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Lord of the `lemang`

Hafidah Samat

EVEN if you miss the signboard which reads Pak Ali Lemang Asli, the utterly-delectable aroma of lemang which permeates the air might just lead you to the shop.

For the uninitiated, lemang is a sumptuous glutinous rice concoction stuffed in a hollow bamboo and grilled.

Located in Ulu Kelang, Selangor, Pak Ali's delicious lemang has a following.

Bespectacled and ever-smiling, he is constantly and tirelessly attending to his stream of customers.

When this writer paid Pak Ali a visit, he was busy serving a Chinese couple. There were many customers awaiting his attention.

While Malays frequent his stall during the festive season, Pak Ali says it is the Chinese who top the list of his "regulars".

"The Chinese seem to enjoy lemang more than the Malays," he says.

"It is interesting to note as lemang is a must-have in Malay households during the Hari Raya season.

"My Chinese customers love to serve lemang during the Chinese New Year!" adds the entrepreneur, who operates from 8am to 8pm daily. During festive seasons, his stall is open 24 hours!

With his excellent rapport with his clients, the stuff he sells (including delicacies like rendang Tok and serunding, which complement the lemang) has "travelled" as far as Brunei and Singapore.

"Yes, people from these places have become my regular customers too," he muses, as he takes a long drag of his keretek (clove cigarette).

They include the occasional Japanese, British and Americans. "Oh, these people can really eat!" he adds, laughing heartily.

Pak Ali, who is originally from Malacca, beams with pride as he speaks about the business which he started in the city 17 years ago.

Then he operated from a little stall (about 500 metres away from the present location).

Through the years, Pak Ali's name has become synonymous with quality lemang.

"I did attempt several other ventures, including running a restaurant, but nothing turned out as well," says Pak Ali, whose full name is Mat Ramli Abdul Rashid.

He runs the lemang business with wife, Rahimah Kamaruddin, and their children Mohd Irwan, Rohana, Juraini and Imran.

When demand picks up especially during the festive season, he hires some part-time workers.

This year, Pak Ali has employed 50 workers to assist him in preparing 5,000 pieces of lemang for his customers.

"On the first day of Hari Raya, I will be supplying about 1,400 pieces for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's open house in Putrajaya," says Pak Ali.

Several VIPs have also made bookings.

What is the secret behind his lemang?

The 59-year-old states simply that one only needs to ensure that there is a generous amount of santan (coconut milk) in it.

"Honestly, there is no other secret," he says, as he cradles his 21-month-old grandson Mohd Shahiran Mohd Irwan.

"I stick to the basic ingredients - pulut (glutinous rice), coconut milk

and salt. I also believe that practice makes perfect. And when you put your heart and soul into it, your labour will bear results," he adds.

Pak Ali, who credits his success to his late grandmother Tijah Mamat for her "winning recipe", says that making lemang is a trial-and-error process.

"It is also a tedious task. You need skill and patience to see to the little details in preparing it."

The bamboo imparts a subtle flavour to the pulut and it takes a discerning nose to detect this, he says.

"The natural aroma of the bamboo is not released immediately during cooking but rather, slowly and over time."

Old bamboo retains the flavour better as young bamboo stems crack easily.

There are four types of bamboo ideal for making lemang - the padi, lemis, telur and talang variety.

"Since lemang is cooked over an open fire for many hours, it should be closely monitored."

A final tip from Pak Ali: "Lemang has a short lifespan. It should not be kept for more than three days. So it is best served while still hot!"

Well, it looks like 'hot' is also the way his business is going ...

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