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Learning to cook Indian delights

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DEEPAVALI is one of the most important festivals of the year for Malaysian of Hindu origins.

It is celebrated with families by performing traditional activities together in their homes. As with any traditional family holidays, you can be rest assured there is plenty of cooking involved.

Most of the food we cook have been passed from one generation to another and comes from years and years of practice.

However, I never really paid attention to what my mother and aunt were cooking when I was growing up. Needless to say, my mind and attention was on other things more important to me as a young, moody teenager.



Rohani (right) showing finer details to her students.

I never thought that there would come a day that I would actually want to cook. Let me also share this with you.

While I was not taking advantage of all the culinary knowledge that my mother and my aunt had, my brother (smart cookie that he was and still is) was soaking it all up.

My brother has turned out to be an excellent cook. I, on the other hand, get by. Nobody has suffered food poisoning after a meal prepared by me. But in my culinary adventure, I have a long and winding road ahead of me.

My biggest challenge with Indian food has been that people expect me to know, simply because I am Indian.

My thosai sticks to the pan every time and my *idli* is sometimes hard as a rock. On the other hand, my potato salad rocks and when I make baked chicken, there are no leftovers.

So when I got the invitation to attend a half day workshop on Deepavali Delights at [Bayan Indah](#), I jumped at the opportunity to join the class.

The thing that I loved about Bayan Indah is their hands-on approach.

On the right track

My main problem with recipes and cooking class thus far has been that reading or watching how a dish is prepared is not the same as actually doing it yourself. There are many questions that run through my mind as I cook. Did I cut it correctly? Is that brown enough or do I have to fry it more? How small is a small fire?

Rohani Jelani has created a great concept with her culinary retreat in Sungai Penchala, less than 30 minutes from Kuala Lumpur.



Vijaya explaining how to make idli.

The location of her retreat is rural and very scenic. Her kitchen is also very impressive. The whole feel and look of the place is resort-like. The peaceful serenity definitely put one's mind at ease and cooking becomes absolutely pleasurable.

Since the theme of the workshop was Deepavali, there was a short saree-tying demonstration. The demonstration set the pace for day as it was fun and truly entertaining. I never knew there were so many ways to adorn a saree.

After the demonstration, Rohani took over the class with a short briefing of the types of food that we were going to cook.

She had some help from seasoned home-maker and cook Puan Sri Vijaya Rama Iyer. Vijaya did a step-by-step demonstration on Idli-making that was very insightful and interesting. She showed me some small Idli moulds that is very instrumental in making "Cocktail Idli's".



Idlis in the moulds, ready for steaming.

Participants were divided into three groups to cook different variations of the 14 recipes handed out during the briefing.

The recipes were Pilaf, Idli, Thosai, Mutton Varuval, Coconut Chutney, Coriander Chutney, Sambar, Murukku, Dhal Vadai, Ulundhu Vadai, Keseri, Carrot Halva and two types of Rasam.

Throughout the whole session, Rohani and her assistants helped with our questions and showed us finer details that somehow a written recipe is unable to capture.

For me, initially, it was not easy to cook in a stranger's kitchen surrounded by people I had met for the first time. But as I started with my work, I lost my inhibitions and started enjoying myself.



Hot steaming idlis.

After the workshop, we sat down to enjoy the food that we had prepared in a lovely dining area that is open to some luscious green surroundings.

But the best testament to this workshop is that I made Idli this Deepavali, together with the coconut chutney and the coriander chutney.

So concept of the class works. The hands-on methodology builds confidence and participants are eager to try the recipes in their own kitchen.

Here are some recipes from the workshop that you can try.

[Idli](#)

[Sambar \(Dhal Curry\)](#)

[Coconut Chutney](#)

[Coriander Chutney](#)