

## Living: Charming culinary-class retreat

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*Cooking classes and accommodation in a typically Malaysian house tucked on the edges of tropical rainforests. ANUSHA K. is impressed*



THE road to Sungai Penchala is narrow, but the view along the way is simply breathtaking. Instead of skyscrapers, you see rows and rows of idyllic kampung houses, and the surrounding forest is filled with lush greenery where ducks and cats roam freely. After a few minutes of absolute bliss driving from the city centre, I reach Bayan Indah, the culinary resort, where I meet the witty Rohani Jelani, brainchild behind the place, to find out more about her much raved-about cooking classes.

Bayan Indah was previously Rohani's family home where she stayed with her three children. She started her career as a food writer with Her World magazine before she embarked on running culinary classes at Bayan Indah. Response to her cooking classes was good, but the large space upstairs meant more maintenance and money, of course.

"After my two kids left to study abroad, my third was enrolled in a boarding school. It felt quite empty, really," says the qualified Cordon Bleu chef.

She did think of selling the place and finding a suitable shophouse for her cooking classes, but her students were not too keen on the idea. So she opted instead to refurbish the upstairs area (where the family's bedrooms were) and turn it into a retreat. She kept everything just as it was, except the bathroom, which was renovated to make it more presentable for guests. Downstairs, her large kitchen (renovated in 2001) is used for the classes. "Students kept asking me, 'Don't you feel that maybe you should have stayed here after all?' Well, I have stayed here for more than 13 years and I'm practically around every other day, either for the cooking classes or recipe development for different food companies," says Rohani with a chuckle.



Today, she stays just 10 minutes away and has opened up four rooms upstairs to accommodate visitors. Bayan Indah was named Malaysian House Of The Year in 2008.

The culinary retreat is open for visitors to stay or enjoy a wellness package on the weekend. But most guests sign up for Rohani's cooking classes as well — there's a discount if you stay and attend the classes, which range from baking to Malaysian and even Mediterranean cooking.

Rohani does a lot of research to improve her classes, trying out recipes and tweaking them till they are perfect. Nutrition plays a big part too — she teaches diet and the right kind of food to primary pupils and teenagers who are going abroad to study.

Besides the young ones, Rohani has seen a surge in young men enrolling for her classes. "Many guys attend my cooking classes as a way to impress girls," she says with a smile. There are four types of rooms at Bayan Indah, all named after Rohani's favourite herbs and spices — Kantan, Kunyit, Selasih and Pandan. The name Bayan Indah itself comes from Bayan, a local name for a red-cheeked, long-tailed parakeet, and indah, a Malay word for pretty, kind or sweet-natured. As I enter the first room upstairs, I see two paintings made by Rohani's sons when they were young. There are also many pictures of birds and nature. The unique pieces of glass art are done by celebrated Penang artist Wong Keng Fuan, and the local furnishings are all made of local sustainable wood. The kantan (torch ginger herb or ginger flower) has an eclectic decor mix of modern Asian art and hand-made fittings combined with Chinese antique furniture.



The kunyit (turmeric) has most of its furnishings in yellow, just like the spice it's named for. It is decorated with hand-made furniture and overlooks the rainforest.

The selasih (Thai basil) reflects, in part, the quirky nature of the herb that's used widely for making aromatic, sweet-tasting and savoury soups and sauces. It's complete with an antique Chinese wardrobe from the 19th Century, flown in from Shanghai by Rohani's close friend who lives there.

Finally, the pandan (fragrant screwpine) room is designed with verve and zest, blending cool modernity with beautiful Chinese antiques.



In fact, most of the furniture at Bayan Indah are either refurbished antiques or new modern items hand-made by its carpenter. Nothing is off the shelf. Each room stay is a minimum of two nights, with complimentary Malaysian breakfast, home-baked cookies, coffee or tea and other goodies available throughout the day. The rooms are fully air-conditioned, with facilities for washing or drying and even a little refrigerator of juices and drinks. The layout of Bayan Indah is spacious, with the outdoors open to the tropical surroundings. Outside the four rooms is an airy verandah overlooking the village and the view is best enjoyed at sunset with a cup of piping hot tea and biscotti. There's also a herb garden, where exotic herbs are grown and used for the cooking classes.

Outside the porch is a koi pond and a swing where you can sit and soak in the beauty of the place.

There's even a seminar house, separate from the main building, for training purposes and brainstorming sessions in total privacy. It has flexible seating for 20-plus delegates and its own dining section.



For details, visit <http://www.bayanindah.com/>

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