



Finding Home in SOHO

By Zarina Mustapha

Living in New York City is a constant test of the integrity of my cultural culinary ties. People are plenty but individuals are isolated, and that means the whole, delightful ritual of dining is incomplete. Ambience and company are crucial ingredients to complete the experience of eating in my home country, Malaysia. So I searched for a restaurant in the Big Apple that would replicate the taste and feel of home.

Food was always a focus of life growing up in Malaysia. That tropical Southeast Asian nation prides itself on its core cultural elements, one of which is a rich and flavorful cuisine. Malaysian food is a fusion of Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Eurasian (European-Asian) influences. Breakfast in my childhood household was like that for many Malaysian families: strong black tea or Nescafé coffee sweetened with condensed milk, coconut rice with cucumber and hard-boiled eggs cooked in fresh chili peppers, and *roti chanai*, a type of flat bread lightly fried on a skillet with oil. Sometimes we had sweet steamed cakes for dessert to complete the morning meal.

Weekday lunches were much less grandiose. Sardine sandwiches or fried vermicelli were tucked into my

school lunchbox. On weekend afternoons more elaborate dishes graced our table: rice with chicken or beef slow-cooked in coconut and coriander gravy, or yellow noodles in curry soup with shrimps and fishcakes, or fish sautéed with aromatic spices. Then of course came afternoon tea, a tradition leftover from the colonial days of the British Empire. Tea usually consisted of sweet potato buns stuffed with spiced, grated coconut, or jackfruit fritters, or crisp and flaky Jacob's Cream Crackers toasted with sugar.

And finally after nightfall, my family gathered for supper. Steaming platters of rice came to the table with seafood, beef, or chicken that was fried, sautéed, marinated, coddled or simmered, in spices, shrimp paste, ground chilies and shallots, or coconut milk.

I especially enjoyed going with my mother and my sisters to visit friends and relatives. Soon after exchanging pleasantries and renewing ties of kinship, the hostess disappeared into the kitchen. I could hear a cacophony of pots and pans as she continued her conversation with my mother on how so-and-so was doing and who was getting married to whom. Moments later the violent hissing of hot oil and

water drowned their voices, and my mother would plead, "Please, don't trouble yourself! Don't prepare anything for us. We're leaving soon." The hostess would reply, "Oh, this is no trouble at all. It's just simple *mee-hoon*." I relished this artificial bickering; this is the art of hospitality. It's almost expected of a host to serve the guest a light meal; the latter's friendly protest is merely a disguised expression of appreciation.

Holiday celebrations in my grandmother's village were especially festive. Her neighbors gathered in someone's backyard — one large enough to accommodate a makeshift kitchen and a great cauldron. They were making *dodol*, a special dessert for celebratory occasions. *Dodol* takes hours to cook, and it's so difficult to prepare that it requires the combined wizardry of skilled and seasoned cooks who have memorized the essential ingredients — coconut milk, rice flour, and palm sugar — and who have mastered the technique of handling the thickening mixture while it's boiling over the fire. They must know intuitively when to stop simply by looking at the color and texture of the concoction. Elderly men and women

