

# THE MALAYSIAN INVASION

Malaysians can't help feting the national cuisine, it's just who we are. Check out some passionate foodies flying the Malaysian culinary flag abroad – plus, exports that do us proud!

**T**HERE'S so much to celebrate about Malaysian food. The sheer diversity, for one thing. The building blocks of the national cuisine come from every major ethnic group in the country, the Malays, Indians and Chinese, and the smaller groups contribute their fair share too. (Hurrah for Portuguese Eurasian *debal* curry, Nyonya *pongteh!*)

There's such a glorious borrowing that goes on, with each culture making great contributions to form the Malaysian foodscape. Every dish is imbued with its own individual spices and herbs, touched lovingly

with technique and given character by a unique history.

Little wonder then that our delicious culinary heritage seeps into our very pores, runs through our veins and makes its home in our hearts. You can put a Malaysian anywhere you like, but there will come a time when *nasi lemak* sounds its clarion call and the only answer is: *satu bungkus!*

Flying the national foodie flag on the international scene is almost second nature to many Malaysians, who share their patriotic culinary passions via their own kitchens. But there are those who have taken it several steps further.

For some, it's opening a restaurant in a foreign land, like Bernard Yeoh, whose Kai Mayfair in London serves up contemporary interpretations of Malaysian Chinese cuisine. Kai Mayfair is possibly the only Malaysian-owned restaurant to have a Michelin star glittering on its pennant.

The popular *MasterChef* cooking competition has quite a few alumni with a local link; the Australian instalment of the series has seen a slew of competitors with a Malaysian connection, including the ever-popular, boy-next-door Adam Liaw, who won Season Two in 2010. The *MasterChef UK 2014* winner is Wan

Ping Coombes, who wowed the judges with her versions of *wantan soup* and *nasi lemak!*

Others have woven their foodie love into the ether of cyberspace – chef and ex-restaurateur Jackie M is based in Australia and has over a million followers on Google+, who tune in to watch her appealing cooking demo videos.

Over in the United States, Penang-born, California-based Low Bee Yinn set up the popular *Rasa Malaysia* food blog, and gets about 100,000 unique visitors a month. On the east coast, Christina Arokiasamy teaches cooking classes at her Washington home kitchen, sharing recipes for

Malaysian and South East Asian dishes. Christina has been appointed the Malaysian Food Ambassador, under the Malaysian External Trade Development Corporation (Matrade)'s Malaysia Kitchen initiative, and will also be promoting the country's products, like Brahim's and Lingham's.

And then there is Chef Wan, whose promotion of Malaysian food overseas is more of a vocation than anything else. He's been at it for 40 years, and his success as the country's first food ambassador is as much due to his charisma as his food knowledge and cooking skills.

Finally, there are some other

Malaysians who have really gone places – our top national export, palm oil, has found a home in kitchens all over the world and become a popular staple ingredient in the food industry.

And home-grown company Brahim's sauces and pastes are a way to take a bit of home with you on your travels. Its subsidiary, Brahim's Airline Catering, services 36 airlines worldwide, and sometimes slips a box of *nasi lemak* onto their fold-out tray tables.

We'd like to wish all these wonderful foodies *Selamat Hari Merdeka*. Keep up the great work guys! The country couldn't hope for more delicious ambassadors. 🇲🇾



CHEF WAN, 55,  
CELEBRITY CHEF,  
MALAYSIA

Chef Wan stands in front of a specially-commissioned painting of his grandmother; the mortar and pestle she used is still in his kitchen today.

## WAN LOVE

IN the beginning, there was Chef Wan.

Long before the celebrity chef was a thing, the effusive, outspoken chap (real name, pretty much never used: Datuk Redzuawan Ismail) was putting Malaysian food on the international map, and giving the varied cuisine of the country a face and voice. In 2007, he was awarded the Lifetime Jury Award at the World Gourmet Food and Media Awards in Beijing; in 2009, he was named the Best Celebrity Television Chef at the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards.

His endearing, larger-than-life persona, and enthusiasm for drawing on the larger cultural and ethnic culinary map in his television shows and cookbooks have won him legions of fans the world over. This love of eclecticism and a desire to celebrate various cultures has always come naturally to him, perhaps due in part to his own mixed heritage: his father has Malay and Thai blood, his mother, Nyonya and Japanese.

Today, as he marks 40 years in the F&B world, Chef Wan shows no signs of kicking back and relaxing. Instead, he has just launched a new cookbook to mark the milestone (*400 Resipi Terbaik Chef Wan: Meraikan Kegemilangan 40 Tahun Pengalaman Kulinari*) and is set to add to his Wan Market restaurant chain, which serves up food from South East Asian countries. With the first already operating in Singapore, new Wan Markets will soon be opening in Malaysia's Cyberjaya, with Jakarta, Indonesia and Singapore's Geylang area next on the agenda.

After walking away from an accounting career and getting an associate degree in Professional Chef Training and Hotel Management from the California Culinary Academy and a Ritz Escoffier Diploma from the Hotel Ritz Paris, Chef Wan realised the great appeal and potential for Malaysian food on the world stage, working extensively with Matrade, Tourism Malaysia (which appointed him its first official culinary ambassador) and national carrier, Malaysia Airlines.

Drawing on his extensive contacts, he escorted many Malaysian food companies and chefs over to Europe, under the Matrade banner. "At the time, not too many people were well-travelled and had international contacts, so I took them over there so they could build their brands," says the chef.

Malaysian food has awesome appeal, he feels, and he slipped into the role as the face of the cuisine because he had the knowledge and communication skills to share his love for it. "And when you do cooking demos, you have to have personality and charisma," he adds. The long lines that form for his book signings and demos are testament to his magnetism.

To promote Malaysian food internationally is to create a global brand, he says. "We need a consulting body of professional F&B consultants to sell Malaysian restaurants overseas, to be discerning as to who should get financial help from the government and to provide training," says Chef Wan.

Malaysian food has amazing

potential to be the next big thing in the gourmet world, he adds. "When I filmed my series, *East Bites West with Chef Wan* in the UK, there was a Bite Challenge segment, where locals determined whether a local dish or a dish I cook tasted better – like curry puffs versus pasties, etc. Twelve out of 13 challenges were won by my dishes, which just goes to show that our food really appeals to everybody. Even the most conservative Brits were loving *murtabak* and the rest!"

Apart from being drawn to the fantastic flavour and wonderful variety of Malaysian food, Chef Wan is always amazed at its power to unite – a power he would like to see drawn on more.

"That is what food is about, it is love, it is all about being together and eating together," he says, waxing lyrical. Which is why fighting over food – whether debating its origins or using cultural and culinary differences to divide groups – is, in a word, "stupid" to him.

"One of the best things about our food is its diversity," he says. "Our nation is built on many cultures and ethnicities, you cannot rewrite history. A part of us comes from others, and that is something to celebrate. Eat and be happy. In Malaysian food, you can find love and peace – we have eaten together and lived side by side for so many years now, and we need to pass this on to our children – celebrate each other's festivals, respect each other's differences, be proud because we have so much."

Now that's Wan Malaysia talking. – **Suzanne Lazaroo**

# IT'S IN HER BLOOD

**J**ACKIE M is a chef, ex-restaurateur, TV personality, cookbook and e-mag author, plus a proud single mother – to name just a few of the many hats she wears. But the adage that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts holds true for her. Not only is she one of the bigger Malaysian names on Australia's food scene, but her involvement in social media has seen her spread the Malaysian influence across the world – through food of course.

Jackie's culinary career had unconventional beginnings. She started out as an IT consultant but planted her flag in food territory some 15 years ago. She did this to cure an itch for our local cuisine that Australia simply could not scratch. Under her tutelage at frequent ground events and through social media, her home base, Sydney, has come a long way in terms of Malaysian food. It is with a glint in her eye and a smile on her lips, that she coyly mentions that there is still a lot of confusion over what constitutes Malaysian food versus other South East Asian cuisines like Thai and Indonesian.

Originally from Seremban, Jackie tries to blend the authenticity of her hometown offerings and her stepmother's cooking into her own style. It's a challenging balancing act, trying to remain true to what she remembers while catering to an Australian audience. The fame of her *char kway teow* precedes her, but even that, she notes, lacks the cockles one would usually find in the dish back home. "Certain ingredients are unavailable Down Under," she groans.

JACKIE M, 47,  
CHEF AND TV PERSONALITY,  
AUSTRALIA

Her *kaya* bread and butter pudding, her take on the traditional dessert with a Malaysian twist, is exemplary in showcasing how she has substituted custard with a local delight folded within, to suit Australian tastebuds.

Jackie harvested the use of social media early on and touts over one million followers on Google+, making her account one of the most followed in Australia, with fans hailing from the United States, India, the Middle East and Africa.

She is humbled by the fact that some tune in religiously to watch her cooking demonstration videos, which sometimes go on for 45 minutes. After meeting her, this writer understands her appeal. There's something quite raw and genuine about her that makes Jackie, despite her years abroad, truly Malaysian. As the saying goes, you can take the girl out of the *kampung*, but you can't take the *kampung* out of the girl.

– **Samantha Low**



# A DIPLOMATIC AFFAIR

**C**HRISTINA Arokiasamy made her name by giving cooking classes at her home in Kent, Washington, sharing unique South East Asian dishes with Americans game for new flavours. It's no surprise that this spice merchant's daughter – incidentally, the title of her first cook book published in 2008 – has been appointed Malaysia's Food Ambassador to the United States, under the Malaysia Kitchen Programme. She now conducts classes at food festivals and conventions, etc.

The appointment by Matrade will see her promoting the country's restaurants and foods as well, including ready-made products like Lingham's chilli sauce, Brahim's Curry Paste, Nona's Ketupat Rice Cakes, Asian Meals' Malaysian Satay Sauce, and Boh tea.

"In this role, you walk a fine line," says the Kuala Lumpur-born Christina. "You need to have passion for Malaysia's beautiful ingredients, but also understand the way Americans approach food.

"They want healthy options that taste good, but they are also looking for convenience and approachability. I have taught Malaysian cuisine to over 300,000 Americans, introduced them to our products and made the style of cooking more approachable.

"I hope that more Americans will come to accept our cuisine, the same way they've embraced Thai, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Vietnamese and Korean. It is much more approachable than most Americans think and we've taken great strides in awakening the American palate to the flavours of my childhood.

"Malaysia is beautifully situated in the region. For over 500 years, seafarers, missionaries and other travellers passed

through the peninsula on the way to their destinations. When you taste a dish from Malaysia, you're experiencing a melting pot of cultures coming together in one cuisine."

Christina herself is of the fifth generation of a family of spice merchants who settled in old Malaya. "My great-great-grandfather was captain of a ship belonging to the East India Company, and my family is still involved in the spice business today," she says.

"Growing up in Malaysia, my home was always filled with the scent of herbs and spices that wafted from the kitchen. I was exposed to the world of spices at an early age. I could always smell the scents of galangal, cardamom, coriander, fennel, chilli, star anise and cinnamon wafting from my house, before it was even within sight."

It is probably these exotic smells and tastes that have helped Christina win American hearts. The US-based National Restaurant Association (the largest food service trade association by membership in the world) listed Malaysian cuisine as No.3 on its list of top flavour trends for 2014. And with that, interest in our cuisine is poised to grow.

– **Ooi May Sim**

CHRISTINA AROKIASAMY, 46,  
AUTHOR, CHEF-INSTRUCTOR AND  
SPICE GURU, THE UNITED STATES



# MASTERFUL MALAYSIANS

IT'S no surprise that a number of locally born talents have graced the kitchen arena of *MasterChef Australia*. Now living Down Under, these culinary warriors brave extreme scrutiny by the best chefs in the business, with only the crème de la crème making it to the finals.

Being on one of the grandest stages of television cookery, these individuals have made much headway in terms of exposing the wonders of Malaysian cuisine to the world. Pride in their roots and early exposure to the numerous flavours found back home have influenced many of their dishes throughout the competition, creating fans among judges and viewers alike.

Even when the cameras stop rolling, the itch to cook prompts many *MasterChef* finalists to spread the gospel of our beloved cuisine to the masses, using their new-found celebrity status as a platform to elevate the dishes to a higher level. From food blogs, social media sites and websites to books and TV shows, it's clear that their nostalgic memories of childhood eats are to be shared with the world. — **compiled by Justin Zack**



**ADAM LIAW, 35,  
SEASON 2 WINNER  
(2010), SYDNEY**

“ I GREW UP EATING MALAYSIAN FOOD, SO I'M A LITTLE BIASED. BUT I THINK BECAUSE I'VE SPENT SO MUCH TIME AWAY FROM MALAYSIA AND SEEN HOW PEOPLE EAT IN AUSTRALIA AND ELSEWHERE, I REALISE THAT THE STRENGTH OF MALAYSIAN FOOD HAS ALWAYS BEEN ITS MULTI-CULTURALISM. ”

Arguably one of the best-known Malaysian-born MasterChefs out there, Adam's book, *Two Asian Kitchens*, TV show, *Destination Flavour*, and countless media appearances have drawn worldwide attention to the little country he calls home. Adam is cosying up to the camera, with various TV appearances scheduled. His latest cookbook, *Asian after Work* hit the shelves last September.



**ALVIN QUAH, 39,  
SEASON 2 FINALIST  
(2010), MELBOURNE**

“ I LOVE MALAYSIAN FOOD. WHILE IT HAS YET TO GAIN THE SAME FAME AS JAPANESE OR FRENCH CUISINE, THERE IS ENOUGH RUSTIC CHARM THAT MAKES IT SOMEWHAT MAGICAL, ENOUGH FOR PEOPLE TO KEEP GOING BACK FOR SECONDS. ”

As a young lad, Alvin had a fascination for Malaysian eats. Nowadays, he keeps busy bringing his boyhood obsession to the world, spreading the word by constantly updating his website ([alvinquah.com.au](http://alvinquah.com.au)) with recipes, as well as through his work with Asian food giant, Ayam.



**POH LING YEOW, 41,  
SEASON 1 RUNNER-UP  
(2009), ADELAIDE**

“ THE COUNTRY'S POPULATION COMPRISES MAINLY MALAYS, INDIANS AND CHINESE. BECAUSE THESE CULTURES HAVE LIVED TOGETHER FOR SO LONG, THE CUISINES HAVE FUSED INTO MANY FASCINATING PERMUTATIONS, WHICH MAKE FOR A TRULY VIBRANT WAY OF COOKING AND EATING. ”

— Quote from [malaysiakichen.com.au](http://malaysiakichen.com.au)

Part artist, part cook, all Malaysian, Poh Ling's love for cookery inspired her hit television show, *Poh's Kitchen*. Between the TV screen and book deals, she is also heavily invested in the Australia-based food blog, *Malaysia Kitchen*, using it to shine the spotlight on the edible splendours of her homeland.



**BILLY LAW, 37,  
SEASON 3 FINALIST  
(2011), SYDNEY**

Born in Ipoh, Billy grew up in one of the nation's foodie hotspots and was exposed to the smorgasbord that is Malaysian cuisine. Finding a niche online, Billy runs popular food blog [atablefortwo.com.au](http://atablefortwo.com.au), using the infinite reach of the Internet to spread his love for food to the world.

“ MALAYSIA IS A CULTURAL MELTING POT AND I WAS VERY LUCKY TO GET EXPOSURE TO MANY TYPES OF SOUTH EAST ASIAN CUISINE AT A VERY YOUNG AGE. WITH MY ASIAN BACKGROUND AND THE INFLUENCE OF WESTERN CULTURE, I COUNT MYSELF LUCKY TO HAVE BEEN EXPOSED TO SOME OF THE MOST SPECTACULAR CUISINES. ”

— Quote from [atablefortwo.com.au](http://atablefortwo.com.au)

**EMILY LOO, 31,  
SEASON 6 FINALIST  
(2014), BRISBANE**

“ MY MOTHER AND AUNT ARE MY INSPIRATION. THEY HAVE BROUGHT ME SO MUCH JOY AND KNOWLEDGE BY TEACHING ME HOW TO COOK. ”



Picture taken from Facebook

Sabah-born Emily, known as the 'Spice Queen' among her friends and family, cooks up a mean Sarawak *laksa*. The kitchen bug bit her hard after her stint on *MasterChef Australia*, and she is now appreciating at Brisbane's Black Bird Bar and Grill, as well as teaching weekly Asian cooking classes at Vanilla Zulu Cooking School.



**TASH SHAN, 27,  
SEASON 6 FINALIST  
(2014), CANBERRA**

“ ONE OF THE MANY REASONS I STARTED A FOOD BLOG WAS TO DOCUMENT MY (CHINESE) GRANDMOTHER'S RECIPES. LIKE ALL GOOD COOKS, SHE USES THE 'HIGHLY SCIENTIFIC' AGAK-AGAK METHOD. WHICH IS GREAT FOR HER, BUT NOT SO GREAT IF YOU'RE FOLLOWING HER AROUND WITH A NOTEPAD. ”

— Quote from her blog

Like any true-blue Malaysian, bubbly Tash discovered her love for food among the offerings of street vendors in the Klang Valley and during her younger days spent nosing around her grandmother's kitchen. Tash runs an Asian-heavy food blog, [akitchenat.com.au](http://akitchenat.com.au)