

19/03/1998

Traditional favourites served the fast-food way

Hisham Harun

SUPERMODEL Christy Turlington and award-winning actress Marisa Tomei both love our Malaysian-style mee goreng mamak. And actor Andrew McCarthy is crazy about popia. Bet you didn't know!

We didn't either until Simpson Wong, the chef and owner of Asean Cafe in Greenwich Village, New York, told us so some months back.

Wong added that his rendang tok, laksa Penang and ayam percik are also a hit with the multi-racial, multi-national clientele that frequents his cosy garden-setting eatery.

Penang is yet another popular Malaysian-operated restaurant in New York which seems to have grown and grown. Eight years down the line and there are now eight outlets in New York City alone, all serving only Malaysian food.

Azizah Aziz, vice-president of the Malaysian Tourism Promotions Board, New York, frequents Penang and said the most popular dishes are nasi lemak, shrimp sambal, roti jala and chicken curry, beef rendang, ikan masak lemak and satay.

It's nice to know that other nationalities appreciate Malaysian cuisine, which makes one wonder why we don't have as many restaurants serving wholly Malaysian menu, even in Kuala Lumpur.

To date, the number of such restaurants is dismal - Restoran Seri Melayu, initiated by Tan Sri Datuk Azman Hashim for Arab Malaysian Development Berhad, Restoran Rasa Utara, Restoran Warisan, Alexis in Bangsar and maybe one or two others.

Chances are, you'll have an easier time locating restaurants serving pasta, spaghetti, pizza and the like, those with tom yam or sushi and teppanyaki on the menu, or restaurants serving only Mediterranean, northern Indian cuisine or even Swiss cuisine.

There is endless talk about boosting tourism but we don't seem to be capitalising on our food when it would surely prove a great selling point with the variety of cuisine we have from all the different cultures here.

This could probably be the reason why Azman, who is also AMDB chairman, has encouraged the opening of yet another Malaysian food outlet - this time with a fast-food concept - The Seri Melayu Sajian Segera.

Designed like any regular fast-food joint with a spacious dining area and wide customer counter, one can get nasi lemak with the works - squid and anchovies sambal, chicken and beef curry and rendang - at this outlet.

You also have a choice of briani rice which you can take with chicken or beef dalca, fruit pickles, spicy chicken briani, beef briani curry or just plain fried chicken.

Nasi tomato ayam masak merah and nasi tomato daging masak merah are also on the menu. For those who prefer it not too rich, the restaurant serves plain rice with tenggiri fish sambal and dalca.

There is also fried popia that goes well with hot home-made chilli sauce and roti canai which you can order with any of the nasi lemak curries or rendang.

For all these orders, you need only wait a few minutes at the most. The noodles - laksa Utara, mee hoon soup, mee soup and mee rebus - take a little longer to prepare.

For desserts you have pengat durian (a sweet dessert with thick santan gravy), sago gula Melaka (sago soaked in brown sugar and santan), bubur kacang and pulut hitam with an assortment of jellies.

My colleague Hamsiah Abu Bakar and I liked the chicken curry, chicken briani and beef briani curry best. The meat was tender and came in gravy thick and tasty.

The squid sambal was as good and hot as the delicious fish sambal.

Aside from the shade of the nasi briani - which we thought looked more like the colourful nasi pelangi - we found it quite palatable, good enough to eat by itself.

The nasi lemak, however, was not "lemak" enough - adding a little more santan could have done the trick. The desserts were also a tad disappointing as they were rather watery and bland.

And while the noodles are sold at RM3.60 per bowl, the nasi lemak, at RM6.40 with squid sambal, egg and chicken curry or rendang, was a bit expensive, we thought.

To this, chef and senior manager Shaari Darus explained that the chicken was boneless and that both chicken and beef portions were big and made for wholesome, filling meals. The price includes a soft drink too.

In addition, the food comes in special imported boxes that one can use in normal ovens or microwaves.

Shaari also pointed out that great care is taken to keep the food warm and everything clean and enclosed in large warmers.

Seri Melayu Sajian Segera is located in Amcorp Mall off Jalan Timur, Petaling Jaya, and will soon start its delivery service in June with special motorbikes fitted with warmers.

The restaurant answers the call by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad several years back for Malaysians to start establishing and franchising their own fast food outlets.

Maybe our restaurateurs can take a cue from Wong's (the Asean Cafe proprietor's) observation: "After Vietnamese food, Malaysian food is fast gaining popularity in New York and I won't be surprised if we are right there at the top one day. Foreigners seem to love our tasty food and the way we prepare them."

* This column is dedicated to Made in Malaysia products.

(END)