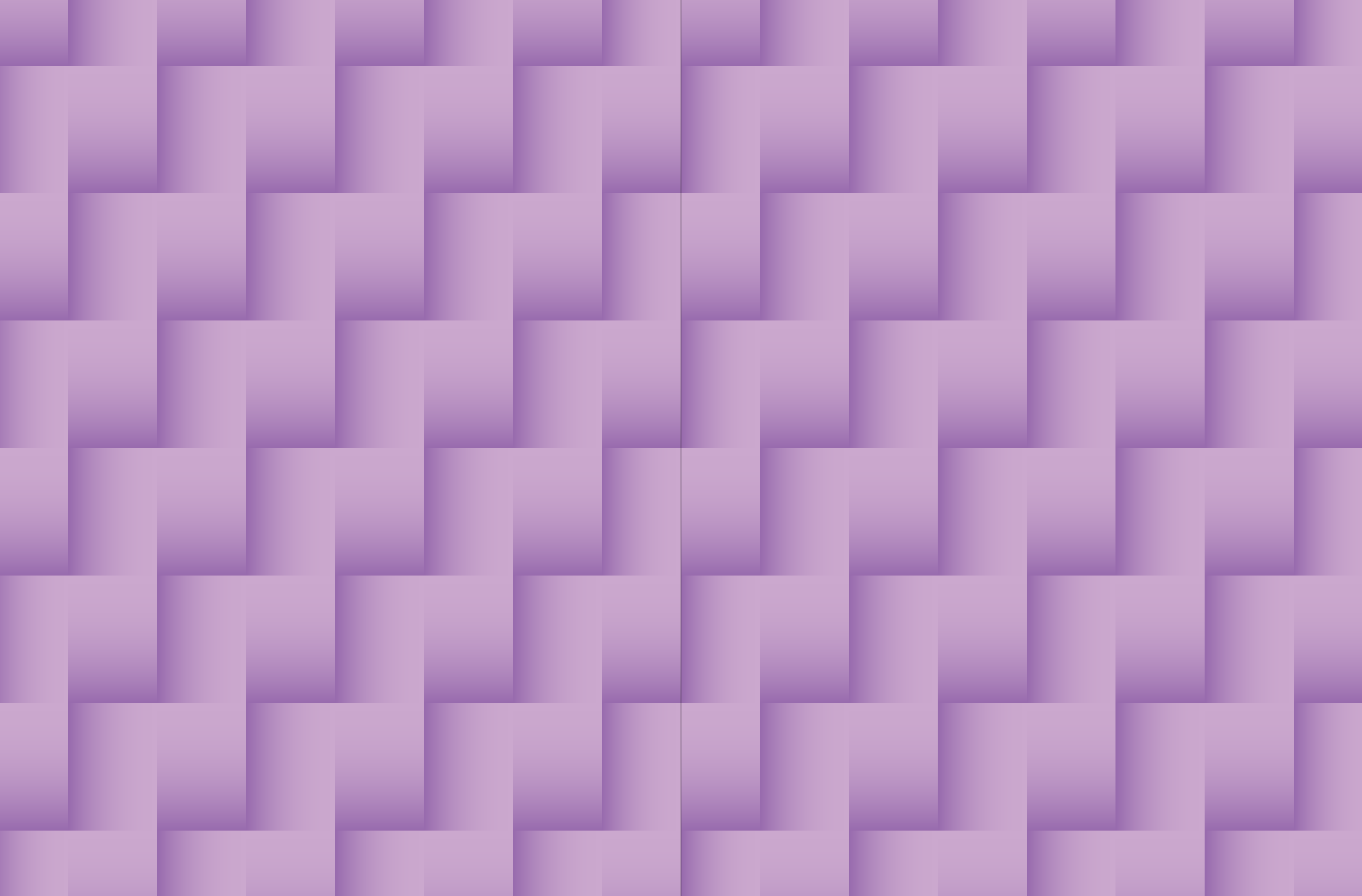


OUR MIGRANTS' KITCHEN







OUR MIGRANTS' KITCHEN

IN CELEBRATION OF
INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY

OUR MIGRANTS' KITCHEN

PROJECT TEAM

Assurance, Care and Engagement Group,
Ministry of Manpower

Stories by In Plain Words
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தமிழ்



中文



বাংলা

Contents

6	Foreword
	Dr Koh Poh Koon, Senior Minister of State for Manpower
7	Introduction
8	Tastes of Home
10	Meeting Mothers Away from Home
	feat. Eti Kurniati and her chicken rendang
20	A Family Like No Other
	feat. Cui Guo Feng and his watermelon rind dumplings
30	Strangers at Home, Brothers in Singapore
	feat. Hossain Akter and his chilli chicken
40	“She is My Godmother.”
	feat. Lucia Santillan Gorospe and her monggo
50	He Whips Up Delicious Medicines
	feat. Thayumanaran Nagarethinam and his nandu rasam
60	Shared Flavours
62	Turning the Stove On for Others
	feat. Mohammad Sabuj and his mutton tehari
72	Dreaming of Home, Here and There
	feat. Chaiwat Lorthong and his chicken tom yum soup
82	A Proud Plant Parent
	feat. Shohel Mohammad Rana and his garden-to-table spinach
92	Soulful Cooking
	feat. Polwatte Gedara Asiri Harendra Polwatte and his kaju maluwa

102	Recipes for Love
104	A Taste of Hearty Dong Bei
	feat. Li Sheng Bo and his zhan jiang cai
114	Working Towards His Dream
	feat. Kyaw Swar Win and his mote hin gar
124	A Husband who Cooks <i>and</i> Cleans
	feat. Hossain Julhas and his labra
134	Together Even When Apart
	feat. Kyaw Min Naing and his egg and lady’s finger curry
144	Sweet Dreams
146	Down, Down and Up
	feat. Egodage Anusha Lakmali and her coconut roti and katta sambol
156	Building a Future Abroad
	feat. Jimmy Guan and his Putian lor mee
166	A Return to Pho-miliar Taste
	feat. Nguyen Van Hien and his beef pho
176	Moulding Her Dreams into Reality
	feat. Istikomah and her kue mendut
186	A Fisherman at Heart
	feat. Mohan Shakil and his appa’s prawn masala
196	About ACE Group
	Acknowledgements

Foreword

Our migrant workers come from different parts of the world and they bring with them their rich cultural traditions and diverse culinary preferences. This book celebrates the heartwarming stories of 18 migrant workers and migrant domestic workers through the sharing of their favourite and for some, unique food recipes.

I am grateful to these workers who have not only shared their favourite recipes but also their personal experiences living and working in Singapore. As you flip the pages of this book, you will uncover not only the lists of ingredients and cooking instructions for delicious dishes but also the heartfelt stories of the special moments in the lives of our migrant friends. For example, Cui Guo Feng showcased his resourcefulness by using watermelon rind to make delicious filling for Chinese dumplings. Mohan Shakil's prawn masala recipe embodies his dream of returning to India after spending over a decade in Singapore.

To our migrant workers, cooking is an essential part of their lives here, whether it is to prepare daily meals for themselves or a special dish to share with friends and colleagues. Cooking also reminds them of their families back home, enables them to connect with their friends, or even with other communities in Singapore. For example, the traditional snack of kue mendut encapsulates Istikomah's memories of her late grandmother while a pot of mutton tehari opens doors for Mohammad Sabuj to make friends across diverse backgrounds in his dormitory.

Food is a universal language that bridges diverse cultures and brings people together regardless of backgrounds. Through this book, I hope we all can gain a better understanding and appreciation of the migrant workers living in our midst.



Dr Koh Poh Koon
Senior Minister of State for Manpower

Introduction

This book showcases the richness of Singapore's multicultural society through stories, diverse culinary traditions and recipes from our migrant community. Over two months, we met up with 18 migrant workers and migrant domestic workers to get to know them, listen to their hopes and aspirations, and enjoy a taste of their food and memories.¹

Through our conversations, the team learnt how the community supported one another in Singapore. Many frequently cooked and shared meals with their roommates or fellow devotees. Others even stepped up to volunteer. For example, a migrant worker got certified by Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) to lead prayers at his dormitory so that fellow Muslim workers could practise their religion together rather than alone in their own rooms. Several domestic workers ran homemaking lessons for their peers so that they could be better prepared for their jobs. In these ways, they came together as a community to offer a home away from home.

The interviewees also embraced different cultures by making an effort to understand, and even connect with colleagues, employers and neighbours. To overcome the language barriers at work, some workers took it upon themselves to learn English in their free time and even picked up the mother tongue of colleagues. By the nature of their job, migrant domestic workers had to adapt to the cultures of their employers. But many also introduced to the households their own traditions and practices, typically in the form of food, thus facilitating an exchange of flavours, memories and cultures.

We hope this book helps to showcase the multiculturalism in Singapore, including migrant workers and migrant domestic workers here, and promote an appreciation of their different cultures as well as who they are as individuals. For many of them, Singapore is a stable and peaceful harbour where they can embark on their personal journeys. In return, they spend a great part of their lives contributing to Singapore. These people who build, maintain and nurture our country are not simply workers, but fellow daughters, brothers, mothers and husbands who have contributed in the development and growth of Singapore.

¹ The book's recipes were based on observations of demonstrations carried out by the interviewees in their own kitchens. All were provided with standard spoons and cups for recording measurements. The instructions stay true to the interviewee's processes as much as possible because they are the experts of their own recipes. Where alternative methods or ingredients exist, they appear as accompanying notes. While the recipes may not always reflect the best of the interviewees' cooking abilities due to restrictions in the availability of ingredients and tools, or even the size of the flame, they nonetheless offer valuable insights about their eating habits and ways of life.

TASTES OF HOME



**MAKING NEW FAMILIES
AWAY FROM HOME**

Meeting Mothers Away From Home



FEATURING

ETI KURNIATI,
INDONESIA

RECIPE

CHICKEN RENDANG

ETI KURNIATI

11

CHICKEN RENDANG

She may be born and bred in Kalimantan, Borneo, but Eti Kurniati's palate leans closer to Malay and Padang cuisines. All thanks to two women who took her under their wings after the Indonesian left home to work in Singapore as a migrant domestic helper in 2007.

Eti's first year cooking for a Singaporean household was a struggle, even though she shared seemingly similar food with her Malay employers. It turned out that except for a few common dishes, Kalimantan and Malay cuisines were vastly different.

"I didn't know how to cook Malay food. Ayam merah in Kalimantan doesn't need turmeric, galangal, lemongrass. But Malay [food] has," Eti explains in English. "The most difficult is laksa. I never knew about this food. First time I cooked it, I thought, why so many ingredients!" The 41-year-old throws her head back and laughs.

Luckily, "nenek" was there to teach her. The Malay term for "grandmother" refers to Tokini binte Suratman, the granny in her employer's family. Nenek welcomed Eti into the family, introduced her to the Singaporean way of life, and patiently taught her to cook essential Malay dishes. This included sayur lodeh, which, to Eti's surprise, comprised cabbage instead of brinjal as was the case back home.

Eti went on to work for three other families but has since returned to living with nenek as she now works for her other daughter. Despite their age difference of over three decades, Eti and nenek chat and joke around like girlfriends. “Nenek sometimes tells me secret, then my ma’am says, ‘Wah Eti, nenek tells you this.’ Like tease me lah,” says Eti.

When nenek and her entire family went to Indonesia for a holiday in 2023, Eti also arranged for them to meet her husband.

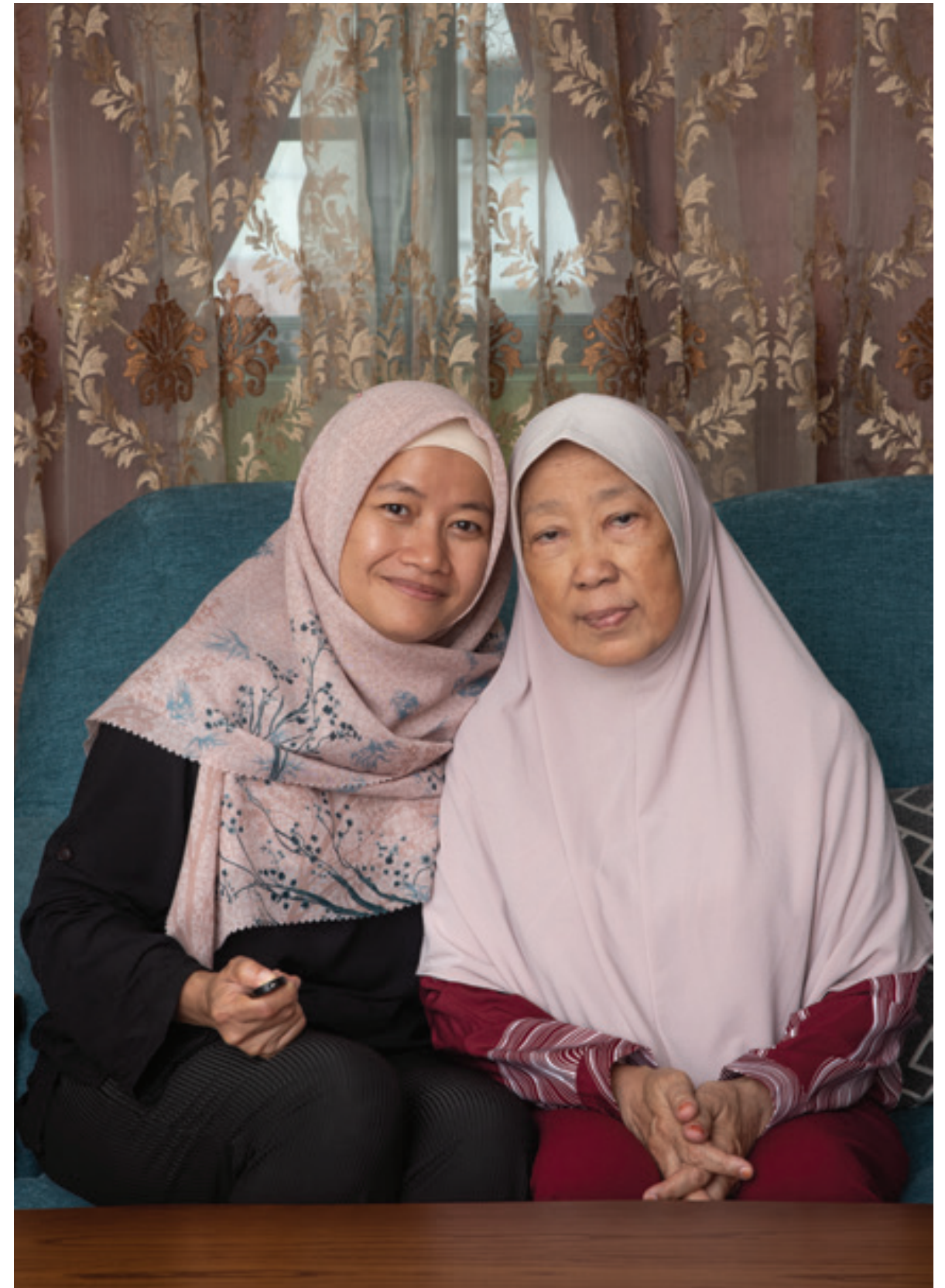
The couple first connected on Facebook in 2008 and only met in person three years later. “I told him I [will not be going] back Indonesia soon. If he wants to meet me, he can come lah,” she explains. And so, he did. Soon after, he got a job transfer from Bandung to Batam just so that they could meet in Singapore every month.

During their long-distance courtship, Eti spoke frequently on the phone with her future mother-in-law too. She would become her other mother figure, especially after the passing of Eti’s mother.

Eti has always enjoyed the Minangkabau cuisine of Padang, and she hit it off with her mother-in-law who happens to have been born there and is a very good cook. In 2012, her mother-in-law shared with Eti a rendang recipe that would become legendary among her employers and their guests. House parties and celebratory feasts have never gone without it since.

Eti, however, has never made the dish for her husband on her annual trips back to Indonesia. Her mother-in-law, she explains, still rules the kitchen.

When asked whose rendition of rendang is better, she quips, “I think it is the same.”



Eti Kurniati (left) with Tokini binte Suratman (right).



Chicken Rendang

Eti enjoys the gravy of rendang more than its meat, so she makes the dish more moist than her mother-in-law's. Besides being her favourite food, Eti chooses to share this recipe also because, according to her, Padang food is popular across Indonesia. "Although when you cook it is a lot of effort, the taste is always nice," she says. This recipe works for beef and mutton too.

SERVES 4-6

Ingredients

For the rempah

55 g ginger
30 g galangal
30 g turmeric
30 g garlic
130 g shallots
9 big red chillies
(or the spicier cabe
merah keriting)
1 lemongrass,
white bottom only
8 candlenuts
100 ml water

For the kerisik

180 g grated coconut
1 tsp coriander seeds

For the coconut milk

250 g grated coconut
500 g water

For assembly

½ cup oil
1 (2 inches) cinnamon stick
1 star anise
5 green cardamoms
3 cloves
1 turmeric leaf
1 daun salam
(Indonesian bay leaf)
5 kaffir lime leaves
1 lemongrass, white
bottom only, bruised
30 g galangal, bruised
1 (1 kg) chicken,
cut 8-10 pieces
1 tsp white pepper powder
½ tsp salt
½ tsp sugar





Cooking Instructions

- 1 **Prepare the rempah:** Cut the ginger, galangal, turmeric, garlic, shallots, red chillies, lemongrass and candlenuts into smaller chunks. Blend all together with water into a fine paste. Set aside.
- 2 **Make the kerisik:** Heat a wok or pan over medium low heat. Add the grated coconut, coriander seeds and stir frequently to spread the coconut evenly around the wok's surface. Do so for about 30 minutes or until the coconut turns brown and fragrant. Turn off the heat.
- 3 Transfer a third of the toasted coconut into a cobek (mortar) and grind it into a paste using a ulekan (horn-shaped pestle) until shiny coconut oil emerges. Repeat on the remaining toasted coconut. Alternatively, blend the toasted coconut into a fine paste. Set aside.
- 4 **Make the coconut milk:** Add the grated coconut and water into a bowl and massage the coconut by hand for a minute or two. Strain the liquid through a colander. Discard the grated coconut and set aside the liquid.
- 5 Heat the oil in a wok or deep pan over medium heat. Add the rempah from Step 1, cinnamon stick, star anise, green cardamoms, cloves, turmeric leaf, daun salam, kaffir lime leaves, lemongrass, galangal and fry, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes.
- 6 Add the chicken and fry, stirring occasionally, for 1 minute or until the meat is cooked on the outside. Add the coconut milk from Step 4 and stir to combine. Cover the wok. The gravy should be boiling vigorously.
- 7 When the chicken is fully cooked, 8-10 minutes later, add the kerisik from Step 3 and stir to combine. Add the white pepper powder, salt, sugar and cover the wok. Turn down the heat to medium low and boil for one hour, stirring every 5 minutes and more frequently towards the end when the gravy is almost reduced. Turn off the heat. Taste and add salt if needed before serving.

A Family Like No Other



FEATURING

CUI GUO FENG,
CHINA

RECIPE

WATERMELON RIND DUMPLINGS

They may have different features, manners and even accents. But these six middle-aged Chinese men see themselves as one family.

It is a Sunday, and like every other Sunday, this group is gathered at a multipurpose hall of a dormitory in northwest Singapore to attend service organised by a local church. While others come and go, they spend the entire day at the back of the hall preparing meals together for the congregants.

The menu today is watermelon rind dumplings, a recipe that one of the men, Cui Guo Feng, learnt when he was serving the army in China as a cook in the 1990s. The 48-year-old from Henan describes the folk recipe as “neither sweet nor salty”, and admits he thought the taste was “weird” at first but has grown to like it.

Like the dumplings they are making, the fellowship among them is unexpected. They come from different parts of China, including Henan, Sichuan, Jiangsu and Shandong. In Singapore, they too live all across the island but ended up coming together while searching for a sense of comfort and home.

It was a colleague who first invited Guo Feng to the service. Even though he was then living in Boon Keng and not a Christian, the construction worker who had been working in Singapore for eight months made the long journey. “He told me there were many fellow Chinese here,” Guo Feng explains in Mandarin. “So I thought

I would come here to make some friends, to have someone to talk to. It has been really fun!”

After spending essentially all their free time together in the past year, the men have become well acquainted, and their wicked banter says it all. While carrying out Guo Feng’s recipe, the other men propose, to his face, ways to improve it. “Good to add some flour,” one says. “And eggs”, another man, whom they call “Fatty”, chimes in. “We add large scallions in the north,” a third man adds. “Spring onions are better. That’s what we use in Sichuan,” Fatty retorts.

Guo Feng ends the discussion by declaring: “My recipe, my decision. I reject all your suggestions!” Everybody chuckles.

All the men are familiar with using watermelon rind as an ingredient because they used to stretch every resource when they were farmers back home. But other than Guo Feng, they have only had it as a stir-fry or cold appetiser until recently.

As the men begin wrapping the dumplings, it is clear that they aren’t the “professionals” they boast to be. The dough skins are anything but round and the folds are neither neat nor beautiful. But every single dumpling emerges intact from the boiling water. Although expressed in different shapes and sizes, the dumplings are similar in essence.

The same could be said of this family of choice. The men come from different places but they share a common sense of belonging.

“Quick! Eat while they are hot!” Guo Feng shouts as he dishes out the last batch of freshly cooked dumplings. “When we are full, we won’t miss home. But we will when we are hungry!”



Cui Guo Feng (centre) and his friends.



Watermelon Rind Dumplings

Unlike a typical dumpling recipe that uses seasonings such as sesame oil, oyster sauce and five-spice powder, Guo Feng uses only salt, so that the subtle sweetness of the watermelon rind comes through. While originally taught to mix the rind with luncheon meat because there wasn't always access to fresh meat, Guo Feng uses fresh pork when cooking the dish at home and in Singapore.

MAKES 30 DUMPLINGS

Ingredients

For the dough

½ tsp salt
130 g water
250 g plain flour + ½ cup for dusting

For the filling

350 g watermelon rind
2 tsp salt
1 tsp vegetable oil
5 g ginger, minced
60 g cabbage, chopped
25 g Chinese celery
180 g minced pork





Cooking Instructions

- 1 Make the dough:** Put the salt and water in a bowl and stir to dissolve. Put the flour into another bowl then stir with your fingers as you mix in the salt water. Knead the dough until it is smooth, with no pockets of flour. Cover the dough with a cloth and let it rest at room temperature for 30 minutes.
- 2 Prepare the filling:** Slice or peel off the green outer layer of the watermelon rind. Discard. Dice — do not mince — the white portion of the rind into ½ cm cubes. Transfer the rind into a large bowl. Add ½ tsp salt and stir to combine. Let sit for 15 minutes, then squeeze and drain the excess liquid. Add the oil and stir to combine. Add the ginger, cabbage, celery and stir to combine. Add the pork, remaining salt and mix well.
- 3 Make the wrappers:** Dust some flour on your countertop. Knead a quarter section of the dough, three or four times, then rotate 45° in any direction and repeat. Go around the dough twice, or until it is firm and smooth. Divide the dough into four equal portions and roll each one into a thick rope. Cut and portion each rope into 12 g pieces. Flatten each piece between your palms and roll it into a thin wrapper with a rolling pin.
- 4 Wrap the dumplings:** Place 1 tbsp of the filling from Step 2 on the centre of each dough wrapper. Lift up the edges and pinch to seal, or fold anyway you like.
- 5 Cook the dumplings:** Bring a pot of water to boil over medium high heat. Drop 6 to 10 dumplings at a time and let cook for 6 to 8 minutes or until the dumplings float to the surface. Scoop out and serve immediately.

NOTE (1) Guo Feng originally used all the salt to draw out moisture from the watermelon rind, but the dumplings turned out bland because much of the salt was removed along with the liquid. This recipe has been tweaked to improve flavour, using only a fraction of the salt to rid moisture, then adding the remaining after the pork has been mixed in.

Strangers at Home, Brothers in Singapore



FEATURING

HOSSAIN AKTER,
BANGLADESH

RECIPE

CHILLI CHICKEN

When Joy Mondol arrived in Singapore less than two years ago, he was only 18 and away from home for the first time. Fortunately, he met Hossain Akter. The fellow Bangladeshi who was 14 years older helped the young man adapt to working as a migrant worker in Singapore — just as how others treated him kindly when he arrived almost a decade ago.

“He reminded me of my younger self,” says Akter, who works in the same shipyard and shares a dormitory room with Joy and others, through an interpreter. “When I first came, I missed my family, my friends. I can relate to him since I have gone through the same things.”

Among many things, Akter taught Joy how to take the public transport, use the ATM machines and emphasised to him the importance of respecting laws in Singapore. “No fighting, no illegal cigarettes, no shoplifting. Laws are the same everywhere. But in other countries you may or may not be punished. In Singapore, you will,” says the 34-year-old.

He guided Joy on daily life in the dorm too. For instance, when to wake up to use the shared bathroom in order to get to work on time, and which, among the tens of lorries at the dormitory carpark, belonged to their company. Akter also taught Joy how to cook and pack several meals at once because the migrant workers bring their own lunches to work. Since this is usually cooked the night before,

along with dinner, Akter advised Joy to prepack curries in plastic bags for reheating in a hot water bath the next morning and to avoid ingredients that spoil quickly.

The duo grew close over time, and even took part in a cook-off organised by the Migrant Workers' Centre together. They prepared chilli chicken, a popular Indian-Chinese dish back home in Dhaka. The recipe belonged to Akter, but it was Joy who persuaded him to participate.

"He lets me try his food so I know his cooking is better than ours," Joy explains. Akter reveals in jest that his partner had an ulterior motive: "He pressured me to put my name down so that he can also take part!"

As with many friendships among transient workers, they will soon have to bid goodbye as Akter is planning to return to Bangladesh to farm. Joy is sad about their imminent separation but accepts that frequent farewells are part and parcel of their lives. "I will miss him definitely. Slowly I will adapt to living on my own," he says, adding that he has been getting along well with his other roommates too.

It is almost 9 pm when the interview ends and Akter has yet to cook his dinner and meals for the following day. But not to worry, he says, with a grin: "Joy already cooked for me."



Akter (left) with Joy (right) in their dormitory room.



Chilli Chicken

It is similar to the Cantonese sweet and sour meat but with the additions of chillies and masala — as with many Indian-Chinese dishes found in the Indian subcontinent. Akter learnt this dish from his sister, who in turn adapted it from a YouTube recipe. These days, he cooks chilli chicken only on his days off as Chinese food is best eaten hot to him.

Ingredients

For the marinade

500 g chicken breast,
cut into 1 ½ inch cubes
1 tsp ginger paste
1 tsp garlic paste
1 tbsp soy sauce
¼ tsp white pepper powder
Juice of ¼ lemon
½ tsp salt
4 tbsp plain flour
1 egg, beaten

2 cups vegetable oil

For the sauce

1 cup ketchup
1 tbsp sweet chilli sauce
1 tbsp soy sauce
Juice of ¼ lemon

For stir-fry

1 ½ medium red onion,
quartered and sliced
1 tsp garlic paste
1 tsp ginger paste
1 capsicum, quartered and
cut into 1-inch lengths
3 bird's eye green chillies,
halved lengthwise
1 cup water
1 tsp meat masala
1 tsp sugar
¼ tsp salt
1 tsp corn flour, dissolved
in 2 tbsp water





Cooking Instructions

- 1 **Marinate the chicken:** In a bowl, add the chicken breast, ginger paste, garlic paste, soy sauce, white pepper powder, lemon juice, salt and mix well. Add the plain flour, egg and mix until the meat is evenly coated in the batter.
- 2 **Fry the chicken:** Heat the oil in a wok or deep pan over medium high heat. When the oil is just smoking, drop the chicken, a few pieces at a time, into the wok. Let fry for 5 minutes then lightly stir to cook the chicken evenly. Let fry, stirring occasionally, for another 4 minutes, or until the batter is light brown and cooked. Scoop out and set aside.
- 3 **Prepare the sauce:** In a bowl, mix the ketchup, chilli sauce, soy sauce, lemon juice and set aside for the next step.
- 4 **Assemble all ingredients:** Drain all but 2 tbsp of oil from the same wok. Reheat the oil over high heat then stir fry the onion for 1 minute. Add the garlic paste, ginger paste, capsicum, chillies and stir for 30 seconds. Add the water, sauce from Step 3 and stir to combine. Let boil to reduce the sauce, about 3 minutes. Add the fried chicken from Step 2, meat masala, sugar and stir to combine. Let boil to further reduce the sauce, about 4 minutes. Add the salt, corn starch water and stir for 30 seconds or until the sauce thickens and coats the meat. Turn off the heat and serve hot.

NOTE (1) The pre-mixed meat masala contains salt, chilli, coriander, turmeric, ginger, cinnamon, cardamom, black pepper, garlic, aniseed, cumin and clove.

“She is My Godmother.”



FEATURING

LUCIA SANTILLAN GOROSPE,
PHILIPPINES

RECIPE

MONGGO

Five years into working for her first employer in Singapore, Lucia Santillan Gorospe applied to go to Canada. It was an attractive destination for many domestic helpers during the 1990s because they could double their salary.

But the Filipino changed her mind.

“I didn’t feel like leaving her,” says Lucia, referring to her employer’s then four-year-old daughter. Even as more of her friends left for North America in the following years, she stayed on. “My heart was already here.”

It had been captured by little Clarissa, who was inseparable from Lucia since the day she was born. Even on the helper’s day off, the child insisted on tagging along. “She wakes up very early and stands at the door to wait for me. I got no choice I have to bring her!” Lucia recalls with laughter.

Clarissa also shadowed Lucia around the house as the helper did her chores. Because of that, Clarissa picked up housekeeping skills from a young age.

“I would be her helper, fetching ingredients from the fridge or plucking the head of tau gay [bean sprouts],” says Clarissa, who is now 33. “I still have this picture of me washing dishes when I was six or seven. She asked me to pose for the camera!”

As much as Lucia adored Clarissa, the helper made sure not to coddle her. Clarissa adds, “If I asked her for a glass of water, she would ask me to get it myself.”

“I raised her to be independent,” explains Lucia, who is now 60 and has been working for the same family for 34 years. “If she could do it, I asked her to do it herself.”

Despite living in a two-storey house with plenty of bedrooms, the pair shared a room right up until Clarissa moved to Sydney for her studies at the age of 20. “Sometimes she [even] squeezes onto my bed!” Lucia says and chuckles.

Clarissa’s mother recognised very early on the bond between the two and requested her helper to be her daughter’s godmother. Lucia did so when the girl was baptised in 1999 at eight years old. Since then, Clarissa has been addressing Lucia as “*nang nang*”, an intimate way of saying “*ninang*”, which is “godmother” in Tagalog.

“I was happy. I didn’t expect my ma’am to ask me to be her godmother because I was her employee,” says Lucia. This sense of bliss stays with her till today. “[Clarissa] means a lot to me. She’s really like my daughter. Sometimes we argue but I always love her.”

Besides learning to be independent, Clarissa, who teaches children with special needs, also learnt from Lucia to be caring and patient. “She listens to my troubles and she listens well. She’s been a constant in my life so naturally our bond is strong,” Clarissa says.

“I never once told my friends that she is our domestic helper. I always introduce her as my godmother.”





Monggo

Lucia chooses to share this Filipino mung bean stew because “it is my Clarissa’s favourite”. She introduced the girl to the dish on one of their visits to Lucky Plaza. It has since been Clarissa’s weakness and she even learnt to make the dish from Lucia before leaving for Australia.

SERVES 6–8

Ingredients

300 g mung beans
1 ½ l water

2 tbsp vegetable oil
25 g ginger, thinly sliced
1 medium red onion, halved and sliced
6 garlic, thinly sliced
120 g pork belly, cut into 1 cm thick strips
1 tomato, quartered and sliced 1.5 cm thick
12 (10–12 cm) prawns, shelled
2 tbsp anchovy sauce
40 g moringa leaves





Cooking Instructions

- 1 Prepare the mung beans:** Add the mung beans and water into a pot. Cover and boil over high heat. When the water bubbles vigorously, after some 10 minutes, turn down the heat to medium low and boil for another 20 minutes, or until the beans are soft.
- 2 Cook the stew:** Heat the oil in a wok over medium high heat. Add the ginger and fry for 40 seconds or until fragrant. Add the onion and stir for 1 minute. Add the garlic and stir for 40 seconds. Add the pork belly and stir for 1 minute or until the pork is cooked through. Add the tomato and stir to combine. Cover the wok and let cook for 1 minute.
- 3** Uncover the wok. Add the prawns and stir for 2 minutes. Add the cooked mung beans along with its liquid and stir to combine. If the beans are too dry, add a cup of hot water. Cover the wok and let cook for 8 minutes. Add the anchovy sauce, moringa leaves and stir to combine. Turn off the heat and serve with rice.

NOTE (1) Lucia uses the thick, Filipino anchovy sauce, which is available at several supermarket chains. But the Thai and Vietnamese versions, she says, are suitable too.

He Whips Up Delicious Medicines



FEATURING

**THAYUMANARAN NAGARETHINAM,
INDIA**

RECIPE

NANDU RASAM

Men in the Nagarethinam family typically begin their day like this: brush their teeth, hunt for freshly laid eggs in the backyard and crack one open right into their mouths for breakfast.

This practice of obtaining protein and strength has been passed down from their grandfather to their father, and then to Thayumanaran Nagarethinam and his two brothers. Thayumanaran, also known as Naga, has recently been teaching it to his four-year-old son too. “But he doesn’t like the smell, so he eats boiled eggs for now,” says the 33-year-old through an interpreter.

Naga, who works as an electrician in Singapore, firmly believes food is medicine and readily volunteers home remedies during the interview. For example, while sharing about his family’s vegetable garden in Sivaganga, Tamil Nadu, he brings up gooseberry and how the sour fruit reduces blood sugar and increases red blood cells.

“In India, we call it the poor man’s apple. Our elders say eating three gooseberries is equal to eating one apple,” Naga says.

His parents who are farmers, have long espoused the nutritional and medicinal values of various foods. They believe “prevention is better than cure”, he says. Given their lack of immediate medical access — only one doctor visits the village a few days a week and two hours each time — this mantra is certainly wise.

In Singapore, Naga stays healthy by sticking to the largely fish and vegetable diet that he had back home. Every Sunday, in the wee hours of the morning, he cycles with roommates in his dormitory to Senoko Fishery Port for fresh and cheap seafood.

Among the many dishes he cooks, one recipe he turns to as a cure is nandu rasam, or crab soup. It is commonly prepared to treat cold, cough and fever by Tamil families, both in India and Singapore. The shellfish is believed to “increase body heat”. Coupled with warming spices such as black peppercorn, the soup dispels shivers and blocked noses.

“Flu all come out. Phlegm automatic go,” Naga promises in English.

While city folks typically use crabs from the sea, he used to cook the soup with tiny crabs found in his family’s rice paddies.

“Village people all understand [that] this crab from the rice land very power,” says Naga, who picked up cooking as a teenager when he would cook by the river with his neighbours for fun.

“I’m not sure if Singaporeans are aware of this [soup],” he adds in Tamil. “It will be very good for you if you try. I’m very proud that it comes from my hometown.”



Naga (left) with his friend, Kannan, in the dormitory.



Nandu Rasam

Instead of his usual choice of vegetable oil, Naga used sesame oil to demonstrate this recipe as it is said to help lower cholesterol. Consider starting with half the stated amount of black peppercorns and adjust to your liking.

SERVES 6–8

Ingredients

4 flower crabs

For the pepper mixture

2 dried red chillies
1/3 cup black peppercorns
1/4 cup cumin seeds

For the garlic-ginger paste

2 bulbs garlic
30 g ginger

For assembly

1/2 cup sesame oil
1 tsp cumin seeds
2 tsp spice mix
6 g curry leaves
3 green chillies,
 halved lengthwise
250 g shallots, sliced
2 tomatoes, halved and sliced
1 tbsp turmeric powder
2 tbsp coarse sea salt
10 cups water
25 g coriander, roughly chopped





Cooking Instructions

- 1 **Clean the crabs:** Remove and discard the top shells and gills. Rinse the crabs under running water. Break or chop them in halves. Break or chop off the claws. Crack the claws with a pestle.
- 2 **Prepare the pepper mixture:** Blend the red chillies, black peppercorns and cumin seeds into fine powder.
- 3 **Prepare the garlic-ginger paste:** Set aside 4 cloves of garlic for the next step. Blend the remaining garlic and ginger into a fine mixture. Add ¼ cup of water if needed to run the machine smoothly.
- 4 Heat the sesame oil in a wok over medium high heat. Add the cumin seeds, spice mix and stir to combine. Add the curry leaves, green chillies, 4 garlic cloves and fry for about 1 minute. Add the shallots and fry for 2 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the tomatoes and fry for 3 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add the turmeric powder, sea salt, garlic-ginger paste from Step 3 and fry for 1 minute. Add the crabs and stir to combine. Cover the wok and turn down the heat to medium. Let cook for 3 minutes.
- 5 Uncover the wok. Add the water, pepper mixture from Step 2 and stir to combine. Cover the wok and turn up the heat to medium high. Let cook for 12 minutes or until the soup boils and tastes flavourful. Add the coriander and stir to mix well. Turn off the heat.

NOTE (1) Naga uses a less common and smaller-sized green chillies that is about the same heat level as the more easily available large green chillies. This recipe has been adjusted for the use of the larger chillies.
(2) The spice mix comprises fennel, cumin, brown mustard, fenugreek and urad dal.



SHARED FLAVOURS

**BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER
THROUGH FOOD AND MORE**

Turning the Stove On for Others

62



FEATURING

**MOHAMMAD SABUJ,
BANGLADESH**

RECIPE

MUTTON TEHARI

At the age of 23, Mohammad Sabuj left home in Rangpur, Bangladesh, to work in Singapore. Since then, food has been a vital link between him and his family, and helps him to be a good son despite being far away from his parents.

Sabuj grew up watching and helping his mother cook. It was unusual in Bangladesh for a boy to spend extensive time in the kitchen, but his parents indulged his interest in food.

Today, the 38-year-old is well-versed in Bengali dishes and prepares his own meals daily. They range from the “normal” hilsa fish and shemai on work days, to the “special” chingri macher malai and mutton tehari on Sundays.

He remembers home through these dishes that his mother always prepared for the family. He also cooks to comfort his parents. To many Bengalis, eating well is a requisite to taking good care of oneself.

“When my mother calls, or when I call, the first thing she asks is, ‘What did you eat? What did you cook?’” Sabuj explains through an interpreter. Thus, every meal starts with sending a photo of what he is eating to his parents and his three married sisters.

Nowadays, Sabuj also cooks to connect with his fellow roommates at the dormitory. The supervisor at an offshore marine company

63

shares a room with other Bangladeshis, and he makes it a point to cook a rice dish with meat to share with them every Sunday. This is despite the fact that the preparation takes up to two hours of his only rest day in the week.

“When people like my food, it makes me happy. I don’t think about how I lost one hour. No. I don’t think this,” Sabuj says in English.

The soft-spoken Muslim leads daily prayers for the dormitory too. He was educated in a madrasah back home and volunteered to be trained and certified as an Imam by Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura (MUIS) in order to bring fellow Muslims in the dormitory together for mass prayers.

“When I lead, then all of us will be together. We pray together, then our relationships will be good,” he explains.

Cooking also helps Sabuj to gather the dormitory’s diverse residents. During the recent Hari Raya Haji, he prepared 10 kilogrammes each of prawns, mutton, chicken and fish for both Muslim and Hindu residents, as well as the local dormitory staff. They were all delighted by the Bengali spread.

Sabuj was thrilled by the reception — and how it pleased his parents. They had always hoped that their boy would eat well just as he did back home, especially during Islamic holidays when Bangladeshis traditionally gathered to feast.

“They had a lot of food in Bangladesh, and they wondered what I would be having,” he says in Bengali. “They were glad that I had the same food even though I was not with them.”





Mutton Tehari

While more commonly prepared with beef in Bangladesh, Sabuj likes mutton better. It also allows him to share the dish with others who do not take beef. Tehari is similar to a biryani, except that smaller pieces of meat are tossed with rice instead of being layered on top of each other. Through this dish, which is usually prepared in large quantities for sharing, Sabuj hopes to offer a taste of Bangladeshi hospitality.

SERVES 4-5

Ingredients

For the mutton

8 cloves
1 (3 inches) cinnamon stick
5 green cardamoms
7 black peppercorns
¼ tsp mace powder
½ tsp cumin powder
½ tsp coriander powder
⅓ cup onion paste
1 tbsp ginger paste
1 tbsp garlic paste
2 tbsp yoghurt
½ lime
¼ cup mustard oil
1 ½ kg mutton, cut into 1-inch cubes
1 tsp of ghee
3 Indian bay leaves
6 whole green chillies
½ cup water

For the rice

¼ cup ghee
2 medium red onions, thinly sliced
7 green cardamoms
7 cloves
1 (3 inches) cinnamon stick
1 Indian bay leaf
1 tbsp salt
1 tbsp raisins
1 tbsp cashews
1 tbsp almonds
750 g basmati rice
2 tbsp mutton biryani masala
6 whole green chillies

For assembly

8 cups boiling hot water
1 ½ tbsp ghee
1 tsp orange colouring





Cooking Instructions

- 1 **Prepare the masala:** Pound the cloves, cinnamon stick, green cardamoms, black pepper into powder, then add the mace powder, cumin powder, coriander powder and stir to combine.
- 2 **Make the marinade:** Combine the masala, onion paste, ginger paste, garlic paste, yoghurt, lime and mustard oil in a bowl that will hold all the mutton. Add the mutton into the bowl and toss to coat it in the marinade. Cover and refrigerate for an hour.
- 3 **Cook the mutton:** Heat ghee in a pot over medium heat. Add the marinated mutton, bay leaves, green chillies and fry, stirring frequently, for 30 to 40 minutes, or until the mutton is cooked and almost tender. Add water as needed if the meat becomes dry midway through cooking.
- 4 **Prepare the rice:** Heat ghee in a wok or a large, deep pan over medium heat. Add the onions, green cardamoms, cloves, cinnamon stick, bay leaf, salt and fry for 1 minute, stirring occasionally. Add the raisins, cashews and almonds. Fry until the onions turn brown, about 2 minutes. Add the rice and fry, stirring occasionally, for 2 minutes. Add the cooked mutton and gravy, mutton biryani masala, green chillies and stir to combine. Turn off the heat.
- 5 **Assemble all ingredients:** Transfer the rice and meat mixture into a rice cooker. Add the hot water, ghee and randomly sprinkle the colouring over the rice. Do not stir. Cook for about 20 minutes. Serve hot.

Dreaming of Home, Here and There



FEATURING

CHAIWAT LORTHONG,
THAILAND

RECIPE

CHICKEN TOM YUM SOUP

For the past 26 years, Chaiwat Lorthong has been straddling between worlds. The 51-year-old Thai national has spent more than half his life in Singapore. The practising Buddhist has also been attending church here.

Chaiwat first joined the Santiphap Church Singapore at Bukit Timah in 2000 after encountering a flyer near the construction site where he was then working. He was attracted by the weekly service in Thai and the free English lessons offered by the Singaporean volunteers at the church.

“Easier to live in Singapore if I speak English,” explains Chaiwat, who was then a signalman directing crane operators. He thought speaking the language would help him to give clearer instructions to his Indian and Filipino colleagues.

Although the course was only two months, Chaiwat continued attending the church. Over the past two decades, it has become more than just a place of worship as he has developed a sense of fellowship with the Thai congregants, for whom he frequently cooks with ingredients sponsored by the church.

“I feel happy cooking for them because they come far away from home like me,” he says of the congregants, many of whom are construction workers like himself. “They think of home when they eat my food.”

Even as most of his friends have returned to Thailand over the years, Chaiwat has only become more invested in Singapore. He rose through the ranks to his current position as a quality assurance and quality control supervisor. He even picked up Mandarin from his colleagues, allowing him to get along with effectively everyone in Singapore's diverse construction community. In the blink of an eye, the father of two has been living here for almost three decades.

Tears well up in his eyes when it is pointed out to Chaiwat that he has lived in Singapore longer than the entire lifetime of a youth. This is when he reveals his plans to retire in March next year and to return to Thailand for good. But he will take along with him the many pictures of Singapore that he snapped while sightseeing on his days off. They will be useful when he is confused about where he is, as it has happened many times before.

"Sometimes when I wake up in Thailand, I thought I'm in Singapore," says Chaiwat. "I have made many memories here."





Chicken Tom Yum Soup

This recipe is from his mother, but is “standard” across Thailand, says Chaiwat, who has cooked it many times for his fellow congregants. After living in Singapore for more than 20 years, however, Chaiwat no longer uses as many chillies in his tom yum as before because he has since developed a “Singaporean stomach”!

SERVES 4-5

Ingredients

- 1 ½ l water
- 4 tsp salt
- 1 tsp palm sugar
- 80 g tamarind
- 2 small red onions, halved and quartered
- 3 lemongrass, cut into 3-inch lengths,
discard top green portions
- 9 kaffir lime leaves
- 45 g galangal, sliced
- 3 coriander roots
- 5 red bird's eye chillies, halved lengthwise
- 2 tomatoes, quartered
- ½ (about 800 g) chicken, cut into 1 ½ inch pieces
- 1 tbsp chicken seasoning powder
- 2 tsp fish sauce
- 80 g oyster mushrooms, torn into bite-sized pieces
- 100 g king oyster mushrooms, halved lengthwise
and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 2 sprigs coriander, roughly chopped





Cooking Instructions

- 1 In a pot, add the water, salt, palm sugar, tamarind, red onions, lemongrass, kaffir lime leaves, galangal, coriander roots, bird's eye chillies and tomatoes.
- 2 Cover and boil over high heat, about 8 minutes or until the water bubbles vigorously. Add the chicken, cover the pot and let boil for about 2 minutes or until the water bubbles again.
- 3 Turn down the heat to medium. With a ladle and a fork, scoop out the tamarind, break it up and dissolve it in the soup.
- 4 Turn up the heat to medium high. Add the chicken seasoning powder, fish sauce, oyster mushrooms and king oyster mushrooms.
- 5 Cover and let boil for 2 minutes. Turn off the heat. Add the coriander leaves and stir. Serve hot.

A Proud Plant Parent



FEATURING

**SHOHEL MOHAMMAD RANA,
BANGLADESH**

RECIPE

GARDEN-TO-TABLE SPINACH

At the height of the pandemic in 2020, when Singapore imposed the circuit breaker to control the spread of the virus, Shohel Mohammad Rana constantly looked out from his third-floor residence towards the Terusan Recreation Centre next door.

Like many migrant workers living in the vicinity at the western end of Singapore, the Bangladeshi spent a great deal of time at the MOM-run recreation centre buying groceries, getting a haircut and dining out on hometown dishes. But something else weighed heavy on the man's mind. He was anxious about the wellbeing of the plants in the recreation centre's community garden that he had been managing since 2015.

"I was worried [because] nobody was watering the plants and loosening the soil," he explains through an interpreter. When he finally visited the garden after the restriction was lifted, all the plants had died just as he feared. "I was very sad."

Today, Shohel is exhilarated to show visitors around the now revived garden. He strides up and down the compound, slides under the fence and climbs up a tree to bring attention to every fruiting plant. He is hard to keep up with, even in a modest 170-square-metre garden.

And there is much to be proud of. Besides the flourishing lady's finger, bitter melon, spinach, Bombay and bird's eye chillies, spring onion, betel leaves and guava, there are drumstick, basil, chiku, longan, jambu and sugarcane among many others waiting for their time to bloom.

"Two months after you coming, this one is very nice. New plants," he says in English, sounding disappointed that he is unable to

show off a more bountiful garden. He then whips out his phone and flashes photo after photo of yet another plant, just like a new parent.

The 36-year-old has been gardening since he was a teenager. He used to tend to a rooftop garden at his parents' house, and was thus more than happy to volunteer when the recreation centre formed an interest group to start and manage a community garden. So was Karim Abdul, a friend and colleague, whom he met 13 years ago when they arrived in Singapore together.

With a few others, they plant fruits and vegetables that they like, with seeds they buy from local nurseries or provided by the recreation centre. Every day, including their days off, the men tend to the garden. Watching the plants grow from seed to fruit gives them great satisfaction, they say.

“If I go outside, I cannot save money. I enjoy coming here to do gardening and have some snacks together with my friends,” adds Shohel in Bengali.

Given the time and resources he has put into the garden, Shohel is understandably protective of it. He ticks off the landscapers when they trim their way into the garden and gets upset when others pluck the fruits when he is not present. “The garden is for everybody,” he admits. “But I prefer others to ask before taking.”

The gardeners usually give out their harvest to the recreation centre's staff and any visitor who ask them for it. As they prefer to eat a wider variety of foods, they still purchase most of their fruits and vegetables. Besides, they say, they are in it not for the food but the joy of gardening.

After the circuit breaker was lifted, Shohel and his friends spent six months reviving the community garden. So successful were they that it won silver in the 2021 Community in Bloom Awards organised by the National Parks Board.

When asked how he felt about the award, Shohel said nothing but smiled — like a proud parent.





Garden-to-Table Spinach

One of the dishes Shohel and Karim sometimes cook with their harvest is stir-fried spinach. As they chop the vegetable short, they do not peel the fibrous layer off its stem. The spinach is also cooked soft, the way they like it.

SERVES 2

Ingredients

2 tbsp vegetable oil
20 g garlic, sliced
60 g medium red onion, quartered and sliced
2 green chillies, halved lengthwise
¼ tsp salt
230 g spinach, cut into ½-inch pieces
¼ tsp turmeric powder





Cooking Instructions

- 1 Heat the oil over high heat. Add the garlic, onion, chillies, salt and stir for 40 seconds.
- 2 Add the spinach and stir for 1 ½ minute. Add the turmeric powder and stir for about 30 seconds or until the spinach is cooked to your liking. Turn off the heat and serve.

Soulful Cooking



FEATURING

**POLWATTE GEDARA ASIRI
HARENDRA POLWATTE,
SRI LANKA**

RECIPE

KAJU MALUWA

Buddhist temples have always provided him solace and guidance. But for Polwatte Gedara Asiri Harendra Polwatte, the Sri Lankaramaya Buddhist Temple in Singapore offers something more. Now that the Sri Lankan is away from home, he visits the temple, whose many devotees originate from his country, to seek a sense of rootedness too.

“I regulate my life according to the teachings of Buddha,” says Asiri, through his interpreter Venerable K. Gunaratana who serves the temple. “When I come to this temple, I [also] feel that I have come to Little Sri Lanka.”

Asiri was posted to Singapore in June 2023 when his employer, a medical garment manufacturer from Sri Lanka, set up a factory here. He trains new hires to sew and pack the garments. While the 39-year-old father of two spent five years in Jordan during his early twenties, this is his first time working outside the country since having his own family.

Living abroad alone has been “uncomfortable”, he says. It is why he often stands before the Bodhi tree in the temple’s compound to “relax” himself. The soft-spoken man also finds comfort volunteering as a cooking assistant to Venerable Gunaratana. A few days a week, the temple offers free vegetarian meals prepared by some 10 volunteers, including Asiri, to some 150 devotees. The mostly Sri Lankan dishes include kaju maluwa (cashew curry) and kiribath (milk rice).

Although Asiri has helped his wife to cook back at home, preparing meals at a Buddhist temple comes with an unusual challenge. To maintain the sanctity of the food, Venerable Gunaratana explains, the cook cannot taste before serving it to the Gods or monks. This means that the volunteers can only rely on the smell of their cooking to assess if it is tasty.

While Asiri maintains ties with Sri Lanka through the temple, he also spends time beyond its walls to explore Singapore. He enjoys visiting hawker centres to try the cuisines of different cultures. “Malaysia, Chinese, Korea. Everything I taste,” he says in English. His favourite discovery so far? Fish ball noodle soup.

Asiri is also impressed with how organised Singapore is, to the extent that he is contemplating settling down here with his family. “Everything is in order in Singapore. There is a system in everything,” he says in awe. “There is stability, there is security and, there is peace.”





Kaju maluwa

Sri Lanka produces crunchy and creamy cashew nuts that is the pride of its people. However, it is more expensive than meat — costing about S\$20 per kilogramme — and is only used on special occasions to make dishes such as kaju maluwa. At the Sri Lankaramaya Buddhist Temple, this curry is served with coconut milk rice cakes, or kiribath, and they are a perfect match.

SERVES 4-6

Ingredients

500 g raw cashew nuts
¼ cup coconut oil
1 tsp mustard seeds
1 (5 g) cinnamon stick, roughly broken into smaller pieces
3 g curry leaves
1 ½ tsp salt
2 garlic bruised
1 g pandan leaves, cut into 1-inch lengths
½ tsp green cardamoms
1 ½ tsp black peppercorns
¼ tsp fenugreek seeds
½ tsp cloves
35 g medium red onions, quartered and sliced
5 g small green chillies, cut into ½-inch lengths
40 g carrot, cut into 1-inch cubes
2 ½ tsp meat curry powder
1 ½ tsp roasted curry powder
½ tsp turmeric powder
250 ml coconut cream
¾ cup hot water
2 Sri Lankan capsicum (malu miris), cut into ½-inch lengths





Cooking Instructions

- 1 **Prepare the cashew nuts:** Soak the cashew nuts in water for 6 hours. Drain the water. Add the cashew nuts into a pot and fill with water, 1 inch above the nuts. Cover the pot and boil over medium high heat, about 30 minutes or until the nuts are soft. Drain the water and set aside for the next step.
- 2 **Assemble all ingredients:** In a wok or deep pan, heat the coconut oil over medium heat. Add the mustard seeds, cinnamon, curry leaves, salt and stir for 30 seconds. Add the garlic, pandan leaves, green cardamoms, black peppercorns, fenugreek seeds, cloves and stir for 30 seconds. Add the boiled cashew nuts, red onions, green chillies, carrot, meat curry powder, roasted curry powder, turmeric powder and stir for 1 ½ minutes.
- 3 Cover the wok and turn up the heat to medium high. Let cook for 2 minutes, stirring occasionally to prevent the cashew nuts from burning. Add the coconut cream, hot water and stir to combine. Cover the wok and turn down the heat to medium low. Let cook for 4 minutes. Add the malu miris and stir to combine. Cover and let cook, stirring occasionally, for about 7 minutes or until the cashew nuts break easily under the pressure of a spatula.
- 4 Uncover the wok. Turn up the heat to medium high to reduce the gravy, stirring constantly. When the gravy is thick and envelops the nuts, about 1 minute later, turn off the heat and serve with rice.

NOTE (1) Roasted curry powder and malu miris are both available in Little India.



RECIPES FOR LOVE

**COOKING THEIR WAY INTO
THE HEARTS OF OTHERS**

A Taste of Hearty Dong Bei



FEATURING

LI SHENG BO,
CHINA

RECIPE

ZHAN JIANG CAI

The northeast region of China, also referred to as Dong Bei, experiences long winters and short growing seasons. As a result, its cuisine comprises many practical one-dish meals that combine whatever ingredients that are on hand. One example is zhan jiang cai, a variety of vegetables — usually picked from farms or the mountains — eaten raw with a dipping sauce made of fermented soybean paste.

“It looks ugly, but it is very rustic and down-to-earth,” says Li Sheng Bo in Mandarin.

The dish was his staple food growing up in a family of landholder farmers in the region’s Jilin province, recalls the affable 48-year-old who is married with two daughters.

Before coming to Singapore to work in 2011, Sheng Bo ran a street food stall with his wife. They made a decent income until municipal officials started chasing hawkers off the streets as they were thought to be unsightly. Tired of being on the constant lookout for the authorities, and witnessing how the harsh weather took a toll on his wife, Sheng Bo sought a job overseas instead.

“My wife had to bear the cold in winter, the strong winds in spring and the heat in summer,” he says, making no mention that he too had to endure the same weather conditions while manning their stall outdoors.

Sheng Bo first came to Singapore to work as a cook in a Sichuan hotpot restaurant, as there were not as many Dong Bei restaurants in the country unlike today. He went on to work at two other restaurants until he scalded his arm in 2019. The incident made him realise that his stamina was declining, so he switched to his present job as a cleaner at Changi Lodge 2, a workers' dormitory where he also lives.

While Sheng Bo works in Singapore, his wife stays in Jilin to raise their daughters. The eldest is a university graduate and is getting married next year. The other is pursuing a degree in the performing arts. This is everything that the couple had hoped for when they decided one of them should stay behind.

“We work hard for the sake of our children. If they stray or break the law because there’s no one watching over them, what’s the purpose of having more money? We only have one income, but it was the right thing to do,” Sheng Bo explains.

When he returns home for visits, Sheng Bo makes it a point to cook for the family so that his wife does not have to. “After I retire, I won’t make her cook too,” he adds.

Besides preparing zhan jiang cai, he has also cooked chicken curry for them —a recipe he learnt while working in Singapore. His family enjoys it so much that they now prepare it even when Sheng Bo is not around.





Zhan Jiang Cai

While Sheng Bo won second place with his chicken and mushroom stew at a cooking competition organised by Changi Lodge 2, he is sharing this dish instead as it is what he used to make back home all the time. In Singapore, he still whips up this recipe two or three times a week because any vegetable goes. Pick the ones you like and eat them with the dipping sauce or make a wrap with a tofu sheet.

SERVES 3-4

Ingredients

1 Japanese cucumber, quartered and cut into 4-inch lengths
5 spring onions, cut into 4-inch lengths
½ red capsicum, cut into ½-inch sticks
½ green capsicum, cut into ½-inch sticks
140 g romaine lettuce
8 cherry tomatoes
35 g coriander, roots removed
12 sheets (6 x 6 inches) tofu skin (dou pi)

For the sauce

4 tbsp vegetable oil
2 eggs, beaten
35 g minced pork
1 spring onion, chopped
1 green chilli, chopped
⅓ cup soybean paste (or spicy Sichuan broad bean paste)
¼ cup water
1 tsp chicken seasoning powder
1 tsp MSG





Cooking Instructions

- 1 Plate the vegetables.
- 2 **Prepare eggs for the sauce:** Heat a wok or pan over medium high heat. Add 2 tbsp oil and swirl it around the wok. When the oil is smoking, add the eggs. Stir quickly and continuously with a spatula to scramble, about 25 seconds or until the eggs are cooked but still creamy. Scoop out the eggs and set aside.
- 3 **Make the sauce:** Add the remaining oil into the same wok over medium heat. Add the minced pork and stir continuously for about 25 seconds. Add the spring onions and stir for 30 seconds. Return the eggs into the wok and stir for 30 seconds. Add the soybean paste and stir for 1 minute. Add the water and stir to combine. Add the chicken seasoning, MSG and stir continuously until the sauce is thick like glue, about 40 seconds. Turn off the heat. Scoop the sauce into a bowl and serve with the vegetables.

NOTE (1) A search of “zhan jiang cai” on the internet produces little relevant results. Try using the Chinese characters “蘸酱菜” instead.
(2) The salt content of soybean or broad bean paste varies widely. Adjust according to the sauce you have.

Working Towards His Dream



FEATURING

**KYAW SWAR WIN,
MYANMAR**

RECIPE

MOTE HIN GAR

One Sunday in August, Kyaw Swar Win whipped up mote hin gar, a classic fish noodle soup from Myanmar, for some 30 Burmese friends. The occasion was the first birthday of his son.

In Myanmar, Buddhists mark birthdays by doing good deeds like giving alms, says Kyaw Swar. But this is not as widely practised in Singapore, where he has been living for 15 years. Nonetheless, he shared food with his friends in hope that this goodwill would bring blessings to his only child. While the boy, who lives in Myanmar with his mother, did not get to eat Kyaw Swar's food, they had a video call.

"I asked him to be a good boy and wished him health and wealth, but he is too young to understand me," says the 38-year-old through an interpreter.

Just three years ago, Kyaw Swar had given up on finding love. He had not been dating since he was 30 and had set a deadline to stop his search after turning 35. "I even told my mother to prepare her for this possibility," he says.

Then cupid got him when he least expected it. A year after his deadline, a friend introduced him to his niece. They began dating and, a little more than a year later, became the proud parents of Sa Shine Thura Aung.

While it all happened very quickly, Kyaw Swar was prepared. The electrician, who was renewing MRT running rails at the time of the interview, had been saving up. He readily took over his wife's duty of providing for her family of five, as she is the eldest child. Kyaw Swar even bought a new house for his in-laws, just as he did for his own parents many years ago.

Before coming to Singapore, Kyaw Swar farmed rice with his parents and siblings. As the earnings did not match up to the back-breaking work, the family sold the land and sent Kyaw Swar to work overseas instead. He has been supporting them ever since.

"We had 50 acres of land and no machine. Just cows and men only. My parents were exhausted, and they didn't want to work anymore," he explains.

Due to the uncertain political situation in Myanmar today, Kyaw Swar has not been home to meet his son who was born while he was away. He wants to return home for good in a few years' time, when he will have enough money to build a poultry farm for his future livelihood.

His family has already bought some ducks and chickens with the money he sent back. He is another step closer to his dream.





Mote Hin Gar

While this fish noodle soup is widely eaten across Myanmar, its ingredients vary from region to region. Kyaw Swar comes from Danubyu, a town on the west bank of the Irrawady River where there is easy access to catfish and mrigal carp. Other places use yellow pike conger eel or shrimp instead. Besides the roasted rice powder that Kyaw Swar prefers, yellow split pea powder, chickpea powder and peanuts are also used to flavour and thicken the dish.

SERVES 10–12

Ingredients

6 lemongrass

For the fish flakes

1 whole (400–500 g) Sultan
fish, cut two deep slits
on each side
3 tbsp fish sauce
1 l water, or just enough to
cover the fish in a pot

For the spice paste

½ cup vegetable oil
1 tsp turmeric powder
7 medium red onions,
quartered and sliced
4 bulbs garlic,
coarsely pounded
70 g ginger, coarsely pounded
2 tbsp chilli powder

For the broth

1 ¼ l water
4 medium red onions, quartered
2 tbsp salt
1 tsp MSG
3 tbsp fish sauce
150 g roasted rice powder,
dissolved in 1 cup water
2 tsp black pepper powder
6 boiled eggs, quartered

To serve

600 g rice vermicelli, follow
instructions on the
packaging to cook
7 long beans, cut into
half-inch lengths
10 sprigs coriander, chopped
6 lime, quartered lengthwise
Roasted chilli powder to taste





Cooking Instructions

- 1 **Prepare the lemongrass:** Peel two outer layers of leaves from each lemongrass, tie them into a bundle and set aside for Step 2. Cut and discard the green portions of the remaining lemongrass stalks. Slice the white portions then coarsely pound with a mortar and pestle. Set aside for Step 4.
- 2 **Boil the fish:** Add the lemongrass bundle, fish, fish sauce and water into a pot. Cover and boil over medium heat. Flip the fish after 10 minutes. Let boil for another 10 minutes, or until the fish is thoroughly cooked. Remove the fish and keep the stock for Step 5.
- 3 **Prepare the fish:** When the fish is cool, debone and flake it with a fork. Set aside for the next step. Pound the fish carcass with a mortar and pestle. Add 1 cup of water and stir to combine. Extract the liquid from the mixture using a colander and set aside for Step 5.
- 4 **Cook the spice paste:** Add the oil into a wok or deep pan over medium high heat. Add the turmeric powder and stir for 20 seconds. Add the red onions and stir for 40 seconds. Add the garlic, ginger, pounded lemongrass from Step 1 and stir for 2 minutes. Add the chilli powder and stir for 4 minutes. Add the fish flakes from Step 3. Stir continuously, while scraping the bottom of the wok, for 10 minutes or until the fish flakes are fragrant and somewhat dry. Turn off the heat and set aside for the next step.
- 5 **Make the broth:** Boil the water in a pot over medium high heat. Add the red onions, fish stock from Step 2, liquid extract from Step 3, fish flakes from Step 4 and stir to combine. Cover and let boil for 5 minutes. Add the salt, MSG, fish sauce and stir to combine. Add the rice powder mixture and stir to combine. Add the black pepper powder and eggs. Cover and let boil for 10 minutes. Turn off the heat.
- 6 To serve, add a handful of rice vermicelli into a bowl and ladle the fish soup over. Top with the long beans, coriander, lime and roasted chilli powder.

NOTE (1) Kyaw Swar usually adds banana stem into the stock and tops the dish with chickpea fritters, but he did not have access to these ingredients at his dormitory. Hence, they are excluded from this recipe.

A Husband Who Cooks *and* Cleans



FEATURING

HOSSAIN JULHAS,
BANGLADESH

RECIPE

LABRA

When Hossain Julhas went home to Chandpur, Bangladesh in 2012 to get married, his bride — whom his parents had arranged for him — was eager to not just meet him, but also taste his cooking.

By then, Julhas had been working in Singapore for eight years. Unlike many Bangladeshi men who were not skilled in cooking, those who had worked abroad for a long time were known to be capable of making themselves a meal.

Julhas did not disappoint. Plus, he also cleaned and tidied.

“[My wife] does not express herself, but I can tell that she is pleased whenever I help,” the 41-year-old shipyard supervisor says through an interpreter. On his annual trips back home, Julhas does housework to show his love for his family and make up for his absence.

In his eyes, cooking is not women’s work but a survival skill no different from driving.

“We men, [if] this type of skill [we do not] have, we have to suffer,” he says in English.

He recalls how dependent his father was on the family’s domestic helper. “He needed to wait for her to cook for him otherwise he would go to the office without any food,” Julhas explains.

Even before learning to cook when he was abroad, Julhas assisted his mother in the kitchen and learnt her recipes by watching.

But it was still a steep learning curve when he finally had to prepare his own meals after moving to Singapore in 2004 at the age of 21. While Julhas knew the ingredients for each dish, he did not remember how to put them together. “I had to call my mother [in the middle of cooking] to ask her how,” he says.

Now, Julhas cooks every week on his off day. He not only wields a knife like a pro, but is also organised. He cleans up as he cooks to be considerate to the other roommates who share the kitchen.

Even though he has yet to pass on his homemaking skills to his son, the eight-year-old is likely to have picked up a thing or two watching him. Once, when Julhas had to make dinner alone as his wife was ill, his son stood by his side and helped throughout.

“I [didn’t have to] tell him. Automatic, he came and helped!” Julhas says in English, grinning from ear to ear. “Automatic!”





Labra

This recipe combines what Julhas learnt from his mother and Bangladeshi roommates. Labra consists of at least five vegetables, and even more when it is prepared on special occasions. In Bangladesh, there are plenty to choose from, including pumpkin, long beans and banana flower. Capsicum and broccoli are unusual, but Julhas uses them in Singapore since they are widely available here.

SERVES 10-12

Ingredients

2 cups vegetable oil
1 tsp panch phoron
4 Indian bay leaves
300 g medium red onion,
halved and thinly sliced
65 g garlic, whole
1 tbsp ginger paste
1 tbsp garlic paste
5 g dried red chillies, cut into
1-inch lengths
35 g green chillies, cut into
1-inch lengths
1 tbsp turmeric powder
1 tbsp coriander powder
1 tbsp cumin powder
2 tbsp salt
320 g carrot, quartered and
cut into 2-inch lengths

600 g pumpkin, cut into
2-inch chunks
370 g long beans, cut into
2-inch lengths
630 g broccoli, cut into
2-inch florets
420 g green capsicum,
quartered and cut into
2-inch lengths
260 g lady's finger, cut into
2-inch lengths
460 g brinjal, quartered and
cut into 2-inch lengths
300 g tomato, quartered and
cut into 2-inch wedges
100 g coriander, coarsely
chopped





Cooking Instructions

- 1 Heat oil in a large wok over medium heat. Add the panch phoron, Indian bay leaves and red onion, stir for a minute. Add the garlic and fry, stirring occasionally, for about 2 minutes. Add the ginger paste, garlic paste, red chillies, green chillies and stir to combine. Add the turmeric powder, coriander powder, cumin powder, salt and stir to combine.
- 2 Add the carrots and cook, stirring occasionally, for about 2 minutes. Add the pumpkin, long beans and stir to combine. Cover the wok and cook for 5 minutes, stirring every minute. Add the broccoli, green capsicum, lady's finger and stir to combine. Cover the wok and cook for 5 minutes, stirring every minute. Add the brinjal and stir to combine. Cover the wok and cook for 6 minutes, stirring every minute. Add the tomato and cook for 4 minutes, stirring occasionally.
- 3 Turn down the heat to medium low. Add the coriander and stir to combine. Turn off the heat. Vegetables should be soft but still in shape.

Together Even When Apart



FEATURING

**KYAW MIN NAING,
MYANMAR**

RECIPE

EGG AND LADY'S FINGER CURRY

Kyaw Min Naing has been married for five years but has only ever lived with his wife for a month. After their wedding, the newlyweds stayed together during a short honeymoon at home in Myanmar before heading back to work — in two different countries.

Kyaw Min was then working in Southern Thailand at a solar panel manufacturing company, while his wife was moving to Singapore to join a cleaning agency. Over the next five years, the couple kept in touch via video calls just as how they first met via Facebook. Kyaw Min had sent his wife a friend request and they quickly fell in love and got married after just one month.

In 2022, Kyaw Min got a welding job at the marine industry in Singapore and the couple has since been living in the same city. But they are still apart — he in a dormitory provided by his employer and her in a rented flat. Despite this, they regularly make time for dates where each prepare a dish for picnics at scenic spots such as the Padang and Marina Bay.

Kyaw Min learnt to cook as a child out of necessity. His parents were always busy farming, so he and his siblings prepared their own meals. It was also an affordable alternative to school meals when he was sent to attend boarding school at the age of 13. “I enjoyed cooking because I could eat whatever I wanted,” he says through an interpreter.

Today, the 30-year-old is skilled in cooking Burmese dishes, such as prawn curry and sour bamboo shoot soup. He also learnt some Thai dishes during his seven years working in Thailand. But while Kyaw Min used to cook only for himself, he now indulges his wife too.

One dish that he often prepares for their picnics is egg and lady's finger curry. As the dish is common among households in Myanmar, they both enjoy it. The ingredients also suit Kyaw Min who grew up eating a mostly vegetable-based diet because his family are farmers with ready supplies of lentils and other plants.

The couple is currently looking for a suitable place to rent so that they can finally live together. For now, they make the best of their dates. After demonstrating his egg and lady's finger curry recipe, Kyaw Min packs it swiftly to go. It is his day off and his wife is waiting to enjoy the curry together.





Egg and Lady's Finger Curry

It is a common dish in Myanmar with regional variations. Besides lady's finger and potato featured in this recipe, one can add other vegetables such as long beans and brinjal.

Ingredients

For the tamarind juice

½ tbsp tamarind pulp
¼ cup water

For the spice paste

3 garlic, sliced
5 g ginger, sliced
1 medium red onion, sliced
2 tbsp chilli powder

For assembly

¼ cup vegetable oil
¼ tsp turmeric powder
¼ tsp spice mix
½ tomato, sliced
2 potatoes, quartered
2 tsp fish sauce
½ tsp MSG
2 ½ cups water
8 lady's fingers, cut into
3-inch lengths
3 eggs, boiled and halved
1 sprig coriander, cut into
2-inch lengths
Salt to taste





Cooking Instructions

- 1 **Make the tamarind juice:** Soak the tamarind pulp in the water for 15 minutes. Use a colander to sieve out and discard the pulp. Set aside the tamarind juice for Step 3.
- 2 **Prepare the spice paste:** Pound or blend the garlic, ginger, onion and chilli powder into a fine paste. Set aside for the next step.
- 3 **Cook the curry:** Heat the oil in a wok or pot over medium high heat. Add the spice paste, turmeric powder, spice mix and stir for 1 minute. Add the tomato, potatoes and stir for 1 minute. Add the fish sauce, MSG and water. Cover and turn up the heat to medium high. Let boil for about 10 minutes, or until the potatoes are almost soft.
- 4 Add the lady's fingers and tamarind juice. Cover and let boil for 3 minutes. Add the eggs and let boil for 2 minutes. Turn off the heat. Add the coriander and salt to taste.

NOTE (1) The spice mix includes cumin, green cardamom, clove, pepper and cinnamon.



SWEET DREAMS

**PURSUING A BETTER
LIFE AND FUTURE**

Down, Down and Up

146



FEATURING

EGODAGE ANUSHA LAKMALI,
SRI LANKA

RECIPE

COCONUT ROTI AND KATTA SAMBOL

Over the past 18 years, Egodage Anusha Lakmali has opened and closed three restaurants, each cut short by duties and mishaps. Yet, the 48-year-old remains faithful to her goal.

“[Going] down, I am not scared. I go down but every time I bring [myself] up again. This is my character,” she says.

No matter what Anusha talks about, the Sri Lankan maintains a smile and upbeat tone. So much so that when she recalls her ordeals, it sounds as if she is simply describing a passing cold.

In 2005, Anusha closed her first restaurant, even though it was profitable. Her brothers insisted she stay at home to raise her child and let her electrical engineer husband support the family alone. Shortly after, however, he was diagnosed with a brain condition and the medical bills wiped out their savings.

Her second restaurant came to an end when her husband broke his leg in an accident. It left her — heavily pregnant with their second child at the time — unable to cope with the business on top of caregiving.

The third restaurant was the most successful and longest running. Then, Covid-19 hit. Anusha hung on until the second year of the pandemic, but Sri Lanka fell into deep financial trouble and dragged her broken dream along.

Having experienced many hardships, Anusha knows exactly what she needs to do to pick herself up. “When I am down, I will come here, and I get myself up again,” she says.

Since 1997 when she finished school, Singapore has been where Anusha has come to pull through hard times. Her first job was working here as a domestic helper. She earned enough during this four-year

147

stint to pay for her three brothers to go to school and even built a house for her widowed mother.

“My first boss loved me so much. Her daughter and me same age,” she recalls.

After Anusha’s savings were depleted because of her husband’s medical bills, she returned to work in Singapore and eventually saved up enough for her second restaurant. When it closed again, she did the same and ultimately restarted her business. After the third restaurant wound up in 2022, Anusha came back to Singapore. She is now working to reopen her business for the fourth time.

Her passion for cooking belies a personal tragedy that led her to it. As a child, she was kept out of the kitchen as her doting father feared she would get hurt. “I couldn’t even boil water,” she says. But he passed away suddenly when Anusha was 15. The devastated girl visited his tomb every day and wailed so hard that she passed out once. To keep her away from the cemetery, her uncle took her out of her hometown in Bentota to live in Colombo with his family.

“I had to do everything [for them]. Until I lived with my uncle, I didn’t know how to cook,” she says.

Yet Anusha fell in love with the given chore and has spent her whole life fighting to make a career out of it since.

While running her last restaurant, she completed a two-year diploma in hotel management and international cookery so that she could work as a chef should the need to seek an overseas job arise again. Alas, the economic situation in Sri Lanka did not give her enough time to secure a hotel position.

Anusha has not forgotten what she is meant to do, however, and wants others to know it too. One afternoon when the temperature hits 32°C, she comes dressed in a chef coat and hat — her hotel school uniform — to demonstrate her recipe in a kitchen that has no air conditioning.

“Working as a chef is no problem for me because I have skill,” she says, sweating profusely under the double-breasted jacket. “I *really* like it.”





Coconut Roti and Katta Sambol

Anusha's last restaurant specialised in Sri Lankan and Indian food. The popular items include coconut roti and katta sambol, which she used to serve with black pork curry. The roti is a versatile staple that can be eaten any time of the day, while the sambol goes very well with milk rice (kiribath) too. The key ingredient of this sambol is Maldives fish, named as such because the cured fish is usually imported from the nearby islands. Maldives fish is often made of skipjack tuna, which is why it tastes similar to the Japanese katsuobushi.

SERVES 4-6

Ingredients

For the coconut roti

700 g plain flour
500 g grated coconut
1 red bird's eye chilli,
thinly sliced
1 green bird's eye chilli,
thinly sliced
1 tsp salt
water
1 tbsp coconut oil

For the katta sambol

90 g Maldives fish,
blended into flakes
¼ cup dried chilli flakes
½ tsp salt
2 medium red onions,
quartered and sliced
1 tsp sugar
½ tbsp coconut oil
Juice of 1 lime

1 tbsp coconut oil
1 banana leaf



Cooking Instructions

- 1 Prepare the dough:** Add the flour, grated coconut, red chilli, green chilli and salt into a large mixing bowl. Knead until the ingredients are well mixed and the dough does not stick to your hand. If there is not enough moisture to bind the ingredients, add water, 1 tbsp at a time. Add the coconut oil and knead a few times. Let the dough rest for 15 minutes. After that, it should feel smooth and moist and does not stick to your finger when you poke into it.
- 2 Make the sambol:** Blend or pound the Maldives fish, chilli flakes and salt in a mortar and pestle. Add the onions and pound until the ingredients are well mixed. Leave some onions partially intact to give the sambol texture. Add the sugar, coconut oil and lime juice. Stir to combine with a spoon.
- 3 Shape the roti:** Portion and roll the rested dough into 6 balls. Set aside. Apply some coconut oil on the banana leaf. Flatten a dough ball on the banana leaf into a quarter-inch-thick pancake.
- 4 Cook the roti:** Heat a non-stick or cast iron pan over medium heat. Place the flattened dough onto the pan. Let cook for about 2 minutes. Flip the dough and use a spatula to press it against the pan. Let cook for another 2 minutes. The dough turns white and opaque when it's ready. If there are raw, translucent parts, flip the dough again and let cook for another 20 seconds. If at any point the dough starts to burn before it is cooked, turn down the heat to medium low. Remove from the pan and repeat Step 3 and 4 with the remaining dough balls. Serve with the katta sambol from Step 2.

NOTE (1) Anusha uses whole Maldives fish which she buys at Little India.
(2) Step 3 may be carried out on a chopping board or directly on the countertop without a banana leaf.



Building a Future Abroad

156



FEATURING

**JIMMY GUAN,
CHINA**

RECIPE

PUTIAN LOR MEE

Since the 19th century, families in the southern Chinese coastal city of Putian have learnt to live apart. Locals migrated en masse to Southeast Asia in search of opportunities, and many have continued to do so even today.

One of them is Jimmy Guan, a father of two who has worked in Singapore for the last 16 years. “Where I come from, people are encouraged to go overseas to broaden their horizons,” says the 40-year-old, who also has many relatives that have been in Singapore for some three generations. “It is never enough for us to make a living. We want a future.”

After finishing school, Jimmy worked for his tailor father at first. But he had long set his mind on going abroad. Four years later, he abandoned the craft to take up a hotel job in Singapore.

In his first few months doing housekeeping work, Jimmy regretted his decision. The hefty agent fee from his home country, however, left him no choice but to soldier on. Through interacting with hotel guests and colleagues from all over the world, he discovered he had a gift for working with people from different cultures, ages and backgrounds. In 2009, Jimmy was recruited by a hotel group and progressively promoted to his present role as a housekeeping manager.

“If you are running a finance department, you can lead with your technical skills. But housekeeping is all about people management,”

157

explains Jimmy in a mixture of Mandarin and English. “You need to learn, understand and adapt to different people. It’s a soft skill that is hard to teach but very important.”

As Jimmy’s career blossoms in Singapore, he has increasingly grown accustomed to the country. “I’ve been in Singapore throughout my adulthood so I’ve become unfamiliar with China’s way of work and life,” he explains.

Jimmy keeps in touch with his family through daily video calls, and he is grateful to have his sister take care of his aging parents who have chronic diseases.

While living apart from his family has challenges, Jimmy is convinced that staying in Singapore will safeguard the future of his family. He believes a family need not be physically together and can stay as one if everybody is “comfortable”. “Comfortable means good health for my parents, good education for my children,” he explains, “and a good career for myself to be able to provide for them.”

It is a belief that applies to his children should they choose the same path he took, Jimmy adds.

“They will have their own pursuits. Just as my parents gave me their blessings, I will not hold my children back just because I want us to be together.”





Putian Lor Mee

This seafood noodle is traditionally the first dish served at weddings in Putian. As standards of living have improved, what used to be a celebratory dish is now prepared on regular days too. Its flavours come largely from the dried and fresh seafood, some of which are caught along the coast of Putian but are hard to get in Singapore. Jimmy buys them online. He suggests using whichever seafood that is similar or accessible, and emphasises that the fried garlic and onion are essential.

SERVES 3-4

Ingredients

4 tbsp vegetable oil
1 star anise
1 medium red onion, halved and sliced
35 g garlic, chopped
100 g pork shoulder, cut into 1 ½ inch pieces
6 dried shiitake, soaked in ¼ cup water and sliced
20 g dried shrimps, soaked in ¼ cup water
35 g dried scallops, soaked in ¼ cup water
6 dried Chinese razor clams, soaked in ¼ cup water
2 cups water
6 small abalone, soaked in ¼ cup water
4 red mushrooms
200 g napa cabbage, cut 1-inch wide

300 g egg noodles (white colour)
60 g fresh Chinese razor clams, mixed with 1 tbsp plain flour
60 g oysters, mixed with 1 tbsp plain flour
120 g clams, cleaned and de-grit
5 medium prawns, shelled and halved lengthwise
1 leek, cut into 1-inch lengths
150 g Chinese celery, cut into 1-inch lengths
2 tsp oyster sauce
¼ cup Shaoxing wine
30 g carrots, julienned into 1-inch lengths
8 g coriander, cut into 1-inch lengths





Cooking Instructions

- Cook the aromatics:** Heat 3 tbsp oil in a wok or deep pan over medium high heat. Add the star anise and fry for 30 seconds or until fragrant. Remove the star anise and set aside for Step 3.
- Turn down the heat to medium low. Add the onion and fry, stirring occasionally, for 1 minute. Add the garlic and fry, stirring occasionally, for 1 minute or until the garlic is fragrant but not brown. Remove the garlic, onion and set aside for the next step.
- Prepare the stock:** Heat 1 tbsp oil in the same wok over medium heat. Add the pork and fry, stirring occasionally, for 2 minutes or until cooked. Add the shiitake, shrimps, scallops, Chinese razor clams, star anise from Step 1 and fry, stirring occasionally, for 1 minute. Add the water as well as all the soaking liquid. Cover and let boil over medium high heat for about 4 minutes. Add the abalone, red mushrooms and napa cabbage. Cover and let boil for another 2 minutes.
- Assemble all ingredients:** Loosen and add the noodles evenly around the wok. Use a spatula to lightly push the noodles into the broth. Do not stir. Layer the fresh Chinese razor clams, oysters, clams, prawns and leek on top of the noodles. Cover and let boil over medium high heat for 3 minutes or until the noodles are cooked and the sauce is thick and reduced, not soupy.
- Add the Chinese celery, oyster sauce, Shaoxing wine, garlic and onion (along with the oil) from Step 2 and stir to combine. Add the carrots, coriander and stir to combine. Turn off the heat and serve hot.

NOTE (1) The scientific name of the Chinese razor clam is *Sinonovacula Constricta*. Replace with other types of clams if you are unable to get it.
(2) The oyster used here is known as 海蛎 (hai li) and is less than ½ inch big. If that is not available, use the next bigger-sized oyster instead.
(3) The abalone and red mushrooms are not essential to the dish.

A Return to Pho-miliar Taste



FEATURING

**NGUYEN VAN HIEN,
VIETNAM**

RECIPE

BEEF PHO

As a child, Nguyen Van Hien was a picky eater who refused to eat anything that did not taste delicious to him. He gave his mother, who cooked for the family, a hard time.

But today, as a chef of a hotel in Jalan Besar, his demanding palate has helped his largely Vietnamese repertoire, including beef pho and bun cha, earn praises from patrons. According to them, his dishes taste just as how they are in Vietnam.

“Here, five kilo of beef bones produce only 40 to 50 servings of [pho] broth. In other restaurants, may be 100 servings. That’s why their soup is bland. Some don’t even use bones. Seasoning powder only!” Van Hien says, in fluent Mandarin.

The Vietnamese picked up the language as an 18-year-old working at a semiconductor chip factory in Taiwan. Four years later, Van Hien moved back to his hometown in Ha Tinh to run a barbecue seafood restaurant with his elder brother. In 2017, he moved to Singapore and subsequently worked for a Chinese restaurant group where he polished his Mandarin while wok tossing alongside several Malaysian Chinese.

During the pandemic, when the restaurant he worked in closed temporarily, Van Hien joined the hotel that was operating as a quarantine facility. He eventually drew up its restaurant’s menu of Vietnamese street food. Although it was his first attempt at

making those dishes, they impressed the hotel owner who frequents Vietnam.

“I knew how those dishes were prepared. I’m a Vietnamese, and a chef, so of course I knew. I just never cooked them!” Van Hien says, and adds that he can figure out the ingredients of dishes simply by tasting.

It helps that his boss gives him the freedom to achieve the exacting standards he desires. “My boss wants it tasty. He doesn’t want ready-made things even though their costs are lower,” he says.

A crowd favourite at the restaurant is beef pho. Van Hien kindly demonstrates his recipe during a lull at work, and he is confident that his version is one of the best in town.





Beef Pho

Despite his constant jokes, Van Hien is serious and meticulous when he cooks and produces a beef pho that all who tried at the demonstration thought was the best they have had in a while. He even serves it with a delightful lemongrass chilli paste that he prepared for two hours.

SERVES 12

Ingredients

For the broth

8 l water
 3 kg beef leg bones
 1 kg radish, cut into
 1-inch-thick rounds
 2 yellow onions, halved

 2 tbsp vegetable oil
 50 g ginger, sliced
 170 g onion, halved and sliced
 4 g (about 1) star anise
 16 g (about 3) cinnamon sticks
 11 g Chinese black cardamoms

22 g salt
 16 g MSG
 35 g sugar
 11 g chicken seasoning powder
 50 g concentrated chicken stock
 55 g beef pho bouillon cube
 95 g hoisin sauce

To serve

1.8 kg flat rice noodle,
 blanched according to
 packaging instructions
 1 kg beef shoulder, thinly sliced
 250 g bean sprouts,
 blanched 5 seconds
 70 g coriander, chopped
 100 g basil leaves
 170 g white onion, halved and
 thinly sliced
 130 g spring onions, cut into
 2-inch shreds
 2 key limes, each cut into
 6 wedges



Cooking Instructions

- 1 **Prepare the stock:** Boil the water in a large pot. Add the beef leg bones, radish and yellow onions. When the water returns to a boil, turn down to low heat. Cover and let simmer for 12 hours. Check the water level every 2 or 3 hours and replenish to its original volume. Turn off the heat and discard the bones and vegetables.
- 2 **Cook the aromatics:** Heat the oil in a pan over medium high heat. Add the ginger and stir continuously for about 1 minute 30 seconds. Add the onion and stir continuously for about 5 minutes or until the ingredients are brown and a little burnt on the edges. Add the star anise, cinnamon sticks, Chinese black cardamoms and stir continuously for 1 minute. Turn off the heat. Scoop everything into a muslin bag and tie a knot to seal.
- 3 **Finish up the broth:** Boil the broth from Step 1. Drop in the muslin bag from Step 2. When the broth returns to a boil, turn down to low heat. Let simmer for 20 minutes or until the broth is infused with the fragrance of the spices. Remove the muslin bag but keep the broth simmering.
- 4 Add the salt, MSG, sugar, chicken seasoning powder, concentrated chicken stock, beef pho bouillon cube and hoisin sauce into the broth. Stir to mix well and keep it at a simmer while preparing the next step.
- 5 **Assemble all ingredients:** Portion the rice noodles into 12 serving bowls, followed by the beef shoulder, bean sprouts, coriander, basil leaves, white onions and spring onions on top.
- 6 To serve, turn up the heat and bring the broth from Step 4 into a boil. Ladle the broth, directly over the raw beef, into each bowl. Serve hot.

- NOTE
- (1) Taste the stock as you go in Step 1. You may not want to replenish the water, especially if you plan to cut back on the noodles, which is 150 g per portion. If you do end up with lesser stock, adjust the seasonings in Step 4 accordingly.
 - (2) Van Hien suggests leaving out chicken seasoning powder and use only concentrated chicken stock if you wish to streamline the ingredients.
 - (3) If pho bouillon is inaccessible for you, Van Hien suggests using more salt, sugar and chicken stock instead.



Moulding Her Dreams into Reality

176



FEATURING

ISTIKOMAH,
INDONESIA

RECIPE

KUE MENDUT

Throughout her schooling years in South Sumatra, Istikomah, or Isti for short, had to wake up at least four hours before her first lesson began. The extra hours were not for travelling to school. Instead, she spent the pre-dawn hours preparing some 50 kilogrammes of kueh with the adults at home. Isti would then deliver them on a bicycle to a market, where her maternal grandmother sold them to supplement the family's farming income.

177

As one of 13 children in her family, Isti was brought up by her grandmother who taught her how to make kueh. She recalls having fun on her first lesson rolling kue cenil, a spindle-shaped tapioca cake, between her tiny seven-year-old palms. But the kueh she holds dear today is mendut, a pyramid-shaped glutinous rice kueh stuffed with sweet grated coconut, as it took her the longest time to gain her grandmother's approval.

"My grandmother [was] always angry with me [when I made this kueh]," explains Isti. "She taught me many things so that when I grow older, maybe I can sell [them]. But I [didn't do it well]."

When she eventually did it right, although long after mastering some 10 other kueh varieties, her grandmother was immensely pleased. They continued working side by side until Isti got married at the age of 20 and soon left home to work in Singapore.

As a domestic helper over the last two decades, she has accomplished many of her dreams. “I tell you, everything [has] come true,” the now 46-year-old says with pride.

Within her first three years of working in Singapore, Isti saved up enough to rebuild a timber house she lived with her husband back in Indonesia with concrete instead. She subsequently bought a plot of land for farming, supported her daughter’s tertiary education, and recently gave her capital to open a fashion boutique in Yogyakarta.

In 2023, Isti spent five months’ worth of her salary to send her mother to Mecca to attend the haj. “This is *really* my big dream, to give this to my mother,” she says. Isti sees it as expressing gratitude to her mother for raising her daughter, just as how her grandmother once brought her up.

Her grandmother imparted not only her kueh-making skills but also the grit and frugality that helped Isti to realise her dreams. She spends most of her days off either taking homemaking lessons or volunteering, including manning a helpline for Indonesian domestic helpers in need. Besides meeting new friends and providing support for one another, these activities keep her from spending money unnecessarily.

“You know if you go shopping or makan, [the] money in your wallet will be gone right,” she explains. “I really don’t want that. I like to save more money for my family and my own dreams.”



Kue Mendut

This recipe's many steps seem daunting, but it is straightforward and easy to follow. The same ingredients also make onde-onde. From Step 2, simply stuff the dough balls with palm sugar shavings only, then boil the balls in water until they rise to the surface. Scoop out and roll them in a bowl of lightly salted grated coconut and now you have another kueh!

MAKES 16 KUEH

Ingredients

For the filling

140 g grated coconut
70 g palm sugar, cut into thin shavings
30 g (white or brown) sugar
Pinch of salt
¼ tsp vanilla extract

For the dough

2 cups glutinous rice flour
200 ml coconut cream mixed with ⅓ cup water
Pinch of salt

2 tbsp vegetable oil
15 (18 x 20 cm) banana leaves





Cooking Instructions

- 1 **Prepare the filling:** Heat a pan over low heat. Add the grated coconut, palm sugar, sugar, salt and stir to combine. Keep stirring until the coconut is evenly coated with the melted sugars, about 6 minutes. Add the vanilla extract and stir to combine. Turn off the heat. The coconut should be moist but without liquid at the bottom of the pan.
- 2 **Make the dough:** Sieve the glutinous rice flour into a mixing bowl. Add the salt, one third portion of the coconut cream and knead for about 5 seconds. Repeat twice with the remaining coconut cream. Knead thoroughly until the dough is well mixed and smooth. Portion and roll the dough into 30 g balls.
- 3 Pour the vegetable oil into a bowl and place it by your side. Press and flatten a dough ball from Step 2 between your palms. Scoop 1 tsp of filling from Step 1 onto the centre of the dough. Bring up and pinch the dough edges together to enclose the filling. Roll the filled dough into a ball between your palms. Roll the ball in the bowl of oil to coat every surface then leave the ball inside the bowl. Repeat with the remaining dough and filling.
- 4 Get the steamer ready.

- 5 **Prepare the banana leaves:** Wipe leaves clean with a damp cloth. One by one, pass the leaves over a small gas flame on both sides, moving and flipping constantly, for about 5 seconds. The leaves will turn shiny and bright green. This makes them pliable for folding. (a) Fold a leaf in half so that the two long sides meet. (b) Measure 12 cm from the top right corner and cut diagonally from this point to the top left corner. (c) Use the larger piece for the next step.
- 6 **Wrap the kueh:** (d) Place the leaf on your non-dominant hand, with the short edge that is intact on top. Lightly rub some oil onto the centre of the leaf. (e) Place the index finger of your other hand on the top $\frac{1}{3}$ length and in the centre of the two long sides. (f) Push the index finger of your non-dominant hand towards yourself, (g) then free the other hand to pull the top right corner across the top left corner, forming a conical pouch with “two peaks”. (h) Place a kueh ball into the pouch. (i) Fold the “peaks” towards you and lie them flat on the kueh. (j) Fold in the right side of the pouch, and then the left side. (k) Fold the last corner up and (l) tuck it into the pocket formed by the previous folds. (m) Invert the parcel, then place the pyramid on a tray or plate that fits into the steamer. Repeat the steps to wrap all the kueh balls.
- 7 Steam over medium heat for about 25 minutes. Let cool before unwrapping to prevent the kueh from sticking to the leaf.



(A)



(B)



(C)



(D + E)



(F)



(G)



(H)



(I)



(J)



(K)



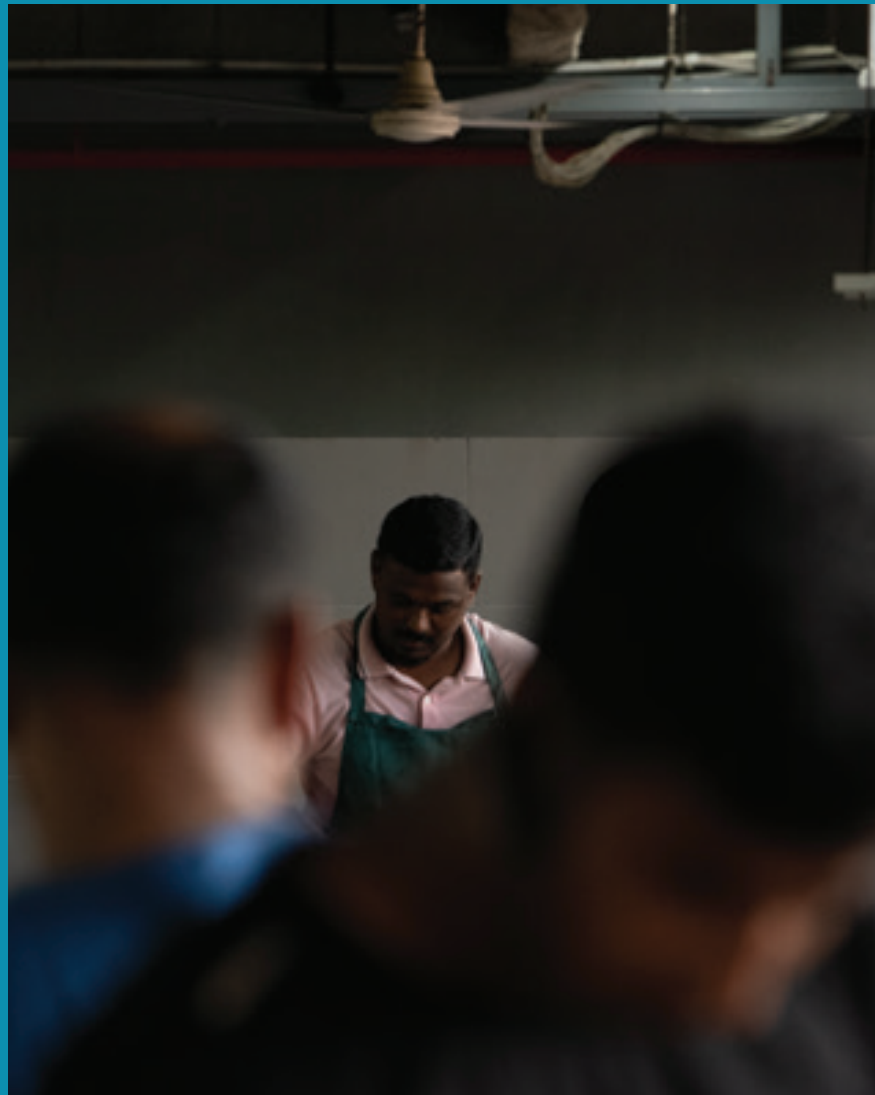
(L)



(M)

A Fisherman at Heart

186



FEATURING

**MOHAN SHAKIL,
INDIA**

RECIPE

APPA'S PRAWN MASALA

Once a man of the sea, always a man of the sea. Not even the threat of a tsunami could deter Mohan Shakil from continuing a traditional way of life.

The men in his family have been fishermen for generations in the coastal town of Cuddalore in South Chennai. At age 16, Mohan followed his father's and grandfather's footsteps, into the Indian Ocean, with the hope of bountiful harvests including trevally, pomfret, sardine and the prized Indo Pacific king mackerel.

If lady luck was with the boy, and the crew of some 20 men on the same boat, a fishing trip could yield a fair profit in 10 hours. Otherwise, the boat that typically left at 4 am did not return to harbour until sunset, or even midnight on very uneventful days.

Even before Mohan joined the trade, the fishermen were experiencing more bad days than good ones. The 2004 Indian Ocean Tsunami inundated fishing villages and killed more than 600 in Cuddalore. It also affected harvests and fishermen were eventually forced to seek work opportunities abroad. Mohan's father left home first for a job in Qatar. In 2011, Mohan stopped fishing after two years in the trade to work for a construction company in Singapore.

At first, the then 18-year-old did not know how to cook and missed the taste of home terribly. When he returned to Cuddalore two

187

years later, he asked his father, who was also home for a break, to teach him some of his favourite dishes.

Like other experienced fishermen in his village, Mohan's father was a competent cook as he stayed at sea for up to a week and cooked his own meals on board.

"At home, my mother cooked. My father only did so once in a while," Mohan says through an interpreter. When asked which parent prepared tastier dishes, the now 30-year-old answers without hesitation, "Appa."

Over the years, Mohan has become an excellent cook too. In 2022, he won a cooking competition organised by his dormitory, Changi Lodge 2, with his father's chicken masala recipe.

But his strong suit is really seafood, which made up most of his meals back in India. Here in Singapore, Mohan continues to keep to his traditional diet by buying imported sea-caught fish at least once a week.

The uncompromising desire for the best takes him from his dormitory in the east all the way to Tekka Market. The long journey is worth it, he says, because frozen fish, although more accessible, is "sad".

For at least the near future, Mohan plans to continue working in Singapore because his income as a construction safety coordinator allows his father to stay at home with the family. But his dream is to return to fishing one day. "It has been our way of life for generations. I cannot leave it," he explains.

There is also an inescapable bond between Mohan and the sea.

"It is like God to us. It provides us food, our entire livelihood. Even after the tsunami we did not abandon our village," he says. "I feel uncomfortable spending too much time on land."





Appa's Prawn Masala

Prawns are common in the diet of fishermen in Cuddalore. To demonstrate this recipe, Mohan bought fresh prawns from the market and peeled them himself. He also kindly contributed an onion pachadi recipe as a counter to the spicy dish.

SERVES 4

Ingredients

For the prawn masala

- 1/3 cup vegetable oil
- 2 tsp spice mix
- 1 sprig curry leaves
- 2 green chillies, cut into half-inch lengths
- 3 medium red onions, chopped
- 3 tsp salt
- 2 1/2 tomatoes, chopped
- 1 1/2 tsp turmeric powder
- 1 kg prawns, shelled
- 2 tsp chilli powder
- 1 tsp coriander powder
- 1/2 tsp garam masala
- 1 1/2 tsp black pepper powder

For the onion pachadi

- 1/2 cup yoghurt
- 3 curry leaves, chopped
- 2 medium onions, chopped
- 1 sprig coriander, chopped
- Salt to taste





Cooking Instructions

- 1 **Cook the prawn masala:** Heat the oil in a wok or pan over medium high heat. Add the spice mix, curry leaves, green chillies and stir to combine. Add the onions, salt and fry, stirring occasionally, for 3 minutes. Add the tomatoes and fry, stirring occasionally, for 3 minutes. Add the turmeric powder and stir to combine. Cover and let cook for 2 minutes.
- 2 Add the prawns and stir to combine. Cover, turn down the heat to medium and let cook for 2 minutes. Add the chilli powder, coriander powder, garam masala and stir to combine. Cover and let cook for 2 minutes. Add the black pepper powder and fry, stirring occasionally, for 5 minutes. Turn off the heat.
- 3 **Make the onion pachadi:** Combine the yoghurt, curry leaves, onions, coriander and salt in a bowl. Refrigerate till the prawn masala is ready to serve. Eat both with rice.

NOTE (1) The spice mix comprises fennel, cumin, brown mustard, fenugreek and urad dal.

About ACE Group



The Assurance, Care and Engagement (ACE) Group safeguards the well-being of migrant workers by enhancing the healthcare, housing and social resilience of the migrant worker ecosystem. This is achieved by providing access to basic medical care and mental health support for migrant workers, improving living standards across migrant worker accommodations and developing more attractive recreation options. Forward deployed officers also directly engage with migrant workers to meet their needs. The ACE Group works in partnership with stakeholders, including employers, dormitory operators and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), to co-create effective solutions and engender a supportive and empowered migrant worker stakeholder ecosystem.

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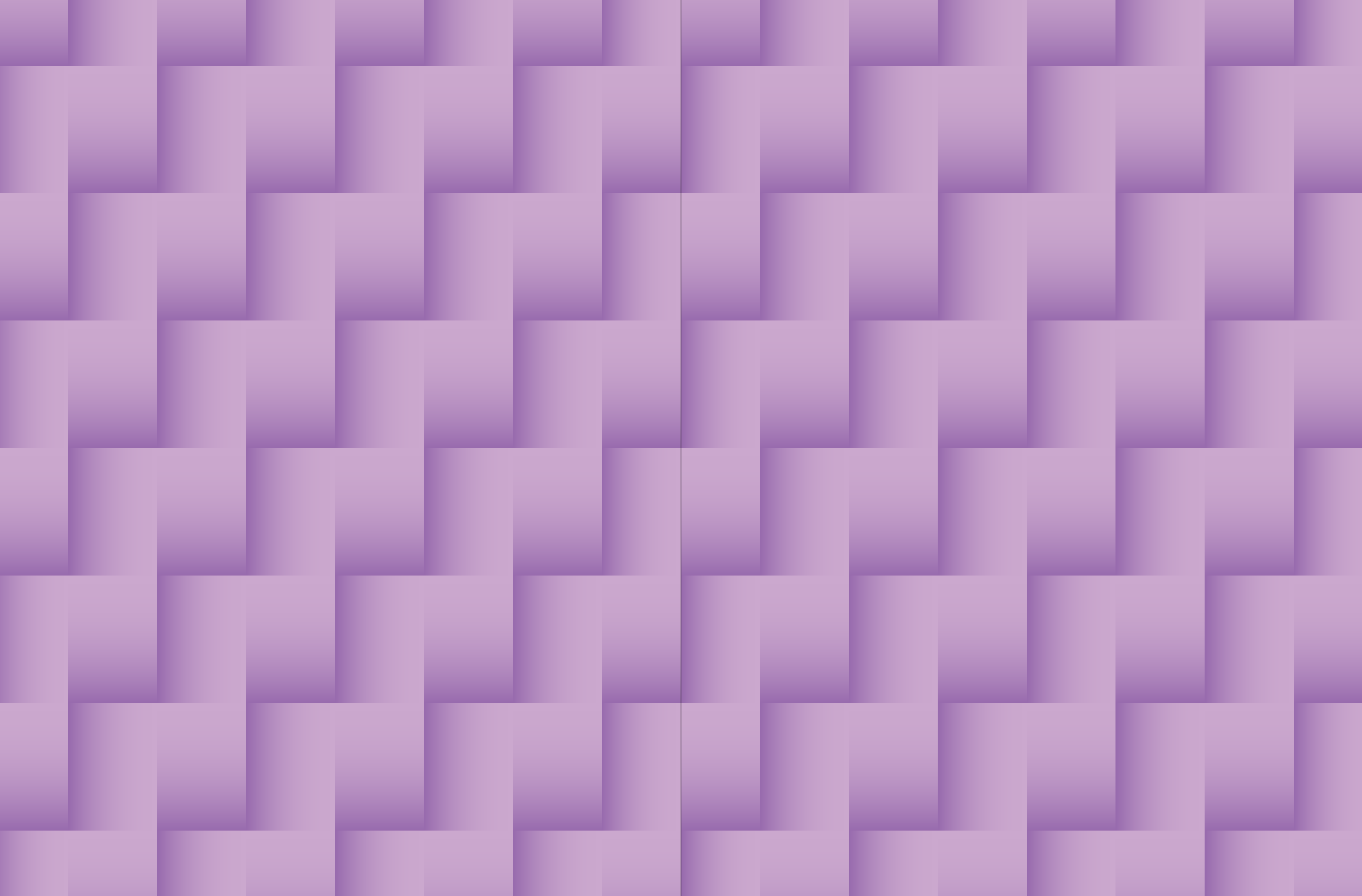
S11 Dormitories



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IN CELEBRATION OF
INTERNATIONAL MIGRANTS DAY