

July to September 2026

Complimentary Copy

Palate.



A NEW ORDER

*Meet Rachel Hor, Chang Yue Shuen, and Maria Escobia,
the women shaking up the spirit of bartending*





A Space Beyond Commerce

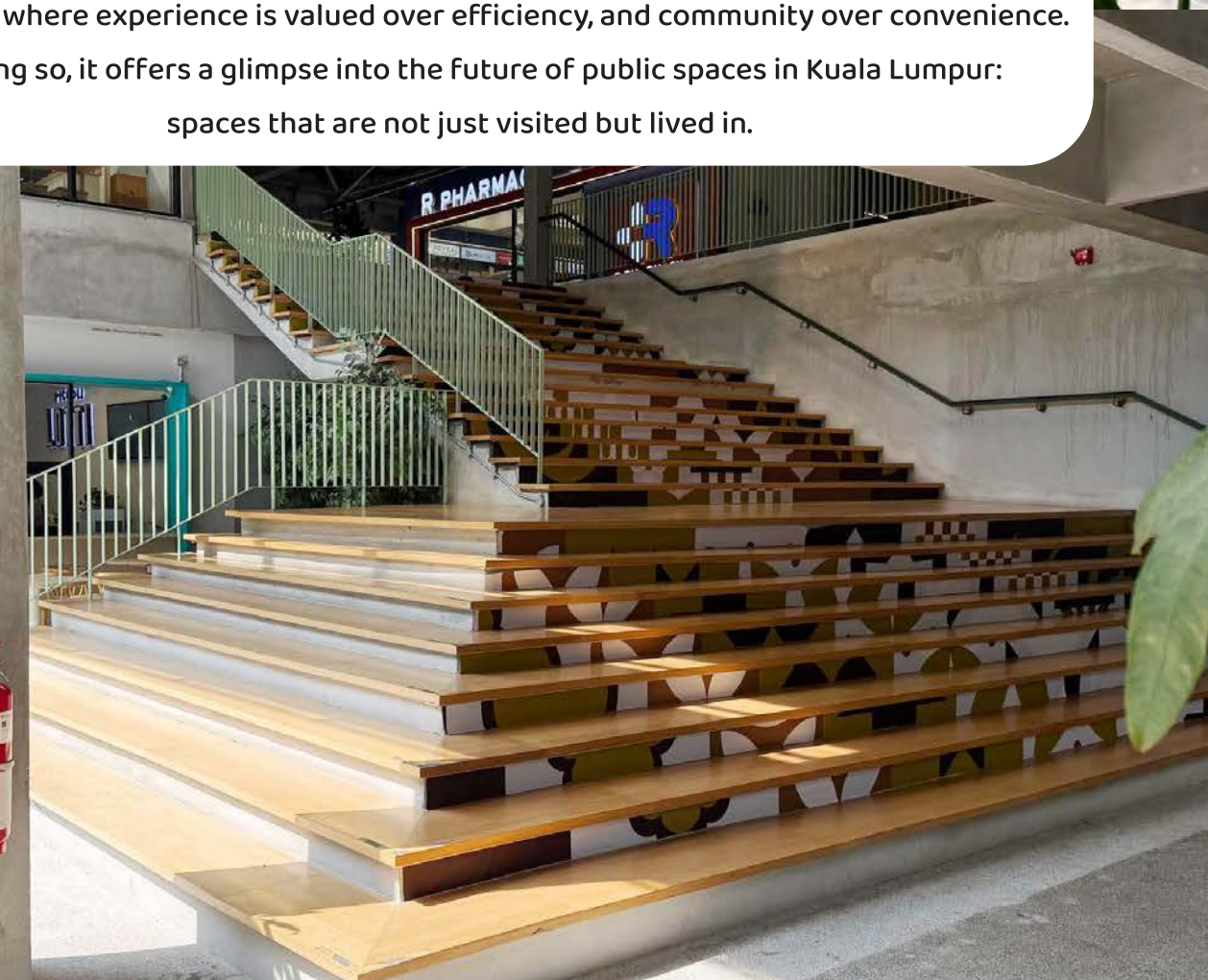
The place is a vibrant lifestyle and community hub that blends modern urban design with a relaxed, social atmosphere.

Unlike a traditional shopping mall, it focuses on creating a space where people can gather, work, dine, and unwind.



Atmosphere & Vibe

The Campus, Ampang is more than a lifestyle hub. It is a reflection of shifting urban priorities - where experience is valued over efficiency, and community over convenience. In doing so, it offers a glimpse into the future of public spaces in Kuala Lumpur: spaces that are not just visited but lived in.



The Best Caffeine Perk-Me-Up at Bukit Bintang

Strong, smooth, creamy, and exotic —
all types of coffee beans, no questions asked.
Come home now, coffee connoisseurs!

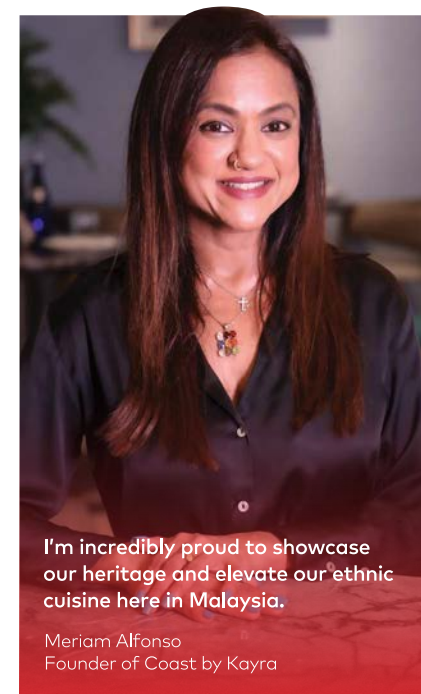
浓郁顺滑，酸韵醇厚，奇珍异豆，尽享非凡风味。
咖啡爱好者，一起品味生活的香醇！



- | | | | | | |
|----|-----------------------|-------------------|----|--------------------|-----------------|
| 01 | The Messengers by JWC | L131-132, Level 1 | 06 | V88 Cafe & Bar | L112-1, Level 1 |
| 02 | Come True CAFE | L113-1, Level 1 | 07 | Cong Caphe | L143, Level 1 |
| 03 | Bean Brothers | G36 | 08 | Tarbush | LG06-LG07 |
| 04 | Coast by Kayra | G03-G05 | 09 | Opera Café | G29A |
| 05 | Café Marais | Ground Floor | 10 | Rue de Paris Table | UG31 |

HOME OF THE TASTEMAKERS

THE HOME OF MICHELIN FLAVOURS 米其林指南



2026 米其林必比登推介 Another Michelin Moment for COAST by Kayra — Bib Gourmand 2026

Coast by Kayra is once again
recognised in the 2026 Michelin Bib
Gourmand, reaffirming its refined
take on Kerala cuisine in Malaysia —
where heritage meets modern
elegance.

Introducing the Latest Kerala Paste
Collection: from Biryani to Roast
Gravy Masala and Pollichatthu
Masala, each jar brings Michelin-level
flavour to your kitchen.

Savour now at
G03-G05, The Starhill

2026 米其林入选餐厅 Li Yen Proudly Retains Michelin Selected Status for 2026

With embroidered wall panelling, velvet
banquettes, and bronze-framed mirrors,
the restaurant sets the stage for a luxurious dining
experience. The menu features classic Canton-
ese dishes, including dim sum, honey-glazed
BBQ Iberico pork, and roast goose.

Visit us now at
Level 1, The Ritz-Carlton, Kuala Lumpur



2026 米其林入选餐厅 Shanghai Restaurant Honored as Michelin Selected for 2026

The veteran chef crafts Shanghaiese
classics, with the must-try xiao long
bao featuring soupy pork filling in
delicate, pleated skin.

Visit us now at
Level 1, JW Marriott Kuala Lumpur



Editor's Letter

Returning to an editor's letter after more than a decade feels both familiar and slightly foreign. The rhythm of the work returns quickly, but the context around it has shifted profoundly. The obvious changes are easy to point to—the rise of digital, the pace of information—but that's not why we're here. The more interesting evolution is happening in the world I'm stepping into.

The table has always been where culture plays out, and Malaysian dining right now feels like it's at a genuine inflection point. There is a steady, confident movement of chefs reclaiming local flavours, bringing ingredients and techniques once overlooked in fine dining onto tasting menus with the same reverence as anything imported. It is as much a move towards meaningful sustainability (page 60) as it is a statement that Malaysian cuisine has far more to offer. That conviction is fuelling dynamic collaborations, with international chefs increasingly eager to enter local kitchens to discover what's been here all along (page 54).

The shift is equally felt in the drinks scene. We put Chang Yue Shuen, Maria Escobia, and Rachel Hor on our cover not simply because they are women thriving in a once-considered male-dominated industry, but because they are among those redefining what the industry values. Empathy. Curiosity. The ability to genuinely connect with the person across the bar. These are not soft skills. They are, now more than ever, the ones that matter most.

What ties all of this together is something I keep returning to: the best dining experiences have never really been about the food or the drink alone. They have always been about what they make possible. The conversations started, the memories made, the cultures understood a little more clearly. That is what this magazine is here to document, to celebrate, and occasionally to question, and I can think of no better seat from which to do it. It's good to be back at the table. Pull up a chair and join me.

Andrea Wong
Editor-in-Chief

Palate.

ALVIN SINCLAIR Managing Director and Publisher
TENGKU ZAINAB AJLAA Group General Manager and Editorial Director

EDITORIAL

ANDREA WONG Editor-In-Chief
PATRICK LOH Deputy Editor
COLIN GOMEZ Features Editor

CREATIVE

SHYE AYOB Senior Designer
ARIUMATHY MARIO PUSPANATHAN Designer

CONTRIBUTORS

VANESSA LIM
ANANDHI GOPINATH

www.palateasia.com

@palateasia

/PalateAsia

@palate.asia

Palate is published five times annually by **Top 30 Media Sdn Bhd** Registration No: 202401049041 (I594886-A)
A-33-10, Tower A, Menara UOA Bangsar, No 5, Jalan Bangsar Utama 1, Bangsar, 59000 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Email info@top30media.com.
Printed by Kuan Press Sdn Bhd (621940-X), No. 1 Jalan Perindustrian PP7, Taman Perindustrian Putra Permai, 43300 Seri Kembangan, Selangor Darul Ehsan. Tel +603-8959 2332.
All rights reserved. No part of **Palate** shall be reproduced in any form or by any means without prior written consent from **Top 30 Media Sdn Bhd**.

INSIDE *the* issue



- 4 Editor's Letter
- 38 Cover Story
- 120 Aftertaste

GRAZE

- | | | | |
|----|--|----|---|
| 12 | THE HOUSE OF APPETITE
Yap Ah Shak House is home to multiple cuisines. | 24 | DINING IN DANGER
This list of dangerous food might surprise you. |
| 14 | BUN INTENDED
Five burger joints worth getting your hands dirty for. | 28 | RAISED BY TIME
Marble 8's dry-aged steaks are worth the wait. |
| 16 | HANDS ACROSS BORDERS
Auntie Omakase brings her Korean cooking to Picaro. | 30 | BANGKOK'S NEW GUARD
These are the most exciting restaurants in Bangkok. |
| 18 | ON THE RECORD
These listening cafés invite you to a new spin cycle. | 34 | CARB DIEM
Pre-race fuelling is a part of the strategy. |
| 22 | MIDDAY ESCAPE
These luxe lunches will give you an afternoon boost. | 36 | BEYOND THE BARREL
Mortlach's new release puts flavour first. |



- | | | | | | |
|-------------------|--|----|--|----------------|--|
| 37 | THE OTHER SIDE OF THE STORY
Shaun Liew of Story of Ono shares his coffee approach. | 60 | ROOTED FUTURES
These restaurants are redefining sustainability. | 82 | KOPI, KAYA, CONTINUITY
A love letter to a Malaysian institution, the kopitiam. |
| SUSTENANCE | | 66 | REWRITING THAI CUISINE
How Chef Ton put Thai food on the map. | AT HOME | |
| 52 | TRAVELLER, STORYTELLER, CHEF
We ask Chef Wan about his favourite food. | 68 | AGED BEYOND REASON
Facts about dry-ageing. | 88 | SUPERFOOD SWAPS
Here are some alternatives to superfoods that won't break your bank. |
| 54 | FLAVOURS IN TRANSLATION
We explore The Ruma's Atas Key Tables series. | 72 | A GLASS APART
It turns out that the shape of a glass can affect taste. | 92 | COOL COMFORT
Beat the heatwave with Nespresso's latest capsules. |
| 58 | LONGEVITY, SERVED
The Okinawa Diet is more than a fad, it's a way of life. | 76 | ACROSS THE GREAT DIVIDE
American rye whiskey is having its moment. | 94 | THE EVERYDAY, ELEVATED
Four simple ways to transform kitchen staples. |



- 98 **LIVING FLAVOURS**
Simple fermentation recipes to try at home.
- 104 **TEA BEYOND THE BREW**
How tea is finding it's way into the kitchen.
- 108 **GHEE WHIZ**
Why ghee makes almost everything taste better.
- 110 **TEQUILA SUNRISE**
Five mixes that just about anyone can make at home.
- 116 **HOT TAKE**
The science behind what makes your food spicy.
- 118 **MEN WHO COOK**
Arnaud Blondel shares a classic French recipe.
- 119 **MEN WHO COOK**
Syomir Izwa Gupta brings the heat with his ikan bakar.



(From left) On Rachel: Top and pants, Justin Yap. On Shuen: Blazer and pants, Justin Yap. On Rachel: Dress, Justin Yap

Photography: AARON LEE/Lensworks Production;
Creative direction and fashion styling: ANDREA WONG;
Make-up: JOEY YAP; Hair: NICOLE NG;
Photography assistant: ABHAR

A STRONGER MIX

For Chang Yue Shuen, Maria Escobia, and Rachel Hor, the road to bartending wound through coffee counters, dance studios, and psychology textbooks—experiences that shaped them into the bartenders they are today. Their stories reflect a craft in evolution, where curiosity, empathy, and connection matter just as much as what's in the glass. And these women? They are thriving in every measure of it.

g1a7e

Polished to Perfection

There is a particular kind of pride in seeing the familiar rendered extraordinary. At Four Seasons Kuala Lumpur, the Jewels of Malaysia Afternoon Tea draws from flavours most Malaysians grew up with—pandan kaya spread thick on morning toast, the heady pull of Musang King, the sun-sweetened flesh of Harumanis mango—and reimagines them not to impress, but to honour. The ingredients were always there; they simply needed the right care and creativity to make them shine.

Words: ANDREA WONG



Hidden in the folds of Chow Kit, Yap Ah Shak House brings together French indulgence, Italian comfort, Japanese jazz culture, and Southeast Asian soul under one roof.

Words: PATRICK LOH

The House of Appetite

KL moves at the speed of a dinner reservation. One week it's a cafe hidden behind a florist, next it's a six-concept dining hub everyone cannot wait to discover. In a city where eating is practically a national sport, new F&B spots appear faster than group chats can decide where to go.

One destination stirring up the scene is Yap Ah Shak House in Chow Kit. Think French bistro elegance, Italian comfort, Japanese jazz culture, cocktail bars, live music, art spaces, and co-working corners, all stitched together under one roof.



Brasserie Alma, French Cuisine

If your idea of happiness involves butter, wine, and the smell of onions caramelising for what feels like eternity, Brasserie Alma deserves your immediate attention. The French kitchen remains faithful to its classical French backbone, but updated with a modern sensibility.

The French onion soup is rich and deeply savoury, while standout mains include the Black Angus tenderloin that's cooked to medium-rare perfection paired with peppercorn sauce and herbed butter, and the sole dressed in capers and lemon butter sauce, keeping your diet on the right side of respectable. brasseriealma.co



Osteria Gamberoni, Italian Cuisine

Italian food already knows how to flirt. Osteria Gamberoni simply turns the charm up slightly for local palates without losing its soul. The handmade pastas alone are a reason to visit.

Our absolute favourites: tagliolini gamberi e limone (pasta with tiger prawns and ricotta), risotto al nero (squid ink risotto with seabass flakes, prawn, squid, and clams), ravioli granchio (pasta with crab meat and crab bisque sauce), and reginette all'agnello (pasta with slow-cooked lamb ragu and parmesan).

And because restraint has no place here, the Roman-style thin crust pizzas, especially the quattro formaggi and prosciutto e tartufo, make a convincing argument for ordering 'just one more dish'. gamberoni.co



Kiku, Japanese Cuisine

Kiku isn't just a Japanese eatery. It's also a jazz kissaten lounge—a concept born in Japan in the 1920s where people gathered to listen to vinyl records over drinks. Here, that nostalgic listening culture meets comfort food with a playful edge.

The menu moves between crisp sandos stuffed with gyū katsu or tori katsu, and donburi options like oyakodon, katsu curry don, and miso halibut don. And yes, there are highballs because a jazz lounge without one would feel almost illegal. kissakiku.co



The Botanical Arts Society, British Cuisine

For all our devotion to Malaysian food, there are days when only a proper British-style comfort plate will do, and The Botanical Arts Society handles that craving with a polished brunch-and-teahouse approach.

The menu moves easily between lighter option—soup of the day, Cobb salad, steak sandwiches, and tuna melts—and heartier fare including Black Angus burgers, fish and chips, cottage pie, and The Late Breakfast. Afternoon tea regulars are present too. Carrot cake, walnut brownies, and banoffee pie are all waiting patiently beside cups of tea and warm conversations. botanicalartsociety.co



Kapitan's Club, Southeast Asian Cuisine

Southeast Asian cooking is loud with herbs, spices, and deeply generous with flavour. Kapitan's Club leans right into that spirit, borrowing influences from all across the region including Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia, and Malaysia while slipping in subtle Japanese touches along the way.

On the menu: nasi lemak kapitan, Katong laksa, and appetisers like bergedil, otak-otak, and ebiko on sourdough. Finish the meal with a cham c because a Malaysian ending is still the best one. kapitansclub.co



Terrasse, Champagne and Cocktail Bar

Every ambitious dining hub is crowned with a rooftop bar dressed for late nights and spontaneity. Terrasse plays that role beautifully. The champagne list alone reads like a celebration waiting to happen: Dom Perignon 2013, Ruinart Blanc De Blancs, Veuve Clicquot Yellow Label, and Chandon Brut.

Cocktails such as Kir Royal, French Martini, and Sidecar cover the classics with confidence while the spirits list stretches generously across whisky, gin, cognac, vodka, bourbon, and beyond. Whites, reds, rosés? Craving for Volcan Reposado tequila? Terrasse has it all. terrassekl.co



Bun Intended

Napkins at the ready, sleeves firmly rolled up. These are the five burger joints worth getting your hands dirty for.

Words: VANESSA L

Picture messy loads (the delicious kind)—smoky char, perfectly stacked tiers of red meat, crisp greens and secret sauces no one saw coming. The kind of thing worth wrapping both hands around. Burgers may be simple in concept, but a truly great one is harder to find than it should be.

Trace it back and you'll land in Hamburg, where what we now call burger meat was once little more than the leftover scraps of prime cuts, ground down and sold cheap. An afterthought that somehow became the main event, today that same patty is stacked high, sourced carefully, and treated like the experience it always deserved to be. Not bad for leftovers. Here are the burgers in KL doing it justice.



Alta Cafe

Tucked away on the second floor, Alta Cafe may fly under the radar, but its understated cool is bound to draw people in. What feels like mere European-Scandinavian coffeehouse sensibility may well become your next comfort corner. It's helmed, notably, by Chef Christian Recomio, whose artistry shows up in every plate. One look at the stacks Alta flips and you'll know what we mean. The Classic Altaburger sets the tone: double Angus patty, cheddar melt, red onions for bite, and enough secret sauce to keep things messy, all served in a soft potato roll. The Burger of the Month keeps things interesting beyond the standard lineup. [@alta_cafe](#)



Decker's

Once Triple Decker and now simply Decker's, the name may have changed but the obsession hasn't. What started as pop-ups and word-of-mouth buzz has since landed at REXKL, and the lines didn't take long to build. Here, it's not just about the sear but the smash: crisp, caramelised edges giving way to tender, juicy beef. With 100% Angus on the menu, there are no questions asked, only your next move: single, double, or triple. [@deckers.official](#)



Hot Buns Co.

"Comfort food, made like it matters." The cheese-washed tones of the establishment might hint at it, but it's what's between the handcrafted buns that smashes the point home. Hot Buns Co. at APW Bangsar is where stack attacks happen, with buns fresh off Patties & Dough. Start with the iconic Cheeseburger: double-pressed Hereford smashed patties, house sauce, pickles, and American cheese. For something richer, the Bone Marrow Burger delivers—bone marrow butter with confit garlic and roasted herb running through every bite. Then there's the Creamy Jalapeño, where bacon jam meets cream cheese. [@hotbunsco](#)



Mean Mince

Tucked in Mutiara Damansara, this stripped-back corner channels small-town America, where the subdued decor lets the menu do the talking. The MM Deep Fried Burger makes the case: a 125g patty wrapped in special bread dough, loaded with caramelised onions, American cheddar, and stretchy mozzarella. Not your standard stack, but an unapologetic one. Rounded out with sliders, crisped sides, and shakes, the supporting cast is never an afterthought. [@meanmince](#)



Fowlboys

"Home is where the heat is." You taste it right off the bun at Fowlboys, where fried chicken is treated less like comfort food and more like craft, elevated into something closer to an art form. Served on their signature steel tray, it's layered over waffles or tucked into enriched yeast buns. The O.G. is a best-seller for a reason: chicken thigh brined for 24 hours, house 'cluck sauce', jalapeño pickles, and sweet 'fowl jam', all held in a soft potato bun. For those who like to dial up the heat, the Motherclucker lets you set your own spice, stacked with house slaw and built for a punch of flavour. Beyond this flaming flock, the experience speaks for itself once you take that first bite, so let the chicken do what words can't. [@fowlboyskl](#)



GRAZE / The Bite

Hands Across Borders

At Picaro, Auntie Omakase introduced Malaysian diners to her heartfelt approach to Korean cooking.

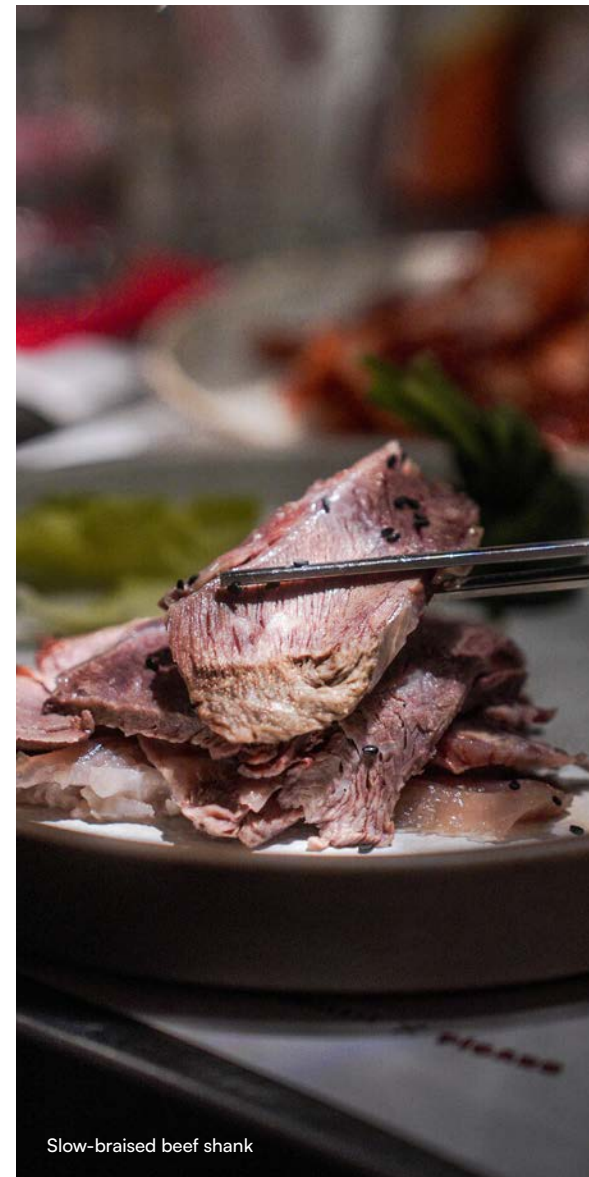
Words: PATRICK LOH

You've seen her on Netflix's *Culinary Class Wars*. Chef Kim Mi-ryeong—better known as Auntie Omakase—has made her first-ever overseas collaboration with Picaro. The Korean chef was in KL for just five nights, launching the restaurant's Off-Menu Limited Edition Vol. 1, the inaugural chapter of the restaurant's new seasonal collaboration series. This first edition celebrated Korean culinary heritage, brought to life in Picaro's lively open-kitchen setting. As Korean culture continues to captivate audiences across Southeast Asia and neighbouring regions, interest in the country's food has grown well beyond K-dramas and K-pop. Diners today are increasingly curious about regional dishes, family recipes, and the stories behind them.

AUNTIE OMAKASE'S COOKING DISCIPLINE

Auntie Omakase is known for her calm, methodical approach in the kitchen, where precision is her hallmark. Yet what truly won audiences over and set her apart from Michelin-starred competitors wasn't just technical skill but something far more personal: her cooking, which embodies the Korean idea of *sonmat*, often described as the 'taste of the hands'—food shaped by years of practice and genuine care.

Also, that warmth extended beyond the plate. Throughout dinner, she moved from table to table, personally feeding guests bites of her own cooking, turning the evening into something that felt more like a family gathering than a chef collaboration.



Slow-braised beef shank

PICARO: FOOD, COCKTAILS, AND A LITTLE CHAOS

Picaro has earned a reputation as one of KL's most entertaining dining destinations. Chefs cook in full view while the dining room gradually transforms into something closer to a party rather than a conventional dinner service.

Here, servers dance atop the bar, challenge guests to drinking countdowns, and before long, may have unsuspecting patrons joining them on tabletops.

Rather than simply refreshing its menu, Picaro has chosen to bring in



Andong noodle soup



Andong cabbage jeon

guest chefs from abroad, creating experiences that are both limited and impossible to replicate once they're gone. In a city constantly chasing the next exciting reservation, the format feels like a natural fit. However, that leaves one question: how does Auntie Omakase fit into all this chaos?

AGAINST ALL ODDS

On paper, the pairing seemed unlikely. Picaro is bold and larger than life. Auntie Omakase built her reputation on studied restraint and understated cooking. Yet within minutes of service, any doubts quickly disappeared.

The chef left her composed screen persona at the door and emerged with a soju shot in one hand and a bell in the other, enthusiastically encouraging the room to drink along with her.

Between feeding guests and downing shots, she danced around the kitchen to blasting K-pop while ringing the bell she had been carrying all evening. It was then that the collaboration made perfect sense.

FROM SCREEN TO TABLE

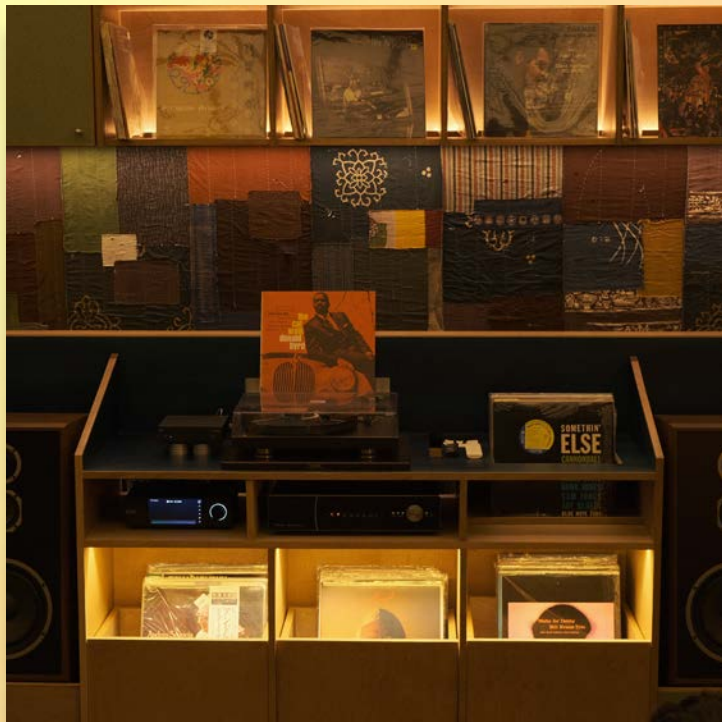
It was a rare treat to have these dishes, admired on screen, finally on the table—sesame-grilled shiitake, Andong cabbage jeon, and slow-braised beef shank experienced at last beyond the frame.

SPICING UP KL'S DINING SCENE

KL's appetite for new experiences shows no signs of slowing down. Food lovers are increasingly willing to seek out limited-run events. If the debut edition of this seasonal collaboration is any indication, Picaro may be onto something. The only question now is who will be next. And will they feed us too? **D**



Auntie Omakase personally feeding guests



On The Record

In a city that rarely slows down, these eight vinyl spots invite you to spend a couple hours in a different spin cycle altogether.

Words: VANESSA L

In a world that traded tactile dials for touchscreens, vinyl somehow never lost its place in the rotation. There are collectors and casual listeners, then there are crate diggers, a different breed altogether, driven by something closer to ritual than hobby. Imagine diving headfirst into record stacks, neck-deep in search of a single soulful pressing.

For years, Kuala Lumpur's listening culture lived in record stores and hidden haunts. Now, that same spirit echoes through a new wave of listening bars across the city. Spaces that blur dining, social ritual, and sonic sanctuary, offering a place to sit still and truly hear.



Belum Friday

Be it the name hinting at a week not yet complete, or the kopitiam-esque space harking back to a nostalgia only traditional coffee shops harbour, Belum Friday captures hearts with its Art Deco interior and stomachs with local comforts—kaya toast smeared with house seafood paste, hand-pulled noodles with minced wagyu, and lychee cheesecake sweetening the close. A seat at the outdoor patio feels like embarking on a long train ride, with Wynton Marsalis spinning on vinyl and life below playing out like figures in a diorama. @belumfriday

Eternyl Vinyl Café

To catalogue Eternyl Vinyl as a mere café is to miss the point, like judging a record by its sleeve. With over 500 vinyl records spanning R&B, hip-hop, and classical, the space is bathed in liquid amber light, each shelf reflecting a lifelong devotion to music, craft and collecting. Part jazz kissa and part acoustic haven, it treats listening as ritual without ever feeling exclusive. First-timers are gently guided by the staff, so take a seat, choose a record, and press play. Every regular began with a first spin. @eternylvinyl



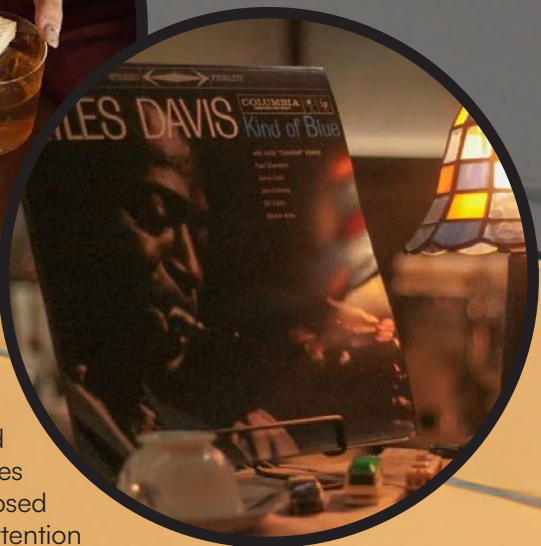
Kool Kongs

Widely known as Penang's first listening lounge, Kool Kongs strikes a balance between palate and playback. Set within Hotel Mokokoy, it's quite a discreet find until the hi-fi system hits you. Regular vinyl DJ sets keep the needle moving over the weekend, best enjoyed with a Sea Is A Lady cocktail in one hand and a Kongs Bikini Sandwich in the other. @kool_kongs



Latibule Coffee

Latibule Coffee, with its two-toned corners, vivid palette, and house rules that favour stillness, is a subtly composed kissaten in Ara Damansara where attention is the guiding principle. The menu is small but very intentional, from the Sibeh Dirty Latte—Brazil fazenda espresso over chilled distilled milk—to in-house egg pudding and a clear preference for dark roasts. The soundtrack includes Cantonese classics from the likes of Leslie Cheung, the music stirring itself into every sip. @latibule.coffee



Photography: Mario: @kymberly, Instagram

Listen HiFi Café

A sun-soaked escape above the hustle and bustle of Chow Kit, Listen HiFi Café feels like a private island in the sky. Perched above Jalan Kamunting with the KL Tower on one side and the city’s historic streets on the other, the mirrored, minimalist space opens into a view like a living postcard. The mood follows suit: unhurried, warm, and entirely easy to lose an afternoon in. Its vinyl collection leans into the now, contemporary and familiar, spinning records that shape today’s listening habits rather than digging through the archives. It’s little wonder the room gathers a crowd fluent in the same musical era. Less a listening bar, more a frequency they all share. @listenhifi



Monk

With only ten seats and a menu as pared-back as the philosophy behind it, Monk is intimacy approached with intention. Beneath its simplicity lies careful attentiveness, from the sourcing of ingredients to the 200-plus vinyl sleeves that shape the lounge’s soundtrack. The space feels like a private sanctuary, an almost Tokyo-like vinyl room where shoji-style grids cast a soft glow over the amber-lit interior. Within this listening haven, audio escapism gives way to French house-bakes and Yunnan black tea, as crackling analogue sounds coax the hours to slip by unnoticed. @monk_41c



Stereotype

Contrary to its name, Stereotype isn’t one to conform. Intimate but far from hushed, it’s a sonorous haunt where DJs spins past midnight and easy camaraderie takes centrestage, with the vinyl records forming only half the story. Less a space to retreat into, more one where the music pairs strangers into company and conversation flows as freely as the sound. As a sober bar, the drinks are non-alcoholic but far from short on character. Between spiced zero-proof coolers and the sambal garlic butter tiger prawn spaghetti served in a mug, the playful irreverence that defines the crowd carries through to everything on the menu, and lingers in the music on the turntable. @stereotype.pj



Vintage Kissa

Look up and a trumpet chandelier presides over a room where guests linger over croffles, pastries, and a warm cup in hand. Look down and a vinyl-styled mat quietly points the way to the Oriental Room, where records spin and analogue audio takes the limelight. Vintage Kissa reveals itself as two sides of the same record—one devoted to comfort and conversation, the other to pure, uninterrupted listening. @vintagekissacafe



Midday Escape

These six fine-dining spots deliver satisfying afternoon resets that feel indulgent without slowing you down.

Words: PATRICK LOH

There are days when you're wedged between a packed workday, trying to stay locked in, and a deadline that feels personally offended by your existence. Your energy is low, your colleague is about to collapse, and only a very good lunch stands between you and a full-blown headache.

On the rare, blessed occasions when the office is a little quieter, consider stretching that lunch just enough to feel human again. Here are six fine-dining restaurants to escape to for a satisfying lunch before you slip back to that spreadsheet.



Nobu KL

Nobu is known for lunch sets that manage to be generous without slowing you down. Think sizable portions that arrive quickly and leave you surprisingly functional for your 2pm meeting.

From the à la carte lunch menu, there's Japanese wagyu, plus the Pre Fixe Lunch set starting from RM190. If speed is the priority, go straight for the Matsuhisa Bento Box (from RM250) or the Set Lunch & Donburi plates. nobukl.com



DC Restaurant

If your lunch strategy involves impressing a client, then DC Restaurant is your move. The menu changes every season, shifting with French techniques and multicultural influences, so nothing feels on autopilot. You can choose between a three-course or four-course lunch, starting from RM358.

The menu includes refined dishes such as Ofunato Bay scallops, slow roasted rack of lamb, Foshan quail, A5 Miyazaki chateaubriand, and Brittany bleu lobster tail with nduja gratin. Lunch ends with a choice of cheese or dessert and at that point, the deal is probably already done. dcrestaurant.com



Skillet

Right in the middle of KL, where everyone is half-running, half-texting, half-forgetting to breathe, Skillet feels like a controlled pause button.

Here, lunch comes in two courses that includes an appetiser and main; three adds dessert; four gives you everything plus an extra appetiser to ease you in. Rest assured, each course is well worth the wait. Prices start from RM138, with beverage pairing from RM88 for two glasses—ideal if you're leaning into the full afternoon experience. skilletkl.com



Shang Palace

When lunch calls for something substantial but not sleep-inducing, Shang Palace at Shangri-La KL has the answer. Its Business Set Menu (RM120) serves up a polished five-course Cantonese feast that strikes the sweet spot between indulgent and wholesome.

On the menu: soy-glazed seafood fried noodles; braised soup with goji berries, fresh mushrooms, and choy sum; and ginger-infused chicken with black fungus in a claypot, among other elegantly executed favourites. shangri-la.com



Tatsu

Tatsu is what happens when you want to mentally clock out from your desk while staying right here in KL. Take your pick from Black Angus beef sirloin teppanyaki or grilled black cod with teriyaki sauce, among many other options, from RM115.

Every set comes with steamed Koshihikari rice, chawanmushi, and a choice of sashimi or tempura. If you're after something quick but still fabulous, Chef Masuda's Signature Chirashi Sushi, served in a pomelo shell, is a standout. intercontinental.com



Nadodi

When the midday craving calls for South Asian fine dining with a little swagger, Nadodi answers loud and clear. Drawing inspiration from the wandering food cultures of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Sri Lanka, the restaurant turns age-old coastal flavours into plates that feel both rooted and wildly refined.

Expect dishes like Chettinad crab tarts, line-caught snapper with dashi rasam and Mount Schanck lamb with saffron rice from the lunch set menu (RM298). Midday meetings can wait. nadodi.com

Dining In



Danger

Not every dangerous food is the result of poor judgement. Sometimes it is just the result of generations of people looking at something poisonous, toxic, or otherwise inedible and deciding to figure it out anyway.

Words: COLIN GOMEZ

Of all the food safety advice out there, perhaps the most fundamental is: if it can kill you, don't eat it. Sounds sensible enough, doesn't it? And not exactly difficult to adhere to either. Yet humanity has spent millennia treating that maxim as more of a suggestion than a rule.

Nature's not short on poisonous plants, toxic animals, and all manner of ingredients that seem determined not to become food under any circumstances. But did we say, "okay, fair enough," and just leave them alone? No. That doesn't much sound like us. We've somehow managed to weaponise the very particles that make up matter itself, remember?

Our response to nature's quite reasonable insistence on not being eaten is to take things and subject them to all sorts of culinary experimentation in an effort to quash that resistance. Whether it's boiling, fermenting, hanging them out to dry, or just straight up burying them, we've gone to great lengths indeed to pummel nature into submission for even having the audacity to want to live.

And you know what? We've largely succeeded in this regard. Here is a collection of dishes that, to an outsider, can seem completely baffling, but to the people who eat them, are beloved fixtures of their local cuisine.



**Pangium Edule
(Buah Keluak) – Southeast Asia**

Starting a little closer to home, we’ve got our own entry in the “who thought this was a good idea?” list. The seeds of the Pangium edule tree, more commonly known as buah keluak, contain hydrogen cyanide. Fortunately, generations before us figured out that if you boil the seeds, bury them in ash and soil, and then leave them to ferment for weeks on end, something rather remarkable happens. The once-toxic seeds emerge black, earthy, and intensely savoury. They’re perhaps best known for their role in Peranakan cooking, where they lend their distinctive flavour to dishes such as ayam buah keluak. There’s something truly admirable about the persistence involved in making this edible.



Hákarl – Iceland

Normally, you’d like your seafood to be as fresh as possible. With the Greenland shark, however, it’s quite the opposite. You see, its flesh contains compounds that render it toxic when fresh. To make the meat safe to eat, it is traditionally buried beneath gravel and stones, where the pressure helps force out the toxic fluids. After that, it is hung to dry for several months, allowing the remaining compounds to break down over time. The finished product, known as hákarl, draws comparisons to blue cheese, urine, and old rubber. Yet for many Icelanders, it remains an important culinary tradition.



Sannakji – South Korea

Sannakji is a popular Korean dish made from small octopus that is chopped and served immediately. The octopus is not alive anymore, but its nervous system remains active for a short time afterwards, causing its tentacles to continue writhing across the plate. The real risk comes from the suction cups, which remain functional long enough to attach themselves to the inside of the mouth or throat, creating a genuine choking hazard if eaten carelessly.

Ackee – Jamaica

Ackee is Jamaica’s national fruit and forms one half of the country’s national dish, ackee and saltfish. It has a creamy texture and a mild flavour likened to scrambled eggs. There is, however, one small caveat, as you’d expect from an entrant in this article. When unripe, ackee contains high levels of hypoglycin A, a toxin capable of causing severe illness and potentially fatal drops in blood sugar. Thankfully though, the solution is quite straightforward. You just wait, that’s it. Once the fruit ripens and naturally splits open on the tree, the toxic compounds fall to safe levels and the flesh becomes suitable for consumption.



Images: Pexels; Brunk-Tan, Wikimedia Commons; Kirk K and Chris Wronski, Flickr



Cassava – Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia

Now you might be thinking, “Cassava? What? Isn’t that a staple food in a bunch of different countries?” And yes, you’re right, it feeds hundreds of millions of people every day. But it’s also, in its raw state, mildly poisonous. The roots of cassava harbour compounds that can release cyanide if eaten without proper processing. Symptoms of poisoning can, in severe cases, include paralysis and death. And yet cassava is everywhere, because communities across the world have developed sophisticated methods to make it safe for eating, such as peeling, grating, soaking and fermenting.

The takeaway

For most of us, there’s a temptation to dismiss these as little more than culinary dares. But that would be doing these ingredients a disservice, because what stands out about them isn’t so much the danger as the ingenuity behind them.

Every one of these dishes exists because generations of people have learned precisely how to handle an ingredient that might’ve otherwise been inedible. They discovered when to harvest, how long to ferment, what to bury, what to dry, and, perhaps most importantly, what not to do. In that sense, these dishes are really monuments to the human capacity to adapt.

RAISED BY TIME

From custom dry-ageing rooms and exclusive cuts to panoramic city views, Marble 8 continues to prove that great beef needs little more than patience, precision, and respect.



Wagyu tenderloin marble score 9



Marble 8

For a city that's obsessed with rooftop dining, KL has no shortage of places with a view. The trick is finding one where the food can hold its own once you've finished taking photos of the skyline. That is where Marble 8 earns its reputation.

Perched on Level 56 of Petronas Tower 3, Marble 8 has spent the last decade building its identity around one thing: beef. Not just serving it, but understanding it, ageing it, cutting it, and treating it with the kind of attention usually reserved for fine wine.

At the heart of the restaurant is its dry-ageing programme. Hidden

behind the dining room is a custom-built ageing cellar where premium cuts, such as the exclusive Marble 8 cut, are left to slowly develop much deeper flavours and richer aromas. Unlike many steakhouses that receive ready-portioned cuts, Marble 8 takes a more hands-on approach. The beef is delivered bone-in, which allows the meat to age naturally for at least 21 days before it reaches the grill.

The result is beef with greater depth. Richer, nuttier, and carrying the sort of complexity that makes diners pause midway through a conversation just to figure out what they're tasting.

The restaurant's approach is heavily influenced by The Marini's Group founder Cavaliere Modesto Marini, who developed the exclusive Marble 8 cuts served today. His philosophy centres on traceability—a word that appears frequently in fine dining but is often used loosely. Here, it means knowing exactly where the cattle come from, how they were raised, and how the meat was handled before arriving in KL.

The wagyu and Black Angus served at Marble 8 are sourced from one of Australia's largest independent beef suppliers, a family-owned operation that oversees every stage of the



Wagyu ribeye



Bone marrow

production. From breeding and grazing to processing and distribution, every step remains under one roof. It's a level of control that gives the restaurant confidence not only in quality, but consistency.

Fortunately, the kitchen fully understands that a premium cut requires restraint more than reinvention. The focus remains on allowing the beef to speak for itself, whether it's a beautifully marbled wagyu ribeye or a robust Black Angus. The cooking is precise, the seasoning measured, and the presentation elegant without feeling theatrical.

That said, Marble 8 is not only for carnivores. The menu also includes bone marrow, seafood dishes, vegetarian options, and house-label caviar for those looking to dial up the indulgence. It's a thoughtful balance that makes the restaurant suitable for both dedicated steak enthusiasts and those looking for alternatives.



Chocolate fondant

The setting helps too. Floor-to-ceiling windows frame sweeping views of KL, turning the city into part of the décor. As daylight fades and the skyline begins to glow, the room takes on a quieter, more intimate energy.

For guests who prefer to stretch the evening a little longer, there's Privé, the restaurant's private lounge dedicated to premium whiskies and cigars. Settle in with a chocolate fondant or classic tiramisu and enjoy the rare luxury of an uninterrupted ending to the night. Think less after-party, more graceful finale.

Since opening in 2014, Marble 8 has weathered relocations, shifting dining trends, and the constant arrival of newer, flashier venues. With its elegant interiors, polished service, and sweeping views of KL's skyline, it could have easily leaned into spectacle.

Yet what has kept it relevant for more than a decade is something far simpler: the steak. While many restaurants chase trends, Marble 8 continues to focus on doing this one thing exceptionally well, refining its craft year after year. And when the steak is this good, that's usually enough.

Bangkok's New Guard

Spanning cuisines and styles, Bangkok's most compelling kitchens aren't chasing the next thing. They are the next thing, and they're reshaping the city's table.

Words: ANDREA WONG

Bangkok's fine-dining landscape continues to evolve, shaped by chefs increasingly focused on refinement over reinvention. This is less a definitive ranking than a guide by inclination, spanning cuisines and approaches that may come as a surprise, reflecting where the city is headed next.



Dry-aged fish with tom kha cold soup

REIMAGINING THAI ROYAL CUISINE

A recent addition to Bangkok's dining scene, WisetWiso opens with a name steeped in history, wiset for the cooks of royal courts and wiso for beauty, and the kitchen makes good on both.



Rice dumpling in ginger soup

Chef Chakkrapoom Boonyakom grew up inside Thai culinary tradition in the most literal sense: a family with royal cooking roots and a grandmother who served in the palace. That inheritance shows, not as nostalgia, but as conviction. The cooking is precise without being overly precious, rooted without being rigid, and carefully sourced with the kind of reverence that makes seasonality feel less like a buzzword and more like a philosophy.

Highlights from the tasting menu linger: a chilled tom kha poured over dry-aged fish that's cool and composed, a pomelo salad with sun-dried squid roe that brings a savoury edge, and a rich and grounding beef panang with kra-bok rice. The glutinous rice dumpling in spiced ginger soup is a fitting close, warm and slow to leave. wisetwiso.com

FAMILIAR LOCAL FLAVOURS, ELEVATED

Khaan's tasting menu begins with a simple premise, Thai street food taken seriously, and builds from there. Led by Chef Sujira 'Aom' Pongmorn, the inaugural recipient of the Michelin Guide's Young Chef Award in 2021, the kitchen operates on a zero-waste philosophy. Sourcing directly from farmers and fishermen across Rayong and Ranong, they use ingredients end to end: seafood trimmings fermented into sauces, fruit peels reworked into infusions. Nothing is incidental.

Familiar formats are the starting point, not the destination. A cassava noodle dish is built on a roasted vegetable and fruit scrap sauce, finished



Cassava noodles you can season yourself



Khaan is situated on bustling Somkid Street

with crispy freshwater algae, house-grown bean sprouts and pine pepper —diners season it themselves in a nod to street-side dining. A daring crocodile tongue stir-fry is lifted with herbaceous pad cha; textural, punchy, and gone before you second-guess it.

Each course comes with just enough context, never overexplaining. Pairings in wine, tea, or juice thread through the progression, enhancing aromatics and gently softening edges. khaanbkk.com



Khao Yai duck with five spice curry

The decadent interior of Purple Laurel



Chilled cherry jelly with foie gras



confined by them. The space at Gaysorn Amarin follows suit, unfolding like a modern Jiangnan courtyard, where lattice carvings, hand-painted wallpaper, and lush greenery create an atmosphere that feels both intimate and transportive.

The menu has its standouts: chilled cherry jelly with foie gras, crispy golden sea cucumber, and a traditional Peking duck that earns its place on any list. A koi fish pudding with passion fruit closes things on a bright, clean note. @purplelaurel.bkk

A NEW STANDARD IN REFINED CHINESE DINING

Purple Laurel arrives in Bangkok with a serious pedigree: the first overseas outpost of celebrated Chinese chef Yu Bin, awarded a Diamond by China's Black Pearl Guide and named Best Chinese Restaurant in Bangkok by BK Top Tables this year.

The kitchen draws from Jiangnan cuisine—the delicate, ingredient-driven cooking of China's eastern heartland—layered with modern Cantonese technique. Chef Yu Bin's 'Yu-style' philosophy runs through every dish: precise, globally inflected, and grounded in his Hangzhou origins without being

Crispy golden sea cucumber



INDIAN FOOD BEYOND THE NORM

Jhol has spent the past six years reshaping what Indian food looks like in Bangkok, deftly moving the conversation away from the familiar and into the full breadth of the country's coastline. Think less butter chicken, more the layered, spice-forward cooking of regions stretching from West Bengal to Gujarat, where seafood, coconut, and tropical ingredients such as tamarind and kokum take the lead.

The menu is punchy and deeply satisfying. The masala muska bun is buttery, spiced, and hard to stop at one; the Berhampur fried chicken wings come tangy and bold with just the right hit of heat, and the Andhra biryani lands fragrant and full-bodied.

The drinks here never feel like an afterthought. Cocktails mirror the food's intensity—bright, spiced, and occasionally smoky—built to move with the food, not against it. The mocktails are equally as impressive: the Dushala, a mix of berries, roselle, and jasmine finished with an orange sphere and popping candy, is as playful as it sounds and better than it needs to be. jholrestaurant.com



The bar at Jhol



Kundapura ghee roasted chicken with dosa



Tamarind Margarita

Carb Diem

Between the jungle trails, steep runs, and open-water swim of The Chapman's Challenge, one lesson became abundantly clear: when it comes to endurance, food isn't the reward. It's part of the strategy.

Words: TENGKU ZAI



Everyone has their own definition of fun. Mine, apparently, involves running through humid jungle trails. Long before endurance races became weekend pursuits, however, endurance was a matter of survival. During World War II, British Colonel Freddy Spencer Chapman spent years evading Japanese forces in Malaya, relying on grit and an extraordinary will to stay alive.

Today, his legacy is honoured through The Chapman's Challenge at Pangkor Laut Resort, where participants tackle the same rugged terrain that shaped his extraordinary story. Held each May, the race combines a hilly 3.8KM run, a tough 2.8KM jungle trek, and a 1KM open-water swim around Emerald Bay. While not as gruelling as a full triathlon, it's no walk on the beach.

As I soon discovered, endurance is not simply a matter of fitness. Beyond training lies another crucial factor: fuel. For many of us, working out is partly about being able to eat more. As it turns out, performance depends as much on nutrition as it does on training.

So I sought advice from Hazel Chapman, a longtime participant in the race honouring her grandfather, and from professional triathlete and SEA Games medallist Riki Shinozuka, this year's



overall winner. Their message was clear: what you eat can make the difference between crossing the finish line and performing at your best.

BEFORE FLAG OFF

The morning of the race is never the time for experimentation. Both athletes favour simple, familiar foods that provide energy without upsetting the stomach. Chapman swears by, "peanut butter and banana toast." Shinozuka's routine is similarly uncomplicated. "A handful of Haribos, two cups of coffee, and a banana," he says of his pre-race breakfast, adding that it's since become his regular race-day ritual.

As for what to avoid, Chapman recommends steering clear of "spicy or heavy foods on race day," while Shinozuka's list also includes "anything even remotely spicy," alongside dairy and beer.

ON THE GO

While many might assume endurance events are won through fitness alone, Shinozuka argues that nutrition can be a deciding factor. He would rather be, "slightly undertrained but perfectly fuelled," than the other way around. "No matter how fit and race ready I may be, bad fuelling will lead to a long, miserable, and disastrous day," he says. "It may even end it prematurely."

That means consuming far more carbohydrates than most recreational athletes expect. Shinozuka aims for around 100 grams of carbohydrates per hour during longer events, starting with a concentrated gel before the race and continuing with one every 30 minutes.

He also drinks fluids fortified with electrolytes and carbohydrates, topping up whenever possible at aid stations. The objective is simple: replace energy as quickly as the body burns through it.

POST-RACE REFUELLING

Crossing the finish line may signal the end of the race, but the fuelling doesn't stop there. Recovery begins almost immediately, and according to Chapman, the body's first request is remarkably simple. "Always water," she says, with one exception at Pangkor Laut. "The fresh coconuts at Emerald Bay are the drink I never knew I needed."



Of course, one of the great joys of The Chapman's Challenge is that recovery comes with a feast. For

Chapman, a successful post-race spread must include "the grilled prawns and the satay chicken skewers," followed closely by "the key lime pie and rocky road dessert." And you can bet that the post-race celebration has all that and then some.

Now, I'm seriously considering signing up for next year's challenge from 28 to 30 May 2027. Same test of grit, but with a little more training and a lot more attention to fuelling. I'm determined to beat my own time. After all,

there are worse ways to have a mid-life crisis. At least this one involves a healthy dose of adventure and plenty of good food. Since eating isn't just the reward but part of the race itself. pangkorlautresort.com



Images: Courtesy of YTL; Unsplash

Beyond The Barrel

Mortlach breaks from convention with Neverbound Release 01, a bold new whisky that trades age statements for flavour, texture, and an unmistakably savoury depth.

Words: PATRICK LOH

Tired of seeing the same familiar whisky labels making the rounds at every bar cart and back shelf? Mortlach is here to disrupt your pour with the arrival of its inaugural Neverbound Collection in Malaysia.

Leading the charge is Mortlach Neverbound Release 01—the brand's first whisky that refreshingly ditches the usual obsession with age statements in favour of something far more interesting: flavour.

For the first time, Mortlach has finished a whisky in French oak casks sourced from the Cognac region. The wood itself is air-dried for up to four years before use, allowing the casks to bring structure and depth without overpowering the spirit. The result? Mortlach's signature 'meaty' profile becomes richer, darker, and more layered.

On the nose, expect red fruits, gentle wood spice, soy sauce, and smoked meat woven together with surprising elegance. The palate opens sweet with demerara sugar before shifting gears into spice, savoury richness, and dense complexity. The finish is long, warming, and intense.

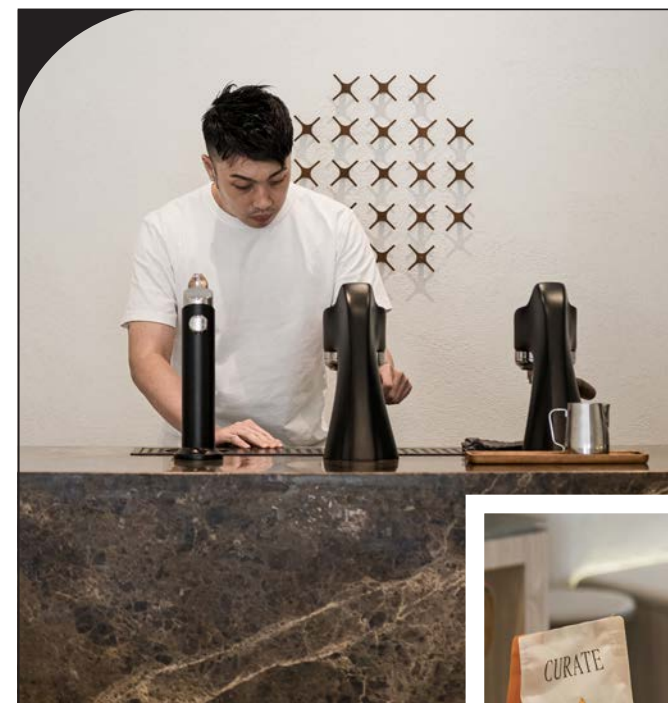
Find Mortlach Neverbound Release 01 at The Chamber and Cellar Eighteen. Quantities are limited in Malaysia, so consider this your chance to pour something your whisky circle hasn't discovered yet. 



The Other Side of the Story

Story of Ono has become a reference point in Kuala Lumpur's specialty café scene, known for its measured hybrid approach to coffee and matcha.

Words: COLIN GOMEZ



Story of Ono began in late 2021 in SS2, Petaling Jaya, at a moment when founder, Shaun Liew, was recalibrating himself instead of coffee for a change. A former café operator, F&B lecturer, and two-time Malaysia Brewers Cup champion, Shaun has grown Ono to achieve global acclaim.

HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN STORY OF ONO MADE THE GLOBAL TOP 10?

To be honest, when I first started off Ono, my goal and my vision was to be the best café in the world. When they announced we were number nine last year, I didn't know how to react. We were a bit overwhelmed, but at the same time, truly grateful.

WHAT DETAILS SHAPE THE ONO EXPERIENCE BEYOND THE COFFEE?

It's in the smaller details. If you can see through the branding, for example, the choice of colour for the cups is very well curated in order to ensure that it's cohesive as a brand. Paying attention to the small details is important. When it comes to food and drink presentation, it's not just *cincai*. It's well thought out and carefully created.

WHERE DOES MALAYSIA'S SPECIALTY COFFEE SCENE STAND TODAY?

The one thing that's good about Malaysia is that

we're a progressive specialty coffee country at the moment. What I'm really happy about is we're progressive in terms of exploration—trying different coffees, trying different signature drinks, and exploring anything coffee-related, which is great, because specialty coffee actually started later here than it did in some other countries. But our growth has been super significant, to the point where other countries around the world are taking notice.

WHAT TRENDS IN SPECIALTY COFFEE ARE EXCITING YOU RIGHT NOW—AND WHAT'S NOT?

The current trending one is pre-batched espressos, where people batch their espresso the night before, and then when it's slam time the next morning, it's easy and convenient. It can be good, it can be bad, it really depends on how you extract the coffee.

I think in the Malaysian market, people are starting to look for signature drinks that are made with coffee. There are a lot of cafés in the market today that are offering signature coffee drinks, but you have to make sure that they're not too complicated to the point where people cannot understand them. 

RAISING the bar

Bartending has evolved into a profession built on creativity, leadership, and emotional intelligence. A new generation of women is helping to lead that change.

Words: PATRICK LOH

Photography: AARON LEE/LENSWORKS
PRODUCTION; Creative direction and
fashion styling: ANDREA WONG; Make-up:
JOEY YAP; Hair: NICOLE NG; Photography
Assistant: ABHAR

(From left) On Maria: Top and pants, Alia Bastamam. Earrings and boots, stylist's own. On Rachel: Dress, Alia Bastamam. Earrings, stylist's own. On Shuen: Dress, Alia Bastamam. Earrings (worn throughout), Shuen's own. Necklace, stylist's own.



decade ago, a bartender's worth was often measured by speed, technique, and how flawlessly they could execute a negroni under pressure. Today, the job description is considerably longer. Modern bartenders are expected to juggle hospitality, creativity, leadership, education, social intelligence, and business acumen, often within the span of a single shift. They play hosts, are storytellers and problem-solvers, all while managing the bar. The cocktail is only one part of the performance.

When Diageo's World Class Malaysia made a comeback this year after nearly a decade away, it returned to a beverage landscape that barely resembled the one it left behind. Cocktail bars have become more ambitious. Guests are more informed, expectations are higher, and perhaps most noticeably, the people behind the bar have changed too. The numbers tell part of the story. When Amanda Wan won the competition in 2010, she made history as the first woman to represent Malaysia at the global finals in Athens. It was a milestone that felt bigger than a single victory. Then, in 2014, Leow Yinying took the title too, raising hopes that more women would follow.

However, the years that followed told a far different story. Progress seemed to stall, and the winners' circle became an all-male affair. By 2016, all four finalists at World Class Malaysia were men. For more than a decade after Yinying's win, no woman stood at the top again.

Fast forward to 2026, and the finals looked very different. Six women stood among the finalists, with Chang Yue Shuen, Assistant Manager of Coley, ultimately snatching up the national title and securing her place at the World Class Global Finals in Edinburgh, Scotland from 18–23 October.

“People think it’s just making drinks. But you’re managing expectations, reading people, solving problems.”

—CHANG YUE SHUEN



Blazer, waistcoat, and pants, Sandro.
Necklace, stylist's own.

WWW.PALATEASIA.COM

Dress, Sandro. Earrings, stylist's own.

“When I looked at how a bar operates, it reminded me of choreography.”

-MARIA ESCOBIA

But this is not a simple story about women entering what was once considered a male-dominated profession. It is about a profession that no longer looks the way it once did.

Technical skills still matter, but today's bartenders are expected to educate guests, read the room, and occasionally play therapist when someone has had a very difficult day. The best ones understand people as well as they understand spirits.

Perhaps that explains why women are thriving. Shuen, along with two finalists Maria Escobia, Bar Manager and Head Bartender of Penrose KL, and Rachel Hor, Bar Manager of Three X Co, arrived behind the bar from remarkably different backgrounds. One came from coffee, one from dance and pageantry, and one from the world of psychology.

Yet they possess qualities that are increasingly valuable in modern hospitality: curiosity, adaptability, empathy, communication, and an ability to connect with people. In other words, skills that can't be measured in ounces.

COFFEE WAS SHUEN'S FIRST LOVE

For Shuen, cocktails were never part of the original plan. “Coffee was my first love,” she says. Growing up, coffee was already part of daily life thanks to her mother, whose fondness for three-in-one coffee sparked Shuen's early curiosity about flavour and beverages. That curiosity followed her all the way to Singapore, where an internship unexpectedly altered the course of her career.

“I was given the opportunity to work behind the bar,” she recalls. “And I realised bartending offered the same things I loved about coffee—precision, creativity, and craftsmanship.” What began as an opportunity quickly became an obsession. Shuen immersed herself in learning, observing, and refining her craft, and eventually crossing paths with global bartending champion Bannie Kang, who became an important mentor to her. Yet for all the technical skills she acquired, it wasn't cocktails that convinced her to stay. It was people.

“What makes me stay is the connection,” she says. “You meet people from different cultures, hear different stories, and have conversations you wouldn't otherwise have. Every day is different.”

Moving to another country taught her lessons that continue to shape her approach behind the bar. Adapting to new environments and communication styles, and understanding different personalities became part of everyday life. Those experiences reinforced something she believes many people still misunderstand about bartending.

“People think it's just making drinks,” she says. “But behind the bar you're managing expectations, reading people, solving problems, and making sure guests feel extremely comfortable.”

Winning the competition may be the biggest achievement of her career so far, but Shuen views the title as part of a larger journey rather than a final destination.

“Winning isn't just about the title,” she says. “It's about every experience along the way and every person who supported me throughout the journey.”

More importantly, she hopes the victory helps shine a light on the talent emerging from Malaysia's growing bartending community. “Malaysia has so many talented bartenders,” she points out. “Competitions like this can push us to improve and motivate the next generation when they see someone from Malaysia competing on the global stage.”

FOR MARIA, A BAR IS SIMPLY A CHOREOGRAPHY OF COCKTAILS

If Shuen found bartending through coffee, Maria Escobia arrived via an entirely different path. Before stepping behind a bar, she spent years on stage.

A graduate of ASWARA, Maria trained extensively in multiple dance disciplines before she performed professionally with a dance company. Later, she ventured into freelance work, appearing in music videos, concerts, commercials, and productions alongside some of the country's biggest names, including Dato' Sri Hajah Siti Nurhaliza Tarudin. She also spent time in the pageant world, finishing as first runner-up at Miss Grand Kuala Lumpur 2017 and later as a Top 18 finalist in The Next Miss Universe Malaysia 2018.

At first glance, none of this seems particularly relevant to bartending. Maria disagrees. “When I looked at how a bar operates, it reminded me of choreography,” she says.



“Everyone can learn to make a good cocktail. But if you can connect with people and leave a lasting impression, they’ll remember you.”

-CHANG YUE SHUEN

(From left) On Shuen: Dress, Maarimaia. Sunglasses and shoes, stylist's own. On Maria: Dress, Maarimaia. Sunglasses, Maria's own. Boots, stylist's own. On Rachel: Dress, Maarimaia. Sunglasses and boots, stylist's own.

Watch a busy cocktail bar during service and the comparison begins to make sense. Orders arrive. Drinks are prepared. Guests are greeted. Conversations unfold. Staff move around one another in carefully coordinated patterns. It all happens simultaneously, yet somehow remains controlled, like a well-rehearsed dance.

“Taking orders, introducing the menu, making drinks, serving guests—there’s a sequence to everything,” she says. “There’s a rhythm and flow to it.”

Years spent performing in front of audiences also gave Maria an advantage that bartenders spend years developing. She can read a room. She understands body language. She knows when to engage and when to step back. Today, she totally believes that communication remains the profession’s most important skill.

“Guests are much more interested in what they’re drinking now,” she says. “They’re asking questions. They want to understand flavours, ingredients, and techniques.”

This means that bartenders increasingly need to become educators as well as service professionals. Equally important is leadership. Since moving into management, Maria realised that bartending extends far beyond the drinks themselves.

“You need to know how to explain things clearly, especially when you’re teaching someone or guiding a team,” she says.

And contrary to popular belief, the work begins long before the first guest arrives. At Penrose KL, preparations often start hours before opening. Ingredients are prepared, cocktails are batched, stations are organised, service plans are reviewed, and staff training takes place.

“People think bartenders come in, make drinks, and go home,” Maria says with a laugh. “They don’t see everything that happens before-hand,” she adds.

RACHEL HOR’S APPROACH TO THE PSYCHOLOGY OF HOSPITALITY

Rachel Hor’s route into bartending might be the least conventional of all. Long before she was shaking cocktails, she wanted to become a clinical psychologist. “Psychology fascinated me,” she says.

After completing her studies, she travelled to Georgia in the United States for an internship before pursuing a master’s degree. Then bartending happened almost by accident. A bartender called in absent and Rachel was asked to step in. There was no formal training programme waiting for her. No mentor guiding her through the process. Just a collection of delicious recipes.

“I followed the recipes and started making drinks,” she recalls. One of the first cocktails she ever made was a Southern Peach. “I don’t actually enjoy drinking spirits on their own,” she admits. “But I found it fascinating how different ingredients could come together and become something new.”

What started as a temporary assignment eventually became a career. Interestingly, Rachel doesn’t see psychology and bartending as separate worlds. If anything, she believes they’re remarkably similar. “Psychology taught me how to listen,” she says. “It taught me how to understand people beyond their words.”

That ability has become one of her greatest strengths behind the bar. Some guests want company and conversation while others want privacy. Some arrive celebrating while others simply need a quiet moment at the end of a difficult day. The challenge then lies in recognising the difference.

“In psychology, you’re trying to understand people’s thoughts and behaviour,” she says. “Behind the bar, it’s very similar. My job is to make people feel heard, seen, cared for, and valued.”

The same approach extends to leadership. Rachel often draws on those skills when mentoring her younger team members and helping them grow professionally.

“A bar is a living study of human behaviour,” she says. For her, the most important skill any bartender can possess isn’t technical ability alone, but the care and affection they have for their guests.

“You can teach someone how to make a cocktail,” she says. “You can’t teach someone to genuinely care about people.” The second one is curiosity. “Without curiosity, you stop learning,” she says.

“My job is to make people feel heard, seen, cared for, and valued.”

-RACHEL HOR

Blazer and dress, Maje. Earrings, Rachel’s own. Necklaces and rings, stylist’s own.



(From left) On Maria: Blazer, top, and skirt, Syomirizwa Gupta. On Shuen: Top and pants, Syomirizwa Gupta. On Rachel: Top, skirt and cummerbund, Syomirizwa Gupta. Earrings, Rachel's own.

MORE THAN JUST DRINKS

Ask most people what bartenders do and the answers tend to be predictable: make drinks, work late, and entertain guests. But the reality is far more complicated.

Managing stock and designing menus are only part of the job. Today's bartenders are expected to oversee operations, mentor staff, understand flavour science, and uphold service standards under pressure—all before making a single cocktail. The work has evolved from technical craft into a discipline centred as much on people as it is on drinks.

"Everyone can learn to make a good cocktail," says Shuen. "But if you can connect with people and leave a lasting impression, they'll remember you."

Rachel agrees. "A good bartender can make a perfect martini," she says. "A great bartender makes a guest feel seen." That distinction increasingly defines hospitality today. Guests may not remember the drink, but they rarely forget how someone made them feel.

WHY WOMEN ARE THRIVING

As bartending becomes more people-centric, many qualities traditionally overlooked are becoming increasingly valuable such as empathy, adaptability, and emotional intelligence.

Qualities all three women returned to during their conversations. For Shuen, it's about connection. For Rachel, it's care. For Maria, it's communication.

Together, they paint a picture of a profession that rewards far more than precision. And perhaps that helps explain why more women are thriving today than before.

"A long time ago, bartending was very much a male-dominated industry," says Shuen. "But things are changing."

Rachel has witnessed the shift firsthand. "It's good to see more women chasing things they might not have dared to pursue before," she says. At the same time, she is realistic about the work that remains. "It takes time to change perceptions." Even so, the progress is undeniable.

Having six female finalists at a bartending competition would have been difficult to imagine a decade ago. Today, it feels entirely natural, expected even. Malaysian bartending has never been more ambitious. Guests are far more knowledgeable, bars are more creative, standards are higher, and local talent is increasingly earning international recognition.

For Rachel, competitions provide something invaluable: visibility. "I

believe that Malaysia is ready to shine as a destination for world-class hospitality," she shares. Maria hopes the competition inspires others to step forward. "There's nothing wrong with making mistakes," she says. "The important thing is to try."

At the centre of it all stands Shuen, preparing to represent Malaysia at the World Class Global Finals in Scotland later this year. Yet, even after lifting the national trophy, her focus remains firmly on the people who helped her get there. "It's a reminder that every experience and every person who supported me along the way matters," she says.

Which perhaps says a lot about where bartending is headed. The future of the profession won't be defined solely by better cocktails, more elaborated techniques, or complex menus. It will be defined by people.

Malaysian bartending has evolved into a profession that rewards curiosity as much as craftsmanship, empathy as much as expertise, and connection as much as creativity. What sits behind this change is a subtle but significant cultural shift. These women are not the exceptions to that evolution. They are among those leading it, setting the benchmark behind the bar. **D**



Sustenance

À La Carte Blanche

Sabayon's new dinner menu at EQ, Kuala Lumpur, is less prescriptive, and more personal. Guests are invited to build their own tasting journey, moving freely between starters, mains or desserts; three courses or seven. Dishes like parsley risotto with king mushrooms, burdock root and pastis reflect Chef Steve Ariffin's precise interpretation of classical European cooking, grounded in seasonal local flavours. Yet once you are 51 floors up, with the city spread out below, the experience feels less about structure and more about freedom. Why stop at three when everything invites you to continue?

Words: ANDREA WONG



Traveller, Storyteller, Chef

Chef Wan has eaten his way across the world. But ask him about the meal he thinks about most, and the answer is disarmingly simple.

Words: TENGKU ZAI



Some chefs collect titles. Chef Wan collects moments. Malaysia's first celebrity chef and perhaps its most beloved culinary son, Datuk Dr. Redzuawan bin Ismail has spent more than three decades doing what few manage to sustain—keeping the world genuinely curious about Malaysian food. Trained in New York and Paris, he has carried the flavours of home across continents, into television kitchens, royal dining tables, and the pages of global publications that rarely turn their gaze this far east. Recognition has followed, as it tends to do for those who move with both conviction and warmth.

Yet for all the grandeur that has marked his journey, it is a plate of nasi goreng that lingers longest. His mother's, to be exact.

We caught up with Chef Wan for a few questions on travel, taste, and the meals that stay with you long after the table is cleared.

1. YOU'VE EATEN YOUR WAY AROUND THE WORLD—WHAT'S ONE DESTINATION YOU STILL THINK IS WILDLY UNDERRATED FOR FOOD?

It has to be Uzbekistan. As well as Iran actually, if you're gonna ask me for two places. Because I think a lot of people tak *pergi* (have never been) and never really understood much about Persian cuisine and food from Central Asia, and they'll be so shocked to see the variety that they have, and how delicious it is. When I went there for filming, I saw everything and tasted so many things, and I was like wow, so underrated, you know?

2. YOU'VE DINED EVERYWHERE FROM STREET STALLS TO ROYAL TABLES—WHAT IS IT THAT IMPRESSES YOU MORE TODAY: FLAWLESS TECHNIQUE OR UNFORGETTABLE FLAVOUR?

I think, for me, what is so unforgettable today is always something that comes from literally a kitchen that's from *mak mak* (mothers) and *dapur dapur* (home kitchens), that sometimes it's just so delicious, that sometimes food like that can cost so little, but taste so delicious.

3. WHICH CUISINE BEST MATCHES YOUR PERSONALITY?

I think it's Japanese. That's my favourite cuisine, cause I like the art, I like the seriousness about presentation, cleanliness, hygiene, the source of where they get all these foods, and that things have to be really at this peak flavour. I'm very meticulous about that, so I think Japanese it is.

AFTER DECADES OF TRAVEL, WHAT'S ONE MEAL YOU STILL THINK ABOUT ALL THE TIME?

That one meal that I'm always thinking about, is none other than my mother's favourite fried rice. She passed away three years ago, and sometimes when I sit down for breakfast or lunch, I can literally still smell my mother's nasi goreng. She passed away at ninety years old, and that memory of her fried rice is always in my mind, in my nose, and it's in me all the time. I feel like sometimes she's living in me. 



Flavours In Translation

The Ruma's Atas Key Tables sees Executive Chef Suhalmi Tasir and Chef Masahiko Kawano discover a common language through flavours and a shared pursuit of excellence.

Words: PATRICK LOH

Some culinary collaborations meet in the middle. The best ones don't—they hold their ground, listen closely, and arrive at something neither could have created alone. That's the idea behind Atas Key Tables, a new chef-collaboration series at Atas, The Ruma Hotel and Residences' signature restaurant. Pairing Executive Chef Suhalmi Tasir with international culinary talents, the series is less about guest appearances and more about the conversations that unfold through food. The series opened with a four-hands dinner bringing together Suhalmi and guest Chef Masahiko Kawano.

On paper, it sounds like a culinary blind date: one chef invested in elevating Malaysian flavours, and the other known for the quiet

precision of Japanese cooking, shaped by classical French techniques and anchored by ingredients such as miso, mirin, and sake.

Yet both described it in remarkably similar terms, centred on a mutual recognition of each other's culinary identity. "I realised that while our techniques and languages are different, we both use food to evoke a sense of home, warmth, and nostalgia. We left our egos at the kitchen door and listened to the ingredients," says Masahiko.

Suhalmi agrees, adding that, despite the language barrier, there was little need for translation when working in the kitchen with Masahiko. "We understood each other quickly through food," he assures.

EXECUTIVE CHEF SUHALMI TASIR

The two chefs arrived at the collaboration from very different starting points. Suhalmi grew up with traditional Malay cooking, inspired by a family heritage rooted in the catering industry, making the kitchen feel like a natural path from early on. "I've become increasingly focused on showcasing [authentic] Malaysian flavours through a modern interpretation," he says. Suhalmi's philosophy is grounded in tradition and innovation in equal measure, with a belief that local ingredients belong in world-class dining.



Executive Chef Suhalmi Tasir



Chef Masahiko Kawano

CHEF MASAHIKO KAWANO

Masahiko's story began in a very different kitchen. From the age of five, he often cooked in place of his busy working mother and, in the process, discovered the joy of making food that comforts others. "What drew me in was the realisation that food could heal and express love when words weren't enough," he recalls.

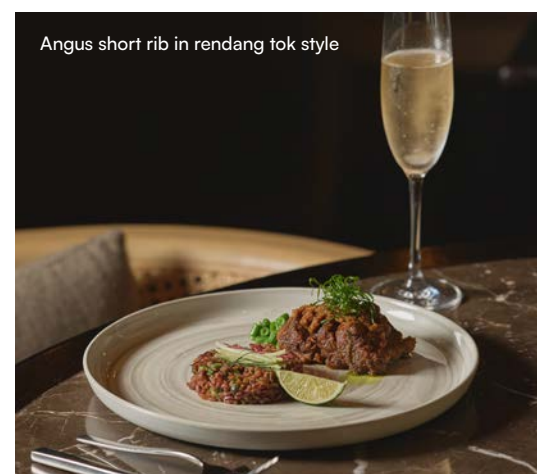
TWO PEAS IN A POT

Masahiko came on board because he shares the same principles as Suhalmi and Atas. "He has a deep respect for precision and craftsmanship, while his Michelin-starred experience brings a unique perspective to the collaboration," explains Suhalmi.

Masahiko embodies the artistry and excellence that Atas Key Tables aims to celebrate, with his philosophy aligning naturally with the restaurant's values of discipline, thoughtfulness, and an ingredient-driven approach. "The opportunity to blend my structured French-Japanese background with Malaysia's vibrant, soulful heritage is incredibly inspiring," he notes.

He was also fascinated by the way Malaysian chefs use spices. "In Japanese cooking, we lean heavily towards restraint, but Malaysian cuisine uses spices to build bold layers," says Masahiko.

The dishes evolved through constant collaboration and refinement. "We spent time ensuring every element felt balanced, so the final menu reflected a genuine dialogue between our perspectives," Suhalmi says. Some were even revisited repeatedly until both culinary identities felt seamlessly integrated.



Angus short rib in rendang tok style

A METICULOUS RESULT

As the inaugural edition of Atas Key Tables, the collaboration brought out the best in both chefs. That shared sensibility became the foundation of a five-course menu that draws from Japan and Malaysia without descending into a culinary identity crisis.

For Suhalmi, the challenge was never about toning local flavours down but refining them. Ingredients such as torch ginger, kaffir lime, Tambun pomelo, and heirloom Bario rice appear throughout the menu, while dishes inspired by nasi ulam and Angus short rib in rendang tok style serve as cultural anchors. He ensures the experience remains rooted in Malaysia while embracing international influences.

Japanese flavours and classical French techniques brought clarity and elegance to the menu. That exchange was perhaps best expressed in the Chawanmushi with Borneo lobster and shiso flower, which Suhalmi describes as the dish that most clearly captured both chefs’ personalities on a single plate. It embodied what the collaboration did best: finding common ground without erasing differences.

Along the way, Suhalmi found himself drawn to Masahiko’s appreciation for simplicity, as Masahiko became increasingly fascinated by Malaysia’s relationship with spice.



Chawanmushi with shiso flower



Bubur cha-cha parfait

A LESSON LEARNT

Beyond the food itself, the exchange left a lasting impression on Suhalmi, both personally and professionally. Given the opportunity, he would gladly spend time immersing himself in the discipline and precision that define Masahiko’s craft.

As for Masahiko, he hopes to delve deeper into Malaysian ingredients and food culture. “Exploring indigenous herbs and jungle produce through the lens of classical French technique would be a fascinating next step,” he shares.

Learning about the roots of Suhalmi’s cooking also gave Masahiko a deeper appreciation for the chef’s perspective. “I would love to learn the traditional, generational secrets behind Malaysian spices and understand how they coax such deep, explosive flavours from local roots and herbs,” he says.

REDEFINING MALAYSIA’S PLACE AT THE TABLE

Atas Key Tables is more than just a chef collaboration; it is a step towards positioning Malaysia as a serious dining destination and an active participant in international culinary conversations rather than simply a gracious host. “This creates opportunities to showcase local ingredients and talent to a wider audience, while challenging us to raise our own standards through global exchange,” explains Suhalmi.

He adds that the initiative reflects The Ruma’s commitment to thoughtful luxury hospitality, setting a benchmark for how Malaysian dining can engage globally without losing its identity.

“I’m always thinking about who I am and where my roots lie. Innovation isn’t about discarding tradition, but using classic, ironclad techniques as a foundation to view local ingredients through a new vision,” says Masahiko.

Atas Key Tables is less about celebrity-chef spectacle and more about meaningful exchange. It’s a conversation between cultures that extends beyond a single dinner, creating opportunities for chefs to share their ideas, techniques, and perspectives. That dialogue continues with the next instalment, which welcomes Singapore’s GU:UM restaurant and its contemporary take on Korean flavours to the table. P



Ayam percik, one of Suhalmi’s signature dishes



Longevity, Served

The Okinawa Diet isn't a fad but a way of life shaped by tradition, community, and an instinct for balance. Find out how the food culture of Japan's southern islands continues to intrigue the world.

Words: PATRICK LOH

On a map, Okinawa is a cluster of subtropical islands drifting between Japan and Taiwan. On the table, however, it is a place where food tells a story of resourcefulness, restraint, and quiet abundance. The Okinawa Diet, often studied by researchers for its link to long lives, is less about strict rules and more about a philosophy that unfolds in everyday meals.

At its heart, the Okinawan way of eating relies on plants. Purple sweet potatoes, once the staple crop of the islands, appear in everything from savoury stews to simple roasted sides. Bitter melon, also known as goya, is stir-fried with tofu and egg to create goya champuru, a dish so deeply tied to the

region that it has become a sort of culinary shorthand for Okinawa itself. Leafy greens, soy products, and kelp like kombu and wakame fill the table before meat or fish make an appearance.

What makes this diet distinctive is not just what's eaten, but how it is approached. Meals are guided by the practice of *hara hachi bu*—eating until you're about 80 percent full. This simple act of stopping before excess encourages mindfulness, and perhaps, a deeper appreciation for what is on the plate.

Fish plays a role, but sparingly, often grilled or simmered in broths. Pork, which arrived in Okinawa centuries ago through trade with China, is also part of the diet, though cooked in a way that stretches every cut—skin, bone, and meat—across soups and stews. Nothing is wasted because everything is used with intent.

What's most striking is that which is absent. Dairy, refined sugar, and processed foods have never been central to Okinawan kitchens. Instead, miso, seaweed, turmeric, and mugwort bring depth and nourishment, while green tea provides daily comfort.



Fish broth is prized for its depth and nourishment

It would be far too simple, though, to reduce the Okinawa Diet to a checklist of ingredients. Food here is inseparable from community. Shared meals at festivals, conversations over bowls of noodles, and the gentle pace of island life give the diet its shape. It's not a health trend invented in a laboratory, but a



The purple sweet potato is rich in antioxidants

cultural inheritance passed down through centuries of cooking, farming, and sharing.

For those curious to try, start with staples like purple sweet potatoes, goya, miso, seaweed, turmeric, mugwort, green tea, and plenty of water. The Okinawa Diet is not just about living long but living well, one mindful bite at a time. **P**



Kombu and wakame add valuable minerals to the diet



Dewakan's Perah ice cream

In kitchens across Malaysia, sustainability is taking shape through thoughtful sourcing, deeper connections to local producers, and a renewed respect for every ingredient.

Words: PATRICK LOH

Rooted Futures

The planet's not exactly thriving and while fashion has been busy reinventing itself with eco-conscious fabrics, the dining world has taken a quieter, more grounded route. In Malaysia, sustainability isn't a headline act in fine dining; it's stitched into how chefs cook, source, and think.

From rainforest to plate, a new wave of kitchens are building menus around what the land gives, leaning into terroir, flavour, and tradition without making a fuss about it. Unlike in the West, where accolades like the Michelin Green Star formalise the movement, Malaysia's version shows up in subtler ways: kampung-grown produce, indigenous ingredients, and menus moving with the seasons instead of resisting them.

You can spot the details on your plates: fish skins turned into crisps and wraps instead of being discarded, bones and innards used to make broths with depth, and whole ingredients like mushroom stems used with care, with very little ending up in the bin.

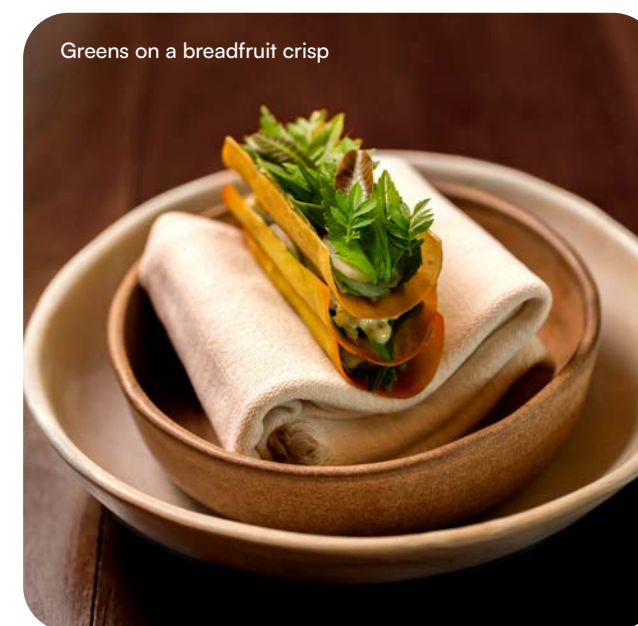
Here, sustainability looks like root-to-stem cooking and real relationships with farmers and foragers. It is also about preserving culinary heritage, arguably the most natural form of sustainability. Around KL and the wider Klang Valley, a small but deliberate group of restaurants is leading the charge, proving that meaningful change often starts on the plate. No grandstanding, no green-washing, just thoughtful cooking that respects where everything begins and matters most.

A pioneer in Malaysia's fine dining scene, Dewakan has long set the tone for what modern Malaysian cuisine can be. Led by Chef Darren Teoh, it holds two Michelin Stars and remains the only restaurant in the country with a Michelin Green Star. "We didn't start thinking we had to be a 'sustainable' restaurant. We just thought that this is the best way for us to be a restaurant," says Darren.

For Darren, cooking has become a way of making sense of the world around him. At Dewakan, ingredients are clues to a place, a season, and a story in motion. "The biggest misconception is that you need to have a philosophy or sustainability angle. The truth is, before starting any business, it has to be ingrained already," Darren says.

His principles extend beyond the plate, championing local ecosystems, fairer food systems, and a restaurant culture that constantly questions how things can be done better.

Dewakan's values run deep: a strong commitment to indigenous and underutilised ingredients like ulam, kulim, and native herbs sourced from across Peninsular Malaysia and Borneo.



Greens on a breadfruit crisp

Dewakan



Kuih Breudher

Working closely with farmers, foragers, and fishermen, shaping menus that are seasonal and story-driven, Darren explains, "we understood from long ago that sustainability is not about more compost, or zero-waste, but raising the economic cycle of indigenous ingredients."

Think less farm-to-table, and more forest-to-fine dining, with dishes including hot smoked sturgeon from Tanjung Malim in a cold button mangosteen soup with sea grapes; thinly sliced cuttlefish and crab roe in a reduced guava juice dressing; and Adan rice steamed in a mahang leaf served with venison and kerdas. For desserts, expect cacao-less chocolate made with dabai, served with rose fudge and keluak tart shell; and coconut jelly with mulberry.

"The more people see value in [sustainability], whether it's the vendors or the consumers, the more impact it will have," Darren posits. Dewakan has been proving that point long before anyone thought to ask. dewakan.com

A newer name on the scene, Akar has quickly made its mark with a Michelin Star under its belt. Helmed by Chef Aidan Low, the restaurant brings a thoughtful Malaysian-European perspective to the table. “Sustainability means having the ability to continue what we do meaningfully over the long term. It exists in many forms, some of which I believe should be mandatory across all kitchens, while others are more personal practices shaped by a restaurant’s philosophy,” Aidan points out.

The cooking is ingredient-led, drawing from regional produce and ecosystems. A significant part of Akar’s sustainability efforts goes into nurturing talent and building a team that can continue developing its craft over time. “We believe the value of a dining experience should come from the thought, technique, and care behind it, rather than simply the cost of the ingredients being served,” explains Aidan.

Expect flavours built around bambangan, bunga kantan, and jungle honey, with a clear effort to minimise waste. Menus shift with availability, keeping things dynamic without losing focus. “When you work with the lives of animals, plants, and the resources provided by nature, there should be an instinctive responsibility to waste as little as possible and maximise what is available on hand,” Aidan notes.

Dishes to look out for include steamed abalone with fried

Akar



Palm sugar and coconut pastry, and monkfish liver rojak



Cuttlefish and ensabi

mung bean noodles and mulberry sauce, rose and coconut scallop topped with edible blossoms, and a bold prawn cake layered with tempoyak, sea grapes, and kaffir lime. “Our sustainability goals and our definition of luxury go hand-in-hand. Both are rooted in creating something meaningful, enduring, and uniquely our own,” Aidan shares.

For Aidan, sustainability is not a trend, and should never be. “Many of the things we associate with sustainability today should simply be fundamental skills and responsibilities of being a cook. Respecting ingredients, minimising waste, and making thoughtful decisions should be part of the craft itself,” he says. *akar.com*

One of the most talked-about openings in recent years, Terra Dining has earned its Michelin Star with a clear point of view. Chef-owner Chong Yu Cheng brings together Malaysian ingredients and French cooking techniques, creating dishes that feel both rooted and refined.

“One of the major pet peeves I have with kitchens is wasted energy when it comes to making stocks and sauces,” says Yu Cheng.

He points out that there are simple ways to improve collagen extraction from flesh and bones, such as using a pressure cooker or acidifying the

cooking liquid beforehand. “They may not seem like much, but these simple changes can cut cooking time by hours, saving precious energy in the process,” Yu Cheng points out.

Local sourcing is central, from forest bamboo to native herbs and aromatics. The kitchen keeps waste to a minimum—fish bones enrich broths, scraps are repurposed where possible—and works closely with farmers to reduce its footprint.

“We also try to cut down the amount of waste product by finding creative uses for trimmings. Our duck liver sausage and duckkwa are ways to use up excess duck legs; our lemongrass vinegar was born out of my frustration over not being able to use the tops in cooking; the herbs that are oversized or trimmed away are turned into herb oils which elevate the dishes. All these initiatives have not only improved the dishes but also expanded our horizons in terms of the possibilities that these ingredients afford us,” adds Yu Cheng.

Highlights from the menu include grilled slipper lobster with asam laksa bisque, aged duck breast with Teochew-style jus, and a carrot halwa tart paired with thosai ice cream.

Yu Cheng believes that as more Malaysian diners recognise local ingredients as the future of local cuisine, they will embrace the same mindset in their own cooking. In turn, that creates demand for higher-quality produce and encourages suppliers to raise their standards. *terra.com*



Smoked pike conger serunding mousse with caviar

Terra Dining



Terra's dining hall

Beta KL



Beta's bar



Loyang Vol 8

For those who like their meals with a side of storytelling, Beta delivers. Helmed by Chef Raymond Tham, the restaurant explores Malaysian terroir through tasting menus that spotlight different states and regions. There's a strong focus on provenance, with ingredients sourced from local producers and artisans, while each course offers a deeper look into the country's diverse culinary landscape.

"Sustainability is about responsibility and respect for the ingredients, the producers, the environment, and the people. As chefs, we have a duty to make thoughtful choices about what we source, how we use it, and how much we waste," Raymond says.

The result is a menu that feels personal and expansive, rooted in culture as much as technique. Highlights include abalone heirloom rice with caviar, Miyazaki wagyu beef striploin, and prawn glazed with homemade fermented rice lees.

At Beta, sustainability is part of the team's daily decision-making. "We celebrate Malaysia's diverse produce and work closely with local farmers whenever possible, and strive to maximise the value of every ingredient that enters our kitchen," Raymond notes.

Diners come to Beta expecting an exceptional experience, and sustainability challenges the team to be even more creative in delivering it. By showcasing seasonal Malaysian ingredients, reducing unnecessary imports, and finding inventive ways to use every part of an ingredient, the team delivers a dining experience that is both refined and responsible.

"Over the years, we have designed menus around seasonality and reduced food waste through better planning and whole-ingredient utilisation," Raymond shares. He added that trimmings and by-products that might traditionally be discarded are often transformed into stocks, ferments, condiments, or garnishes.

These practices have encouraged greater creativity within the team, strengthened relationships with local producers, and helped the restaurant create dishes that are uniquely Malaysian. "Most importantly, we have shown that sustainability and culinary excellence can work hand in hand rather than being opposing goals," says Raymond. betakl.com

A modern French restaurant with a strong sustainability ethos, Entier is best known for its nose-to-tail philosophy. Under the direction of Executive Chef Romain Fabre, the kitchen uses every ingredient, from skin to bone, without compromising finesse. "Some unexpected parts can deliver flavours that people couldn't imagine," says Romain.

He believes sustainability begins with simple, everyday actions, noting that ignoring its importance would be irresponsible. In his view,

luxury dining and environmental consciousness can comfortably coexist. "We focus on quality and guest experience while reducing waste, using resources responsibly, and supporting sustainable practices without compromising our standards," he says.

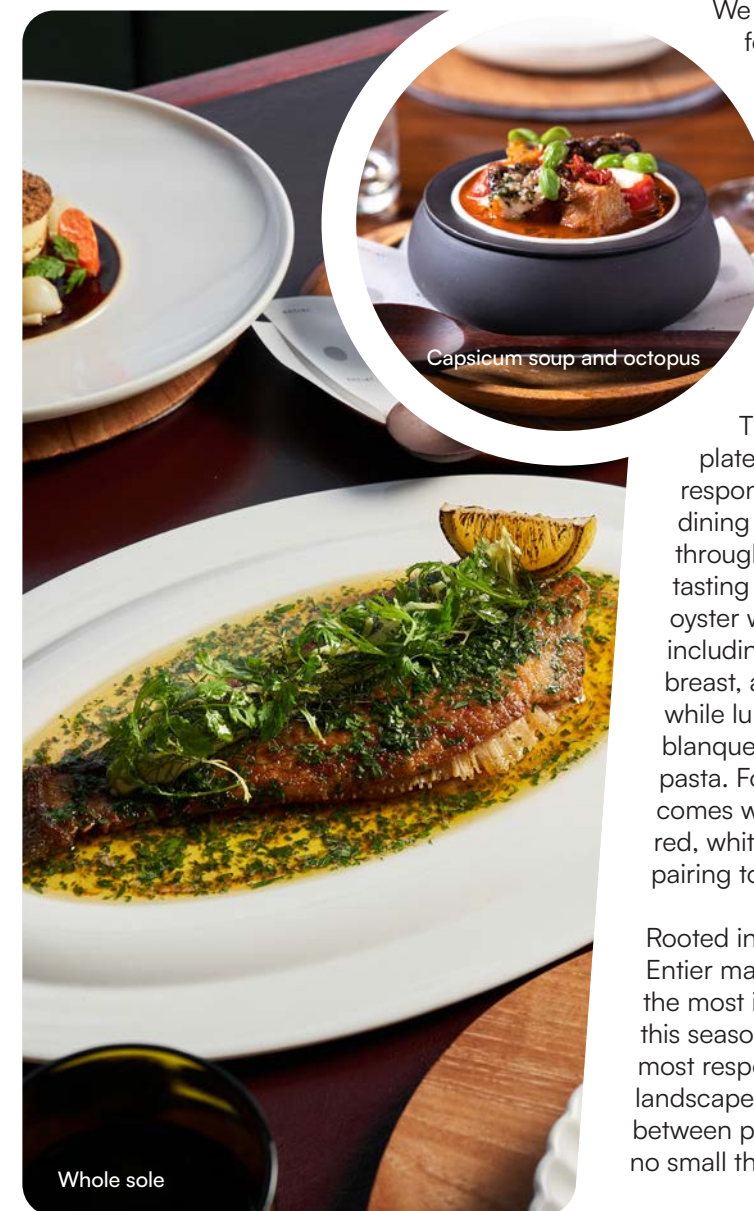
These efforts have improved efficiency and created a more sustainable kitchen while maintaining the level of excellence guests expect. There is also a growing emphasis on premium local produce, adding a clear Malaysian layer to Entier's French foundation.

"At Entier, my main goal is to use as many ingredients from Malaysia as possible to reduce the environmental impact of imports. We also focus on reducing food waste through careful portion control, making full use of ingredients, and monitoring inventory closely," says Romain. "We prioritise seasonal ingredients whenever possible and encourage strict recycling and proper waste segregation."

The proof, as always, is on the plate. Guests can experience how responsible cooking and refined dining can seamlessly coexist through Romain's latest lunch tasting menu. Appetisers such as oyster with caviar lead into mains including uni pasta, Irish duck breast, and wagyu with foie gras, while lunch sets offer dishes like veal blanquette, beef bavette, and lobster pasta. For a limited time, the lunch comes with a complimentary glass of red, white, or rosé wine, a simple pairing to complete the experience.

Rooted in intention and ingredient, Entier makes a persuasive case that the most indulgent meal you'll have this season can also be one of the most responsible. In a dining landscape still finding its footing between pleasure and purpose, that is no small thing. entierfrenchdining.com

Entier French Dining



Whole sole

Capsicum soup and octopus

Rewriting *Thai* Cuisine

Chef Ton took Thai food to fine dining level, putting the cuisine on the map.

Words: PATRICK LOH

There's a moment in every chef's story where instinct takes over, where something shifts from obligation to obsession. For Chef Thitid Tassanakajohn—better known as Chef Ton—it wasn't in a professional kitchen, nor under the watchful eye of a mentor. It was at home, as a child, standing over a humble pot of five-spice braised eggs.

"I started adding everything," he laughs. "Chilli, fish sauce. Just mixing." It wasn't refinement. It wasn't technique. It was curiosity. And in that small, chaotic act of tinkering, something clicked. "That's when I realised cooking could be fun."

THE ACCIDENTAL CHEF

Like many great chefs, Ton didn't begin with a grand culinary plan. In fact, he studied economics, briefly worked in a bank, and quit just as quickly. "I didn't like it," he says, plainly.

Instead, he packed his bags for the United States and enrolled at the Culinary Institute of America, trading spreadsheets for stovetops. What followed was a whirlwind of kitchens across New York and beyond—long hours, hard lessons, and the kind of discipline that only the industry can teach.



A STAR, AND THE WEIGHT OF IT

When his Bangkok restaurant Le Du earned a Michelin star, it was everything he had dreamed of and more. "I was super happy. It's every chef's dream." But with recognition comes expectation. And expectation, it turns out, is far heavier than ambition.

"Before winning, people come with no expectations. Now, they come expecting something." That shift changed everything. The room feels different. The stakes feel higher. Every plate carries not just flavour, but promise.

"It's stressful," he admits. "You have to learn how to handle it." The realisation, eventually, is grounding: not every dish will please everyone. Not every experience will be perfect. What matters is doing your best and standing behind what you create.

As I Am's Thai crepe with crab curry and caviar



REDEFINING THAI FLAVOURS

Long before the accolades, Ton had already taken on a personal, more stubborn mission: to change how people perceive Thai food.

"When I started, people thought local food should be cheap," he says. "Fine dining meant French, Italian, Japanese." Thai cuisine—like much of Southeast Asia's culinary heritage—was rarely given the same reverence. He defiantly refused to accept that, as his restaurants became more than places to eat. They became platforms—spaces where Thai ingredients, farmers, and traditions could be elevated without losing their soul.

Over time, something shifted. Producers he worked with from the start grew alongside him. Ingredients once overlooked—such as shrimp paste, tamarind paste, and krachai—found their place on tasting menus. A community formed not just of diners, but of growers, suppliers, and collaborators. "That's the most fulfilling part," he says. "We built it together."

THE RISK THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Opening his first restaurant wasn't just a career move but a gamble. "I had one chance," he says. "If it failed, that was it." It was family money. A final shot. No safety net. "I gave everything I had."

It paid off. But not without scars. Expansion came too quickly at one point—too many restaurants, too little structure. Some had to close and it was a hard reset. "I didn't open anything new for six years," he says. "I waited until I was ready."

AS I AM, AS IT SHOULD BE

Now, with As I Am in Kuala Lumpur and Sood in Penang, Ton is entering a new chapter—one that feels more relaxed and more refined. The concept? "Fun dining," as he calls it. Less rigid than traditional fine dining, but no less thoughtful.

In Kuala Lumpur, he leans fully into a tasting menu format; something he believes the city is ready for. "The market here is strong," he says. "People here understand food and they're more open."

BEYOND THE PLATE

If you've seen Ton on *The Restaurant War Thailand*, you might think you know him—the intensity, the urgency, the raised voice in the heat of the moment. But off-screen, he's softer. Quieter.

As I Am's Samrub 12-course dining experience



"I'm not that loud," he says with a smile. What the show does capture, though, is something he deeply believes in: growth. Not just for himself, but for others. "I want people to learn, to be better, and to be proud of what they do."

WHAT COMES NEXT

Expansion is inevitable. Thailand, the Philippines, even the United States, with plans for San Francisco on the horizon. But this time, it's different. "I only grow when the team is ready," he says. It's a lesson learned the hard way and one he won't forget.

Because for all the ambition, all the accolades, and all the movement, Ton's approach now is surprisingly grounded. Cook honestly. Build slowly. Stay true. Or, as the name suggests—be exactly as you are. 

Aged Beyond Reason

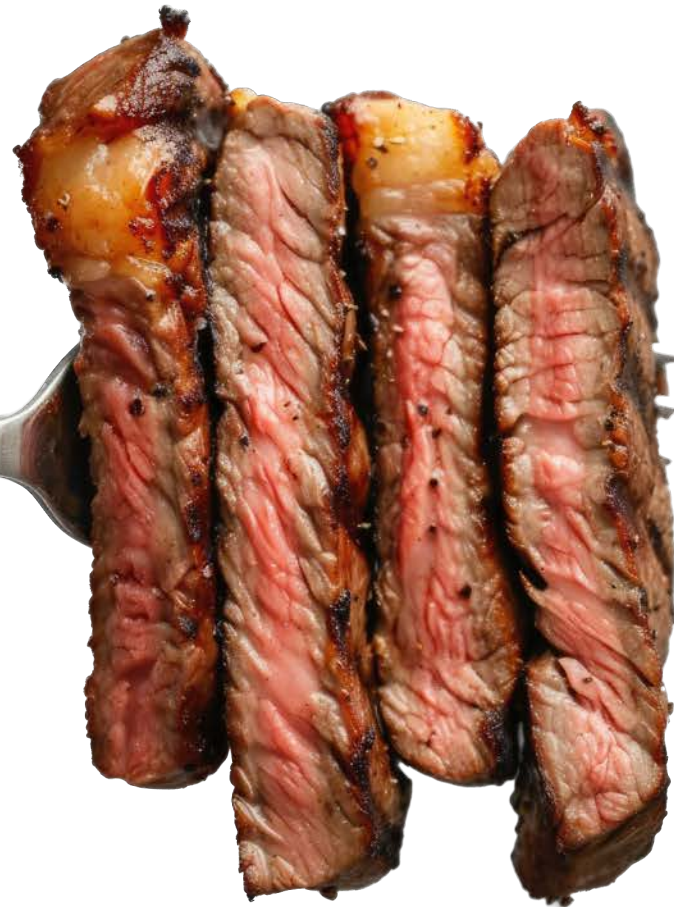
Why do people willingly pay extra for beef that has technically been left alone on purpose?

Words: PATRICK LOH

There are few dining experiences more theatrical than a waiter presenting a dry-aged steak. The ritual is always slightly dramatic. A large board. A glimmering knife. A solemn explanation involving days, temperature, humidity, and phrases like ‘funk,’ ‘nutty notes’, or ‘blue cheese aroma’. Somewhere nearby, another table immediately regrets ordering chicken.

Dry-aged steak has become the luxury watch of the meat world. It’s expensive, mysterious, and admired by people who may not entirely understand it but desperately want to. Restaurants build entire glass-walled ageing rooms just to display it. Diners photograph it before they eat it and chefs speak about it with the reverence usually reserved for wine or religion. And yet, at its core, dry-ageing is simply controlled decomposition.

Don’t get us wrong, it’s not rotten or spoiled, and it’s most definitely not dangerous for consumption. But decomposition also means slow transformation of beef through time, air, enzymes, and patience. The miracle is that instead of becoming something off, it somehow becomes something richer, deeper, stranger, and infinitely more seductive. Think of it like this: a fresh steak is loud and dry-aged steak is jazz.



develops that famously buttery texture. The meat relaxes and stops fighting back, so a knife can glide through it without negotiating.

Third: oxidation and complex microbial activity begin creating entirely unique flavour compounds. A well-aged steak can taste nutty, earthy, savoury, slightly sweet, and almost fermented. Some develop notes of parmesan rind, toasted hazelnuts, mushrooms, or even whisky. Others creep closer to pungent blue cheese territory. The best examples somehow remain deeply beefy.

SO WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS DURING DRY-AGEING?

When beef is first butchered, it contains a huge amount of water. Fresh steak tastes clean and mineral-forward, but it is also relatively one-dimensional. Dry-ageing changes that by letting the meat rest in a precisely controlled environment for weeks, sometimes even months, where temperature, airflow, and humidity are obsessively monitored. Over time, three things happen.

First: the moisture in the meat evaporates, leaving behind concentrated flavours. Imagine reducing a stock until it becomes glossy and intense. It’s the same principle here, except now it is happening inside a ribeye.

Second: natural enzymes begin breaking down muscle fibres. This is why properly aged steak

THE STRANGE PSYCHOLOGY OF PAYING MORE FOR OLDER MEAT

In almost every context, ageing food sounds like a problem. Old milk? Food poisoning. Old sushi? Hospital visit. Old salad? Biological warfare. Yet, dry-aged steak somehow became a luxury. Part of this comes down to its scarcity. During ageing, beef loses weight through evaporation, and entire outer layers must eventually be trimmed away because they become too hard and dehydrated to eat. A restaurant may lose up to 30 percent of the original product before it even reaches the grill. Time, storage, electricity, labour, and spoilage risk all add cost. The appeal is, ultimately, emotional.

Dry-aged steak feels deliberate in a world chasing speed. It exists because someone decided that waiting mattered. Fast food can arrive in minutes. Dry-aged beef might sit untouched for 45 days



Raw meat ready for dry-ageing

Images: Magnific; Unsplash; Pixels; Vecteezy



Worth the wait: a dry-aged steak sliced and served

while chefs monitor it like anxious plant parents. It's oddly romantic, that level of restraint. Nobody rushes a dry-ageing room. Nobody panic-checks the beef after three days. It's literally just left alone.

WHY CHEFS BECOME DEEPLY OBSESSED WITH IT
Speak to some chefs about dry-ageing long enough and their eyes start to change. There's a particular gleam that appears when they begin discussing topics of humidity percentages or Himalayan salt walls. What starts as casual conversation becomes devotion. They'll describe mould cultures the way sommeliers discuss Burgundy terroir.

This obsession exists because dry-ageing is one of the few culinary techniques where time itself becomes an ingredient. Salt can be measured. Butter can be added. Heat can be controlled.

But ageing requires surrender. You cannot bully a steak into maturity but only create the conditions and wait.

That uncertainty is addictive. Two cuts aged for the same number of days may still emerge vastly differently. Fat content, breed, diet, bone structure, airflow placement; every detail changes the outcome. Dry-ageing sits somewhere between science experiment and gambling addiction, and chefs love nothing more than a variable they can spend years trying to master.

THE 30-DAY MYTH
Many diners assume there is a universal 'perfect' ageing period but really, there isn't. 30 days is often treated as the gateway benchmark simply because it delivers noticeable tenderness and flavour concentration without becoming too intense. This is the safe middle ground. At 45 days,

things become more complex. At 60, funk begins arriving to the party. At 90, opinions split dramatically.

Some diners taste magnificence. Others wonder whether their steak briefly attended a cave rave with several wheels of stilton. Extreme ageing has become something of a flex among steakhouses, particularly in cities where culinary machismo thrives. Menus proudly advertise 120-day, even 200-day ageing programmes with the unchecked confidence of somebody casually mentioning they climb mountains recreationally.

THE AGEING ROOM AS RESTAURANT THEATRE
Few restaurant design choices are more seductive than the dry-ageing cabinet. Behind glass walls sit enormous primal cuts slowly darkening like expensive artefacts in a museum.

The brilliance of the ageing room is psychological as it transforms patience into spectacle. Most diners cannot explain humidity control or enzymatic breakdown, but they understand visually that what's happening behind that glass is important. Steakhouses know that the ageing room is not merely storage but marketing with temperature control.

WET-AGED VS DRY-AGED
Not all premium steak is dry-aged. In fact, much of the world's beef is wet-aged instead. Wet-ageing involves vacuum-sealing beef in plastic, allowing it to age in its own juices. It is cheaper, more efficient, and prevents moisture loss. Many excellent steaks are wet-aged as the texture still improves significantly. Flavour-wise, wet-aged beef tends to remain younger, fresher, and more straightforward.

Neither wet-aged nor dry-aged beef is objectively superior, it just boils down to preference, as some diners genuinely prefer the cleaner and more metallic profile of the former, while some prefer the robust and umami-rich flavour of the latter.

THE RISE OF DRY-AGEING BEYOND BEEF
Once chefs realised that dry-ageing could transform flavour, they began applying it to almost everything with reckless curiosity. Fish and duck are the most common, followed by lamb and dairy products.

Around the world, restaurants now experiment with ageing tuna until it develops the richness of cured ham. Some age whole ducks for weeks to intensify flavour and crisp the skin while

others mature pork until it acquires a deeper sweetness. This is part culinary innovation, part chef behaviour escalating naturally over time, because once a chef successfully convinces you that a 45-day ribeye tastes better, soon another chef will decide to age a trout for 12 days and call it 'an exploration of umami'. And somehow, against all reasonable expectation, it works.

WHY DRY-AGED STEAK TASTES BETTER IN A STEAKHOUSE
Here is the slightly painful truth: most people cannot properly recreate elite dry-aged steak at home. The deep, savoury smell of rendered fat hanging in the room like perfume only happens in restaurants because chefs control variables obsessively. Commercial ageing rooms can maintain humidity, airflow, and exact temperature conditions. High-powered restaurant broilers produce crusts domestic kitchens struggle to achieve. Even cooking technique matters enormously.

IS IT ACTUALLY WORTH IT?
This depends entirely on what you want from your steak. If your priority is pure beef flavour and tenderness, an excellent fresh or wet-aged steak may already deliver everything you need.

Dry-aged steak is not necessarily 'better' in the universal sense. The flavours are more specific and layered, yes, but it won't suit everyone's tastebuds. Like natural wine, vinyl records, or jazz improvisation, part of the distinct pleasure comes from actually appreciating the idiosyncrasies.

What diners are really paying for is transformation. Tasting what happens when time is allowed to

leave its fingerprints on food. And perhaps that is the fascination. In an era obsessed with novelty, ageing feels ancient—and all the more compelling for it.

Dry-ageing is, at its core, an argument against the instinct to intervene. A reminder that the most sophisticated move is sometimes to step back and let time do the work. Besides, there's something wonderfully irrational about humanity discovering that if you leave beef alone long enough under perfect conditions, it eventually tastes like luxury. Not many foods can pull off that kind of comeback story. 



Dy-aged steak on a grill

You've probably encountered this person before. The one who insists that a particular wine simply must be served in a particular glass. They launch into a self-indulgent monologue about how a Burgundy glass really allows the wine to breathe, as you tilt your glass, half searching for a pair of lungs. By the time they start dissecting the apparent differences between a flute and a tulip, you begin to wonder if this is some kind of bit, and if they just happen to be really committed to it.

It turns out though, annoyingly enough, that they actually have a point. It might sound a little ridiculous on the surface. I mean, the drink is the drink, right? Surely your beer doesn't just magically transform into something else just because you chose to house it in a snifter instead of a mug this time? And it doesn't, not unless you haven't been washing your glasses properly. You see, the liquid invariably stays the same; that's a given. But what does change is how you experience it.

A Glass Apart

You don't really need a cabinet full of specialised glassware. But you should know that the people who do aren't completely making it up.

Words: COLIN GOMEZ

MAKING SCENTS

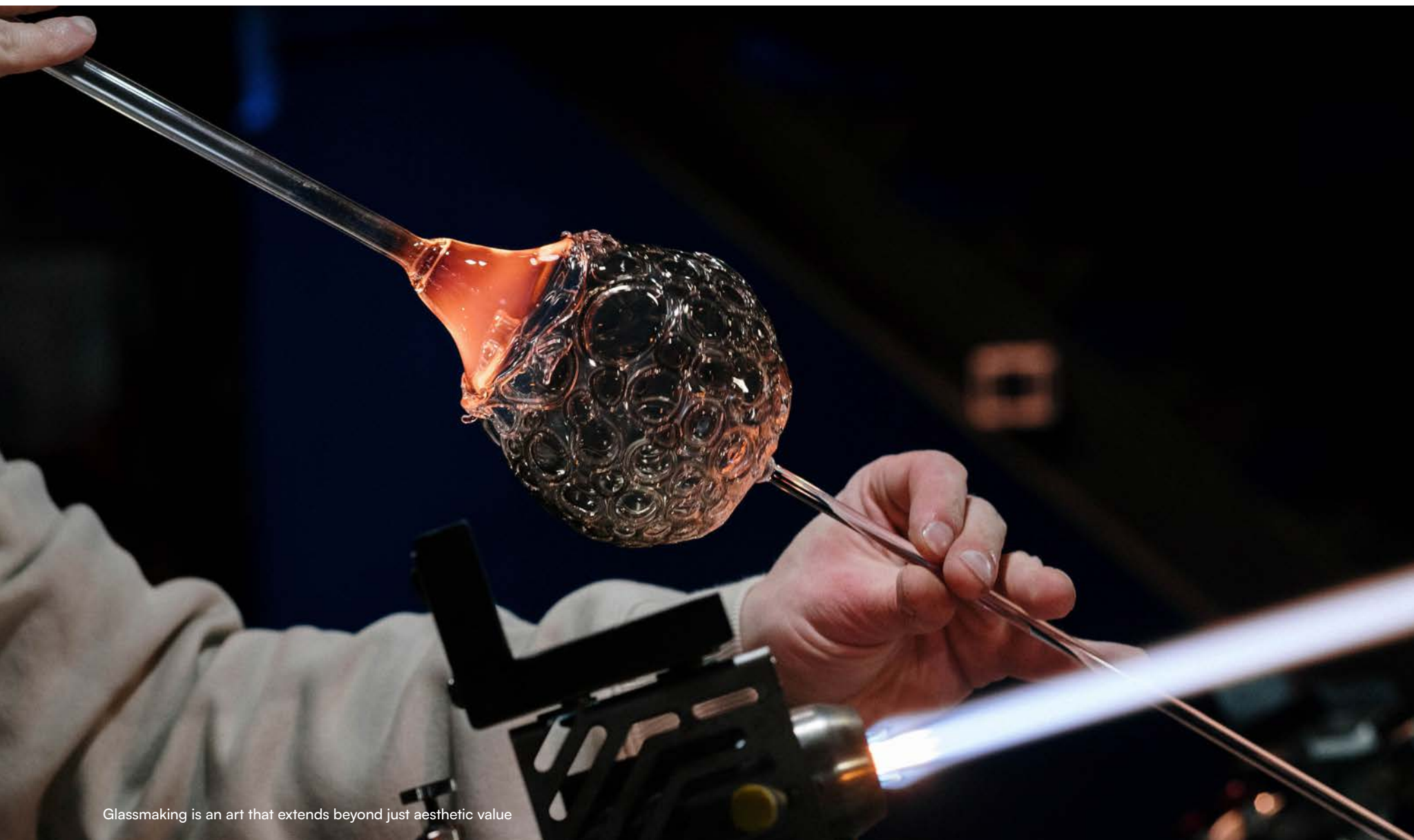
When we think of taste, we tend to focus on what's going on in our mouths, but flavour is more complicated than that. Much of what we perceive as taste is, in fact, smell. Researchers have found that the shape of a glass influences how aromas are released and concentrated, which in turn can alter our perception of flavour. A wider bowl gives volatile compounds more room to develop, while a narrower opening funnels aromas more directly toward the nose, sometimes concentrating them in an undesirable way.



Different glasses lend themselves to different types of wine

Taking red wine as an example, it's usually served in a broad-bowled glass so that more of its surface area is exposed to oxygen, which allows its aromas to develop more fully. Serve it in a straight-sided tumbler instead, and only a fraction of that aroma is left exposed, essentially neutering what would have otherwise been a delightfully layered glass. The wine itself might not have changed, but your experience of it certainly has.

Images: Magnific; Pexels



Glassmaking is an art that extends beyond just aesthetic value

TAKING SHAPE

And it isn't just wine. Beer glasses are often designed with foam retention and olfactory considerations in mind, while whisky enthusiasts favour tulip-shaped glasses because they help concentrate the spirit's aromatics while softening some of the alcohol burn. This extends to coffee too—a world equally not short on pedantry—where enthusiasts have experimented extensively with cup shapes designed to emphasise different characteristics such as sweetness, acidity, and aroma.

Of course, not all of this is purely physical. As you might expect, psychology plays a role too. The weight of a glass, the thickness of its rim, the way it feels in your hand, and even how it looks can all influence your perception of what is inside. Rather than affecting the drink itself, it shifts what's going on in your head while you're having it instead, shaping interpretation before the liquid even touches your lips. Flavour is as much about perception as it is chemistry, and what we taste is shaped as much by expectation as by what's in the glass.

GLASS BUT NOT LEAST

So what does this mean for you and me, the average Jane or Joe, fond of the occasional drink or two over the weekend? Should we go out and start building a cabinet full of specialised glassware that'll house just the right vessel for every conceivable beverage out there? Probably not. That said, it's best to remain wise to the fact that quaffing a refreshing lager from a pint glass is going to be somewhat different from sipping it out of a teacup. Whether or not there's a difference in having six nearly identical wine glasses

A good beer mug leaves enough space for a nice head



designed for six different grape varietals is another matter entirely that I'm happy to leave to people with opinions stronger than mine.

So the next time somebody goes on about the importance of why you just have to use this very specific glass for this very specific kind of beverage, resist the urge to roll your eyes because they might just have a point. Yes, I understand that they're insufferable, but on the strength of the evidence, we'll just have to let them have this one. **U**

Across The Great Divide



Sazerac master blender Drew Mayville explains how American rye whiskey is challenging the Scotch single malt hegemony in Malaysia.

Words: ANANDHI GOPINATH

For over two decades, the narrative of premium brown spirits in Malaysia has been written almost exclusively in the language of Scottish single malts. To walk into a high-end bar in Kuala Lumpur is to be greeted by rows of familiar, age-stated bottles from Speyside, Islay, and the Highlands. It is a market built on a specific definition of luxury: the elegant roundness of unpeated barley, or the maritime smoke of a peat kiln.

Despite this deeply entrenched Scotch hegemony, discerning Malaysian drinkers are increasingly crossing the aisle, guided by a spirit that swaps gentle honeyed tones for a fierce and vibrant tapestry of spice, citrus, and herbal complexity. Premium American rye whiskey has arrived, and it is reshaping the local connoisseur's landscape.



MIND THE 'E'

To understand this shift, one must first look to the label. In the world of spirits, the presence or absence of a single vowel acts as an immediate geographical and stylistic line in the sand. Scotland, Canada, and Japan bottle whisky. Ireland and the United States bottle whiskey.

Historically, that solitary 'e' has meant a world of difference to the Malaysian palate. It separated the familiar, malty elegance of the old world from what many mistakenly assumed was a monolithic New World style defined by the heavy, cloying sweetness of standard corn-heavy bourbon. Today, however, premium rye is utterly dismantling that bias, proving that the American category possesses a depth and architectural complexity that can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with any historic single malt.

This shifting tide is being championed locally by those with an instinct for avant-garde taste. Boutique distributor Single & Available—founded by Shareen Yew, whose exceptional taste and sharp industry instincts have made her a singular force in the local spirits scene—has been quietly introducing these complex liquids to a market hungry for what is next. It is a bold move for a boutique setup traditionally rooted in the single malt world, but one that aligns perfectly with a global movement led by some of the most respected palates in the industry.

Chief among those palates is Drew Mayville, the Master Blender and Director of Quality for Sazerac. With over forty years of experience stretching from the historic Seagram dynasty in Canada to his decades-long tenure in Kentucky, Mayville is the liquid architect behind some of the most coveted spirits on earth. Crucially, the Sazerac Company owns and operates the historic Buffalo Trace Distillery in Frankfort, Kentucky—widely regarded as the world’s most award-winning distillery.

Under this single, monolithic production footprint, Mayville manages an extraordinary portfolio ecosystem, meticulously blending everything from the flagship Buffalo Trace Bourbon to ultra-premium experimental ryes like E.H. Taylor, Jr. and the cask-strength Thomas H. Handy Sazerac Rye. Mayville, in essence, embodies the cross-border mastery required to perfect these volatile grains.

Mayville’s journey to possessing a world-class blending nose began with an unusual childhood obstacle. “Being highly sensitive to aromas and tastes as a child was a blessing and a curse,” Mayville shares. “Everything felt amplified and sometimes overwhelmed me. If there was a flavour I didn’t like... I really didn’t like it. I remember that I even hated the smell and taste of pizza.”

What could have doomed a culinary life, however, became his greatest professional asset. “Over time, I realised that sensitivity could be an advantage in sensory evaluation in the blending room. What made me very picky as a child became a valuable tool as an adult. I discovered that my gift was invaluable because I could detect subtle differences.”

In American whiskey, the limelight usually belongs to the Master Distiller, tethered to the romance of the copper still. But Mayville, true to his Canadian roots, views the liquid through the sharp lens of a blender.

“American whiskey has a long tradition of celebrating the master distiller, and rightly so,” he notes. “The distillery is where the spirit’s character begins. But whiskey’s journey doesn’t end when it comes off the still. Time, maturation, barrel selection, and blending are where many of the final decisions are made.” It is a philosophy that mirrors the traditional Scotch house structure, familiar ground for single malt purists.

“Rather than seeing distilling and blending as competing disciplines, I see them as complementary,” Mayville explains. “The distiller creates the palette of colours, and the blender creates the painting.”

AN EMOTIVE APPROACH TO BLENDING

Early in his career, Mayville worked as a certified quality engineer, a discipline defined by precision and data. Yet, his blending philosophy is surprisingly emotional at heart. “The science may give you the consistency, but the art gives you the emotion,” he says. “My science and quality background taught me to trust data and processes. But ultimately, the goal isn’t to create a technically perfect whiskey—it’s to create one that makes someone say, ‘wow.’”

For every global triumph like the highly acclaimed E.H. Taylor, Jr. Four Grain, there are trials that collapse under their own ambition. “Experimentation guarantees failure,” Mayville chuckles. “Our small barrel experiment was a complete disaster. I remember trials where the theory sounded fabulous on paper but produced a whiskey that was a complete failure. The good news is that failures are usually educational.”

It is precisely this relentless pursuit of complexity that is drawing Malaysian single malt drinkers toward premium ryes like Sazerac Straight Rye. “Seasoned Scotch drinkers tend to be curious when asked about rye’s growing global footprint. “They have already explored complexity, age, regional styles, and nuance. What rye offers is a completely different expression of complexity.”



Mint Julep with Buffalo Trace Bourbon

FROM BOURBON’S SWEETNESS TO RYE’S STRUCTURE

To truly appreciate this distinction, a newcomer must map the sensory bridge between corn-dominant bourbon and rye-dominant whiskey. When one pours a benchmark expression like Buffalo Trace Bourbon, the nose immediately greets you with rich, comforting waves of molasses, warm vanilla, and sweet oak. On the palate, it behaves with a creamy, coating texture, opening up into dark fruits and brown sugar before easing into a smooth, lingering finish of soft toffee. It is the quintessential American profile—lush, round, and unapologetically sweet.



Sazerac Straight Rye

Cross to Sazerac Straight Rye, however, and the entire architecture changes. The nose drops the heavy sugars in favour of bright citrus peel, clove, anise, and a prickle of fresh-cut wood. The first sip is an awakening for a single malt drinker: rather than coating the tongue, it cuts cleanly across the palate with sharp black pepper, candied ginger, and a subtle undertone of liquorice. The finish is crisp, remarkably dry, and leaves behind a lingering, structural warmth of rye spice. It behaves less like a heavy dessert and more like a finely tailored suit.

“A great rye delivers layers of spice, herbal notes, dark fruit, citrus, and oak in a way that’s distinct from malt whisky,” Mayville explains. “There is a vibrancy and intensity that experienced whisky drinkers find fascinating. I don’t think consumers are abandoning Scotch at all. I think they’re expanding their sensory experiences. Once you’ve spent years exploring single malts, discovering a world-class rye can feel like opening an entirely new chapter in the whisky story.”

For the die-hard Scotch purist who remains sceptical, dismissing American whiskey as a monolith of sweetness, Mayville has a definitive remedy ready in his portfolio: Thomas H. Handy Sazerac Rye.

“Thomas H. Handy challenges that assumption,” he says of the uncut, unfiltered powerhouse. “It’s bold, layered, spicy, powerful, and remarkably complex. It showcases the depth that rye can achieve while still expressing the richness and maturity that serious whisky drinkers appreciate. Every sip reveals something new—spice, fruit, oak, herbal character, texture, and evolution across the palate.”



Thomas H. Handy Sazerac Rye

Ultimately, the goal here isn’t to replace the beloved single malt on Malaysian shelves, but to broaden the horizon. As Mayville concludes: “I wouldn’t pour it to prove that American whiskey is better than single malt Scotch. I’d pour it to demonstrate that great whiskey can achieve complexity through different paths.”



Kopi, Kaya, Continuity

For all its clatter and chaos, the kopitiam has always been a place of relaxed certainty—one that continues to evolve with the times without ever quite losing itself.

Words: COLIN GOMEZ

It's a typically muggy afternoon as you step into a local kopitiam. The faded signage welcomes you like an old friend into a living room dotted with plastic stools and chipped tile flooring. The air is a cacophony of clinking cups, spirited chatter, and orders shouted across the room.

It smells of coffee—the local kind, with its charred edges and rich buttery undertones—as well as toasted bread, spread with butter and kaya that slowly melt into the warmth of the slice, settling into its little pockets. There's a lot going on. You take a step back, and from that vantage point, you get the sense that it should feel a lot more chaotic than it actually does.

Instead, the surroundings seem to envelop you, just like a warm cocoon, making it out to be this soothingly

predictable sanctuary of sorts. There's something paradoxical in the way a kopitiam seems to defy its own noise: a tacit familiarity that permeates the atmosphere and makes even the busiest afternoon feel grounding and restful.

The word kopitiam derives from the Malay kopi for coffee and the Hokkien tiam for shop. You'll also find them in neighbouring countries like Singapore, Indonesia, Brunei, and Thailand, where—much like here—they've traditionally been operated by Chinese communities.

Pay one a visit, and the first thing that'll jump out at you is just how diverse the crowd is. You'll see elderly regulars sitting together, exchanging animated (and occasionally questionable) takes on politics and the economy. An adjacent table might play host to a troop of weary labourers, dropping in for a quick meal and a moment's respite from the oppressive heat. Office workers filter through on their breaks, while school-children arrive in noisy clusters after their classes end. It's an everyday gathering space, and one of the few where such different slices of society intersect so naturally and seamlessly.

At the centre of all this is, of course, the food and drink. Much of the appeal of kopitiam fare lies in its comforting consistency. There are staples you can expect at almost any kopitiam, with breakfast an almost iconic fixture on the unwritten menu. Buttered kaya toast, equal parts sweet and savoury, paired perfectly with a cup of kopi, makes for a morning with few equals. Then there are the soft-boiled eggs, seasoned simply with soy sauce and pepper. You might have that with coffee or tea, or even cham—an earthy and satisfying blend of both.

If you're after something a little more substantial, most kopitiams will have a chap fan (mixed rice) section or a menu of local favourites cooked to order. This



A man preparing a cup of kopi



Nasi lemak, a dish typically found at a kopitiam

Images: Magnific; Pexels; Gizer Esigues, Wikimedia Commons

consists primarily of no-frills food, made to nourish. But make no mistake: that doesn't mean it's not good. Its simplicity does not come at the expense of flavour. It just happens to be the kind of cooking that eschews presentation for comfort.

These days, though, a new generation of kopitiam has emerged. Sleeker and more curated, they offer air-conditioned interiors, cleaner spaces, and a more deliberate aesthetic. Unsurprisingly, they've found favour with a younger crowd, many of whom might not otherwise frequent your more traditional establishments.

This recasting brings with it a host of changes. These newer spots tend to be pricier, reflecting their upgraded ingredients, be it artisanal coffee or elevated takes on classic dishes. In places like Oriental Kopi, for example, their nasi lemak is far from the humble leaf-wrapped version most are accustomed to. Instead, it's reworked with more generous portions and a refined appearance, almost a dish of its own wearing a nasi lemak veneer. Hock Kee Kopitiam takes on a similar approach with their pumpkin kaya butter toast, a creative twist on the old favourite.

Where older kopitiam are characterised by their communal energy, noise, and nostalgia, the newer ones sport an altogether more polished feel. The atmosphere is markedly less frenzied, the design more deliberate, and the sensibility unmistakably informed by a more contemporary one.

Whatever form they take, the kopitiam remains an integral part of Malaysian identity. There was a time when it seemed at risk—caught between changing tastes and a younger generation reluctant to inherit the trade. But instead of fading, the kopitiam has adapted and found new life in a different era that continues to reshape it in its own way.

It doesn't replace the old-style kopitiam. If anything, the two now exist quite happily side by side—different in form, but sharing in the same spirit. And as long as people continue to seek out spaces like these, there will be room for both. Because in the end, they're not so much different places as they are different ways of finding the same kind of comfort. 



A typical kopitiam scene



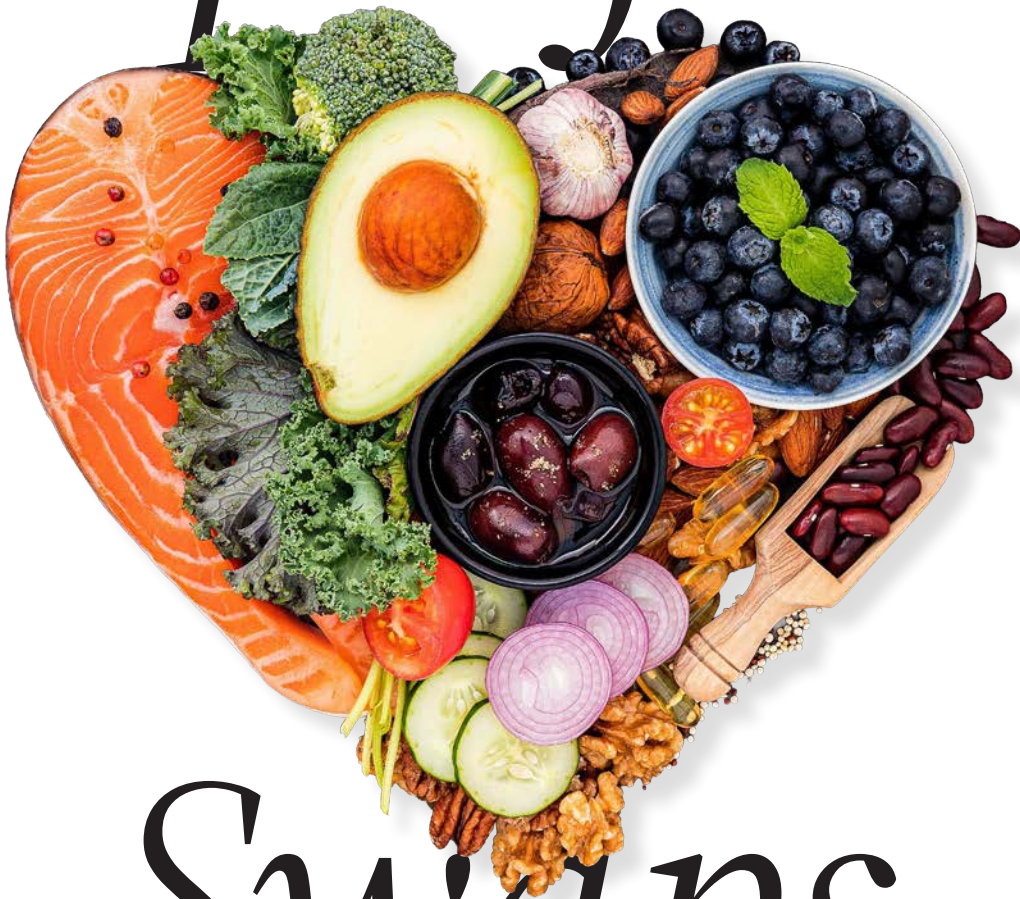
AT HOME

A Cup Above

Since 1913, William Stanley Jr.'s vacuum insulation idea has evolved into a design icon that has outlived trends and generations. Making its Malaysian debut at Mid Valley Megamall, Stanley's cult-favourite tumblers step into everyday rituals, where utility meets a certain kind of lifestyle shorthand: durable, purposeful, and built for a world increasingly done with disposable.

Words: ANDREA WONG

Superfood



Swaps

The health benefits attached to superfoods are real—but so is the mark-up. Here are a few cheaper alternatives that offer many of the same nutritional perks for a fraction of the price.

Words: COLIN GOMEZ

Superfoods. You know the term. You've seen them plastered all over the internet, if your mum hadn't already shared a list of them on Facebook or sent you one of those videos with an AI-generated voiceover. The thing about them, though, is that while they're undeniably nutritious and come with a host of real benefits, the hype around them—along with branding, importing, and wellness culture—has sent prices skyrocketing.

But just because you're on a budget doesn't mean those benefits are off-limits. There are plenty of underrated and affordable alternatives that may not get the same attention, but still pack a serious nutritional punch.

WHY IT'S A SUPERFOOD?

Açaí is a dark purple fruit native to the Amazon region. It took the wellness world by storm when it first gained traction, with just about everybody throwing it into juices and smoothie bowls. It's rich in antioxidants, especially anthocyanins—the pigments responsible for its signature purple colour. It also contains fibre and healthy fats not commonly found in most other fruits.

AFFORDABLE ALTERNATIVE: BLUEBERRIES

Blueberries contain many of the same anthocyanins, which explains their colour, as well as antioxidants linked to brain and heart health. In fact, studies suggest that regular consumption may support cognitive function and reduce inflammation over time. If antioxidants are what you're after, then yes, açai does contain exceptionally high levels, but blueberries are a worthwhile alternative that's far easier to find and much easier on the wallet too.

Açaí





Chia Seeds

WHY IT’S A SUPERFOOD?

Chia seeds are tiny seeds that come from the *Salvia hispanica* plant and were historically consumed by the Aztec and Mayan civilisations. A quick and easy addition to smoothies, puddings, and overnight oats, they’re sought after for their extremely high fibre content while also being a good source of protein, calcium, magnesium, and antioxidants.

They’re also often praised for their ALA omega-3s, though the body converts these rather inefficiently into EPA and DHA, meaning you’re generally better off relying on fish for those forms of omega-3.

AFFORDABLE ALTERNATIVE: FLAXSEEDS

Flaxseeds come with many of the same benefits as chia seeds, being rich in fibre, omega-3 fatty acids, and antioxidants themselves. They’re just as easy to add to the same meals you’d normally use chia seeds for, not to mention usually quite a bit cheaper per serving. For most people, the practical nutritional difference between chia and flax is relatively small compared to the difference in price.

Salmon



WHY IT’S A SUPERFOOD?

Ah, salmon. It’s practically the gold standard for healthy fish, and there’s definitely some validity to that reputation. A fatty fish rich in EPA and DHA omega-3 fatty acids—both strongly linked to cardiovascular and brain health—salmon is also a high-quality protein source packed with vitamin D, selenium, and B vitamins.

AFFORDABLE ALTERNATIVE: SARDINES

It turns out that the affordable alternative to one of the most expensive fish at the supermarket happens to be one of the cheapest. Sardines also come with a healthy helping of omega-3s, protein, vitamin D, and B12, and you’ll often find them canned, making them far more shelf-stable and accessible than fresh salmon. They’re also lower on the food chain, which may mean they contain lower levels of mercury than larger fish. That said, it’s worth keeping an eye on the label, as some canned varieties can be quite high in sodium or packed in heavy oils, so opting for lower-sodium or water or brine-packed versions where possible is probably the better move.

The Takeaway

The traditionally touted superfoods are celebrated for a reason. Many contain genuinely beneficial compounds that can support your health when consumed regularly. The issue is that, with the hefty price tags they often come with, not everyone can afford to eat them consistently without their wallets wailing out in protest.

Luckily, budget-friendly alternatives abound. They may not be as glamorous, but they’re foods you can realistically incorporate into your diet on a regular basis. And in the long run, that consistency will do far more for your health than occasionally splurging on trendy superfoods.



Cool Comfort

Nespresso's Summer of '86 collection brings back crowd favourites and fresh new blends made for long afternoons, melting ice cubes and staying cool one sip at a time.

Words: PATRICK LOH

KL's heatwave clearly didn't get the memo about leaving, so survival mode currently involves two things: air-conditioning and iced coffee. Since we can't exactly live inside a freezer, Nespresso's new Summer of '86 collection arrives right on cue with a line-up designed for drinking cold and staying vaguely functional.

Leading the new additions is the Yuzu Vanilla Over Ice, where bright Japanese yuzu meets sweet vanilla in a light-roast Arabica blend that tastes like someone gave your usual iced coffee a citrus holiday.

Returning by popular demand is the Coconut Vanilla Over Ice. Smooth Latin American beans bring rich caramel-like notes, while coconut vanilla rounds everything out into something extremely easy to finish in one sitting.



Then there's the Athens Freddo, built for those who like their coffee with a little more attitude. Robust and dark-roasted, it balances cereal and woody notes with a pleasant bitterness that stays lively over ice without turning flat halfway through the drink.



The World Explorations Lisbon Bica leans deeper and nuttier, layering roasted cereal notes with warm almond undertones for a more intense iced coffee moment that feels polished rather than punchy.

Seasonal favourites are also back in rotation. Ice Leggero keeps things bright and breezy with fruity notes softened with cereal undertones, while Ice Forte goes heavier and fuller-bodied, bringing together South American and Indonesian Arabicas for a cold cup that holds it's own beneath the ice. **D**

The Everyday, Elevated

Four ingredients you already own. Four simple ways to transform them. Here's how to upgrade your kitchen staples.

Words: VANESSA L

The difference between good cooking and great cooking lies in the details—ingredients, spices, and seasoning. With a little time and an extra step or two, everyday essentials can become richer, more refined staples. And the best part? You can make them better right in your own kitchen.

1. Butter

Butter, if you ask me, sits above everything else. Be it plant-based, unsalted, or sweet cream, it has long held its place in the kitchen. Imagine letting it melt into toast as it turns golden at the edges, or stirring it into your morning cuppa for a fuller sip. It's the kind of ritual you return to every sunrise.

To coax even more flavour from butter, infuse it with herbs, both dry and fresh work well. Finely dice them to ensure their aroma is well distributed throughout. From there, the possibilities open up: compound butter can be fortified with savoury ingredients like spices and cheese, or taken in a sweeter direction with honey and fruit. Fold your chosen additions into softened butter until evenly incorporated, then refrigerate until set.

Often rolled into a log and sliced into neat pats, compound butter is minimal effort to make at home but delivers concentrated bursts of flavour. A simple bread spread one moment, a finishing touch for red meats and vegetables the next.



Images: Pexels; Magnific

2. Honey

Honey has been around longer than most occupants in your kitchen. Used for everything from sweetening food to soothing throats to embalming the dead, versatile doesn't begin to cover it. Honey transforms: lifted by herbs, sharpened by spice, and deepened by heat. Here's how to try infused honey at home.

While fresh ingredients can be used, dried are the better choice. Pure honey lasts almost indefinitely when stored properly, and dried ingredients help keep it that way.

Start with a mild honey, then introduce your infusions. Herbs like rosemary, lavender, and thyme; spices like cloves and turmeric; dried fruits like citrus peel and fig; or something with heat like dried chilli.

For the cold method, tuck additions into a honey-filled jar and store in a cool, dark place for one to two weeks, turning the jar once a day to ensure even coating.

For a faster result, a hot infusion does the job. Gently heat the infused honey over a low flame until the desired depth of flavour develops, then strain and store. Quicker than the cold method, but it still requires care—rush it, and the flavour won't fully come together.



3. Oil

Oil is a fixture in every kitchen, where even a small drizzle can significantly lift a dish's aroma. Infused oils take this further, adding depth in both taste and texture. Think shallot oil, a familiar staple in many Chinese kitchens, where the oil becomes as expressive as the main ingredients.

Infused oil, like honey, can be made two ways: hot and cold. For hot infusions, a neutral oil with a high smoke point—sunflower or grapeseed—works best, while the more expressive extra virgin olive oil suits cold infusions better.

The hot method follows a similar rhythm to its honey counterpart: warm a modest amount of aromatics in oil over low heat, just enough to perfume without overcrowding. Once fragrant, remove from heat, cool completely, and strain before bottling.

The cold method, again, unfolds more gradually. Aromatics are submerged in oil and left to infuse for one to six weeks in a cool, dark place, depending on the robustness of the infusion.

As with honey, dried ingredients are preferred for their stability and clarity of flavour, while fresh ones require more care in handling and storage. A little extra effort, as with most things in the kitchen, goes a long way.



4. Salt

If there's one thing worth its salt in the kitchen, it's salt itself. It doesn't just season, it balances. Salt sharpens natural flavours, tempers bitterness, and brings clarity to taste in a way few ingredients can.

But what if it went a step further? Just as herbs are blended, salt can be too. Seasoned salt is simply a mix of salt with spices and aromatics you already have on hand. Think paprika, cayenne, rosemary, garlic powder, or even a touch of sugar, combined to create a single, ready-to-use seasoning.

It is also a practical way to use up small amounts of spices that might otherwise sit forgotten in the pantry. Once combined, they form something greater than the sum of their parts: an all-purpose blend that can be reached for instinctively, without pause or measuring.

Used well, seasoned salt becomes less a finishing touch and more a shortcut to depth. Use it as a dry rub for meats before grilling or shake it over roasted vegetables straight from the oven. Even the simplest dishes—a soft-boiled egg, a bowl of rice, a slice of buttered toast—gain an extra layer of character with nothing more than a pinch.

From pantry to possibility

What begins as everyday pantry staples ends as possibility. In their simplest forms, butter, honey, oil, and salt hold more potential than they first suggest. Unchanged in essence, they shift in expression.

With care and a little patience, even the most familiar ingredients reveal more than expected.

Living Flavours

Fermentation sounds fancy, but it's really just controlled rot with better PR. Here's how to turn everyday ingredients into tangy, living food without blowing up your kitchen.

Words: COLIN GOMEZ

Images: Pexels; Magnific; Unsplash; Vecteezy

Fermentation is one of those rare culinary processes that humanity didn't invent so much as stumble upon—and have been grateful for ever since. It's that wonderful process behind the great taste in your beer, cheese, and sourdough. One of the oldest culinary techniques in the world, it was likely stumbled upon in prehistoric times. So if a caveman could it, so can you. Here are a few ways to start.

Kimchi

Kimchi is, in many ways, the gateway ferment. It's easy to start with and almost impossible to mess up. This is because the salt works to control the environment within your jar, letting only good bacteria (mainly *Lactobacillus*) thrive and do its thing.

METHOD

1. Chop or quarter napa cabbage (or really any firm leafy veg like mustard greens).
2. Toss with about 2 tablespoons of salt per medium-sized cabbage, rubbing it in to draw out moisture. Leave for 1–2 hours until it softens and releases water.
3. Rinse briefly to remove excess salt, then coat with a paste made from garlic, ginger, chilli flakes, maybe sugar, and a splash of fish sauce or soy. Recipes vary, so feel free to look up one you like.
4. Pack tightly into a clean jar, pressing down to remove air pockets. The vegetable should be submerged in its own brine at this point.
5. Loosely seal and leave at room temperature for 1–3 days (depending on how warm your kitchen is), then refrigerate.

What's happening here is that the bacteria feed on the vegetable's sugars and produce lactic acid as a result—precisely what gives kimchi that tangy, complex dimension we love so much. As it ferments each day, the flavour starts to deepen.





Sauerkraut

Kimchi is easy, but what if we told you there was something even easier than that? Enter sauerkraut, kimchi's staid German cousin. It's simpler by design, requiring exactly two things to pull it off: cabbage and salt. That's it. Nothing more, nothing less.

METHOD

1. Shred cabbage finely and sprinkle about 2% salt by weight (that's roughly 1½ teaspoons per 500g cabbage).
2. Massage it with your hands for 5–10 minutes until it releases enough brine to cover itself.
3. Pack it into a jar, pressing down firmly. The cabbage should stay submerged because oxygen encourages mould.
4. Cover loosely and let it sit for 1–2 weeks, tasting along the way.

It works in much the same way kimchi does, where the salt draws the water out and creates a salty brine in which the naughty bacteria can't survive, but the lactic acid bacteria can. It's so simple that it would be hard to mess up. Just make sure to keep everything under the brine and you'll get crisp, tangy, naturally preserved cabbage that can sit in your fridge for months.

Kombucha

Kombucha's great, and while you might think it's a modern wellness fad, its origins actually date back to China some 2,000 years ago. It's basically fermented tea, helped along by a SCOBY (Symbiotic Culture of Bacteria and Yeast) that takes sweet tea and then coaxes it into the tart, effervescent beverage that our colon loves.

METHOD

1. Brew 1 litre of black or green tea and add about 100g sugar (the microbes eat this sugar later).
2. Let it cool to room temperature, then pour it into a clean glass jar.
3. Add your SCOBY plus a bit of starter tea (you can get a SCOBY from store-bought kombucha or a previous batch).
4. Cover with a cloth and let it sit for 7–10 days.

During the fermentation process, you'll notice a tangy scent in the air and perhaps a new "baby" SCOBY forming on top—this is actually a good thing. Once it's tart enough, you'll want to bottle and refrigerate it. To add some fizz, you'll have to do a second fermentation, in which you'll throw in some chopped fruits and then seal the bottle for two to three days. Feel free to add in whatever fruits your heart desires—mango, lychee, pineapple, or even durian if you have the stones for it.





Sourdough

Sourdough is the oldest bread on Earth and, to the uninitiated, might seem like an intimidating prospect to tackle. But in reality, it's just flour, water, and letting some of the invisible organisms floating around your house do their thing. The starter is where it all, well, starts. It's just a bubbling little jar of fermented flour and water that acts as your colony of wild yeast and bacteria. Keep this happy and fed, and it'll keep making you bread for years on end. Some starters even have lineages that stretch back to the 19th century, which is kind of wild when you think about it.

METHOD

1. Mix equal parts flour and water in a clean jar until it forms a thick paste.
2. Leave it loosely covered at room temperature and feed it daily with more flour and water, discarding some each time.
3. After about 5–7 days, it should start bubbling and smelling pleasantly tangy.
4. To make a loaf, mix 100g active starter with 500g bread flour, 350ml water, and 10g salt until it forms a shaggy dough. Let it rest for about 30 minutes, then knead or fold it a few times until smooth.
5. Leave it to rise slowly for several hours—or overnight if you want deeper flavour—before baking.

How it works is that the wild yeast produces carbon dioxide, which helps lift the bread, while the lactic acid bacteria are what's responsible for its signature sour taste. The slow fermentation is also a major contributor to that chewy texture and crackly crust that we all know and love.

Yoghurt

Yoghurt might just be the most common thing that people have been eating without being aware that it's actually a product of fermentation. Not only that, it's also one of the easiest things to ferment at home. All you have to do is keep the bacteria warm and comfortable while they do all the work. It's literally just introducing live bacterial cultures into milk and giving them time to convert lactose into lactic acid, and it's this process that thickens the milk and gives yoghurt that familiar tang.

METHOD

1. Heat about 1 litre of milk to around 82°C, stirring occasionally to keep it from catching at the bottom. (This helps denature the proteins and gets rid of any unwanted bacteria that might interfere with the fermentation process.)
2. Then, let it cool to roughly 43–46°C, so it's warm but no longer scalding, before stirring in your yoghurt culture.
2. Stir in 2–3 tablespoons of plain yogurt with live active cultures.
3. Pour into a clean container and keep warm for about 6–12 hours. An oven with the light on works surprisingly well.
4. Once thickened and tangy, refrigerate to stop the fermentation.

Make a batch for yourself and you'll see why supermarket yoghurt could never compare. You'll find your homemade version to be fresher and tangier. Additionally, by making it yourself, you get to tweak the texture to however you like it. Strain it and you'll get something approaching Greek yoghurt. Spoon it into some fruit and honey and breakfast will never be the same again.





Tea Beyond The Brew

*The cup may be where tea begins,
but it's the kitchen where it finds
new life.*

Words: VANESSA L

When it comes to tea, a teapot and an unhurried moment often come to mind—leaves awakening in hot water, teawares primed, then the gentle invitation to pause and sit back as everything unfolds at its own pace. But to confine it to a cup is to overlook its versatility. The teapot may be tea's most familiar stage, but it is hardly its only one, and what it does best in water is only the start of what it is capable of elsewhere in the kitchen.

Brewed differently, tea can perfume rice with subtle fragrance and depth. Its leaves can also tenderise, adding structure and nuance to marinades, much like wine in different register. Steeped into stocks and broths, it lends layered complexity. Tea is more than comfort, it can cook.

Images: Pexels; @seitosushisandlake, Instagram; Magnific

The steep before the sear



Tea's reputation may be rooted in delicacy, but it is equally at home with tougher cuts of meat. Its tannins work much like wine, gently softening fibres while adding their own depth of flavour. Black tea brings the most structure. Ceylon, full-bodied and gently malty, lends steady tenderness to richer cuts, while lapsang souchong adds a distinctive woodsmoke depth suited to slow-cooked meats. Green tea offers a lighter touch, bringing a clean, herbaceous lift that works well with leaner meats like lamb or venison. Let the tea cool before marinating, or it may seize the meat before the flavours have a chance to settle.



Tradition in a bowl

Tea and rice may seem simple on their own, but together they form a surprising kind of harmony, most clearly expressed in the Japanese comfort classic, ochazuke. Served in a bowl rather than a pot, it's a dish rooted in simplicity and everyday practicality, born not from ceremony but from necessity and ease. What makes it enduring is its adaptability—it works just as naturally with hot or cold rice, later brought together by the heat of tea poured over. Once a humble way to transform leftovers, it has evolved into a quiet ritual of its own, unbound by time or occasion. Whether at dawn or in the stillness of midnight, ochazuke asks for little more than what is already there. In many ways, it is an ode to yesterday—gently reawakened, warmed, and welcomed back to the table.



Leaf it in the broth

Through a different strainer, where the leaves run deep, tea seeps into broth, shifting from drink to foundation. Once steeped into savoury form, it lends structure, aroma, and a depth that sits beneath the surface rather than on top of it. Oolong leads the way here. Roasted and gently buttery, it brings softness to tofu and gains depth with mushrooms, turning the broth more rounded and savoury. Pu-erh follows with darker weight—earthy, woody, and warm. Aged and fermented, it carries a shaded umami that aligns naturally with wild mushrooms, as though the forest has been drawn into the same pot. Jasmine is the lightest touch. Floral and restrained, it drifts through seafood broths with fragrance rather than force, then gently recedes. For something so often confined to a teapot, tea feels remarkably at home in a stockpot. Perhaps all it asks is a little more room to steep and become something more.

Ghee Whiz

At first glance, ghee is just butter that's been cooked a little longer. In practice though, it's responsible for some of the richest, most comforting flavours in Indian cooking.

Words: COLIN GOMEZ

Today, we're going to be shining the spotlight on an oft-overlooked ingredient in ghee. You've probably had it more times than you realise, though usually its presence only really announces itself through a certain richness to whatever dish, most likely Indian, that you're eating. You've probably caught whiffs of it rising from your plate of biryani, the smell whipping you into a feversish frenzy before you maniacally dug in, or maybe you were hypnotised by its toasted, buttery aroma, gently cloaking the air as artful hands manning the bread station at your local mamak wove their magic spells with each toss.

A lot of people don't really know what ghee is beyond "that thing that makes food taste good", but it's an ingredient that deserves to be accorded far more importance than that. It's a vital component of Indian culture, where you'll find it used in everyday cooking, traditional medicine, and Hindu religious rituals, among other things.

Perhaps the most stripped-back way to see what kind of difference ghee can make to your food is to go to your local mamak and order a ghee thosai. Compare this to your regular thosai and see how the difference makes itself immediately apparent. You'll find the edges develop more of a hardened crackle, while the centre feels richer and almost custard-like.



Your fingers come away carrying traces of the faintly buttery aroma that whispers dangerously compelling suggestions of one more round. Nothing against regular thosai, it will always have its place in my heart (hopefully not literally), but the addition of ghee is an undeniable elevation.

Having said that, ghee is so much more than what it does to your thosai. If you've ever had a really good murtabak or a stellar briyani, chances are ghee had something to do with it. It's something you can usually smell before you taste: a warm, nutty, almost caramel-like presence that hangs heavier and longer in the air than regular butter.

Alright, so we all know it makes food taste good, but what exactly is ghee? Ghee is, despite its ostensible exoticism, really just clarified butter. I say it's "just clarified butter", but in all actuality, it's this one simple process that changes its characteristics almost entirely. You see, butter is made up of roughly 80 percent milkfat, along with water and milk solids. Ghee, on the other hand, is made by simmering butter until the water evaporates and the milk solids separate out. Those solids are then allowed to caramelize lightly before being strained away, leaving behind only pure butterfat.

Making a batch of ghee from butter is a fairly simple process you can pull off in your kitchen in under 20 minutes. As you cook the butter, you'll find its facets slowly beginning to warp. The bubbling starts to quiet down, and the kitchen, which smelled so creamy before, begins to take on a more roasted turn. This olfactory substitution is heralded by the milk solids at the bottom of the pot taking on a beautiful shade of golden brown.

Where butter in its unadulterated form is creamy and rich, with a little sweetness to it, ghee takes on a deeper nuttiness on its journey through the fire, and this only serves to dial up the richness further. We all love cooking with butter when we can; it imparts the kind of flavour cooking oil never could. But because butter contains milk solids, it tends to burn quickly. Try cooking a steak entirely in butter, and you'll find the butter giving in well before the steak does.



Ghee, though, has shed the vulnerability that comes with milk solids and, as a result, obtained a smoke point of around 250°C. This hardness makes it perfect for high-heat sautéing, searing, and frying without burning, all while carrying that unmistakable richness into whatever you're cooking.

For something that can be boiled down to, well, butter that's been boiled down, ghee has quite the outsized presence. If you still needed any more convincing, start cooking with ghee today and revel in how it perfumes a kitchen, clings sultrily to flatbreads, enriches your curries, and somehow makes food feel warmer and heavier in all the best ways. There's a reason it's viewed with reverence in certain quarters, as few ingredients do so much while asking for so little attention. **D**

The night is slipping away. You've got the vaguest sense that it could still be something more, but how? You scan the kitchen and spot your half-empty bottle of tequila and a few leftover limes in the fridge. What could you do with that? Turns out, quite a lot actually. Tequila is far more versatile than it gets credit for.

It can be bright and refreshing or smoky and serious, depending on how you approach it, and far more refined than those shudder-inducing nights from your uni days would suggest. Here, we show you the easiest ways to make the most of this spirit. No apron, shaker set, or fancy glassware needed. Just a decent bottle and an open mind.

Tequila

Mockingbird

If your tequila experience begins and ends with salt, lime, and emotional damage, it might be time to branch out. These easy cocktails are a much better use for the bottle in your kitchen.

Words: COLIN GOMEZ



Margarita

Of course we had to begin with the Margarita. It is the quintessential tequila cocktail after all, and basically what the G&T is to gin. Whether you're at a breezy beach bar or partying it up at the club, the Margarita is a drink at home almost anywhere—and it can be at your home too. Sharp, citrusy, salty, you know the drill. It's definitive proof that limes and tequila were made for each other.

INGREDIENTS

50ml tequila
25ml lime juice
20ml triple sec (or Cointreau)
Ice
Optional: salt rim, lime wheel

METHOD

1. Run a lime wedge around the rim of your glass and dip it in salt if you want the full experience.
2. Add tequila, lime juice, and triple sec to a glass with ice.
3. Stir until chilled.
4. Garnish with lime if you're feeling theatrical.

It's the classic and the go-to for a reason. The best part about making it at home is that you don't need to keep count of how many you've had.



Paloma

The Margarita may be the life of the party, but the Paloma is the guy everybody chats with at the snack bowl and goes, “hey, you know what, this guy is actually pretty cool.” It’s light and fizzy, with a bright citrus-forward zing that makes it oh-so refreshing, not to mention dangerously drinkable. And in true chill-guy fashion, it’s also easy and unfussy to make.

INGREDIENTS

- 50ml tequila
- 100ml grapefruit soda
- 10ml lime juice
- Ice
- Optional: salt rim or grapefruit wedge

METHOD

1. Fill a tall glass with ice.
2. Pour in tequila and lime juice.
3. Top with grapefruit soda.
4. Give it a gentle stir.
5. Garnish if you’d like to pretend you planned ahead.

Bubbly and effervescent with just the right amount of bitterness to round things off, the Paloma makes for a quick and easy mix-up on a sweltering afternoon, or something for guests to sip on at a laid-back barbecue.



Tequila Sunrise

There is something irresistibly retro about the Tequila Sunrise. For some reason, it conjures up images of synth keyboards, analog glitches, Ferrari Testarossas, and Miami skylines at dusk, despite its name and appearance. For how elaborate it looks, it’s actually laughably easy to make.

INGREDIENTS

- 50ml tequila
- 100ml orange juice
- 10ml grenadine
- Ice
- Optional: orange slice or cherry

METHOD

1. Fill a glass with ice.
2. Pour in tequila and orange juice.
3. Slowly pour grenadine down the side of the glass.
4. Let it sink and do the whole “sunrise” thing.
5. Garnish if you’re committed to the aesthetic.

If you distilled an 80s summer playlist into a cocktail, this is probably what you’d get. Sip on it and be swept away to a land where neon lights reflect on wet pavement, palm trees sway against a purple-orange sky, and somewhere, a lonely saxophone solo plays for a gritty hard-boiled neo-noir detective.



Ranch Water

This is one drink that is, I think we can all agree, thankfully not self-descriptive. Despite its name, it's actually one of tequila's greatest low-effort triumphs. A crisp, clean, no-nonsense cocktail that's a little like tequila doing its best highball impression.

INGREDIENTS

50ml tequila
Sparkling water
15ml lime juice
Ice
Optional: lime wedge

METHOD

1. Fill a tall glass with ice.
2. Add tequila and lime juice.
3. Top with sparkling water.
4. Stir gently.
5. Garnish with lime if you've got one nearby.

There's something to admire about the easy simplicity of a Ranch Water. It's a drink that doesn't go out of its way to impress anyone, and that's exactly the point.



El Diablo

The El Diablo may sound like it was concocted by a man with slicked-back hair and a driving ban among some other offences, but it's actually a surprisingly elegant drink. The tequila gives it some backbone, the lime keeps things lively, and the ginger beer adds bite.

INGREDIENTS

50ml tequila
15ml lime juice
100ml ginger beer
10ml crème de cassis (optional, but recommended)
Ice
Optional: lime wedge

METHOD

1. Fill a glass with ice.
2. Add tequila, lime juice, and crème de cassis if using.
3. Top with ginger beer.
4. Stir lightly.
5. Garnish with lime if you're so inclined.

Put it all together and you end up with something fizzy, fruity, and carrying just enough spice to keep things interesting.



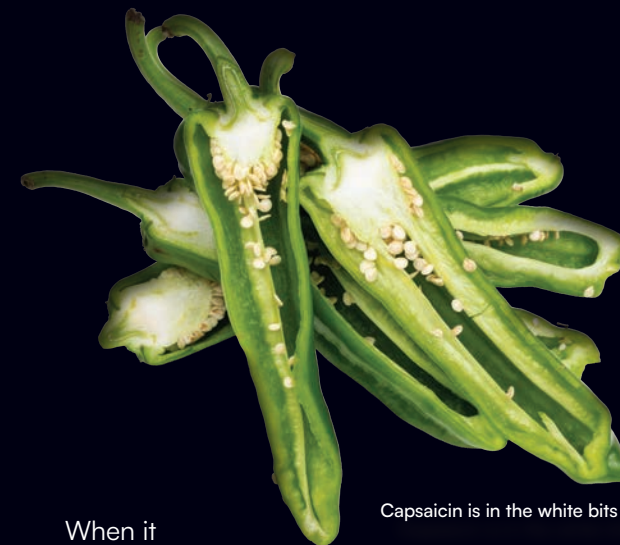
Hot Take

That burning sensation in your mouth isn't heat at all, but instead a neurological sleight of hand courtesy of a compound that's very good at lying to your nerves.

Words: COLIN GOMEZ

Have you ever wondered what makes your food spicy? A simple enough question, sure, but one with an answer far stranger than you might expect. Despite your tingling tongue and watering eyes telling you otherwise, what registers as heat when you bite into a chilli pepper isn't actually a taste at all. In fact, it's a reaction of the body that is not very different from if you'd pressed your hand against a hot stove.

The culprit behind this apparent malfunction of your senses is a compound called capsaicin, which is primarily found in the white membranes and pith inside chilli peppers. Capsaicin works by binding to something known as TRPV1 receptors, which are heat-sensitive nerve receptors that normally exist to warn you when something is genuinely hot enough to cause harm. Capsaicin, through a fascinating mechanism of action, essentially hijacks this system.



Capsaicin is in the white bits

When it binds to these receptors, it sends a signal to the brain that says, "hey, there's something hot happening here, and you should be concerned," this being despite the fact that there has been no actual increase in temperature. What then follows is that hellishly familiar sensation that leaves you sweating, turning red as a beet, and reaching for the nearest glass of water (or milk, if you're smarter than the average bear). Your mouth might not be on fire, but your nervous system, through capsaicin's ingenious trickery, has been led to believe otherwise. So your body, in its panic, responds with everything it has.

Of course, not all chillies are created equal, and the Scoville Scale—named after American pharmacist Wilbur Scoville and measured in Scoville Heat Units, or SHU—tells us exactly how much capsaicin each pepper contains. It ranges from bell peppers at zero, meaning no heat at all, to jalapeños with a little bit of kick at 2,500-8,000 SHU, all the way up to tear-inducing habaneros, which can reach 350,000.

Originally, Scoville measured heat by repeatedly diluting pepper extracts until tasters could no longer detect the burn. Nowadays, laboratories use a more precise chemical analysis, which is honestly better for everyone involved.

As if this wasn't enough, there is a brand of proud sadists who have dedicated years of their lives with the express goal of making peppers even hotter. Through selective breeding, growers have crossed particularly fiery varieties over multiple generations in an effort to increase capsaicin concentrations.

The result is a class of peppers known as super-hots. Among them are names you've probably heard of before, such as the Carolina Reaper or Pepper X, the current incumbent atop the infernal throne of the world's hottest pepper. These peppers are so potent that eating them has become something of a competitive sport, though why anybody would willingly subject themselves to such an experience is beyond me.



The Trinidad Moruga scorpion

It is, when you stop to think about it, a rather absurd state of affairs. A pepper evolves to stop things from eating it, and what do we do? We hold competitions to see who can eat the most aggressive version of it. Yet another quirk that characterises our at times deeply confusing species. ▀



Men Who Cook:

Arnaud Blondel's French Onion Soup

Arnaud Blondel cooks the way he lives: with a French soul and a Malaysian instinct.

Words: ANDREA WONG

Arnaud Blondel, founder and visual storyteller of Samacomplis and co-founder of Syomsz, has spent years making Malaysia home without losing his sense of where he came from. For Men Who Cook, he turns to French onion soup—slow-cooked, rich, and unapologetically French, in spirit at least. In practice, Arnaud cooks the way Malaysia has taught him to: by the distinctly local philosophy of *agak agak*. No strict measures, just patience, intuition, and good broth.

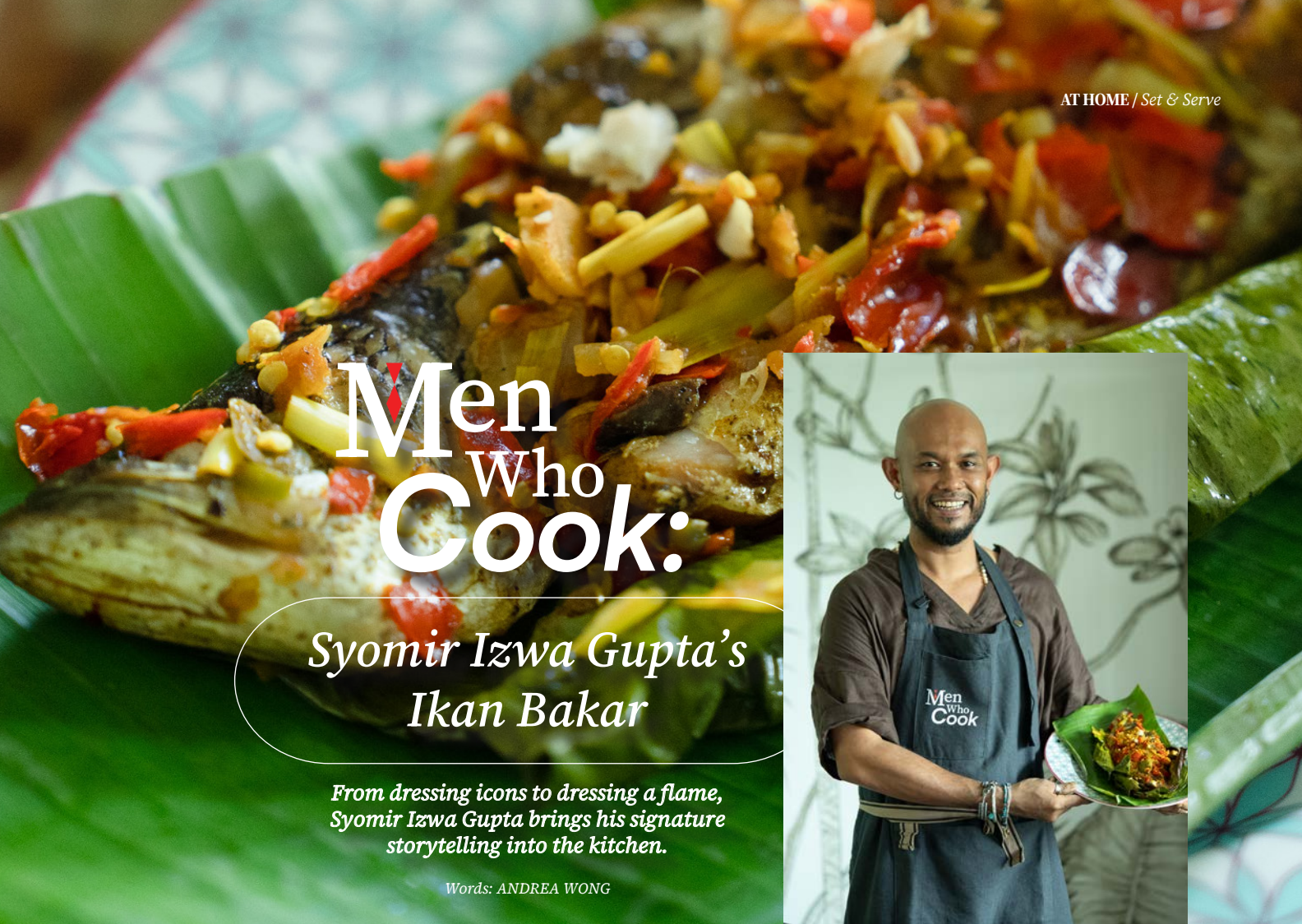
Ingredients:

9 onions, sliced	Flour
Butter	Nutmeg
Chicken broth	Salt and pepper
Beef broth	Bread
Wine	Garlic
Brandy	Cheese

Method:

1. Cook the onions low and slow in butter until deeply caramelised.
2. Add wine and brandy, then pour in chicken and beef broth.
3. Slightly burnt flour goes into the soup for extra depth and thickness, followed by nutmeg, salt, and plenty of pepper.
4. Let it simmer gently before topping with garlic-rubbed bread and melted cheese, then transfer to the oven until everything melts together.

Unhurried, deeply French, finished with a Malaysian flourish. Some things, it turns out, translate perfectly.



Men Who Cook:

Syomir Izwa Gupta's Ikan Bakar

From dressing icons to dressing a flame, Syomir Izwa Gupta brings his signature storytelling into the kitchen.

Words: ANDREA WONG

Fashion designer Syomir Izwa Gupta has always worked at the intersection of tradition, contemporary influence, and personal experience—channelling creativity through colour, placing a botanical motif just so, and layering meaning until something new and singular emerges. The founder of his eponymous label and co-founder of Syomsz brings that same energy to the kitchen, and his ikan bakar is exactly what you'd expect: bold, expressive, and entirely, recognisably his.

Ingredients:

Ikan siakap	Ginger
Salt and pepper	Galangal
Turmeric	Lemongrass
Olive oil	Tamarind
Kicap manis	Butter and coconut oil
Red and green chillies	Belacan (lightly toasted)
Shallots	Banana leaves

Method:

1. Marinate the fish with salt, pepper, turmeric, olive oil, and kicap manis.
2. Blend chillies, shallots, ginger, galangal, turmeric, and lemongrass into a sambal—split into one for dipping and one as a paste.
3. Cook the paste lightly, then layer it onto the fish before wrapping in buttered banana leaves.
4. Grill over charcoal until smoky and tender. Serve with fresh cucumber and sambal on the side.

Rooted in heritage, sharpened by experience, and delivered with confidence over fire, this ikan bakar is, unmistakably, a Syomir original.

Smash Hit

At Skillet, few dishes carry the weight of memory quite like Texture of Chocolate. A signature since day one, it has evolved with every season while staying true to its core: an exploration of chocolate in layered forms. This latest update draws inspiration from the organic geometry of Barcelona's Sagrada Família. The ritual remains unchanged—a delicate chocolate sphere, a mallet, and a pour of liquid nitrogen. One strike, and a satisfying snap of blonde chocolate gives way to smoked Wuyi tea and a bright lift of citrus within. 11 years on, still breaking the mould.

Words: ANDREA WONG

Set *the* Table.

We'll bring the stories.

Find us at:

 www.palateasia.com

 [@palateasia](https://www.instagram.com/palateasia)

 [/PalateAsia](https://www.facebook.com/PalateAsia)

 [@palate.asia](https://www.tiktok.com/@palate.asia)

STARBUCKS RESERVE™



Scan here for
more details



Exquisite Coffees.
Immersive experiences.