



Section 3

Special
Columns





Head over Meals

by Nazima Versay Kudus

Roti Bengali: Milk belongs to the cow, but the bull cow gets the name

By Nazima Versay Kudus

Penang is eminent for its food - *nasi kandar*, *asam laksa*, *pasembur* to name a few. One famous dish is its old-fashioned bread, *Roti Bengali*. It is said that the bread is given such a name due to the turban-like shape of the bread which looks like the head covering worn by the Bengalis. Of course this is a misnomer and can be an offense to the Sikhs. It is the Sikhs who wear the turban or the *dastar* not the Bengalis.



In the past, in Penang, fresh daily bread like *Roti Bengali* were delivered to homes by the *Mamak Roti* on bicycles, later on motorbikes. The presence of the *Mamak Roti* is easily identifiable with its iconic bike bell sound from afar. Upon hearing the sound, children and mothers would wait at the front gate welcoming the *Mamak Roti* just like the homecoming of a family member. Mothers would purchase the freshly baked bread as a staple while children would choose snacks such as Chickadees, Twisteers, Haw Flakes and Keropok Popo. The *Mamak* offered interest-free loans - any purchase of the day would go into one of the popular items of the 70s, the *buku tiga lima* or 555 notebook that kept tabs of debts, paid at the end of the month.



Roti Bengali is known for its versatility, and is suitable for any age group. It can be eaten anytime of the day or in between meals for a quick bite to break the hunger pangs. The bread spread with jam or peanut butter or Milo powder are delights for the young. Adults, alternatively, would dunk the *roti* in hot *kopi O* or dip it in an overnight curry. In *kedai kopis* (coffee shops) *Roti Bengali* would be toasted on a charcoal grill and spread with margarine and *kaya* and also eaten with a half-boiled egg. *Roti Bengali* eaten with *bamia* (meat and okra stew) is a favourite among the Jawi Peranakans.

To some of us, *Roti Bengali* is a comfort food. Consuming it evokes the feelings of nostalgia, warmth, and emotional satisfaction linked to the memories of childhood, family gatherings, and other happy times.

