

## People

### Your Friendly Neighbourhood...

*This column is dedicated to highlighting interesting personalities in the Damansara areas and the surrounding vicinity. So, if you know of any such person(s) whom you would like to introduce to your community, we would like to hear from you.*

### The Culinary Maestro

**ROHANI JELANI**

– your favourite recipe developer



A celebrity right at our doorstep that's what she is. Sitting and smiling in front of me this graceful and delightful celebrated food connoisseur has been in the food business for about 30 years.

Rohani Jelani, who now lives in Mutiara Damansara, is the owner of Bayan Indah, a culinary retreat and beautiful resort. Talking to her, one can grasp the wisdom in her and the passion in what she is doing.

It was her passion for food that propelled her into her current identity.

"When I was young, I'd always like to cook," says Rohani. Her interest uprooted her from Malaysia to study at the London Cordon Bleu. After graduating and returning to Malaysia, she was immediately employed to work in the kitchen of a hotel. This proved how good she really was and still is.

However, she found that the long and back-breaking hours over stoves and ovens did not suit her energetic self. This knowledge coupled with the meager wage gave her the added determination to look out for something more suitable to her character.

The opportunity came when she was offered the opportunity to work as the resident food writer of Her World magazine in the 1980s. In this position, she had the chance to work in a wonderful office environment, beautiful kitchen and photo studio. She spent 7 glorious and agreeable years there.

### **Developing enticing food recipes**

Throughout the years, she kept perfecting her skills in developing enticing food recipes and the art of presenting them in beautiful pictures. Skills which she uses till these days in her recipe consultation job for food companies, restaurants and publications. She will design specific menu for specific clients, organising events as a special service to the clients.

She will go all the way to other states and other countries to seek out more interesting food and recipes. Her love for developing her own recipe made her a renowned recipe developer.

### **Cooking classes**

It was in 2001 that Rohani decided to give cooking classes. However, this bubbly and confident lady was not sure how she should go about it. That is, whether to do it demonstration style or to have more hands-on. She was not sure if people would like to cook in an unfamiliar kitchen and with other strangers.

Determined to find out the answer, she begged friends and friends of friends to allow her to give them free cooking lessons. After which they were asked to answer some questions in a questionnaire. For example, "Would they part with hard earned money by learning how to cook hands-on?"

The response was encouraging. From the initial few classes, more classes and themes were offered. Thus, began her career in teaching food enthusiasts how to cook and how to prepare the food. For instance, students are taught the best way to shred herbs for nasi kerabu and how to display the food nicely.



The participants get to work in an airy kitchen that is fully equipped and divided into 4 sections. It is so well-equipped that participants don't even need to bring their own aprons! There is also a walk-in pantry. The kitchen opens out to a beautiful backdrop of lush greenery. Looking at nature and cooking your favourite dishes. What else can a food lover ask for?

Fresh and local ingredients are used in her classes and meals. Many of these are from her organic herb garden in Bayan Indah. The dishes are simple and quick to prepare yet delicious and wholesome.

"Many of our organic ingredients come directly from our own herb gardens. It is simply healthier and tastier!" says Rohani.

The range of class themes has widened throughout the years. There are 60 themes to choose from. One can also tailor a private class for a family or group on an existing theme. Alternatively they can use a complete new theme. Market visits can be arranged. In fact, one of the classes is called 'Fishy Business'. Participants are taken to the day market to learn about fish and how to buy good ones. Then, they go back to Bayan Indah to cook what was bought.

Rohani's creativity often gives birth to amazing cooking recipes and themes, such as Currying Flavours, Easy Speedy Pasta, If The Choux Fits, Loafing Around and Parsley, Sage, Rosemary & Thyme.

### **Culinary students**

Her students were amazed at how sharp and fast Rohani was around the kitchen. She would be able to show the participants how to do it and catch any mistake along the way.

The classes are normally booked at a fast pace. However, sometimes students are not sure which classes or how many classes to take up. Being more a food connoisseur rather than a businesswoman interested in profit only, Rohani will suggest that the participants attend one class first. If they find that it is interesting enough, then they can sign up for more classes. On the contrary if they are not interested anymore, then they have only paid for one class which they have attended. In fact, there were cases where the participants after attending one class signed up for all the other classes scheduled.

When asked what type of food participants prefer to learn to cook, Rohani answers, "I was initially surprised that people can tell me they know how to cook spaghetti, steak and other western food but not local food such as laksa and curry. So this and the fact that foreigners will always want to learn how to cook local food, I find that the more popular recipes are the local recipes."

### **And ordinary students**

Rohani started offering basic cooking classes for students preparing to go overseas for further studies when suggested by her friend who wanted it for her son and his friends. Already toying with the idea since her son left for further studies overseas and worrying over his meals, Rohani decided to go ahead with it after her friend's email.

"Students need basic cooking skills when they study overseas. Here, things are easier. One can just go out and eat. There's such a big variety. Overseas, the situation is different for students and most of the time they find it more convenient if they can cook a few simple dishes," comments Rohani.

Her cooking class participants and resort guests include people from overseas, such as Australia, the UK and USA. These people got to know about Bayan Indah from the website.

### **Of interesting people and interesting hobbies**

This fantastic world of Rohani has opened up doors for Rohani to meet many different types of people.

"I've met an amazing number of nice people whom I still keep in touch with," smiles Rohani, her eyes dancing as fond memories flit through her mind.

Rohani spends her days teaching classes, developing recipes, creating themes for special events and requests, writing or blogging about food and taking pix of food for publications. Besides taking care of stay-in guests. Yet, so many activities do not slow her down. She still finds the time to walk the markets for inspiration for new recipes. She also travels and goes around tasting and exploring the many varieties of food.

### **A well-deserved Award**

Spotting a trophy which states '5-Star Food Ambassador program', I ask Rohani what this represents.

"Oh, this is for my project with the MAS cabin crew. MAS sent 60 of their cabin crew for a series of 4 different classes. My job was to teach them how to present food. Cabin crew working in business and first class cabins has to prepare food differently from those serving the economy class. They have to actually take the food out and place them on the food to be served. But they have a problem. They are not trained as waitresses or cooks so they have no idea on what to do. So my role was to help them with ideas and rules on how to place the food and serve it. I emphasise on the use of herbs, the different types and for what appropriate usage. I must say, the crew really enjoyed the classes," replies Rohani.

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