you that there are two natural spring water paths trickling between the thick vegetation on each side.

Nearing the house, you would have to stop short and admire the amazing array of edible plants not unlike celebrity chef Jamie Oliver's herb garden.

There are rows upon rows of basil, rosemary, lavender, pandan, mint and ulam raja to even pineapple growing lush and large here, certainly making it the proverbial Garden of Eden for aspiring chefs.



Greens - a sight to behold



Tables in carved dark wood and marble tops add an Oriental touch

You run up the stone staircase to an open dining area and what a pleasing picture you'd find. You could almost visualise a big happy family of 18 having elevenses at the rectangular marble table the colour of sand and also at two square tables made of dark wood.

There is a symbiotic flow of soothing colours from the pistachio green chairs at the big table and the rich limes of the Chinese style stools at the smaller tables. Set against the rich terracotta of the floor, the effect is all at once elegantly cosy.

A series of four huge paintings that hang on the wall reflect the understated chic of the whole place. The motifs are just light strokes of herb plants set against an expanse of white.

That the owner cooks is pretty obvious, nothing odd when you consider that Rohani, who graduated from the London Cordon Bleu, is the celebrated resident food writer behind the all-occasion recipes and such in the food pages of Her World magazine.



Lime green Chinese-style stools pep up the look



Siting area with Oriental details

The kitchen area adjoins the dining space and here, there seemed to be more than 10 ovens, I dare say, fitted all around. It is separated by a counter where Rohani would place her mouth-watering savoury or soufflé of the moment for guests.

The kitchen has ample work stations or islands where you could knead and roll out dough or pound belachan to glory. Quite the best yet is the pantry which houses all manner of cooking tools from mixing bowls to the plethora of utensils including spatulas and ladles, not to mention bottles of spices and a myriad other ingredients.

These things embody the very spirit of the lady of the house, who is indeed our answer to Martha Stewart. Bugged by requests from friends and readers, she has started giving cooking classes in 2001.

Since then, she has built an amazing repertoire of some over 60 classes, some of which go by whimsical themes like Currying Flavours, Easy Speedy Pasta, If The Choux Fits, Loafing Around and Parsley, Sage, Rosemary & Thyme.



The kitchen's well fitted out



The general quest sitting area upstairs has a tropical touch



The colour purple pops a surprise

“Based on bookings, I hold classes for half a day right here from 9.30am-1.30pm,” she says, adding it has indeed been a passion teaching locals the art of making Malaysian delights like nasi kerabu and ayam percik. Lately, she has also been getting requests from tourists interested in getting the hang of making Malaysian cuisine as well.

“They all got to know about this from the Internet, of course,” she says, as she led this writer up the solid stone staircase to view the rooms which she has recently decided to rent out as homestay or bed and breakfast.

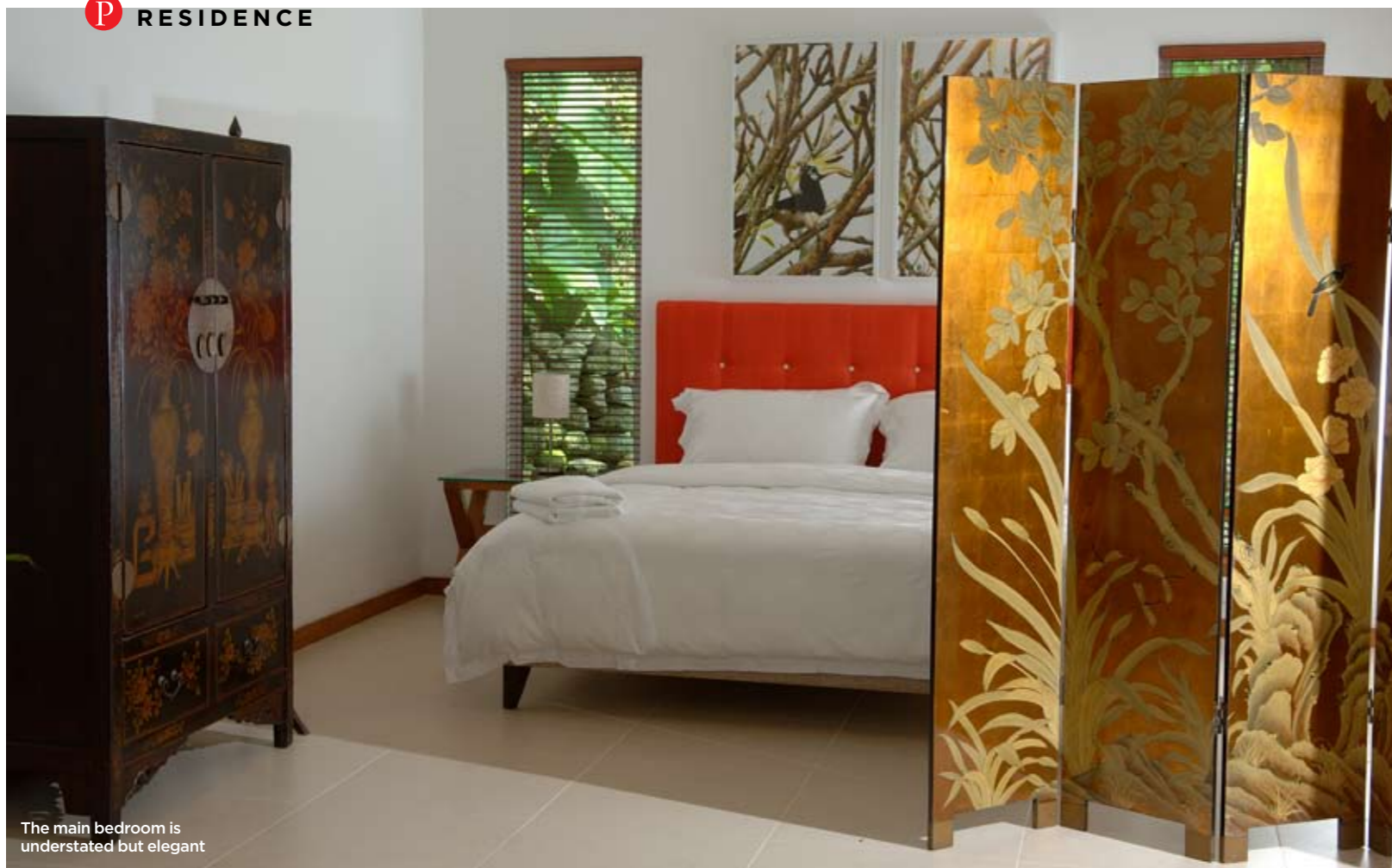
The Oriental details are also present here but adding on to that is a Zen-like feel which is perceivable almost immediately. Clutter is not part of the dynamics.

A purple sofa here, a lime green Ottoman there and glass paintings placed at strategic spots give the area its splashes of colour.

“I am not a carpet person as you may notice,” she says, bemused. “Well, I admit it does look a bit Spartan without rugs but this whole area can get humid, what with the trees around. You don’t want rugs that will get all musty.”

The understated tones extend to the bedrooms which comprise a master bedroom and three standard-sized rooms. The clean lines work positively here because in contrast, the ‘little surprises’ which Rohani has worked into the decor pops to the fore.

The main bedroom has the most arresting headboard of fire engine red and above, a minimalist Chinese painting of golden brown branches is set against the white wall. A Chinese-style cupboard stands on the side.



The main bedroom is understated but elegant

An eye-catching gold and light yellow Chinese lacquer screen stands between the bed and the door, creating a sense of modesty and privacy for the honeymooning couple.

"I saw the screen in a shop window and I liked it immediately," recalls Rohani. "I didn't have an idea where to put it then but I knew I would somehow find a way of using it. Since I am familiar with the price of artworks, I know I have gotten it for a steal."

The other bedrooms are characterised by the different shades of headboards with a ceiling-to-floor curtains which are in shades of lime green, burgundy and turquoise.

"Since this is basically a home, I don't have to standardise the look in each room," says Rohani, disclosing that she had gotten the beds custom-made with furnishings of her choosing.

"I sourced all the things in the house myself," she continues. "I wanted every room to have its own colour scheme but didn't want them to be too flashy. On one hand, I didn't want things to be too muted either!"

The bathrooms are not for the faint-hearted and this has nothing to do with the lovely slate and stone finishes. It is that you have a choice of not drawing the blinds if you want to admire the exotic tropical vegetation outside like the monkey palms and giant keladi leaves as you shower.

"Some people like to stick to a safe path with their décor. You can see that I like to have little surprises here and there," she says. "I must say I am very lucky though. I have a carpenter who customises things for me."

Rohani muses, "I am not trained to do interiors. That's why I feel that it has worked to my advantage as I kind of go with the flow. I go with my gut feeling."

"Basically, I was just going with what I liked but of course, it is a risk



A bedroom with a local flavour



Wide glass panels provide the 'outdoor' feel



Stylish and inviting

as your choices may not gel with what other people might like," she explains. "I am also a practical person, even though I'd like the place to look nice, I do think about it from the point of view of the user as well."

The mother of three has certainly come a long way from when she had first purchased the land in 1996. "I was living in a house in Damansara Utama prior to that and my garden used to be the size of this table!" she says with a chuckle. "I needed to take the children to the park for recreation and with my youngest son being asthmatic, we just had to look for a place which offers cleaner air."

As fate would have it, the land was up for sale. "Initially, it was like living in a forest reserve. There were about 10 durian trees. The garden was often soggy and swampy due to the presence of a natural spring that trickles down the slopes on both sides of the house."

The durian trees were precious commodities but later, some had to be felled for safety's sake, Rohani explains. The family stayed in a smaller house which they built first before the bigger abode was completed.

The family stayed there for a year. "It was a very stressful time," she remembers. "It seemed that I was looking for trouble, doing the place up! I have looked out the window once and cried! The garden was still a mess and the grass hadn't been planted. There were tree trunks everywhere! It was such a struggle."

She continues, "I would go to Sungei Buloh and fill up my van with plants but the vast land would just 'swallow' everything up afterwards. So I took the advice of good friends not to do the garden all at once as that would be too overwhelming."

"I would go to the nursery, get plants with big leaves and cheap ones at that as there is a lot of space I needed to cover! Even grass isn't cheap, you know. So I DIY-ed everything," she says with pride.

Fencing up the place initially was also a delicate matter as she had to be mindful about not offending the villagers. It would appear unfriendly putting walls up, she says. Gradually though, she tried

'cordoning' her land with chicken wire fencing which was later upgraded to proper walls.

Rohani started refurbishment works on the 10-year-old house in the middle of last year. She had then decided to open the place as a homestay and realised that every room upstairs should have an attached bathroom.

The kitchen had to be bigger too. "As you may know, my classes are hands-on, not mere demonstrations. At any one time, there would be about 12 people in the kitchen. The area had to be expanded."

With everything in place, naturally, Bayan Indah has become quite the retreat for all sorts from culinary aspirants and nature lovers to honeymooning couples. Even if it is an all-girl outing, it will be a great place to be.

Tucking into the most unique of cheese cakes, which had Japanese anise seeds in them, I was certain I'd come back someday for the complete experience, a weekend of great food, blissful sleep and admiring a monkey plant while taking a bath... ▣



Framed pictures in muted colours add to the restful ambience