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Sumatran specialties

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THE Minang people of western Sumatra are characterised by the double-pointed headdress of their womenfolk. And their cuisine too. Minang cuisine is also known as Padang cuisine - well known for its variety and tastes.

Padang cuisine is served pretty much warong style, with pre-cooked dishes - only these are brought to your table on trays and you pick and pay only for what you eat. This traditional way is unfortunately, none too hygienic unless you don't mind eating food that had been left ignored on someone else's table.

Fortunately, most Padang restaurants in Malaysia don't have the same practice. Although there is a showcase of the various items, the food is brought to your table only after you've picked what you want from the menu.

The newly-opened Natrabu Restoran Minang, takes this one step further and offers all the salubrious flavours of Minang cuisine in a totally clean and casual dining environment.

Located in a stand-alone building next to KL Sentral, one can drive straight into car park right within the grounds of the restaurant. Diners can opt for either air-conditioned comfort indoors or go al fresco outside. The staff are dressed in traditional Minangkabau uniforms, complete with pointy headgear for the waitresses.

Natrabu is a pretty well-established restaurant as the first Natrabu Restoran Minang was opened back in 1958 in Indonesia. The concept of the restaurant caught the attention of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed during the Non-Alliance Movement conference in Jakarta in 1990 and at a reception held at the Malaysian Embassy in 1994. He felt that a restaurant like Natrabu would do well in Malaysia.

But it was only this year that the wheels were set in motion and Natrabu Restoran Minang was set up as a subsidiary of Perbadanan Nasional Berhad. The restaurant was finally opened for business on October 31.

Through word of mouth, business has been brisk, says its director Shamsul Anwar Haji Mohamed Razi. He's pleased that response has been positive and is confident about expansion plans nationwide.

The sun is shining brightly and our Press group is cooling down with tall glasses of fresh fruit juice (from RM4.90) while nibbling on slices of kerupuk emping, made from the melinjo fruit. We are a little disappointed this doesn't come with a dip which would have taken the slightly bitter edge off the crackers.

Kerupuk kulit looked innocently like deepfried tofu. But in case you don't eat beef, be warned. These are crispy beef crackers, an explanation that was not made clear by the staff.

The sari buah (RM6.90) is a mixture of orange and pineapple, fragrant and sweet. But I enjoy more the thoroughly refreshing quality of ketimun or cucumber (RM4.90). A small quantity of added sugar gives it a double kick.

Apart from these, there's avocado, starfruit, apple, mango, melon, soursop etc and... what do you know! Durian. Got to try that some day.

We start the meal with a soto daging minang (RM5.90), with glass noodles in clear chicken stock with spices (never mind that the menu reads "clear beef soup"). This is topped with chopped scallions and parsley, pieces of funky pink kerupuk udang, perkedil and crispy chunks of beef. If you don't

like beef, just tell them to inform the kitchen to leave the latter out and you'd be fine.

What gives Natrabu's soto such punch is the unsuspecting bit sambal on the side. Talk about getting a kick.

Minang cuisine is best eaten with rice, white rice too. One cannot have too many dishes and this is limited only by the size of one's stomach. After all, Natrabu does offer over 30 varieties of dishes including chicken (RM6.90), beef (RM5.90), seafood and vegetables. Prices are for single portions.

We decided against deepfried and grilled chicken, opting instead for Ayam Kampung Gulai. Natrabu serves only kampung chicken, and skinned for health's sake.

The chicken is extremely tender, almost falling off the bone and the curry sauce is creamy and fragrant without threatening to retard your tongue. Just goes to show one can still make an excellent curry without setting the kitchen on fire.

Likewise, the Ayam Kampung Pop is equally satisfying and tastes better than it looks. Basically, the chicken has been simmered in stock with herbs and spices like bunga lawang, cloves etc. Just before serving, it is dipped in very hot oil for just a minute and then served with boiled tapioca leaves and a special red sambal. One is supposed to delicately place a bit of chicken on the leaves and then top it off with a bit of sambal. I tried it and later, when I reverted back to eating the chicken plain, found I liked it so much better without the embellishments.

Telur gulai (RM2.50) is hard boiled eggs cooked with Natrabu's special curry sauce which tastes rather like that of the ayam gulai - sweetish and aromatic.

Beef features prominently in Minang cuisine and Natrabu serves dendeng balado (thin slices of crispy, deepfried beef), cincang sapi gulai, kikil gulai (beef tendon), otak (ox brain), paru paru (ox lung), rendang and sop buntut (oxtail soup).

Those who tried the rendang found the meat tender but slightly sweetish, reminiscent, says one, of dodol.

I wanted fish. Sadly, more used to the fiery nonya stuff, I find the ikan asam pedas a bit of a cuisine shock. The tenggiri slice is fresh as the morning, but the tomato based sauce brings to mind canned sardines. The addition of asam juice didn't help too much either, resulting in a dish that's neither quite here or there. But children, with palates yet unweaned on hot chili sambal, will enjoy it immensely.

Personally, I like the vegetables best. The Perkedil or potato cutlets (RM1.90) are pretty neat. Deepfried, the mashed potatoes are mixed first with chicken meat and seasoned with spices.

Sambal Ijo (RM1.50) is superb and a hot favourite with everyone present. This green chili sambal is not in the least bit hot and can be eaten like a vegetable. The green chilies are crushed coarsely and then cooked with added spices and petai.

Sayur Pucuk Ubi Masak Lemak (RM2.50) is a light soupy dish which again has added sliced petai for extra flavour. Terong Balado (RM2.50) is a seemingly simple dish of deepfried brinjal but here, the trick's in the rather excellent chili sambal.

Natrabu will also cater specially to buka puasa buffet style during the Ramadan period.