

The Finches'



Guide

GHOSTS
& MAGIC



to

Malaysia



Hello! Welcome to the Finches' Guide to Malaysia. Here I'll introduce you a little to the country I come from while illustrating some of the elements you see in my story. While by no means an exhaustive guide, I hope it will encourage you to discover more about the beautiful, colourful place I called home.

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Malaysia is a country of slightly over 30 million people located in Southeast Asia. We're right smack on the Equator, resulting in balmy weather year-round. The country itself has two geographical portions; Peninsular Malaysia, which juts out from mainland Asia, and the states of Sarawak and Sabah which occupy northern Borneo Island.

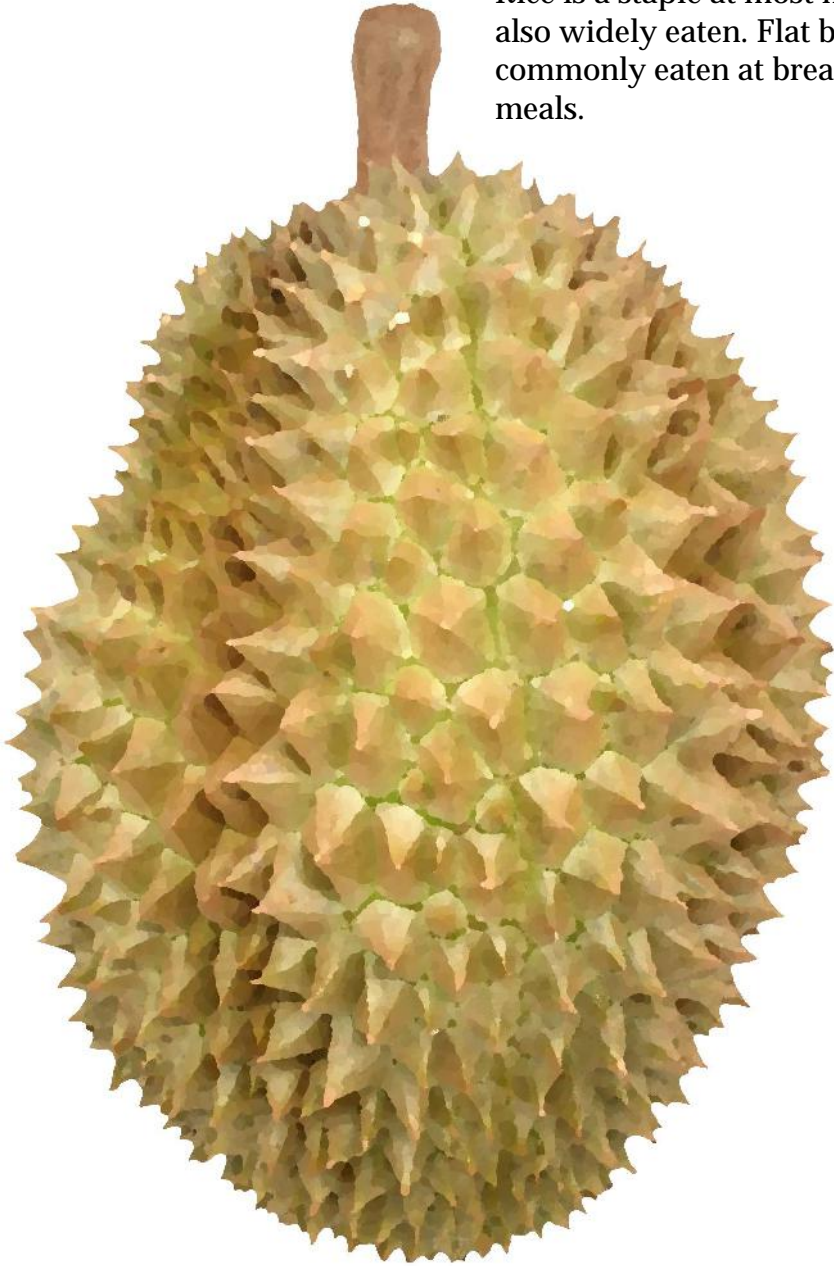
Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected government. The King is chosen every four years from among the nine historical Malay sultanates that comprised Malaysia. In their prime, the historical Malay kingdoms were major stops on the maritime trade route between India and China. Thusly, the descendants of travellers from throughout Asia, Arabia and Europe are represented in our population, each of them adding their influence to our shared culture. Malaysia's three largest ethnic groups are Malay, Chinese and Indian. We also have a multitude of indigenous peoples like the Orang Asli and Dayak, who have lived on these lands for thousands of years.

Most Malaysians are nominally bilingual, having been taught Bahasa Malaysia (our national language) and English as part of the national curriculum. A great number of Malaysians speak a third or even fourth additional language that might be a Chinese dialect (usually Cantonese or Mandarin), Tamil or an indigenous language. The news is broadcast in Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil daily, with newspapers also available in those three languages. Signage, especially in urban centres, is printed in at least both Bahasa Malaysia and English.

Kuala Lumpur

Colloquially known as KL and the financial capital of Malaysia, the Kuala Lumpur I remember is a place with great food and terrible traffic jams. Rapid and hodgepodge development raised fancy shopping complexes alongside traditional villages, and our underlying infrastructure didn't always keep up. When it wasn't sweltering outside, it was monsoon season. Every time it rained, the area around my college in the old Indian part of town would flood—not only adding two hours to what was usually a 20 minute ride home, but also causing electrocution hazards. Not coincidentally, Kuala Lumpur roughly translates into “muddy delta” because the original town was built at the confluence of two major rivers.

Rice is a staple at most meals, though noodles of many kinds are also widely eaten. Flat breads and steamed buns are more commonly eaten at breakfast or as snacks rather than main meals.



MAMAK STALLS & 24-HOUR CURRY HOUSES

'Mamak' refers to Muslim Tamils of South Indian descent. Over centuries of trade, Indian spices have become an inseparable part of Malaysian cuisine. Virtually every ethnic group has its own style of curry. Typical Indian foods like biryani, roti and chapati are considered everyday fare.

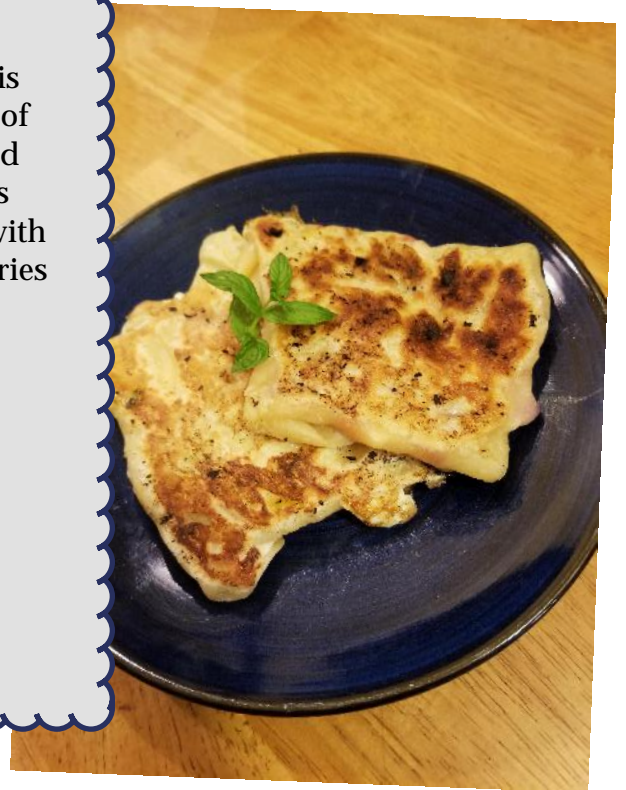
24-hour Mamak stalls and curry houses are incredibly popular in Kuala Lumpur. They're like heading to the pub, just non-alcoholic. Some curry houses even have televisions hooked up to live English football. Because they're so unfussy and affordable, Mamak eateries can be found in every neighbourhood, serving hot meals all day. Rich and poor Malaysians of all races eat at their local Mamak joint, making it a truly egalitarian experience.

TEA

Tea is the caffeine of choice in Malaysia. The predominant styles of serving tea are sweetened with milk or Chinese tea drunk neat. The most popular form of tea is teh tarik (lit. pulled tea). Fortified with sugar, condensed milk and evaporated milk, hot black tea is poured between two metal mugs until frothy and served in a glass. A speciality of Mamak eateries, it's a vital source of caffeine for office workers, university students and World Cup Finals at 3AM.

ROTI CANAI

Roti canai is what is most frequently ordered with teh tarik. It is most basic form of roti, an Indian flatbread. A simple dough of wheat flour, oil and water that is stretched paper thin, layered and fried on a hot grill, this crisp, calorie-dense food item has many beloved variations including fried with eggs, stuffed with bananas or filled with minced meat and onions. Mamak eateries typically sell it for breakfast and in the evenings for tea and dinner.



1 head of Napa cabbage (washed and leaves separated)
½ to 1 cup coarse salt
3 to 4 cloves garlic (sliced thin)
3 to 4 stalks green onion (sliced thin)
Enough starchy water to cover the cabbage in their jars
(see notes below)
Several glass jars with airtight lids
A few sealable bags or closable plastic containers to wilt
cabbage in

1 tbsp red chilli flakes or 1 to 2 fresh chillies (minced)
1 tsp sugar

1. Slice the bottom off the cabbage. This will help separate the leaves.
2. Wash separated leaves and shake off excess water.
3. Divide leaves and salt between the sealable bags or plastic containers you are using. Note: Salt can react with some metal containers so I do not recommend using them for this process. Ceramic and glass works fine though.
4. Leave the salted leaves to wilt overnight in a cool, dark place. If you'd like your pickles to be less salty, you can skip to the next step after 4 or 5 hours of wilting.
5. Drain any resultant brine and rinse excess salt off the cabbage leaves. If you're using sugar, add it to the starchy water and mix until combined.
6. Roll each cabbage leaf tightly. Layer some cabbage leaf rolls, garlic, green onions and chilli/chilli flakes at the bottom of a glass jar. Top this layer with some starchy water.
7. Continue layering the leaves, garlic onions and chilli as in Step 6, topping each layer with more starchy water, until the jar is filled to about 1 inch from the top.

8. When the jar is filled, add just enough starchy water to ensure all the vegetables are covered. This is important to prevent the pickles from spoiling. Press down the vegetables with a spoon to remove any air bubbles and ensure there are no gaps between the layers.

9. Leave about 1 inch clearance at the top of each jar as the cabbage will ferment and the liquid will bubble up.

10. Loosely screw on the jar's lid. Don't tighten it fully yet so the air released during fermentation can escape.

11. Place the jars somewhere you'll remember to check on them. It takes about 3 days for the pickles to start fermenting, longer if the weather is cold. Each day, open the jar and press down the vegetables with a spoon to release trapped air before loosely screwing on the lid again.

12. When the liquid begins to foam up pretty vigorously and the contents smell mildly sour, the jars are ready to be tightened and stored in the fridge. Wait about a week before using the pickles to let the flavours mature. The pickles can be stored for about half a year.

Water with a little starch helps kick-start the fermentation process. Traditionally, the water left over from rinsing white rice before cooking is used. I have found the water used to boil pasta works just as well. If the starchy water you have isn't enough to fill the jars, fill the jars with about half starchy water and the rest of the way with boiled water (wait till the water is cooled before using).

You can also use 1 part rice flour to 3 parts water to make a starch solution. Stir the rice flour and water together in a pan on low heat and keep stirring until the mixture begins to thicken. Use this to fill your pickle jars once it cools.







called
children, one of the ways to deter them is to scatter marbles on the floor. The

being
is obliged

to exorcise their premises.

And there we have it! I hope you've had fun learning a little bit about my country—I certainly had a great deal of fun writing this. In these pandemic times more than ever, I truly wished more people could experience all the wonderful and tasty things Malaysia has to offer first-hand. Someday, this will be possible again. Until then, thank you for reading and please enjoy my strange little book.

For more about me and my writing, please visit my website at:
<http://www.ammuffaz.com>