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Penang restaurants offer the best `nasi kandar' in the country

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IN the 1950s and 1960s, the leading Muslim restaurants and eateries in Penang were Dawood in Lebuah Queen, Hameediah and Meerah (both in Lebuah Campbell), Ghani Bryani in Penang Road and Minah Restaurant in Glugor.

In those days, nasi kandar was not so popular as it is today. The original nasi kandar had made its debut in Penang just after the First World War.

It was sold by itinerant hawkers who balanced the rice and condiments at each end of the kandar pole on their shoulders as they made their way to their pitch which was usually under a shady tree. This was how the name nasi kandar originated.

Oldtimers will fondly recall that in pre-war days, a plate of nasi kandar cost two cents while a piece of meat or fish cost only a cent.

The best pre-war nasi kandar, they said, were near the waterfront - at Mydin's in Lebuah Gereja and Arakashi in Lebuah Downing on the site now occupied by Bangunan Tuanku Syed Putra.

Nasi kandar curries, while spicy, are usually light and not hot. The fish, prawns, meat and vegetables that go with nasi kandar are usually quite simple and not too varied.

Fifty years ago, the leading restaurants never claimed to provide nasi kandar which was then only popular with the lower income group. The eateries were more interested in pushing their nasi beriani.

It was only in the 1970s that nasi kandar became truly popular and recognised nationwide. Penang soon came to be recognised as the traditional home of nasi kandar.

Today of course even five-star hotels and classy restaurants in Kuala Lumpur also offer nasi kandar but even die-hard KLites will be the first to admit that KL nasi kandar does not taste the same as the traditional Penang version.

And that is why most outstation visitors never miss out whenever they are in Penang - never mind if the stalls are located in sidelanes or near open sewers.

Of the notable restaurants, Meerah and Ghani Bryani have long called it a day. Dawood, which used to be the king of an earlier era, is today facing a formidable challenge from the "new kids on the block" such as Tajuddin Hussain and Kassim Mustafa.

Factory manager Alan Chang, 41, who is from Pantai Jerejak and is a keen nasi kandar fan, has a list of his favourite outlets which include Tajuddin Hussain in Lebuah Queen, Line Clear in Penang Road, Kayu Nasi Kandar in Bukit Jambul, Sahuban in Jalan Burmah and Kassim Mustafa in Lebuah Chulia.

Kassim Nasi Kandar in Jalan Gurdwara (formerly Jalan Brick Kiln) can also lay claim to the fact that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad once had his breakfast here on a visit to Penang.

This restaurant was established by one-time Penang Nasi Kandar "king", the late Mohamad Kassim.

Apart from Kassim, the oldest surviving nasi kandar restaurant is Cravan Cafe at the junction of Jalan Macalister and Jalan Datuk Keramat.

The present owner Mohamad Ibrahim said his father, the late K.K. Dawood established the restaurant in 1920 and claims that it is Penang's first nasi kandar restaurant.

Cravan prides itself in the fact that it has always remained a 24-hour

outlet.

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