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Bowling for Malaysia

March 16, 2010

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by felixexplody

I love meals in bowls. Who doesn't? Steaming plates of spaghetti bolognese, french onion soup with cheesy croutons, short soup of slippery wontons. As great as these dishes are, in my humble opinion the laksa is the reigning monarch of bowl food. My favourite laksa has everything. A complex base of chilli and shallots, fragrant with dried shrimp, lemongrass, citrus and other secret herbs and spices, tickling the tongue. Hot, silky broth, rich with stock and coconut milk. Slippery noodles. Spongy, toothsome tofu puffs, drenched with broth. A mixture of sweet prawns, tender thigh of chicken and perhaps the odd fish ball. Crispy, succulent bean sprouts. Vietnamese mint, otherwise known as 'laksa leaf'. A sprinkle of fried shallots, crunchy, and sweet. A squeeze of sour lime. And last but not least, a dollop of pungent chilli and shrimp-paste sambal.

I have loved many laksas. My all-time favourite laksa was from a short-lived Nonya kitchen in Redfern, located conveniently across the road from my workplace at the time. I don't even know if it had a name. I don't know what else was on the menu. But a man we knew as Ba-ba was the laksa master, serving up steaming bowls of the stuff for our lunching pleasure. Sadly he had to hang up his wok due to a repetitive strain injury caused by years of expertly handling the wok chan, and while the building now houses a cafe which, to the best of my knowledge, is run by the Serbian mafia, Ba-ba is still remembered and revered by my former colleagues.

Moving to a new workplace in the city, I made it my business to find some new delicious laksas. The first, and my current favourite, is from [Sayong Curry and Laksa](#) in a dingy hole-in-the-ground below Woolworth's on Park Street which I fondly refer to as The Secret Food Court. The highlight is the finishing touch of a spicy, smoky sambal. In the immortal words of Depeche Mode, I just can't get enough. Also a favourite is Jimmy's Recipe Malaysia in Tank Stream Way. Though I've never traveled in South-East Asia, there's something that feels authentic about trying to find a stool in this hole-in-the-wall, slurping up your soup while knocking elbows with someone at the next table.

Everyone seems to have a favourite laksa joint. My friend Sue the Cyclist recalls pilgrimages to the famed Malaya in Sydney, long before it moved to its fancy digs at King Street Wharf. She imagined a giant, bubbling laksa pot, like a master stock with a life of its own, to which the chefs would simply keep adding things, creating a broth of immense complexity and flavour. Indeed, the Malaya was the home of Sydney's first legendary laksa. Perusing my collection of vintage food guides, I came across this decades-old review by irreverent food critic 'Sam Orr'.

Malaya (from Sam Orr's Sydney Restaurant Guide, 1977)

787 George Street, City

The Malaya which is open for both lunch and dinner seven days a week specialises in a small section of its menu at the back of the huge Chinese section in Malay-Indonesian food. The sates are no great shakes here but all the curries and the laksas as well as the Singapore noodles have always been quite brilliant. The place always has been very cheap and the cheapness has survived the move from lino to carpet, from unlicensed to licensed (although you

can only get the export style beer in small bottles there). To my mind it has always been one of the best values around in Sydney. The staff are generally engagingly rude, not only to the red-faced European scum but to their own kind as well – which shows a nice impartiality. It takes a fair bit of retaliation to be thrown out of the Malaya, but I managed it one time along with a couple of pseudo-literary types. Don't try the Chinese section of the menu, it will nearly kill you. Say about \$8 to \$10 for two.

Alas. Not a laksa is to be found in my new country home. That is, unless you make it yourself. I was inspired by a recent invitation to a Nonya cooking class held by [Victors Food](#). Being as it was in Sydney, I unfortunately couldn't make it, but they were kind enough to send me the recipes so I could have a crack at home. While my laksa wasn't up to the standard of the experts, it more than fulfilled my craving, utilising some beautiful local seafood including Yamba prawns fresh from the previous night's catch. These were, without a doubt, the best prawns I have ever eaten, fresher and tastier than prawns straight from the tank at the Golden Century, perhaps due to their higher content of will to live.

Spicy Seafood Laksa (as adapted from VictorsFood Recipe)

Serves 2-3

750g seafood (I used Yamba prawns and mackerel)

2 cups chicken stock

1 tbsp vegetable oil

250g rice vermicelli

2 cups coconut milk

Laksa Paste (makes a double quantity, freeze the rest for later!)

6-8 dried chillies

3 tbsp dried prawns

1 stalk lemongrass, inner stalk

1 medium brown onion

4 tsp fresh galangal, minced (or 2 tsp galangal powder)

1 tbsp coriander seed, finely ground

2 tsp fresh turmeric, finely chopped (or 1 tsp ground turmeric)

1 tsp sweet paprika

8-10 macadamia nuts

1 tsp lemon zest

3 tsp peanut oil

Garnish

4 tofu puffs, halved diagonally

150g fresh bean sprouts

1 lebanese cucumber, deseeded and julienned

1/2 small bunch Vietnamese mint (though I didn't have any, so used basil)

1/2 lime, cut into wedges

Fried asian shallots (sold at most Asian grocers and some supermarkets)



Last night's catch

Soak the dried prawns in hot water for about 20 minutes, and the dried chillies for 10, until they soften. Drain the chillies and prawns and put in a blender with the soft bit of the lemongrass, onion, galangal, coriander seed, turmeric, paprika, lemon zest and macadamia nuts. Blend into a fine paste. Warm the peanut oil and fry half of the laksa paste (store the rest in a sealed jar in the freezer for your next laksa craving). Once the oil from the paste starts to separate, the paste is done. Add seasoning to taste

Prepare the seafood, peeling the prawns, leaving tails intact and removing the intestinal tracts, and dicing the fish into bite-size chunks. Season and gently fry in 1 tbsp of the oil. Set aside.

Heat the laksa paste and add the stock. Allow soup to simmer slowly as you prepare the rest of the ingredients. Bring a saucepan of water to the boil and scald the noodles for a few minutes, then drain and set aside. Add the coconut milk to the simmering soup, allow it to heat through, adjust the seasoning and pour over the noodles and garnishes.

In separate bowls, divide the noodles, top with seafood, bean sprouts, cucumber, herbs and fried shallots.



Bowled over

Where is your favourite laksa???

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1. March 16, 2010
Sue Webber [permalink](#)

Oh for a bowl of that Malaya laksa. It more than tickled the tongue, sometimes it numbed the lips too. Somewhere in the stock, the taste of cold tea. I would like to see those MasterChef contestants name the ingredients of that one.

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2. March 16, 2010
[Emma](#) [permalink](#)

I have always found the will to live an unusually delicious thing...

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3. March 16, 2010
[reemski](#) [permalink](#)

ooh, wish I was there to eat those divine prawns!

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4. March 16, 2010
Hugh [permalink](#)

Is laksa always made with chicken stock?

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5. March 16, 2010
Emma [permalink](#)

Oi! Who showed you the secret food court! eh?

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6. March 16, 2010
[Jim](#) [permalink](#)

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Yum! Personal fav is Penang Asam Laksa – no coconut milk, so the flavour is zippy and fresh.

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