

newstraitstimes

Life&Times

TRENDS: DIY way to tasty morsels

2010/02/02

P. SELVARANI

In anticipation of their inevitable craving for hawker fare, five overseas-bound teenagers decided to pick up some culinary skills from a renowned chef, writes P. SELVARANI.

YOU'RE thousands of kilometres from home, in a land where burgers, fish and chips and tacos abound. But you are dying for a plate of nasi lemak or mamak mee goreng and there are no Asian (read Malaysian or Indonesian) restaurants in sight.

What do you do? a) SOS mum for the recipe? b) Settle for a bowl of instant noodles? c) Crawl into bed, all cold and hungry? or d) Learn some basic hawker fare the next time you're home.

Five pre-university students did exactly that – picked the last option, that is – recently when they signed up for a basic cooking course under well-known chef and cookbook author Rohani Jelani at her culinary school Bayan Indah in Sungai Penchala.

For two days, Loy Guang Wei, Nurain Kamarulzaman, Carinna Stephens, Johari Imran Lok and Lynn Ng skinned, chopped, sliced and slaved over a hot stove to whip up nasi lemak, claypot chicken rice, fried rice, Cantonese yee mee and chicken curry, among others.

The cooking lessons will certainly come in handy as they are leaving the comforts of home or boarding school to fend for themselves abroad. "All along in boarding school, I was fed. It's time I learnt to feed myself as I will be living in an apartment when I start university in Melbourne soon," said 18-year-old Johari who had signed up for the course together with his cousin Carinna and girlfriend Lynn.

A self-confessed foodie who loves watching cooking shows, Johari is no stranger to the kitchen.

"But I have mostly been cooking stuff like burgers, steak or pasta. It's the first time I am trying to cook Asian food and it's not that difficult. I was initially scared of (using) the wok but Rohani taught us how to take control of it, and it's really quite easy," he added.

Carinna, 17, who is in her final year at The Geelong Church of England Grammar School in Australia, took up the course not just to acquire new cooking skills but to also clock in creativity hours for her International Baccalaureate Diploma. "Before this, I used to bake a bit ... though it was mostly the ready-mix sort. But learning the basics of cooking Asian food is not as challenging as I expected it to be. Rohani's step-by-step guide is pretty easy and it's a good skill to have because I enjoy cooking." Lynn, 18, who will be joining Johari at the University of Melbourne, hopes to save a little by cooking her own meals especially when she gets cravings for home-cooked or Malaysian hawker fare. "My mum taught me to cook some dishes so I can cook fried rice and stuff like that but here I have learnt to cook chicken curry, prawn sambal, sweet sour chicken and claypot chicken rice. Cooking Western food is easy but I have discovered that cooking Asian food is not that difficult either!" she added.

Nurain, 21, who plans to study medicine, signed up for Rohani's course on her mum's advice. "Since I will not be starting college until August, I decided to enrol for the course. Although I have helped mum in the kitchen before, I found the course really interesting because you learn the basics.

“Sometimes, mum takes shortcuts when she is cooking but here you learn everything from scratch... even the proper way to skin an onion. Rohani is very meticulous!” Guang Wei, 19, who is in her gap year before starting university in Sydney, added that they were even taught to cook rice the traditional way on a stove, instead of a rice cooker.

“We learnt to de-vein prawns but the most challenging part was learning to de-bone a chicken! I like cooking but I just don’t like the cleaning up!” she quipped.

The idea for a basic cooking course for students was borne out of an email Rohani received from her friend Faridah Stephens, who is Johari’s mum.

Rohani said she had contemplated holding such a course ever since her own son left to further his studies overseas, but never got down to it until she received Faridah’s email asking if she could conduct some cooking classes for Johari and his friends. “And I thought, why not? It’s good for young people leaving home to have some basic cooking skills, especially when they live abroad. We take it for granted here because it’s so easy to just go out and eat, and there is so much variety.

“But when you are far away from home and you miss home-cooked food and especially hawker food, what do you do? There’s only so much of burgers and tacos that you can eat,” she added.



Rohani’s cooking class in session

Faridah, 48, who accompanied her son on the second day of the course, said her son’s interest in cooking prompted her to request Rohani for the lessons.

“I know they can get most of these dishes in Australia but it’s easier to cook your own. So I thought why not let them learn to cook these dishes. Besides Rohani is a good teacher.” When her son left to study abroad, Rohani came up with her *Malaysian Hawker Favourites* cookbook to help him learn some simple hawker food.

“So, when Faridah came in with her request, I designed 12 simple recipes that young people can easily learn such as stir-fried vegetables, sesame oil and ginger chicken, sweet sour chicken, nasi lemak, chicken curry, sambal tumis, roast chicken and noodles.

“I even taught them how to cook rice on a stove because you can’t always get hold of a rice cooker when you are abroad. The recipes and steps are easy enough to follow. Once you try it, it’s quite easy.”