

Redefining Malay Food in the Post Malaysia's New Economic Policy (NEP)

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Abd. Razak Aziz*

Akademi Pengajian Melayu
Universiti Malaya, Malaysia
abdra656@salam.uitm.edu.my

Awang Azaman Awang Pawi

Akademi Pengajian Melayu
Universiti Malaya, Malaysia

Abstract

The Malays whom many were from the rural areas have moved up the hierarchical class ladder in the past ten to twenty years, joining the middle class and are much expose to a more contemporary food items. Moreover, the heavy influence of diversity of regional and other ethnics' cuisine and the plethora of ingredients have produced a cuisine which is completely changed from its predecessor. In addition, Malay cuisine is still struggling to position itself locally and internationally. In term of research, there had been attempts but many failed in understanding the nature of Malay food. Therefore, consumers are unable differentiate between a Malay food and others due to the lack of a apparent identity. As a result, young Malay Chefs have begun to reinterpret, rejuvenate, invents or reinvents, borrow or exchange specific food and foodways of another ethnic group in assigning a decent position to the Malay food identity. This study adopted the qualitative method in assessing the complex social phenomena of Malay food preparation and consumption behavior.

Keywords:

Malay Food, New Economic Policy (NEP), Fine Dining

1 Introduction

Food, cooking and eating habits play a central role in every culture. Preparing food for consumption, and commensalism, are activities that are conducted for purposes other than for the sole sake of nutritional requirements (Warde & Marten, 2000). On the same note, foods have symbolic meanings too. The symbolic meaning of food sometimes has little to do with the food itself, as in the use of yellow rice to shower newlyweds in Malay cultures, or food habits have less to do with nutrition than with communication and relationships. Food has also played an important part in religion,

by means of its dietary prescriptions specifying one group from another (Fieldhouse, 2013). The techniques utilized to prepare and process foods and the ways of serving and consuming it, which vary from culture to culture, can be the source of social and familial relationships.

For the Malays, food is very important elements of their culture and Islam play prominent roles. For Muslim, it is obligatory to consume only Halal food for the continuation of living except in certain dire situation (Mohamad & Backhouse, 2014). All meats must be from an animal that has been slaughtered according to Islamic rituals. However, there is no restriction for most vegetables and fruits. A balanced diet to the Malays means a balanced intake of “hot” or “cold” food. These traditional beliefs have been passed from generation to generation throughout the Malay history. But little is known about traditional Malay nutritional philosophy as compared that of the Chinese. Most of the old Malay literature hardly ever mentioned about food (Duruz & Khoo, 2014). Even though the depiction of ancient Malay palaces was always associated with the lavish spread of foods, drinks, music and dance performances with colorful and welcome hospitality, but it hardly mentioned the type of foods or drinks being served.

It is said that Malay cuisine is weak in portraying its distinctive identity. According to Yoshino (2010), one of the reasons why Malay food failed to diffuse globally is due to its basically home-cooking in nature, and the Malays themselves have not come up with any particular ways of presenting it to consumers as “ethnic cuisine” in a commercial setting. The apparent lacking of a clear identity has created a whole host of problems in positioning the Malay food in the lucrative international market. It is difficult to project a positive image for foods with ambiguous identities to vital stakeholders. Most Malaysian often tends to choose Western Fast food rather than traditional Malay food.

2 Literature Review

2.1 New Economic Policy (NEP)

The NEP was introduced with aimed to increase the Malays own in corporate assets from 2 percent in 1970 to 30 percent in 1990 and to have employment patterns in the urban sector to reflect the racial composition of the country. Some have labeled the NEP as a positive discrimination in favor of the Malays which in reality is a state intervention in the nation economic activities to soften competition with the hope to redistribute at least thirty percent of the national wealth to the Malay community (Chin & Dosch, 2015). Rapid industrialization is proposed as solutions to the problem of Malay backwardness. Industrialization under NEP trustees was intended not only to increase the economic growth rate but, most importantly, to modernize and urbanize the Malays (Hourmant, Ackerman & Lee, 1990).

Another major consequence of economic development under NEP is the proliferation of organization to organize the new Malaysian Economic Policy. The

Expansion of federal civil service reached almost fourfold in the period 1970 to 1983. It created a growing demand for university-qualified Malays to fill white collar and professional positions at ethnic quota levels specified by the NEP (Chin & Dosch, 2015). On the same note, the export-oriented industrialization policies pursued under the NEP created a new Malay working class especially for the young Malay women who are the bulk of segment of the new working class. They are mostly being employed in private sector export-oriented manufacturing industries. These situations have opened up new opportunities to the mostly rural Malays, and their relocation to their places of work which situated in bigger towns facilitated the process of urbanization. Some of them have successfully qualified to join the new Malay middle-class group. Before the advent of NEP, many of the Malays belonging to this class are government servants. Hence, the middle class who did not exist in traditional society has emerged now as a result of these economic, politico-administrative and educational developments (Hadiz & Teik, 2011). With greater disposable income, eating out was another favorite pastime among the new Malay middle-class partly because they wanted a change of culinary taste. Their favorite eating places included a budget restaurant, hawker stalls or food courts, fast food restaurants and hotels (Embong, 2002).

2.2 Modernization Process

The process of modernization as the result of NEP introduced by the government has brought positive changes in various fields. One notable major influences of this are Westernization which is greatest among individuals and group in the upper and middle classes especially those in the urban areas. This is not surprising as the principles of national economic, political, administrative, legal and educational systems that have been established are based on the Western pattern, mainly the British one. In this context, Ali (2008) stressed that the Western systems and values, or for that matter anything Western, have been revered to such an extent that the indigenous systems and values have been ignored, despised if not destroyed. As Western elements become stronger, the traditional elements tend to get correspondingly weaker. This occurs from food and attire to economy and politics (Fieldhouse, 2013).

Up until the late 1980s, posh restaurants serving Malay food were a rarity in Malaysia. Malay foods were only available in roadside food stalls. Most established restaurants and hotels refused to serve Malay food on their premises. In such situation, the interest in Malay food seemed to be at the lowest ebbed. It is hard to get a decent Malay meal. On the same note, the weaker economic condition of the Malays during that time means it has a very weaker support to create a strong demand (Leftwich, 1995). Malay food is regarded as poor man food, or at the very least it is backward and not refined enough. The statement is not without truth as Malay food lack proper preparation methodology. It lacks standard cutting styles and shapes whether for vegetables, meats or chickens. Chicken or fish pieces are served with bones. This, on the other hand, creates unpleasant sight on the dining table as leftovers bones have to be placed on the same table. Lack of refinement also involved in how the foods are being displayed.

Most of the younger Malay generations were born in since the 1980s and they grow up with Westernized food. For them food like burger, Pizza and pasta do not any longer represent foreign food. The different between what is local and what is foreign is not significant to them. The emergence of popular culture which has been strengthening via mass media, however, lead to gradual loss of traditional food over time. It is not rare to see international food chains such as McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut and Burger Kings to name a few being established adjacent to the supermarket and hypermarket. In fact, these shopping malls are helping to spread Westernization to the Malay tastes bud.

In this regard, Klein (2007) notes that youth are becoming increasingly "westernized" and care little about correct methods. People know less about taste and health and care only about superficial things such as the romantic ambiance in a Western restaurant or the social status associated with it. The Malay also has begun to follow monocultural paths by adopting Western food and their way of serving as they progressed. On the other hand, the Malays also reinterpreted, rejuvenated, invented or reinvented, borrowed or exchanged specific food and foodways of another ethnic group (Beadwork, 2009). This is not something new as if we look at the Malay cuisine historically it can be concluded that it has been profoundly shaped by centuries of interaction and trades.

While questioning the nature of Malay food, no one doubts their existence. According to Cade, Thompson, Burley and Warm (2002), a cuisine requires a population that eats that cuisine with sufficient frequency. They all believe and care that they believe, that they know what it consists of, how it is made, and how it should taste. In short, a genuine cuisine has common social roots: it is the food of a community albeit often a very large community. But how these foods evolved to become a specific Malay food? Possible answers to these questions may be deduced from the literature on Malay food ways and by studying ancient Malay manuscripts and from the reports of the British Officers during the colonial days of the late eighteen centuries. As has been reported there is no major influence to the Malays in terms of food ingredients prior to the British occupation apart from India and the Arabs. As such it can be assumed that the food during this era is still in its originality since the usage of convenient food is not widespread yet. Nonetheless, a concern with authenticity will affects the contents of any concerned individual's body of tradition. It is the authenticity of tradition that is a paramount concern as it wills affects how individuals learn and practice what they call their tradition. Any foods that combine the Malay ingredients and foreign ingredients will be considered as a hybrid version of the Malay food.

3 Methodology

This research relied on the in-depth interview and personal observation as the principal means of gathering data. These two methods are seen capable of taking particular advantage of variability in participant responses through focusing the

specific qualities and needs of individuals during the research process. Looking at the research model qualitative is considered the most relevant for this study. Qualitative data help to elucidate the unique world-view and meaning system of the group being studied. The current state of knowledge in term of sociological dimensions of the Malay food and cooking is still underdeveloped. As such it requires a broad but focused and exploratory in nature. To facilitate the research objectives, a qualitative method with case study aspect was employed to collect the data. Specifically, a qualitative study with multiple case study design was employed, and it is considered more compelling and robust than single case (Herriot and Firestones, 1983). According to Yin (2013) the distinctive need for case studies arises out of desire to understand complex social phenomena because “the case study method allows investigators to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real lives events,” In fact case study seem to be the preferred strategy when “how” or “why” questions are being posed, when the investigators has little control over events and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context (Yin, 2013)

The data used for this study consist of a pool of 24 descriptions collected from three Executive Chefs in three Malay restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. These restaurants are more exposed to the contemporary process where a variety of foods which originated outside the Malay society provides greater arrays of cooking style, different cuisine and the spreading of new consumption patterns. Name of informants and restaurants have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

4 Findings

4.1 Case1: Restaurant ABC

Restaurant ABC is located in the compound of a large Government-linked plantation company with the capacity of 250 seats. A mixture of Malay and western food are served here. The restaurant serves their food in buffet style. The idea is to have a mixture of both cuisines. The trick is to capture the Malay middle-class group who are very fond of western food but still cannot be separated from the Malay food. On closer examination, the Malay food here is heavily influence by the Thai food, especially on the appetizers, for example, the *kerabu* (mixed salad). These dishes clearly showed the strong influence of Thai food particularly on the ratio of certain ingredient used in the dishes. In Malay cooking, lime juice and bird chilies are used very lightly compared to the Thais who used it generously. The Malays used grounded coconut paste in their *kerabu* while the Thai did not have that ingredient in their food. The vegetables used in the preparation of these dishes are prepared according to Thai style of preparation. The Thai styles of cutting the vegetables are more standardized compared to the Malay who still preferred free-style of cutting.

On similar note, most of the main dishes apart from curry and *Masak Lemak* (cook with coconut milk) look strikingly Thais. For example, “*Siakap Tiga Rasa*” (which actually Thai style deep fried sea bass) has all the component of Thai food. The affair is

not much different on the dessert counter; glutinous rice with mango, for example, is definitely Thai. The same can be said to "*Kuih Tako*" which literally means "*Tako Thai*". The style of food presentation also showed it is moving towards the Thai food, with its intricately carved fruits and vegetables, on most occasions Thai style plates and cutlery are used. On the other hand, most well-known Malay sweets are labeled as "*Nyonya Kueh*" which literally means the cakes of the *Nyonyas*. No alcoholic drinks are served in this restaurant.

4.2 Case 2: Restaurant DEF

The restaurant is set in a colonial building and is very simple but elegant. The main food theme of this restaurant is the fusion of French food and Malay food. Chef DEF (the main informant) called this type of cooking as "neo-Malay" cuisine. It is a new concept in the Malay culinary world. It is the practice of this restaurant to serve a plate of salmon mousse on top of crisp bread with tofu before their guests making their orders.

The range of appetizers served in this restaurant is not similar to any ordinary Malay appetizers. Dishes like grilled catfish and soft crab masala are served with pomegranate salad and a touch of red caviar. This is definitely new in Malay cuisine. The way the food is being presented is exactly on the fine dining template, where dishes are intricately prepared and arranged on a white porcelain plate. This is far from the usual way how Malay food is being served. Some dishes involved a combination of exotic local fruits with well-known seafood items, for example, a dish of baked scallop is being served with a puree of *Kedondong* fruit. This fruit (Jamaican plum) is never served that way in Malay cuisine. The restaurant also offered a dish of foie gras with Ciku fruit (sapodilla) and kiwi dressing, an additional curry sauce which will be shaken in a cocktail shaker before being poured into the dish. Foie gras is a foreign ingredient as far as Malay food is concerned.

On overall some dishes have the typical spicy level usually associated with Malay food while other dishes are milder allowing foreign guests who cannot take the spicy ingredients to enjoy the food. The restaurant, however, has only 12 main dishes, and most of these dishes are hardly similar to any ordinary Malay food. For example, grilled rack of lamb is served with mashed breadfruit flavored with local herbs. The dish is accompanied by papaya lime pickles and pink peppercorn gravy. The restaurant also has a comprehensive wine list.

4.3 Case 3: Restaurant GHI

This restaurant was located in the vicinity of a five-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur. It is one of the Malay restaurants claiming to be a "Malay fine dining" restaurant. The food served here features a creative presentation albeit a fusion between Western and Malay flavors. The menu is divided into two sections where the first features traditional Malay dishes while the second section offered dishes that have been given modern fine dining touches. The traditional part offered common Malay food. However, the modern part offered dishes that are totally different from the normal Malay food fares. Dishes like pan fried foie gras and scallop served with avocado and

flavored with sweet chili sabayon. This is actually a combination of western and Malay flavors where foie gras served the western element while a spicy Malay salad compliment it with the Malay element.

According to Chef GHI, the differences in flavors and styles allowed him to “play and manipulate with” taste and styles. This was evident that such thought and effort are not limited in the blending of Western and Malay elements but also in food presentation. The manipulation of taste and presentation is featured in the dish like cream of red sweet potato served with local basil and black caviar. The only local flavor is from the local basil used in the soup while black caviar is not part of Malay gastronomy. Another invented dish is singgang broth (usually light seafood broth) that was served together with stuffed pomfret and Alaskan king crab on *Karipoley* (curry leaves) noodles. It has the combination of chili, curry powder and turmeric. Most of the dishes utilize top quality imported ingredients, for example, lobsters, beef tenderloin, Kobe beef and many imported seafood items. Some local exotic items like *Ikan Haruan* (snakehead fish) also had been used in the menu. The restaurant also has a comprehensive wine list to compliment the foods

5 Discussion

There are many reasons of why these chefs arrived at these choices. One prevalent problem with Malay food is the unclear concept and lack of customer appeal. As a result of these lackluster developments, these young and energetic chefs tried to find ways how these problems can be overcome. According to Chef ABC “Malay food only appear in casual dining of coffeehouses in hotels, and its stop at that point, this situation, however, is not helping Malay food to develop into more sophisticated dining and taste.” The problem is further compounded when these coffeehouses have the propensity to offer homogenous offerings of hawkers and ordinary Malay food making it more difficult to identify its distinctive identity.

The need to innovate is echoed by Chef DEF. He said that “we want our Malay food attractive to local and Westerners tastes but and this way it will help to expand the concept to the rest of the world. To that, he added “Malay food has remained stagnant and has not achieved a very high standard even among the locals, in fact, is considered very ordinary. The decision to adopt a Western style of fine dining and food presentation because we want to say that Malay food is not just about hawker’s food”. The Chef stresses further “this style of cuisine provides space for creativity and presentation. Its ingredients, presentation, and ambiance must be exceptional, but at the same time the taste must still be authentic Malay taste.”

However, according to Chef GHI, it is necessary to introduce some exotic, premium ingredients in the menu because in that way it can uplift the food to be on par with the well-known Western food. Items like cod fish, caviar, and even foie gras have been introduced into the menus. Nonetheless, the taste is still with Malay character. He concedes, “Our aim is to create dishes with a sense of nostalgic elements

and to achieve this we make sure that we have the right combination of spices, herbs, and ingredients.”

6 Conclusion

By using participation observation, it is observed that the phenomenon of culinary innovation in the Malay gastronomic world is due to the poor reputation the food had. Fine dining has been chosen to be the basic principles of their innovation activities. Both the Malay fine dining restaurants in the study i.e. Restaurant DEF and Restaurant GHI are adopting Western culinary techniques in which foreign ingredients are used interchangeably with local ingredients. This invented dishes seemed like Malay food being prepared in the style of Western fine dining dishes. The authenticity of such dishes is questionable; it is not wrong to say that such dishes have been “sans-Malayed.” It is apparent that the emergence of Malay fine dining restaurants could be a strategy to create a new identity to compete with the more established existence of Thai, Western, Chinese and Japanese food in Malaysia. The way it is prepared, presented and served is derived from the Western fine dining techniques while the Malay elements look very superficial. In simpler words, the western fine dining criterion is being used to define the Malay fine dining. The availability of wine in both restaurant DEF and GHI can be controversial as wine has never been part of the Malays’ culture. The same thing can be said to Restaurant ABC, although they are claiming to serve authentic Malay food but on closer examination, most of the dishes are either Thai or Western dishes.

As the food looks too foreign (or too French) in comparing with the traditional Malay food, the vital stakeholders will be more confused in identifying the proper Malay food. It might be appropriate to make Malay food looks modern but not the sustainability of that food in the long run. The new identity, however, can be the future of Malay own “haute” cuisine while the ordinary Malay cuisine will remain as the Malay low cuisine. This trend is well received among the young Malay chefs; in fact, it has become a standard way of presenting the new Malay food especially in Kuala Lumpur.

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