



For the love of cooking

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Whether you're a first-timer or a seasoned cook, Rohani Jelani's cooking class is right for everybody! Story and pictures by ANIS RAMLI

FOR students who trickle into Rohani Jelani's open-air kitchen, the laid-out aprons, chopping boards, knives and neatly-typed recipes on the individual workstations can present an intimidating challenge.

But it shouldn't, Rohani told a classroom of foodies during a day of hard-core cooking in her working kitchen in Sungai Penchala, KL. Cooking is not as difficult as you think, she began. "Much of cooking is actually problem-solving - you need to be able to think on your feet." And with that, the scene turned to a flurry of action.

No one who has ever attended Rohani's cooking class, sits back to watch. They all get their hands dirty. Literally.

"I believe in learning by doing," Rohani explained. Cooking can be intimidating at times, so the approach she takes is to explain why one does something or what happens if one doesn't do something. In short, it is all very hands-on.

"I don't want students slavishly following instructions on a piece of paper but have no idea why - I think it's important to understand the reasons."

So she goes through the recipe first, explaining certain steps, giving them a few tips and then letting them cook. And then, of course, she shows them nifty little cooking tips, like putting the lid on the pot to get the water boiling faster or how best to season a dish properly.

Fun With Food

Second-time student Li-Hsian Choo says: "The best part is that you are actually doing the recipes on the spot, secure in the fact that Rohani is there to make sure no major screw-ups happen! You are not just watching her do it; you are actually cooking the dishes so you will be able to reproduce them post-class."

With Li-Hsian is her friend, Srihari, a self-confessed "non-cook" who confesses: "It did feel a little overwhelming in the beginning. But once we got into the swing of things, it was a lot of fun trying out everything."



Asked what he had learned, he replied: "Cooking with the least amount of mishap!"

More Than Just Cooking

Rohani's cooking class is more than just food and kitchen know-how. In the past, she has done a comprehensive five-day cooking course for a soon-to-be-married woman who could not cook! So she learned, not only to cook, but also to shop for food.

Unlike neighbouring Thailand, where cooking classes have sprouted up from the beaches of Phuket to the hillsides of Chiang Mai, cooking classes in Malaysia are still a relatively new concept. Tourists to Thailand are even known to arrange a holiday around these classes, ubiquitous in resorts and luxury hotels.

Rohani's class came about in response to the growing demand for hands-on cooking rather than tourist demand for authentic

Malay cuisine. She explained: “My classes are geared towards the home cook, not specifically tourists. The themes I offer are what a home cook here is interested in and will find useful.”

Recipes reflect the way Malaysians like to eat, she says. But her classes also do the occasional simple Italian pasta dish as well as basic curries, rice dishes and noodles.

For Samantha Lim, who considers herself a seasoned cook, the classes let her pick up ideas on entertaining her friends at home. “Rohani’s class is easy and fun. She makes even the most difficult dish achievable for the novice. I love replicating her fuss-free recipes at home and showing off to my friends.”

Off To Market

Another thing that makes Rohani’s class entertaining is that she sometimes brings her students to the market, making the experience even more “real”.

The tour provides a first-hand look into everyday shopping, selecting the freshest spices, herbs, vegetables and seafood with Rohani passing on tips for good marketing. As opposed to the sanitised atmosphere of the supermarket, the market strips everything down to the basics.

“I have a better understanding of all the ingredients. I can’t say I enjoyed looking at how the chicken was de-feathered, but at least I know how to choose fresh fish. It’s so different from reading cookbooks,” said Ena Abdullah.

At the end of each class, students eat what they cooked. Says Li-Hsian: “I came here to learn how to cook but I got more than that. Now I’ve learnt how to cook in a more relaxed manner, and to have fun while doing it, focusing more on the process rather than just stressing about the end product.”

A former food writer for a magazine, Rohani is now a recipe consultant for food companies, restaurants and publications. For more details about her classes, log on to www.bayanindah.com or email her at rohani@cookery.net