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Sunday December 19, 2010

Mother cooks best

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A new generation is rediscovering cooking.

COOKING, once seen as a nurturing act, has had its status eroded by modern living with the younger generation regarding the activity as "uncool" and old-fashioned. Women with high-flying careers think it is socially backward to be chained to the stove.

The mere fact that one has to make a pasta sauce from scratch might be regarded as a waste of time since there are so many ready-made ones available in the supermarket. Also, slaving away in the kitchen is seen as unnecessary, as you can practically find any of your favourite dishes in restaurants and eateries. Why waste time peeling, chopping and dicing when you can just eat at the mamak stall or *tapau*?



Loving what she does: Rohani Jelani's first love is food.

However, in the last decade or so, the advent of celebrity chefs whose food is as yummy as their looks (think Nigella Lawson, the English chef who stirs more than just a pot with her luscious beauty), is part of the social forces restoring cooking to its original role and more.

And when you mix good food with good looks, the result is hot – young people fed a daily dose of the Asian Food Channel and its ilk now view cooking as "sexy".

"A lot of modern women have lost the ability to put simple meals together. (But) cooking is trendy now," says Rohani Jelani, a cooking teacher, food writer and innkeeper of the Bayan Indah Culinary Retreat in Kg Sungai Pencala, Selangor.

"I get a lot of satisfaction teaching people how to prepare simple Malay, Chinese and Indian dishes," Rohani adds.

According to Rohani, it is important to learn the basic skills.

"I do concede in certain circumstances that it is not practical to cook everything from scratch. But it shouldn't be a substitute for the real thing. If we don't learn and preserve recipes from our heritage, then it will come to a point where we rely on pre-mixed sauces to cook. That is just sad," adds Rohani, 52.

Back in the day when our mothers

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and grandmothers made our favourite curries and that mind-blowing sambal, there was no such thing as pre-mixed sauces. Every spice was freshly crushed and mixed in the pestle and mortar or on the stone grinder. Vegetables were painstakingly chopped with utter fluidity.

For someone whose light is barely flickering when it comes to trying new gastronomic adventures, it can be quite stressful, especially when the end result doesn't turn out well.



Skilled cook: Manju Saigal hosts different cooking classes in her own kitchen.

Rohani's cooking classes takes a student back to mother's kitchen, learning the properties of every ingredient so as to produce healthy, wholesome food using the freshest of ingredients.

"Preparing and eating good, wholesome food is essential. People think Malay food is too greasy. But you should understand the concept of *tumis* where oil should only be used as a lubricant. That is why when you eat outside food, it is oily because they have to cook quickly in mass quantities and using less oil slows down the cooking process," Rohani says.

"There is a sense of detachment between people and ingredients. They are fixated on the end product therefore they can't relate on how things come together," Rohani adds.

As we are not all blessed with a big kitchen and a garden to grow fresh vegetables, it should not deter wannabe cooks as the modern supermarket supplies a whole array of prepacked ingredients to help us replicate grandma's cooking.



Foolproof method: Grinding ingredients the oldfashioned way by using the pestle and mortar is still practiced today.

"Not having a pandan plant in your backyard was unheard of in the past. Then again, how can you grow one if you are living in a condominium? Now you can find any leaf and herb prepacked at the supermarket. With this convenience, cooking shouldn't be such an arduous task," says Rohani.

Rohani offers various themes in her cooking classes at Bayan Indah – from Malaysian and Asian to fusion and European cuisines, as well as baking. If you're from out of town you can even stay at the boutique accommodation which is Rohani's house, surrounded by lush tropical jungle.

"As my children are away at university, I decided to open up my house and kitchen to teach and offer a unique culinary experience," says Rohani.

And she loves eating too.

"I love food. People always ask me why am I not fat since I'm surrounded by food all the time," laughs Rohani. "To me, eating in moderation is important."

When it comes to Indian cooking, the essence is down to fresh garlic,

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ginger, tomatoes, chillies and the ubiquitous tumeric which dye our fingers a bright yellow but it's a colour every self-respecting cook of Indian culinary is proud to show-off.

Manju Saigal, who conducts cooking classes out of her own kitchen in Bukit Travers, Kuala Lumpur, says you can prepare basic spice pastes ahead of time (for curries and sambals) and store them in the freezer.

"A ginger and garlic paste is essential for chicken and meat curries and you can buy most of the spices at the Indian sundry store in Brickfields," says the mother of two grown children.

According to Manju, when you cook from scratch, there are no additives and preservatives. "Even if you have to use pre-mixed sauces, make sure you use some extra fresh herbs and vegetables," says Manju.

Manju learnt to make her first chappati when she was eight years old from her grandfather in India.

"Cooking has always been my passion and anyone can learn. I invite people to my house not only learn a recipe but to enjoy a cultural experience as well," says Manju.

One of the minefields of cooking is measurements but according to Manju, it is no obstacle to good cooking.

"As long as you know how to balance the different flavours you will be fine. But you learn from trial and error," she adds.

She considers cooking as an art of entertainment. "I feel it is an honour to have people come to my home and eat my food, rather than dining in a restaurant."

There are many good reasons for a person to return to mother's kitchen. Convenience, it seems, is loaded with calories and excess sugar.

Dietician Mary Easaw-John of the National Heart Institute cautions against using prepared sauces and mixes over an extended period of time.

"A lot of them contain high amounts of sugar and emulsifiers and colouring. Once in a while is fine but in the long run, it is not advisable for the sake of one's diet," says Easaw-John.

To contact Rohani for a cooking class or to book a stay at Bayan Indah, write to her at rohani@bayanindah.com or call 03-7729 0122 or visit her website at www.bayanindah.com. Manju Saigal can be contacted via her

e-mail at thespiceconnection@hotmail.com.

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