

( Peranakan food with a twist )



# Second to Nyonya

At a time when foreign flavours are causing a major stir on Singapore's dining scene, Arwen Joyce steps into the kitchens of three chefs who are preserving Peranakan cuisine, a long-time local speciality, at the same time as they add a few intriguing modern twists

PHOTOGRAPHY MARK TEO



Chef Jet Lo's beef rendang has little in common with his mum's traditional version



## CHEF JET LO'S 48-HOUR BEEF CHEEK RENDANG

Ding Dong  
23 Ann Siang Rd  
dingdong.com.sg



he beef cheek is cooked gently in a sous-vide bath for two days before being placed atop a cushion of orange-red

foam and garnished with puffed rice and crispy coriander. This is not your grandmother's beef rendang. What it is, aside from delicious, is an homage to the beloved Peranakan dish and an example of the changes taking place in the realm of modern Singaporean cuisine.

The 48-hour beef cheek rendang prepared by chef Jet Lo at Ding Dong, a trendy spot in the popular expat enclave of Ann Siang Road, is just one example of how Singapore's chefs are drawing inspiration from the city-state's rich culinary heritage. In kitchens islandwide, Peranakan favourites are being given a reboot through the use of modern techniques and non-traditional ingredients, thus breathing new life into a food culture that's more commonly associated with home cooking than haute cuisine.

Of course, Peranakan (or Nyonya) cuisine has long been defined by change. Its evolution can be said to have begun in the 15th century, when Chinese immigrants to the Indonesian archipelago, and what's now Malaysia and Singapore, began to adopt local customs and marry into prominent



»The flavours of his childhood enjoy pride of place on the menu»



**Make a rendang paste from minced shallots, garlic, lemongrass, galangal and red chilli. Fry cumin, fennel and coriander seeds individually over low heat until fragrant; add them to the paste. Add candlenut, curry powder, turmeric powder and dried chilli powder to the wok. Combine well and cook over low heat. Add lime leaf, turmeric leaf and fried coconut. Finally, add water and beef stock, and season with gula melaka, salt and black pepper.**



**Blend the sauce in a food processor and push it through a drum sieve. Use the fine paste for the rendang espuma (foam) and save the coarser paste to marinate the beef cheek.**



**To make the espuma, combine the fine rendang paste with coconut cream and coconut milk. Pour into a siphon bottle and charge with cream.**



**Cover the beef cheek in the coarser rendang paste and place it in a vacuum-sealed cooking bag. Submerge the bag in a 72°C water bath for 48 hours.**



**Chef Shen Tan puts a modern spin on this jelly noodle hawker-stall dessert**

local families. The cuisine developed as adaptations were made to the region's tangy, aromatic dishes, and recipes were passed down through the generations. The starting point for many Peranakan dishes was a mortar and pestle, used for the pounding of seeds and spices into *rempahs* or blended spice pastes. Restaurants favour electric blenders these days, but that hasn't stopped a growing number of Singapore chefs from taking a page from their forefathers' cookbooks.

Christopher Tan (foodfella.com), a Singaporean food writer, has a deep love for Peranakan food and is pleased to see that interest in the cuisine is growing. And he's all for its ongoing evolution. "A living and vibrant culture will always change," he says. "Peranakans should own that fact and strive to be wise, creative and intelligent agents of change." Based on the evidence of his carefully deconstructed and reassembled ode to beef rendang, Chef Lo fits that description.

The dish is also symbolic of Lo's journey to Singapore from his father's *kopitiam* (coffee shop) in Malaysian Borneo via culinary schools in Melbourne and Zurich. Lo was born into a Chinese family of tofu and noodle merchants. In keeping with his status as the family's eldest son, when Lo wasn't in school, he was cutting his restaurant-industry teeth serving *teh tarik* (milk tea) and kaya toast, a breakfast staple. Then, for two years, Lo studied progressive European cooking techniques – think sous-vide, liquid nitrogen and foams – which he employs with restraint but to great effect in his modern South-East Asian cuisine.



But it's the flavours of his childhood, stamped on his taste buds, that enjoy pride of place on Ding Dong's menu: pandan, curry leaf, candlenut, tamarind, *galangal* (a ginger-like spice) and *gula melaka* (palm sugar).

The same flavours figure prominently in the creations at Immigrants, a Joo Chiat gastrobar where chef Damian D'Silva pairs dishes inspired by his Eurasian-Peranakan roots and his travels in the region with craft beers, boutique wines and rare whiskies. D'Silva cuts an imposing figure, tall with broad shoulders and a bald pate, but he puts diners at ease with a ready smile. He prepares meals at Immigrants in much the same way that his mother and grandfather did in his family kitchen on a housing estate in the east of Singapore. Occasionally, he'll swap out ingredients his grandfather favoured for something he feels contributes more to the overall taste of the dish without sacrificing its integrity. Other than that, he stays true to the family recipes.

Peranakan staples on D'Silva's menu such as grilled seafood *otak*, a fishcake wrapped in a banana leaf and grilled, and *ngoh hiang*, a sausage-esque blend of minced pork, crab, prawns and spices, were mainstays of his childhood. D'Silva is passionate about sharing these dishes with a new generation of Singaporeans.

Sharing D'Silva's passion for Singaporean food is chef Shen Tan, who once ran a state-of-the-art kitchen at Ujong in the celebrated Raffles Hotel. Her energy has always been contagious, whether she was buzzing around inside a tiny hawker stall or greeting guests at Wok & Barrel, her former shophouse eatery. Tan's passion for cooking and

**>>She puts a mind-bending twist on an old favourite>>**







## CHEF SHEN TAN'S "SHENDOL"


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 Melt 200g of gula melaka in a pot with the same amount of water. Soak three gelatine leaves in cold water until soft and add to the gula melaka mixture. Whisk and strain the mixture.

 Line the insides of ramekins with cooking spray and pour in the gula melaka mixture, about 2mm thick. Place ramekins in the fridge to set.

 Bring 500g each of coconut milk and cream to a boil together with 6 tbsp of sugar and four pandan leaves. Reduce to a simmer and add four soaked gelatine leaves. Strain and leave to cool. Once cooled, pour the mixture into the ramekins on top of the gula melaka layer. Place the ramekins back in the fridge to set again.

 To make green cendol worms, blitz 20 washed and chopped-up pandan leaves and 1 litre of water in a blender. Sieve the pandan pulp to obtain pandan essence. Whisk and combine the pandan essence, 6 tbsp of sugar, ½ tsp salt, ½ tsp alkaline water and 100g of green bean flour. Let this mixture sit for 40 minutes.

 In a saucepan, whisk the mixture over medium heat until it thickens to a stage where there are trails in the mixture and it's a dark jade green. Transfer the mixture into a piping bag and pipe it into a bowl of ice water. Let the green cendol worms sit in the ice-water bath for 20 minutes before using them to garnish the panna cotta.



#### CHEF DAMIAN D'SILVA'S AYAM PANGGANG

Immigrants  
467 Joo Chiat Rd  
[immigrants-gastrobar.com](http://immigrants-gastrobar.com)

Blend deseeded fresh chillies, chopped shallots, ground coriander and candlenuts (after soaking in water). Add galangal, fresh turmeric and ginger, all skinned and sliced, and blend to a fine paste.

Heat a medium-sized saucepan on the stove and add enough oil for frying. When the oil is smoking, add the paste and fry, stirring continuously

until fragrant. Next, add deboned chicken and cook for 5 minutes before adding tamarind flowers (soak in warm water first), julienned lemon lime leaves, bruised white lemongrass stalks, palm sugar and coconut milk. Cook until the chicken is three-quarters done (10-15 minutes). If the amount of sauce starts to decline drastically, gradually add water until a thickish consistency is achieved. Add salt to taste and remove chicken pieces from pan.

On a very hot griddle, in an oven or over charcoal, cook the chicken pieces until slightly charred and use the reserve sauce to baste the chicken. Serve on a banana leaf and garnish with quartered tomatoes, sliced onions and red chillies. Squeeze lime juice over the chicken before serving.



creating new dishes is what led her to leave a desk job five years ago to run her own hawker stall at Maxwell Food Centre.

Like Lo, Tan manages to give her creations – prepared both for her own restaurants and for the clients she serves as a consultant – a distinctly Singaporean slant, despite the use of modern cooking techniques. Even so, Tan admits that she may have gone overboard when she put Italian techniques to use in the creation of a coconut panna cotta version of *cendol*, a simple hawker-stall dessert. But by envisioning the dish in a new way (and winkingly dubbing it “Shendol”), Shen succeeded in introducing this icy treat, which features green, worm-like rice-flour jelly, to diners who might’ve resisted it otherwise. She also showed those who’ve been enjoying the dessert since childhood that it’s possible to put a mind-bending twist on an old favourite.

Treating diners to the flavours of yesteryear and riffing on treasured heritage recipes to create new dishes is a labour of love for all three chefs. For Lo, the litmus test comes when his mother visits from Malaysia. The beef rendang he makes bears very little resemblance to the version she used to make for the family, but he’s confident the rempah flavours of his childhood are there. “Luckily, she says the taste of the rendang is good,” Lo says. “I think she’s telling me the truth – she’s not one to sugar-coat things!”



**Chef Damian D'Silva walks us through a spicy grilled chicken recipe that shares his Eurasian-Peranakan roots**



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