

# FRAGRANT FLAVORS OF Singapore

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SPICY  
COCO-  
NUT FISH  
CAKES



This Southeast Asian  
island is a hub of  
multiethnic fare

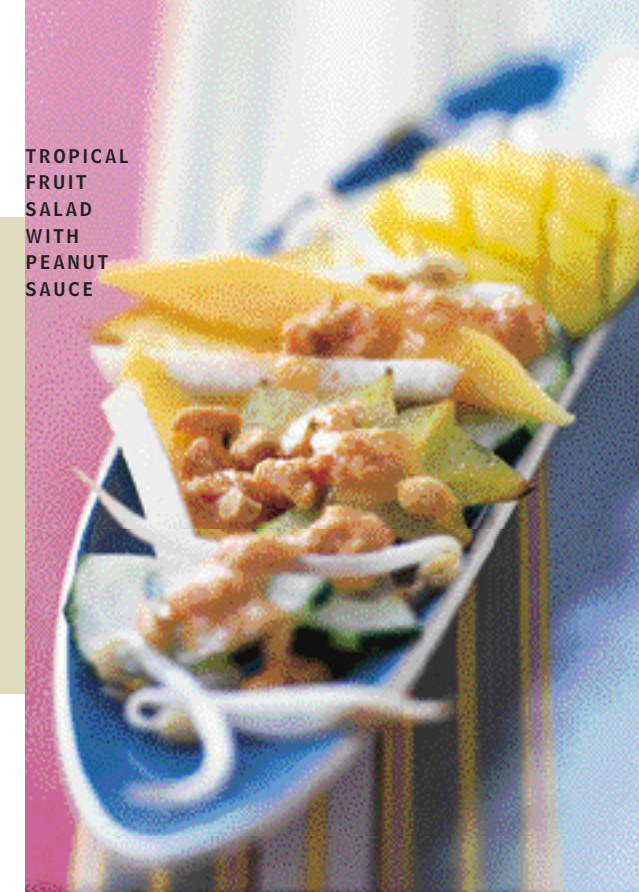
**FOOD IS A NATIONAL OBSESSION IN SINGAPORE** and there is no better place for a Far East culinary adventure than the tiny island at the tip of the Malaysian peninsula. A bustling trade center and former British colony, Singapore was settled over the centuries by Chinese, Indians and Indonesians, who each added their foodways to those of the local Malays. The cultures remain distinct—a visitor can dine on Cantonese or Szechuan-style foods, partake of north Indian tandoori or southern curries, or choose between Sumatran and Javanese dishes. And nowhere has fast food evolved to such a pinnacle as what's available at hawker stands in sprawling food courts that serve inexpensive—but inspired—multiethnic fare to the refined palates of Singapore's hungry masses.

Of all the varieties of Asian cuisine in Singapore, one is unique: Peranakan, or Nonya, cooking. The Peranakans, descendants of southern Chinese immigrants who married Malay women, have blended Chinese beliefs with Malay food, dress and language. The men are called *baba* and the women *nonya*, hence the term Nonya cuisine.

Peranakan food incorporates Chinese elements such as bean sprouts, pork, noodles and tofu, but it gets its flavor from Malay spices such as lime, turmeric, galangal (a ginger-like root), coconut, tamarind and the ubiquitous chile peppers—a must in most Singapore dishes. In fact, many recipes begin with making sambal, a blend of hot chiles, ginger and other fragrant herbs that spices the cuisine.

Food is so important in Peranakan society that the name for kitchen means “stomach of the house,” because it's the center for cooking and congregating. It's also where dried chiles, lemongrass, coriander leaf and belacan, a spicy fermented prawn paste used in many Nonya dishes, are stored. □

TROPICAL  
FRUIT  
SALAD  
WITH  
PEANUT  
SAUCE



## Tropical Fruit Salad with Peanut Sauce (Rojak)

Serves 8 / This colorful salad neatly blends sweet fruit with vegetables and tops it all off with a peanut and chili sauce that also makes a delicious gravy over rice or Chinese noodles. A traditional recipe would include tamarind juice and bunga kantan, a fleshy pink edible flower.

PEANUT SAUCE	SALAD
4 ounces roasted, shelled peanuts	1 papaya
1-2 bird chiles or Thai peppers	1 mango
1 clove garlic	1 medium jicama
½-inch piece of ginger, peeled	1 starfruit
½ cup lime juice	¼ pineapple
1½ tablespoons sugar	1 cucumber
½ cup water	¼ pound bean sprouts

1. Make Peanut Sauce by mixing first four ingredients in a blender or food processor. Pour chopped nuts and spices into bowl, and add juice and sugar. Then add water slowly until dressing reaches a sauce-like consistency. Set aside.
2. For the salad, peel and slice fruits and vegetables. Arrange in salad bowl or on individual plates. Drizzle with Peanut Sauce.

**PER SERVING:** 163 calories, 37% fat calories, 7g fat, 0mg cholesterol, 23g carbs, 6g protein

## In some parts of Singapore, the name for kitchen means “stomach of the house” because it’s the center for cooking and congregating.

My personal Singapore food quest began not in a home kitchen, but at The Blue Ginger, a Peranakan restaurant located in Chinatown. There, I first tasted the exotic Ayam Buan Keluak, a braised chicken with Indonesian black nuts baked in a clay pot until they soften and taste like bitter chocolate. My favorite Nonya dish was the homemade coconut fish cakes called Otak Otak, a recipe I’ve re-created here. A close runner-up was Laksa Lemak, a coconut seafood soup that I first tasted at the Lau Pa Sat food

court. In lavish restaurants and humble food stands alike, the bold and spicy flavors of Singapore are unforgettable.

### Kale with Ginger and Chiles

Serves 4 / For side dishes, the people of Singapore love dark-green, leafy vegetables such as kai lan and kangkung, which resemble spinach or kale.

- 1 pound kale or spinach
- 1 bird chile
- 4 cloves garlic

### Spicy Coconut Fish Cakes (Otak Otak)

Serves 8 / This aromatic treat is a favorite in Peranakan restaurants and hawker stalls. You can grill this tangy appetizer the traditional way—wrapped in banana leaves—or simply bake it in the oven. Otak Otak can be served hot or cold as a snack. Follow the additional instructions for a creamy tofu version of this recipe.



- 2-inch piece of ginger, peeled and sliced
- 2-inch piece of turmeric root, peeled and sliced
- 6 bird chiles
- Zest of one lemon
- 10 shallots or 2 onions, peeled and sliced
- 1 tablespoon ground coriander
- 1 14-ounce can light coconut milk
- 1 tablespoon sugar
- 1½ teaspoons salt
- 2 tablespoons flour
- 1 egg, beaten
- 10 kaffir lime leaves or zest of 1 lime
- 1½ pounds chopped, filleted haddock, cod, mackerel or any other white, flaky fish\*
- Banana leaves for wrapping (optional)

1. Place ginger, turmeric, chiles, lemon, onions and coriander in a blender or food processor and purée. Add a little water if needed.

2. Place ground spices in a skillet or wok and cook 2 minutes, just enough to release spicy flavor. Turn off heat and allow mixture to cool. Stir in coconut milk.
3. Add sugar and salt to mix, and stir.
4. Add flour and beaten egg. Stir thoroughly.
5. Remove center vein of kaffir lime leaves and mince finely, or substitute lime zest. Add to spicy coconut mixture.
6. Chop raw, deboned fish into small chunks. Stir into spicy coconut mixture.
7. Pour fish mixture into an 8-inch cake pan. Bake in 350° oven for 25–30 minutes until edges are golden brown and mixture has set. Cool slightly and cut into squares and serve. To make small, round fish cakes, pour mix about 1½-inches deep into muffin tins and bake for 15–20 minutes. Or, spoon about 5 tablespoons of the mixture into 6-inch x 12-inch banana leaves, wrap like a tamale, and secure ends with toothpicks or skewers. Grill over hot coals for 10–15 minutes, or until mixture has set.

\* **TO SUBSTITUTE TOFU FOR FISH**  
Use 18 ounces of firm tofu. Chop into cubes and prepare recipe as indicated, but instead of using fish, place tofu and vegetable egg mixture into blender or food processor and purée until smooth. Bake or grill as indicated.

**PER SERVING:** 168 calories, 30% fat calories, 6g fat, 70mg cholesterol, 13g carbs, 17g protein

- ⅓ onion, chopped
- 1-inch slice of ginger, peeled
- 2 tablespoons water
- 1 tablespoon tamari sauce
- 1 tablespoon sesame oil

1. Wash, de-vein and chop kale or spinach into bite-size pieces. Set aside.
2. Purée chile, garlic, onion, ginger and water in blender or food processor.
3. Pour blended spice mixture into wok. Add tamari and sesame oil. Heat until sizzling, then add kale to wok. Stirfry for 3–5 minutes until kale becomes limp. Serve hot.

**PER SERVING:** 105 calories, 33% fat calories, 4g fat, 0mg cholesterol, 15g carbs, 4g protein

### Coconut Curry Noodle Soup (Laksa Lemak)

Serves 8 / This is an updated version of a classic Nonya soup, replacing Chinese-style rice noodles with udon and quail eggs with tender morsels of lightly fried tofu.

#### SAMBAL

- 4 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped
- 1-2 bird chiles
- 1 large onion, diced
- 2-inch piece of ginger or galangal, peeled and chopped
- 2 teaspoons shrimp paste (optional)
- 2 teaspoons curry powder
- 2 stalks fresh lemongrass, peeled and diced, or zest of 1 lemon

#### UDON

- ½ pound organic, firm tofu
- 1 teaspoon oil
- 6-8 ounces udon noodles
- 1 egg, hard-boiled
- 1 cup canned light coconut milk
- 1 cup canned fat-free chicken broth
- 1½ cups water
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 4 ounces raw shrimp, peeled and de-veined
- 4 ounces raw scallops
- 1 cup bean sprouts

1. In blender or food processor, purée garlic, chiles, onion, ginger, 1 teaspoon shrimp paste, curry powder and lemongrass until mixture forms liquid paste. Add a few teaspoons of water if necessary. Set aside.
2. Slice tofu into squares about 1-inch wide and ¼-inch thick. In a nonstick pan, lightly fry in oil until edges are golden. Pat with paper towel to remove excess oil and set aside.
3. Boil udon noodles and set aside.

4. Slice hard-boiled egg; set aside.
5. Pour sambal into wok or soup pot and simmer on medium heat until bubbly and fragrant.
6. Add coconut milk, chicken broth and water. Bring to a boil. Add salt and 1 teaspoon shrimp paste.
7. Add seafood and tofu. Stir until cooked, about 4 minutes.
8. In individual bowls, put ½ cup noodles, some bean sprouts and a slice of egg. Cover with seafood soup. Serve immediately.

**PER SERVING:** 197 calories, 30% fat calories, 7g fat, 56mg cholesterol, 22g carbs, 13g protein

### Singapore Barbecue Chicken (Ayam Panggang)

Serves 6 / Every nonya spends hours in the kitchen, which invariably has a wood fire perfect for grilling meat. This hot and tangy barbecue sauce adds just a touch of sizzle to chicken. Serve with steamed rice and top with leftover barbecue sauce for fiery flavor. Wash down your barbecue with a cold, tangy limeade, a popular Singapore beverage.

- 4 cloves garlic
- 1-inch slice ginger, peeled
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice □

## Singapore's bold and spicy flavors are unforgettable.

4-6 skinless, boneless chicken breasts  
Dash of salt

### BARBECUE HOT SAUCE\*

6 bird chiles  
2 onions, peeled and quartered  
12 cloves garlic, peeled  
2 tomatoes, cut into quarters  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
Juice of one lime, freshly squeezed  
1 teaspoon sugar  
Salt and pepper to taste

1. Mince 4 cloves of garlic and ginger, mixing them together in small bowl. Pour in 1 tablespoon lime juice. Rub mixture onto raw chicken breasts. Sprinkle lightly with salt. Set chicken aside.
2. To prepare Barbecue Hot Sauce, place chiles, onions, garlic and tomatoes into steamer and cook 5 minutes.
3. Peel tomatoes; place steamed vegetables into a blender, and chop coarsely.
4. Heat oil in skillet and add chopped vegetables. Sauté over medium heat for about 5

minutes to allow sauce to reduce.

5. Add lime juice, sugar, salt and pepper to cooked sauce.
6. Marinate chicken breasts in Barbecue Hot Sauce for 30 minutes.
7. Place chicken over charcoal or indoor grill. Top with thin layer of Barbecue Hot Sauce. Cook on one side, turn, cover the cooked side with sauce and finish grilling.
8. Serve with steamed rice. For extra spicy chicken, garnish with lime wedges and left-over sauce.

\* Barbecue Hot Sauce can be prepared in advance.

PER SERVING: 211 calories, 20% fat calories, 5g fat, 63mg cholesterol, 15g carbs, 29g protein ■

Laurel Kallenbach, a travel and health writer, would like to thank Siti Ismail, who shared her mother's recipes. *The Food of Singapore* (Periplus Editions, 1997) and *The Best of Singapore Cooking* (Times Books International, 1999) by Yee Soo Leong also provided culinary inspiration.