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## Culinary charm

Written by Elaine Lim  
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Occasional cooks and professional chefs, foodies and gourmards, all clutching directions, have for years navigated the byzantine kampung roads leading to chef Rohani Jelani's home in Sungai Penchala, Selangor.

Their determination is rewarded with several hours of slicing, dicing and cooking, as the affable Rohani unlocks the secrets to the perfect ayam percik or pandan muffin. And after the last flame dies down, they sit down for lunch in convivial company on the verandah.



It's an experience to savour, for the house — named Malaysia's House of the Year 2008 by a local interior design magazine — and its grounds are as delectable as the meals turned out in the kitchen. The one-acre property sits at the foot of a hill and is thus blessed with a fabulous backdrop of green. Throw in a herb garden, a pond, the occasional visit by a bird, snake or monkey, and you've got a slice of paradise just minutes from civilisation.



Rohani, who has lived here since 1996, recognised its potential — visitors often commented on how they loved the modern, tropical-style house and its peaceful surroundings. With her three children away at college and the house now too big for her, she felt it was time to give it

a new purpose.

And that's how Rohani Jelani, chef/recipe consultant/food stylist, became owner-operator of the four-room Bayan Indah Culinary Resort.

"Well, I wouldn't do it if I didn't enjoy it and have a message to deliver," she says of this new addition to her portfolio. "And it is not really a serious resort — we use the word only because it is the closest fit.

"Bayan Indah is actually just a cool, fun place where people can learn and experience Malaysian cuisine, enjoy themselves in a modern Malaysian home and leave with fond memories. But that is quite a mouthful and the closest word we found was 'resort!'" she says over lemongrass tea and banana muffins in her elegant sitting room.

### Playing house

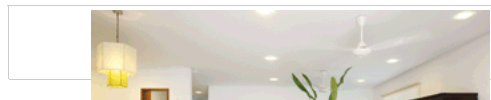
Over several months, with the help of architect Michael Quek and the house's original contractor Sakai, Rohani had a thoroughly enjoyable time remodelling the interior. The main layout of the house was left intact, save for the addition of a bathroom so all four rooms would have en suite bathrooms. A standalone building in the garden was turned into a seminar room.

New furniture was brought in to complement the pieces Rohani could not take with her to her new apartment — bookshelves that hold her collection of cookbooks and colonial-style armchairs, among them. The new furniture, featuring one-of-a-kind pieces that were specially commissioned, was made by a carpenter friend. Rohani says some of them, like the block of wood with a glass top, which is among her favourites, are rather quirky.



"The beds and sofas were custom-made for us in a special factory and the rest are antiques that we restored ourselves. They impart a sense of history and calm to the place and have a story to tell. Besides, I just think it's fun to mix old and new. I don't like being too predictable!"

Much like Rohani's cooking, the house is attractive yet unfussy. The neutral palette is accented by bold flourishes on



The patio upstairs is a nice spot for a cup of tea

headboards, curtains, cushion and sofa covers. The glass art and light fixtures by her friend, glass artist Wong Keng Fuan, and framed photographs of flora, fauna and Malaysian scenery by another friend Howard Tan, soften the harder lines. And for a final, natural flourish, the windows and doors open to gorgeous views of the garden.

When pondering upon the new venture, Rohani had considered the possibility of giving the home a Malaysian or kampung feel in keeping with Bayan Indah's rustic location. Taking a close friend's advice, she decided to be true to herself instead.



The living area upstairs features antiques as well as custom-made furniture

"So, that's what I did. I picked colours and items of furniture that I personally liked and learnt to trust my instincts... I'm also a terribly practical person. I don't favour decorative items that have no practical use and I don't go for showy, fussy styles.

"At the end of the day, this is, after all, still my home and I don't want to make it some kind of show house. Anyone coming to stay here comes as my personal guest and will be welcomed like a favourite old friend."

#### Kunyit, Selasih, Pandan and Kantan



Guest room - Selasih

Guests can stay in one of the four rooms, christened Kunyit, Selasih, Pandan and Kantan. The first three are smaller — they used to be her children's rooms. Kantan, the former master bedroom, is a beautiful suite with its own sitting room as well as a writing corner with views of the hillslope behind. Guests can indulge in a soak in the bathtub — with a little imagination and the help of an expansive window, you could almost believe you were in the Garden of Eden.

The daily rates ranging from RM450 to RM600 are inclusive of breakfast, which Rohani can tailor to your preference, all-day supply of tea/coffee, fresh fruit and home-made cookies. If your windows are open, you'll get free, tantalising smells from the kitchen too.



You won't want to leave after you've stayed at the 560 sq ft suite, Kantan. It's a well-appointed room with ensuite bath, a study area and a private garden



That's because the huge, open-concept kitchen at the lower level of the house is the heart of Bayan Indah. Rohani runs regular classes in the space, which accommodates 16 and has six ovens, 24 cooking hobs, four sinks and "plenty of pots and pans". Guests can enrol in the classes for a richer holiday



The newly renovated kitchen can accommodate 16 students

experience or let Rohani and her staff of four pamper them with their cooking.

"I wanted a kitchen that felt deliciously spacious, open, bright, airy and comfortable — my own space where I can enjoy creating recipes and cooking. And on days when there are no classes, I really do cook here — it's a lovely space to work in.

"I love that we have a great garden view, so I made sure the kitchen had a very 'open' design, so it almost feels like you are cooking in a tropical garden."

#### To market, to market

Now that Bayan Indah is operational, Rohani is exploring the best ways to market it to both locals and foreigners. Already advertised on her website are Wellness Weekends, which offer food, cooking classes, yoga and massage — perfect for a girls' weekend out or an anniversary celebration.



She is also working with establishments that organise niche travel, such as those for foodies or people looking for an unusual, memorable holiday.

The verandah located next to the kitchen is a fabulous place for enjoying a meal after a class, or just relaxing

No doubt, foodies will find her on the Internet (www.rohanijelani.com and now, www.bayanindah.com), as they have over the years. Her students have come from places as diverse as Japan, Seattle, New York, even Kalgoorlie in Australia.



Rohani's favourite spot in the house - an intimate dining area in the kitchen that overlooks the garden

In August, Rohani welcomed her first guests to Bayan Indah, a young couple from San Diego who had read about her on the Internet. Next was a family from the UK.

Feedback from these guests and those who follow will help Rohani fine-tune the services at Bayan Indah. One thing, though, is unlikely to change — guests will be treated like friends in this extraordinary resort.

"I want them to take away fond memories of a good time. And then more people will want to visit Malaysia when their friends hear about Bayan Indah. Or at least, that's what I hope."

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