

# MAKAN LAOK HARI HARI

NYONYA LINDA CHEE SPEAKS TO BABA MATT TAN ON HIS HEARTWARMING COOKBOOK OF EVERYDAY DISHES ENJOYED BY GENERATIONS OF BABAS AND NYONYAS | PHOTOS COURTESY OF LANDMARK BOOKS

**D**aily Nonya Dishes is a refresher on basic Peranakan dishes from the days of my childhood. Many cooks in my generation would probably share the same thought. I am reminded of dishes that I have not tasted for a long time. Like *Buah Paya Masak Titik*, or *Ikan Kekek Masak Nanair*, and a classic dish like *Tempra* which has variations using chicken, pork, eggplant, fish, eggs, prawns or *kiam chye* (salted vegetable).

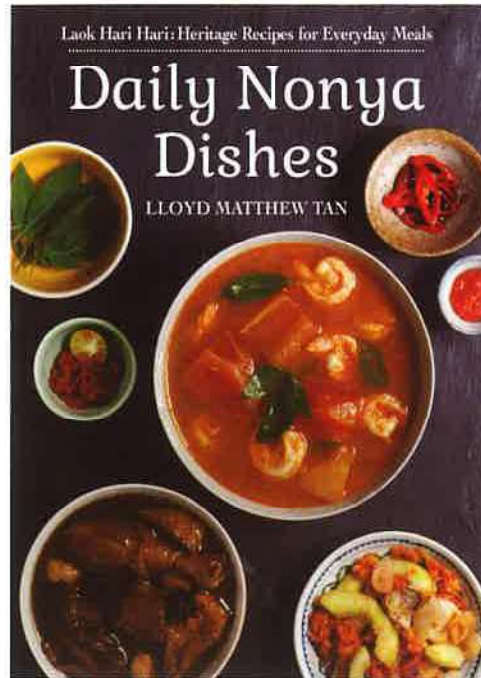
This cookbook by Lloyd Matthew Tan, better known as Baba Matt Tan, is different because the recipes are for simple home cooking. No detail is spared. It almost feels as if he wants anyone trying his recipes, even first-time cooks, to succeed in making the dishes.

In his 15-year journey to produce this handy reference, Matt was driven by a single, unwavering purpose – to ensure that the *laok hari hari* of the Peranakans did not disappear from the dining table.

## A CHIP OFF THE OLD BLOCK

The book is a tribute to his parents, Doreen Anne Ong Liang Neo and Robert Tan Choon Chye who loved to cook together. Matt's parents were like *belangkas* (horseshoe crabs) that once paired, are inseparable. He recalls: "Every Sunday lunch was a feast prepared by my parents. They would do everything together. Dad was the sweet one, who would hold Mum's hand when they were out. Mum was the shy one, easily embarrassed by his show of love for her. He would buy little treats for her, while Mum would always make sure he had proper meals."

Their enthusiasm in the kitchen rubbed off on Matt. His mother insisted on meticulous precision in cutting ingredients. She was trained by his maternal grandmother, Khoo Quee Neo, the matriarch of the family home called Bonny Grass at 12, Kim Yam Road. One of his favourite dishes in the book is *Ayam Oh*, a chicken stew with garlic, ginger and *taucheo* (fermented soya bean paste). "Mum always said that you can tell if the person is baba or nyonya if they



enjoy dishes with a *taucheo* base."

His father's intensive involvement in the kitchen held many wonderful memories. "I remember once when Dad and his friends went to catch pigeons at Victoria Theatre. He wanted to recreate his grandmother's special dish. When he came home, he was so excited to show us what he had in the sack that his hand slipped while untying the string and all the pigeons flew out!" Matt laughs.

## GOOD TO COOK, HARD TO FIND

With so much to share, he agonised over the many recipes that had to be left out of the book, like Pickled *Remis* (a small bivalve mussel), or even *Chinchalok* (fermented shrimp). As late as the 1950s people could still find *remis* in season on Katong Beach before the area was reclaimed. These ingredients

are "very hard to come by these days", says Matt. "I debated if some recipes should be in the book just for the sake of documenting them."

For instance, he left out the recipe for fried *Ikan Tamban* as it is rare to find the fish in markets these days. "This is a fingerling-size fish called *Fringescale sardinella* which is marinated in tamarind and fried to a crisp." Ironically, one week after the photo shoot for the book was done, he spotted the fish in Tekka Market!

Changing tastebuds was also another concern. Unlike well-known Peranakan dishes like *Ayam Buah Keluak* or *Babi Pong Tay*, "many have never eaten or known of dishes such as *Batang Keloh*, where the pods from the Moringa tree are cooked in a spicy gravy." Another rare dish is *Trubok Busok*, or vegetables in spicy tamarind gravy flavoured with salted fish bones. Matt laments that "as traditional recipes lose favour, it will be a loss to the community".

## A SAUCY GEM

I am heartened that he even shared one of the best-kept secrets of Peranakan cuisine. Befittingly, this is the last recipe in the book: *Bee Cheo*.

*Pechah lobang!* I do not recall any Peranakan cookbook that shows how to make this unique home-cooked sweet flour sauce. The full-bodied taste of the humble golden brown *Bee Cheo* makes the world of difference to what I consider to be the crown jewel of Peranakan dishes – the egg skin-wrapped nyonya *popiah*.

Among Peranakan families, I believe there are only

few that know or make *Bee Cheo*. Matt's recipe from his grandmother has that extra oomph spiked with brandy. The spirit is added to taste and swirled around the jar as well. *Tentu sedap*. This recipe alone is worth the price of the book!

Below is an extract from *Daily Nonya Dishes* that we share with readers through the kind courtesy of Matt and his publisher, Landmark Books.

For two delicious bonus recipes (*Bangkawang Chah & Ikan Sambat Chilli*), visit the Peranakan Association's website at: [www.peranakan.org.sg](http://www.peranakan.org.sg) or scan the QR code here.



## AYAM GORENG TAUYU LADA KERING

*Dry-fried Chicken with Dark Soya Sauce and Pepper*

### Ingredients

- 1 kg (2.2 lb) chicken thighs and legs
- 2 tsp white pepper
- 3 tbsp dark soya sauce
- ½ tsp sugar
- salt
- 1 red chilli
- 150 ml (½ cup) groundnut oil

### Preparation

- 1 Trim the fat from the chicken thighs and legs. Chop each piece into two and rub them with 1 tablespoon of salt. Leave aside for 30 minutes, then rinse and drain.
- 2 Make a marinade by combining the pepper, dark soya sauce and ½ teaspoon each of sugar and ½ teaspoon salt. Marinate the chicken ensuring that each piece is well coated. Cover with cling film and refrigerate for at least two hours or overnight. Rinse the red chilli, pluck off and discard the stem and cut the chilli diagonally into thin slices. Set aside.

### Deep Frying

- 1 Remove the marinated chicken from the chiller and let it return to room temperature. Heat a wok till hot over a high flame. Pour in the oil, heat till hot then lower the flame to medium.
- 2 Drain the chicken well. Fry a few pieces at a time over low to medium heat, turning and cooking each side. Do not overcrowd the wok.
- 3 Transfer the chicken onto a serving plate and garnish with the sliced chilli.