

Rohani Jelani's passion for culinary experiences shines through her 'cooking resort' which encourages guests to immerse in her classes with the added draw of a rustic getaway





The verandah outside the living area



The Kantan suite



Bayan Indah's fully equipped kitchen



ROHANI JELANI

Founder, Bayan Indah Culinary Resort

The final flourish to a great tasting meal is the knowledge that it has been made with love. By all accounts, Bayan Indah Culinary Resort is the getaway equivalent to a lovingly prepared dish.

A charming mansion sitting on an acre of land surrounded by unspoiled tropical forest, Bayan Indah, located in Sungai Penchala 30 minutes away from Kuala Lumpur city centre, entices culinary enthusiasts with the promise of a relaxed, bucolic milieu where they get to learn how to cook traditional Malaysian dishes. The property – voted Malaysian House of the Year in 2008 – comprises three guest rooms and a suite, each furnished with Asian antiques, bespoke furniture and glassware fastidiously selected by its owner Rohani Jelani.

Bayan Indah is a manifestation of Rohani's passion for food. She has been conducting cooking classes at the mansion since 2001 – an activity tagged as a Top 10 Things To Do by New York-based *Saveur* Magazine – before converting it into a "cooking retreat" last year.

"I wanted Bayan Indah to be more than a place where people come for just a couple of hours and then leave. The house has given me so much joy that I wanted it to be a retreat for others too," says Rohani, who has lived in the mansion for 13 years before moving out last year with her family to a nearby apartment.

A graduate of Le Cordon Bleu Culinary School in London and an ex-pastry chef, Rohani recalls her first cooking experience in Primary Five. "I made multi-layer fruit jellies for the class party," she enthuses. "Back then I was already collecting recipes; my father saw my passion and bought me a Betty Crocker cookbook that gave me my first cooking lessons!"

A sought-after magazine food stylist and recipe consultant in the 1980s, she is also an acclaimed cookbook author specialising in traditional Asian recipes. But perhaps Rohani's best claim to fame is her devotion to traditional cooking methods, evinced through her disdain for production line kitchen work.

"I did not enjoy working in a hotel kitchen as the focus was always on the bottom line. It took the joy out of cooking," she explains. On the other hand, she remembers her time in publishing with fondness. "I got to sharpen my knowledge on Asian cuisine, testing out countless recipes and even developing new ones. It also improved my communication skills, which benefitted me when I started conducting cooking classes."

Rohani started giving her cooking classes on an ad hoc basis to friends in the mid-1990s. They proved to be so popular that she set up a cooking school in Bayan Indah in 2001.

"The whole experience is designed to be fun, informative, exciting and a little challenging," she says, adding that traditional cooks are a source of inspiration. "I enjoy learning family recipes from women from rural Malaysia. They cook the most delicious food and have such a natural instinct for the craft."

The traditional culinary experience is part of Bayan Indah's draw. Besides a large, fully equipped kitchen, the property also boasts a herb garden that provides fresh ingredients for the cooking classes.

"There is a certain sense of joy that comes from making your own food, especially in an environment away from the urban jungle," she opines. She forgot to mention the key ingredient that makes Bayan Indah such a success – her unwavering dedication to the project. ●