

FAY ON FOOD

Fay Khoo turned passion into a vocation, tantalising our mental tastebuds with her food writing and television shows. Here, she talks about what drives the Malaysian palate, her own love for food and almost setting Rick Stein's eyebrows on fire.

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or liking for the food here. "But the way it has evolved gastronomically has been remarkable!" she enthuses. "If you look at Cilantro, Third Floor and Lafite, they are great restaurants with award-winning chefs. Is there room for more? Yes, definitely. KL is a growing city. Our

as the top 3 criteria when evaluating an eating establishment for her guides.

Despite notions that food writing is all eat and fun, Fay lets on that it can be quite the contrary. "Because I do a lot of food reviews and write-ups myself, it can be quite exhaustive. When it comes close

on Southeast Asian food in London. "I'd like to be an ambassador for food. That's partly why I do the Miss Khoo's Asian Deli, because I want people to know about our food and heritage. It is something to be proud of," she says. These little silver packets featuring a

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restaurant standards have really gone up by leaps and bounds, and people are becoming more adventurous in introducing us to different cuisines."

But the way forward also has its downside, she points out. "The drawback is some people cashing in on the trend and making a place trendy but the food mediocre. You don't have to be serving excellent food and yet you can still pack out your restaurant. I hope during these leaner times, restaurant owners will pull up their socks a little if they want to survive."

Fay's ties with food can be traced back to her childhood. Born in hawker food haven that is Penang, she was raised around good food, both at home and out on the streets. "My mom and my grandmother are very good cooks, so I guess I have been spoiled. I always had such good overall food experiences that it became par of the course for me that the search for the good is always there."

She fell into a career of food writing, a natural consequence of a passion. "Writing was always the destiny but food writing just became a preoccupation," she explains. Her first foray into food guide writing was on her hometown in 1997, an ambitious project which took her a year to complete, before embarking on *Best Eats* for Kuala Lumpur. She lists consistency, value for money and service

to deadline, you do eat out quite a lot. It can be quite hazardous!"

Her exuberant manner, and lusty laugh, makes her an animated presenter, and besides hosting local programmes, Fay has also appeared on Discovery Asia's *Food on Penang* and minded Rick Stein on his tour of Penang, where the two almost had their eyebrows burnt off.

"We were cooking a fish head curry together, and talking so much that we forgot that the heat below the wok was already on for awhile. The camera's rolling, and Rick Stein goes, 'Well, I guess I'd better throw in the oil!' He threw the oil into the wok, and kapow!" Fay laughs excitedly, re-enacting the scene. "Well, alright then, let's just wipe our eyebrows and keep going, shall we?"

But Fay isn't content with promoting food we already know about within our shores, she is currently in talks to do a television programme and book project

stylised Asian girl with spatula in hand are sold in upmarket joints such as Harvey Nichols and Harrods in London.

The plucky lady is also a natural cook, capitalising on her innate sense and understanding of taste to recreate gourmet food at home. "Cooking is all about senses, right? I think it is having a relaxed attitude towards it, and not stressing out about it. Get your basics right, and you can build on it. Read or watch shows about food, and think about what goes into your mouth. Be a little more thoughtful about what you eat," Fay advises.

"But end of the day, food, no matter who cooked it or where you eat it, it is all about sharing it with the people you care about. Eating is not a solitary venture, it is best enjoyed with the people that you love, who appreciate what's put on the table. The best memories are entwined with the best meals that you've had." ☺

CURRENT TOP 5 FAVOURITE FOODS:

1. Duck confit with a nice mash and a little bit of truffle oil on the side
2. I'm going through a wanton mee phase at the moment, and it is really crazy. It's killing me! It's become a bit of an obsession, and I am cutting a trail through KL and Penang.
3. Pasta is always a favourite of mine. I am a noodle freak. The last pasta dish I made was a cream smoked salmon pasta with flying fish roe and zucchini. It sounds complicated but it is very simple to make.
4. A really good simple salad with buffalo mozzarella, basil, the sweetest tomato and a touch of balsamico.
5. A good solid chicken soup with carrots and whole onions in it. Very wholesome and nutritious.

Food is a national preoccupation, and for some like Fay, it is an enviable job. With her enthusiasm, rapid speech and blunt views, Fay Khoo has carved a name for herself in the local food scene having written several guides and books on the subject, hosted foodie programmes and produced a range of Southeast Asian spice mixes called Miss Khoo's Asian Deli. Her latest venture is the second edition of *Best Eats*, a food guide to Kuala Lumpur, launched together with Qguides, an online restaurant reservation service, with another guide on her hometown Penang on the way.

indeed take real delight in her food. When talking about lunch, it is with loving description, bringing it to the mind's eye and watering the mouth. "I am a typical Malaysian but taken to a new level of obsession. I love to eat, I love everything about food, so that translates to what I write about," enthuses Fay.

So why does she think that Malaysians are so fixated with food? "By nature of the fact that food is so abundantly available and the hawker culture so prevalent in Malaysia. With that sort of proliferation of cheap food culture, it becomes very much a part of your everyday life. You look at the way Malaysians plan their life, they don't plan it from day to day but from meal to meal," she says.

Malaysia's cornucopia of edible delights has granted us taste buds that can take in

fiery chillies with the mild saltiness of soy sauce, incredibly sweet Indian sweets with face souring Chinese pickled plums; opening up our palates to all sorts of new gastronomical adventures. "By nature of our geography and our history and the migration of our people, it ensures that we are very experimental and daring in the way we eat," Fay offers. "Food is the one thing that binds us together. We have Malay, Chinese and Indian food, as well as intrinsically Malaysian food. I think it transcends language and race and gender. I like to think that this is what brings all Malaysians together, a good meal."

Since her early years as a food writer in 1990s Kuala Lumpur, Fay has seen a lot of change to the gastronomical landscape. She admits that having first settled in the mother city, she had little expectation

