Never Leave Home Without Your Chilli Sauce

Stories of FOOD, FAMILY *and* TRAVEL

CONSTANCE SINGAM

Advance Praise for
Never Leave Home Without Your Chilli Sauce

"Constance Singam's food memoir is a captivating read and, in relating the experiences of her family, evokes many memories of a bygone era. Her adventures with food are really interesting and some anecdotes had me laughing. And I can't wait to try some of the recipes that pepper every chapter." — Wong Ah Yoke, food critic, *The Straits Times*

"Connie Singam, advocate for women's issues in Singapore, is less well-known as a great chef. Among friends, we know otherwise. Connie's cooking, when I tasted it at her lovely home, spoke volumes of the culinary heritage of Singaporean South Indians, and then of a cosmopolitan Singapore where a large proportion of our people have travelled or lived abroad.

Her memoir echoes many stories familiar to Singaporean families. Days spent under the shade of coconut palms in compounds (not gardens), of family feasts spread out on long tables in the backyard and of marketing in Tekka and Serangoon Road. These shared experiences showcase a valuable part of Singapore's cultural and culinary history that is not just important for those of a certain vintage, but also for those who are much younger."

— Violet Oon, chef and restauranteur

"This book offers a rare glimpse into Singapore's diverse culinary heritage and is written in a style that is as warm and inviting as the recipes that it contains." — Dr Leslie Tay, author of *Only the Best! The ieatishootipost Guide to Singapore's Shiokest Hawker Food*

"A feminist, food lover and excellent cook all rolled into one. Who could ask for more? I have had the honour of savouring Connie's cooking; and being a fan of cooking myself, I am extra pleased that there are so many of her recipes in this book." — Pam Oei, actress

"Connie inspires. And she does exactly that as she shares vivid memories of tastes, smells, the origins and sharing of food. She makes us remember what we ate, and to treasure time spent at the table with family and friends."
— Alan John, author of *Good Grief! Everything I Know About Love, Life & Loss I Wish Somebody Had Told Me Sooner*

"A veritable feast of transnational tastes, memories, histories and recipes to pique a reader's appetite. Constance Singam truly knows that the way to the heart of Singapore is through its ample stomach." — Philip Holden, author of *Heaven Has Eyes* and Professor of English, National University of Singapore

"Many an idea has hatched over eggs and appam at Connie's. Many an issue of hidden or blatant injustices hotly debated over Kerala fish curry, letters to a public authority or the Forum pages composed right there and then with the carefully laid out dishes pushed aside. Connie may be persuaded to temperate her curries to suit your palate but the Mother of Civil Society, as she is fondly embraced, will be sure to leave something to keep that fire in your belly ignited. No matter how you arrive, you almost always leave with renewed optimism for the world, for your country, for literature (!), for yourself; feeling you can do anything. Having a place set for you at Connie's can seem akin to having your place in the world. This slim volume is the next best thing." — Dana Lam, artist and author of *Days of Being Wild: GE2006 Walking the Line With the Opposition*

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CONSTANCE SINGAM

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Also by Constance Singam

AUTHOR

Where I Was: A Memoir from the Margins

EDITOR

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Contents

Chilli Sauce

Makes about 2½ cups

Ingredients
500 g fresh red chillies
5 cm ginger
6 cloves garlic
½ cup vinegar
Salt, to taste
Sugar, to taste

Tip
To sterilise jars, pour boiling water into clean jars. Allow hot water to sit for one minute, then drain. Pat dry the jars using paper towels.

Method
Combine ingredients and blend in an electric blender till smooth. Pour into a non-aluminium pot and cook, stirring for about 20 minutes. Allow to cool and store in sterilised jars. In tropical climates, refrigeration is advised.

Stories About Food

Cookbooks, books about cooking and stories about food were delightful digressions from my early struggling attempts at cooking. Reading them or even just flipping through their colourful pages gave me great pleasure. They fed my imagination and offered me glimpses of lives that revolved around good food. These books started me on an adventure of discovery and pleasure that once, I could only have imagined. The way I cook and what I cook, the way I entertain, and what is in my refrigerator and larder tell me how much I have changed and how far I have come in my understanding and experiences of different types of food and cultures. This journey all started with books.

My collection was initially very modest when I started cooking, but buying cookbooks soon became addictive. I would happily buy a book for a single recipe, a set of photographs or even its interesting layout and design. I often find that cookbooks make good presents and are appreciated by the recipients. Two books that I have given as presents and became well-thumbed through are Madhur Jaffrey's *Indian Cookery*, which I gave my sister Celine over a decade ago for Christmas, and Charmaine Solomon's *Complete Asian Cookbook* which I gave to my niece Sharmini as a wedding gift. One of my own favourites is Maya Angelou's *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table: A Lifetime of Memories with Recipes*, which was a gift from my friend Alan John and eventually inspired me to write my own book. Maya Angelou, who wrote my favourite poem "Phenomenal Woman", was one of the world's most accomplished and celebrated writers and her cookbook has been inspirational. I received the book almost 10 years ago and I have been planning my own book for almost 20 years now. Time keeps running away from me, in the same way that life often does.

It was Maya Angelou who gave me insight into my own interest in writing and cooking by explaining: "Writing and cookery are just two different means of communication." Both are ways in which one can reveal interest, express love and joy, build connections with people or narrate the story of one's life. In every page of Maya Angelou's book, stories about her life abound. "For me," she says, "food has always been about association. In my previous cookery book, *Hallelujah! The Welcome Table*, I chose recipes that had punctuated some of the key events in my life, such as the cassoulet I cooked for the food writer M.F.K. Fisher on the day she moved to California, and the caramel cake my mother made me on the day I was expelled from school for not being able to talk."[1] In this vein, accompanying each dish are poignant, pithy and sometimes hilarious memories.

Exploring Bookstores

One of the drawbacks of my love of reading and my insatiable interest in learning more about different cultures, histories and people is that I often hit the airline baggage allowance limits with my book purchases. One of these times was during a trip to Australia when I visited Melbourne's excellent bookshops. I couldn't bear to leave the books behind but I did part with clothes, which I left behind to be picked up at my next visit. Bottles of olive oil (such as a chilli-infused one), honey-infused balsamic vinegar and other types of Italian vinegars, cooking wines, and fresh cheeses from Margaret River in Perth are other regular items in my suitcase. It is possible to buy them in Singapore but they come at a steep price. Buying them in Perth was worth the stress of carting them over the Indian Ocean.

One ominously grey morning in Melbourne, my sister Filomena (Fil) and I decided that we would go to Readings, a bookshop in Carlton. The heavy clouds were hanging so low that it looked like it would pour any minute. We had just two days left in Melbourne and I knew I had to make this visit to Readings. Armed with an umbrella (which was of no use in windy Melbourne) to shield us from the drizzle, we embarked on the tram journey. After reaching Lygon Street, we had a 10-minute walk before reaching the bookshop—just in time before the heavens opened. But Readings was well worth the visit despite almost getting caught in the storm. The bookshop, which I am told opened in 1969, is one of Melbourne's icons, and has been a gathering point for the members of the Australian literary scene. It is a treasure trove that could have easily distracted me from my current interest in stories about cooking. But I was careful in my selection and picked up three books from the store, two of which are sitting right in front of me as I write. Linda Civitello's book, *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People*, is a gold nugget of anecdotes with references to history, culture, religion and culinary experiences. James and Kay Salter's *Life is Meals: A Food Lover's Book of Days* is a homage to great writing, great writers and great meals, and is the kind of book I wish I could write. Open the book to a page at random and gems like these spill out: "The lobster begins life as one of ten thousand to twenty thousand fertilised eggs that the female slowly releases into the sea. She has carried them for nine months or more…"[2] And on another page: "The peach has been celebrated for more than four thousand years for its erotic qualities, its shape, the delicate down of its surface, as well as its flesh-like tones. It came originally from China…"[3] The book also includes a quote from a famous 19th-century journal which reads: "When intelligent men drink and dine together, the subject of conversation is always women and love."[4] To write stories like these, one needs an educated and well-read mind that intuitively knows how to reach for information. I find that this is the reason why the Salter book is so compelling. Pat Conroy, who is a captivating storyteller himself, elaborates on the mind of a writer in his book *The Pat Conroy Cookbook: Recipes and Stories of My Life:* "Alertness is a requirement of the writing life, staying nimble on your feet, open to the stories that will rise up and flower around you while you are walking your dog on the beach or taking the kids to soccer practice."[5] This is something I can relate to.

Myths & Fables

There are other books that I love, and wish that I could have written. My list is quite extensive. Among these are Ruth Reichl's books with delicious titles such as *Tender At the Bone*, *Garlic and Sapphire* and *Comfort Me with Apples*. In comparison, the titles that come to mind for my books almost seem boringly prosaic.

Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* features recipes, romance and home remedies, and affirms my inclination to believe in the mystic qualities of food. I found it at Readings together with the discounted books. Each chapter opens with recipes and is filled with rich imagery. Gems include: "Her head about to burst like a kernel of popcorn"[6] and "The moment Tita, the protagonist, opened the jar, the smell of apricots transported her to the afternoon they made marmalade."[7] The protagonist Tita is born in the kitchen, on the kitchen table amidst the scent of herbs, pots of simmering noodle soup, garlic and onions. She consequently develops an interesting relationship with cooking and impacts all who eat the food she cooks. I recall reading the book years ago, but since then it has disappeared from my shelves. Still, it was the first book that came to mind when I was preparing to write my own book.

Another remarkable piece of food writing is Charles Lamb's essay, *A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig*, which tells the tale about mankind's discovery of roast pig. According to the story, Lamb, at his humorous best, relates the discovery as an accidental burning down of a pig farmer's house in a village in China. This fire inadvertently roasted a suckling pig, which the farmer's son was delighted to find had a delicious taste. "There is no flavour comparable," Lamb wrote, "to that of the crisp, tawny, well-watched, not over-roasted *crackling.*"[8] As often as the sow farrowed, there was bound to be a fire. The cottage was burnt down more frequently till he realised that there were other ways of roasting a suckling pig.

It is a surprisingly compelling story that Lamb may well have taken creative licence with. So much of what we eat today could have been discovered by accident. For instance, many people (such as myself) need an early morning cup of coffee to wake us up before we tackle the rest of the day. For this early morning cheer, I am

thankful for the accidental discovery of coffee by a very observant Abyssinian goat herder named Kaldi thousands of years ago. He noticed his goats became more cheerful after they ate some wild-growing berries. It is said that he shared the discovery with a local abbot, who made a drink with the berries—thus, coffee was born.

But I find the mythical stories behind the discovery of tea richer by far. As one story goes, a particularly cruel Chinese Emperor was banished to a remote area of China and was stricken by poverty. At his poorest, he only had hot water to keep him alive. One day as he was taking shelter under a tree, a few leaves fell into his saucepan of boiling water. This turned the water into a tasty, refreshing and relaxing drink and transformed this cruel man into a benign being. He returned to the capital a wise and valued advisor to his new emperor, and in turn inherited the empire to rule it once again. He named the drink "tai" meaning "peace".

Another version of the discovery of tea leads us to a monk who lived in the 5th century AD and who brought Buddhism to China from India. He became so frustrated with his inability to stay awake during meditation that he tore off his eyelids and threw them to the ground. These eyelids took root and grew into tea plants. I much prefer the story of the discovery by the emperor, which is a far more positive and transforming one than that of the monk.

A cup of coffee in the morning and tea in the afternoon used to be a daily ritual for my dad when I was growing up. Tea didn't do much for Dad if he was in a bad mood. So that story about the transforming capability of tea has to be taken with a pinch of salt. That being said, like Dad I am addicted to my cup of coffee in the morning and having a cuppa in the afternoon.

Food & Politics

Cookbooks are not just about cooking. They are snapshots of history and the culture of a particular country or time period, which makes for fascinating reading. For instance, sugar, which is now plentiful and easily available, came to Europe from India in the 17th century and was sold as a luxury item or sometimes as medicine. "Medicine?" you might ask. Yes; yet ironically today it is denounced as the source of many health problems. The need to produce more sugar started the slave trade in the Caribbean and Brazil. Indeed, the search for food and resources has triggered wars, conquests, annexation of foreign lands and long, dangerous journeys into far-off unknown lands. The opium wars, for example, were triggered by Britain's attempt to control the tea trade.

Tea, coffee and chocolate, as alternatives to alcohol, came to Europe at a crucial stage in Europe's development. European workers were required to exercise restraint and were persuaded to exchange alcoholic addictions for tea and coffee, which were considered to be healthier and didn't affect productivity. The coffee plant is native to Ethiopia and East Africa and made its way to Egypt and Turkey before reaching France. In Turkey it became so essential to daily life that denying a wife her coffee could be grounds for divorce. Writer Honoré de Balzac, drank almost 30 cups of coffee while writing for 12 hours each day.[9]

Linda Civitello writes extensively about the way history, culture, politics, wars and religion determine how and what we eat. She writes: "Some important food firsts came from India: the first plowed field in the world, before 2800 BC and the chicken. The technology for turning sugar cane into granulated sugar existed at least as early as 800 BC in India; the word 'sugar' comes from the Indian word 'sharkar'."[10]

An overlapping migration between India and China led to a great deal of cultural exchanges. The first exchange occurred almost 65,000 years ago—a point in time so far back in history that I have problems getting my head around it! The migration between India and the Middle East around 6,000 BC brought in domesticated cattle, sheep, goats and wheat. People migrating west from China brought rice and, subsequently, tea. Back then, Indians were not vegetarians and the concept of the sacred cow came much later.

While today we may think that the potato is a European staple, it was in fact only introduced to Europe by Francis Drake in 1586. It was originally domesticated in southern Peru and extreme northwestern Bolivia between 8000 and 5000 BC. Potatoes can be easily grown and are highly nourishing; being cheap, they freed Europe from mass hunger. The German writer Günter Grass argues that it was the potato that made the industralisation of Europe possible, which then led to the rise of the proletariat.

Today the potato's role in politics continues. It even made an appearance during a meeting between the US Secretary of State and his Russian counterpart! In January 2014, John Kerry presented Sergey Lavrov with two large Idaho potatoes, as the latter professed a knowledge of them. So in 2015 when Kerry went to Russia, the Russian foreign minister returned the compliment by giving him two baskets of Russian potatoes and tomatoes. One wonders if there was a hidden message in this exchange between the two former Cold War adversaries.

Searching for Inspiration

For months I wrote at a furious pace before hitting an impassable wall—I lacked inspiration on how to continue with the book. I ran out of stories. As is my habit when I am stressed, I took off to Perth to find new ideas and to talk to my sisters. The first few days were spent having lunches and dinners with my sisters and looking out into their gardens while enjoying the beautiful autumn weather.

I would gaze down from the upstairs windows to look upon the profusion of brilliant colours from the bougainvillea that spread across the roof and a huge bush of blue plumbago in the background. After a few restless days I took my computer out onto the terrace. Celine picked up the latest collection from her library, titled: *Letters of Note: Correspondence Deserving of a Wider Audience* that was compiled by Shaun Usher in 2013. This anecdote caught my attention.

On 24 January 1960, Queen Elizabeth sent her recipe of drop scones to President Dwight Eisenhower. He had enjoyed the scones on a visit to Balmoral Castle where he was her guest. The one image of the Queen that I have is of her wearing jewels, clad in glittering gowns and gloves, looking majestic and distant. The idea that she could don an apron and make drop scones for the president of the United States was an image of domesticity that I couldn't quite grasp. But then I had read somewhere that President Eisenhower himself also collected recipes and would potter around in the White House kitchen. Sometimes he copied them out himself and sometimes his staff would type them out for him. He was famous for his chicken soup recipe, his charcoal-broiled steaks and cornmeal pancakes. In his memoirs he confessed that cooking gave him "a creative feeling".[11]

This is a feeling that women instinctively understand. The kitchen is one place where they can exercise their creative freedom. Whether it is to produce instant meals for hungry children or to prepare a meal for unexpected guests or to stretch a little to feed her family, women are creative or are compelled to be creative in the kitchen.

The Queen's Recipe[12]

Drop Scones

Serves 16

Ingredients

4 teacups flour
4 tbsp caster sugar
2 teacups milk
2 whole eggs
2 tsp bi-carbonate soda
2 tsp cream of tartar
2 tbsp melted butter

Method

"Beat eggs, sugar and about half the milk together, add flour, and mix well together adding remainder of milk as required, also bi-carbonate of soda and cream of tartar, fold in the melted butter."

The Queen also offers these suggestions:

"I have also tried using golden syrup or treacle instead of only sugar, and that can be very good, too."

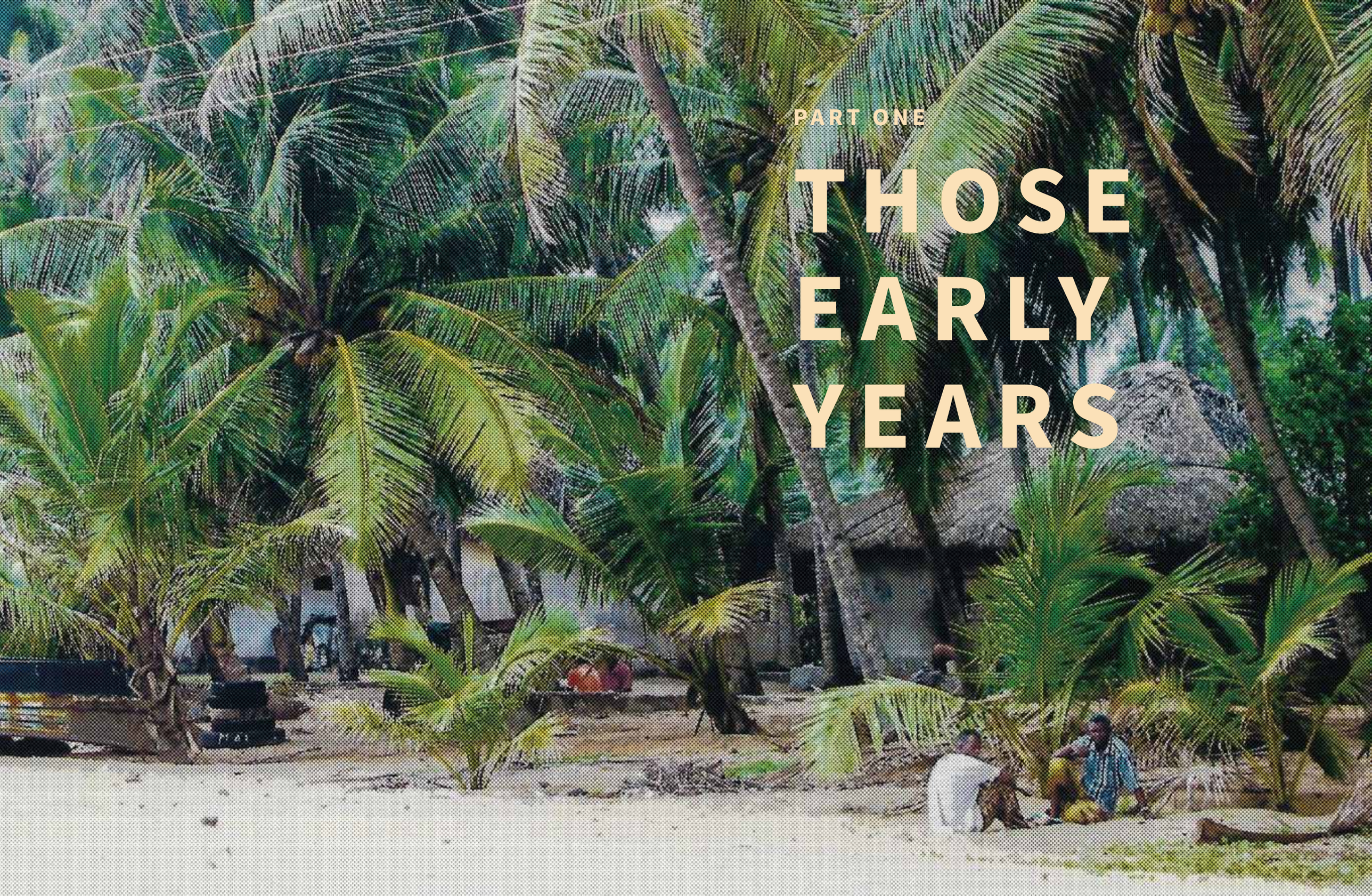
She also advises that "the mixture needs a great deal of beating while making, and shouldn't stand about too long before cooking."

My most creative moments are in the kitchen or when I am planning a dinner party. Many a time, I have cooked dishes which were thrown together on the spur of the moment. In a multicultural society such as Singapore, ideas to create a dish or a meal can be inspired by a whole range of cultural influences.

A Memoir

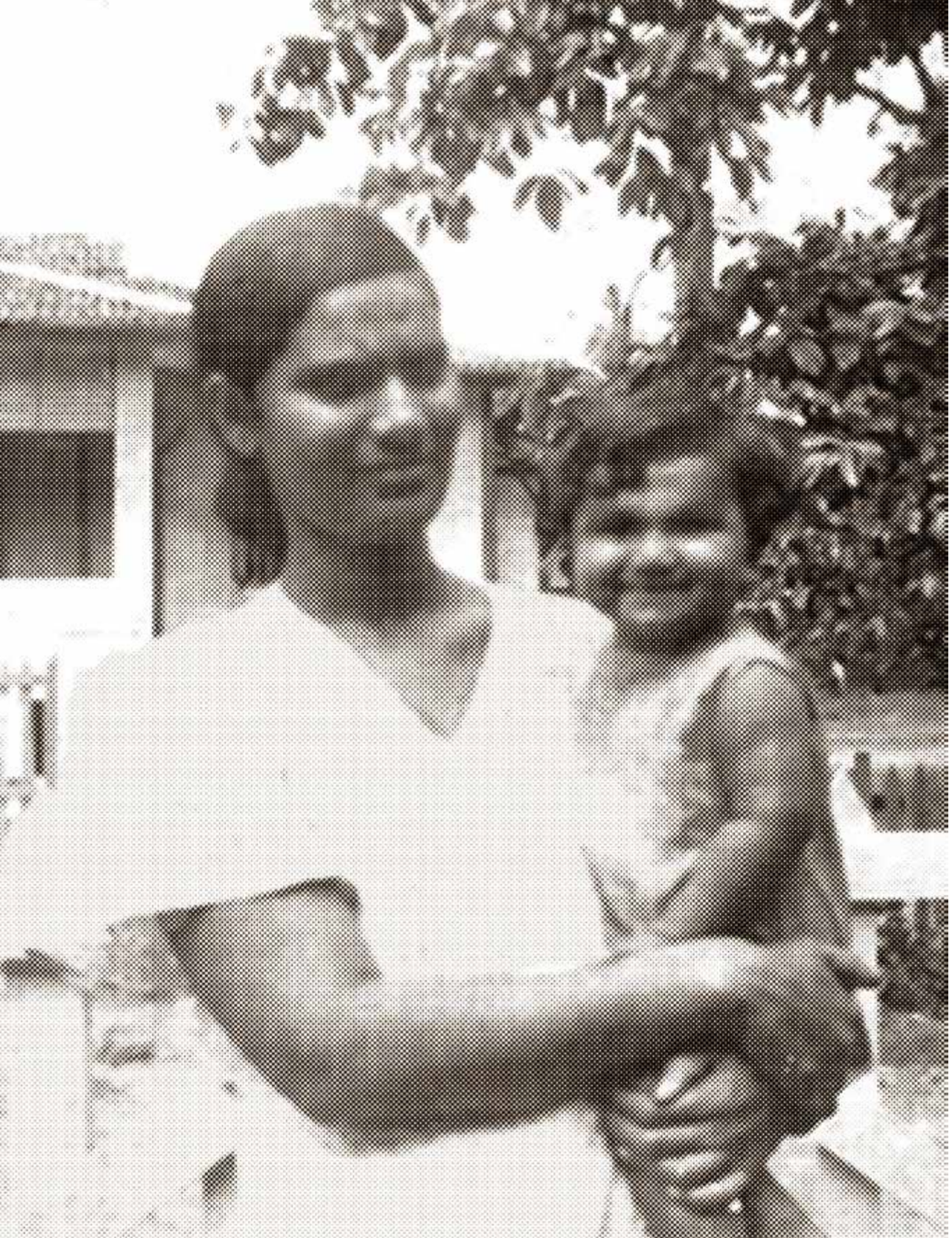
My food memoir traces Singapore's journey towards its current global character through the lives of one Singaporean family—mine, in which celebrations and food remain central to our family connections, no matter how many miles might separate us. The book follows the changes that have occurred in the eating habits of my family through our migration from South India to Singapore, and then to Australia where most members of the family now live. The family cuisine has been influenced by the various cultures: my parents' Keralan culture, my marriage which led me to Jaffna Tamil food, our Singaporean Chinese and Malay cuisine, our travels, education, cosmopolitan experiences and my European and Australian influences. The food that we eat takes us back in time, to recipes and rituals of previous generations such as my mother's.

A family portrait of myself (*back row, fifth from left*) with my parents, brother and sisters, 1975.



PART ONE

THOSE EARLY YEARS



CHAPTER ONE

Mumma's Life & Times: An Enduring Image

Back in the 1950s, my mother and her culture dominated the family's food habits. For my mother, food was love transformed. This is an approach that I have come to value and appreciate. I associate meals with family gatherings and bonding with friends, the joy of feeding, good company and great conversation. Food is pleasure; food is love. My mother died more than 20 years ago, but our family's attitude towards food, meals and festivals continue to trigger emotional responses in our memories of her. While these memories are infused with warmth and love, they are occasionally embarrassing. Mumma was known to make politically incorrect statements whenever her high standards were transgressed.

Food is pleasure; food is love.

She was a snob when it came to the freshness of food. My mother was the queen of her kitchen and mistress of put-downs. My sister Fil reminded me of an embarrassing, almost cringe-worthy anecdote about my mother and her prejudices. We can laugh about it now and we do. But at that time my sister Doris, who was with Mumma, was not amused at all. Doris remembers, to her utter consternation, one evening sometime in the 1970s when she took our parents to her friend's house for dinner. At the table, Mumma very gingerly tasted a piece of meat, looked up at the hostess and asked, "Was this meat frozen?" The hostess acknowledged that it was, to which our mother very sagely responded: "That's why…" What exactly she meant by that wasn't hard for the hostess to guess. My sister understood and

OPPOSITE
With Mumma, 1937.

was mortified. On recalling that incident, she said, “I was so embarrassed, I wanted to crawl under the table and hide.” Mumma was indirectly saying that the food tasted terrible and that the hostess didn’t know the difference between fresh and frozen meat. In my mother’s view, no self-respecting cook would ever use frozen meat.

Housewives like my mother who were used to fresh meat never did take to frozen meat. Neither did writer H.D. Harben, who, in 1936, raised a concern about the British colonials in Singapore eating frozen food. “The food,” he wrote, “is really abominable in the hotels.” He attributed this poor quality to the use of frozen meat, canned food and vegetables. This constant use of frozen food meant that it had become “customary to ignore the produce of the district”, which was a shame as he believed them to be more nutritious and a rich source of vitamins. “If we lose the East,” he warned, “it will be largely due to our unhealthy habits.”[1] One wonders if this contributed to Britain’s loss of Singapore to the Japanese!

Today many of us prefer to use fresh food and try to avoid anything frozen as much as we can.

But my mother has been vindicated. The refrigeration industry, the frozen food industry and supermarkets can claim the freshness of frozen food, but today many of us prefer to use fresh food and try to avoid anything frozen as much as we can. On top of her insistence on fresh produce, my mother was always suspicious about newfangled ideas. For instance, she continued cooking in the clay pots that she had always used. I used to buy anything that was new and shiny and colourfully advertised. Did my food taste any better? Not that I was able to discern. Previously influenced by the advertised information about the quality and safety of fancy cooking equipment, I am now going back to my old clay pots.

The most profound and enduring image of my mother is the one of her moving around her kitchen calm and unruffled, an image of great ease. My mother’s range of menu was limited, but the quality was consistent and superb despite never having read a recipe or written anything down. Mumma’s Keralan style of cooking was a delicious and delicate blend of very basic spices such as chillies, turmeric, coriander, pepper and onions. Although Mumma, during her early years in Singapore, had a distaste for anything foreign, she

OPPOSITE
Scene at a wet market.

The most profound and enduring image of my mother is the one of her moving around her kitchen calm and unruffled, an image of great ease.

too would succumb, ever so reluctantly and ever so slowly to new ideas and different cuisines as our tastes began to change.

As a result, even my mother was persuaded by the changing times and the developing palates of her family to suspend her pride in her beloved Keralan cuisine. She would, for instance, cook roasts regularly, produce an excellent cheese macaroni, bee hoon goreng and, in her 70s, she was consulting recipes to cook something as foreign as Hungarian beef goulash.

So many memories of those early years come flooding back. While we have moved to storing food in plastic containers, in my mother's time everything was stored in tins. The salt and tamarind were kept in pottery jars bought from a pottery store in Jalan Hwi Yoh and the rice in a big black trunk. Mumma used to bury unripe fruits in the rice to quicken the ripening process. I recall watching bunches of unripe bananas being buried in sand in preparation for large gatherings (such as weddings) in my grandparents' village in Kerala. I often bury unripe avocados in rice, nestled in a jar that I

ABOVE
Mumma at the wet market.

bought almost 40 years ago from the Aw Pottery shop in a shopping centre along Tanglin Road. That building (which has been replaced by Tanglin Mall) was one of my favourites because of its informal, friendly village atmosphere.

Those Early Days

I can still see my mother as clearly as if it was yesterday. Back in those days of wet markets and street hawkers, she would be carrying her marketing and walking down Kovan Road to our house on Flower Road. She would have gone up to Lowland Road to the 6 Mile Market (so called as it was located at the sixth mile along Upper Serangoon Road, just opposite the turn to Tampines Road). My younger sisters, Celine and Fil, who were still in primary school, were under instructions from their older siblings to help carry the groceries during weekends and holidays. Celine's memory of those excursions is of them being dragged up the hill and Fil grumbling about the smell of the market: "Ma, it is smelly. It is so

I can still see my mother as clearly as if it was yesterday, back in those early days of wet markets and street hawkers.

ABOVE
The now-defunct 6 Mile Market along Upper Serangoon.

smelly!" That is Celine's version of the story, but Fil remembers it differently. She remembers Celine being the one protesting loudly. The fact remains that an excursion to a market during those days was both a fascinating and repelling experience. The drainage must have been non-existent. Puddles of stagnant water, especially near the fish and chicken stalls, were their sources of distress. The clamour from the stall holders and the squawking of live chickens and ducks were exciting, but the smells that emanated from the vegetables and fish (which ranged from fresh to rotting) and the clogged drains were absolutely repellent. Fil, holding her nose, would refuse to enter. When Celine and I visited the market in the late 1990s, it had surrendered to a time of disuse and neglect but was still an interesting relic in an era increasingly dominated by sanitised supermarkets.

The fact remains that an excursion to a market during those days was both a fascinating and repelling experience.

By the 1960s my family had moved to Jalan Hwi Yoh, which is now part of Hougang North. The marketing now took place at the 5 Mile Market along Serangoon Road, at the junction of Yio Chu Kang Road. The main attraction in Jalan Hwi Yoh was one of the oldest dragon kilns from which many of the pots for our garden plants had come. Located at the edge of Serangoon Gardens, Jalan Hwi Yoh retained its kampong atmosphere. Down the dark end of the street, among the old rubber plantation trees, was where my sisters were convinced lurked the Barisan Sosialis, the only opposition party that dared to exist at the time. The large garden provided ample space for Mumma's vegetable garden, Dad's prized orchids and ferns, and a playground for children to play a game of rounders after Sunday lunch. These were the days when the Magnolia ice cream man would come cycling down the road in a well-timed marketing strategy to meet this hot and sweaty group clamouring for ice cream.

One monthly ritual was placing the order for groceries from Govindasamy's Provision Shop located in Little India. This store was an institution, and the only shop that Mumma would patronise. Each month, a man from the provision shop would arrive to take our grocery orders. Mumma would have a list that she would read from, and the man would write her orders down. The list almost

never varied and neither did the ritual. My younger siblings would watch these proceedings, while Mumma spoke in her minimal Tamil (she being Malayalee and he Tamil). The kids would be waiting in anticipation for the last item on the list—a box of Quality Street chocolates. Sometimes the provision man would get rather dramatic and add a bit of suspense to the proceedings by folding and putting away the list before the last item was added. At this point the kids would shout, "Quality Street chocolates!" He would smile broadly and open his notebook to add chocolates to the list. A few days later the groceries would arrive in a lorry: paper bags of whole spices, lentils, sugar, salt, tamarind, flour, sacks of rice, tins of Milkmaid condensed milk, Klim (powdered milk), tins of Lipton tea, a bottle of eau de cologne, which went into the fridge, and the box of Quality Street chocolates. Without fail, the delivery man would treat the kids to packets of nuts and raisins. For the children, there was a sense of excitement when the groceries arrived and a buzz of activities ensued. We didn't need much to be happy in those days.

Bread was delivered each day by a Bengali man carrying a large basket filled with a variety of breads and buns on the top of his head. The basket rested on a roll of cloth, which helped balance the load. He would bring the basket down and Mumma would usually pick a loaf of white bread (wholemeal and mixed grains were not yet available) and buns, and sometimes she would treat us to sugee biscuits for tea. I have tasted many sugee biscuits since but the modern version never tastes like the ones I remember—the biscuits from the basket of the Bengali bread man all those years ago. Since then, the closest that I have found in taste to that biscuit was in Casuarina Curry located at Upper Thomson Road.

The Bengali bread man, the Malay satay man and the Chinese hawkers selling brooms on their bicycles or food in pushcarts were common sights across Singapore. In his book *From the Blue Windows: Recollections of Life in Queenstown, Singapore, in the 1960s and 1970s*, author Tan Kok Yang writes fondly of these itinerant traders and recalls "how we children would wait eagerly almost every afternoon for the middle-aged Indian man to pass by our flat. He had a very

The Bengali bread man, the Malay satay man and the Chinese hawkers selling brooms on their bicycles or food in pushcarts were common sights across Singapore.

OPPOSITE
The 6 Mile Market, Upper Serangoon.

special way of carrying the basket of bread that he sold: he placed them on his white turbaned head. It was indeed fascinating that he could move his head from side to side as he talked to his customers, even with that basket-load of bread on his head."[2]

It was these everyday encounters that laid the foundation for the relationship between the many races who lived in harmony for hundreds of years. Things have changed since those early years. Politics and politicians have their ways of exploiting racial differences to their advantage, whatever their rhetoric may be.

The Passing of an Age

These were the innocent, uncomplicated pleasures of childhood days living in Singapore some 50-odd years ago.

Once upon a brief time we lived in a pre-war house, which even had a bomb shelter underneath it. The house was surrounded by an expanse of land (referred to in those days as "the compound") to house a large chicken coop, where fruit trees such as rambutan, duku, langsat, jambu (both the pink version and the now forgotten white ones) and chiku trees supplied us with abundant fruits. I remember a couple of belimbing trees loaded with fruits that Mumma would use for her curries and for pickling. I remember chickens being chased, caught and slaughtered, their necks cut in one slash before being dunked in boiling water, then plucked, cleaned and curried for Sunday lunches. I remember picking runner beans from the garden. There was a ready supply of tapioca, sugarcane and herbs. We used to get a continuous harvest of papayas. Even to this day, I am reluctant to buy papayas from the market because they are never the same as the ones from our trees. When in season there were rambutans, young coconuts straight from the palms in the backyard for coconut water, soursops and chiku. Mumma and Dad also grew kang kong, which was used to feed the geese that were kept to catch snakes.

Mumma took great joy in her garden. Visitors to the house always left with tapioca straight from the garden, which Mumma would dig up for them. Mumma made the best tapioca cake in town (although I have to say that I do think local chef Violet Oon makes a really yummy version of this cake). Ginger was also always available when needed. When necessary, Mumma would go out into the garden and dig out what she needed. Her happiest days were in those houses with large gardens. Those were the days when anybody might drop in on a Sunday. Many did and would be invited to join us for lunch.

Our parents were not easily put out and they believed in having a house open to all. So when Mumma had to give up her garden and move to a semi-detached house in Seletar Hills, it took her many years to get over the loss. Times were changing. Gone were the days of spontaneous feasts for unannounced visitors.

I think back on those days when the world was an easier place: an afternoon meant a tea with surprise goodies that Mumma would have prepared; a sunny Sunday after church when the family would gather; the excitement of hearing the bells of the Magnolia ice cream man and rushing out to catch him. These were the innocent, uncomplicated pleasures of my childhood in Singapore some 50-odd years ago.

Memories Are Made of These

This is how my sister Celine remembers Mumma and her dominance in the kitchen:

"Mumma was the giant in the kitchen. Dad's contribution would be to add newfangled kitchen equipment (like a blender) that Mumma would treat with disdain and insist on using the old-fashioned, labour-intensive alternative if she thought Dad was watching."

After Mumma died, Dad stayed with me in Perth and in his time there, embarked on a tentative cooking foray. He would work himself to a state of exhaustion making string hoppers (popularly known as putu mayam) and after many test batches, finally worked up the courage to invite the rest of the family around. After trying them, I pointedly told my sister Addy that she was not to breathe a word that Dad had actually not quite gotten the texture right.

He also attempted kozhukattai (a steamed confection of coconut and sugar encased in a rice flour dough), which we associate with Mumma as she often made them as an afternoon tea treat. He

would busy himself around the kitchen, occasionally giving me a half-smile and a look that said: "I know this is not going to be as good as Mumma's." I cannot remember my reaction when he came to me with a kozhukattai to taste. I only hope I was encouraging and positive. Looking back, I don't think I appreciated how poignant these moments were. Sometimes, we only see these things when we look back. He must have missed her and wanted to please us. Dad made quite a few kozhukattais. I hid them in the freezer and found them many months after he died. Anyway, I tried making them again and I don't think I succeeded any more than Dad did.

Fil recalls:

I remember the curry puffs from Red House, Polar Café and Adelphi Hotel, which we all thoroughly enjoyed and still crave for today.

"The hawker food carts that would come around the neighbourhood were always a no-no for us. Mumma thought the carts were 'dirty'. She also used to get annoyed if I sang the praises of food purchased outside (such as fish head curry) as she could not understand why I would pay for the very dishes that she cooked at home and I would not eat! Mumma, of course, got the greatest pleasure being in the kitchen.

"Dad, on the other hand, introduced us to the 'finer things in life'. I remember the curry puffs from Red House, Polar Café and Adelphi Hotel, which we all thoroughly enjoyed and still crave for today. Tea time was a big thing in the family. Dad never missed his afternoon cuppa. I also remember baking when I was in secondary school, because Mumma always wanted us, the younger ones, to bake a cake for afternoon tea during the weekends. And with time, both Mumma and Dad enjoyed the delights of hawker food, such as popiah, satay, nonya cakes and paratha, which eventually also became part of our diet.

"Having an open home to welcome friends and family was considered the norm. Both Mumma and Dad welcomed our friends to the house and spent time talking and offering them food. I recall a close friend of mine saying that it was always a privilege to visit our home and how lucky I was to have parents who were hospitable, as it was something she missed while she was growing up."

Baked Tapioca Cake

Serves 4 to 6

Ingredients

5 cups fresh, grated tapioca (squeeze out any excess water)
1½ cups sugar
4 cups coconut milk from fresh coconuts, or coconut cream
1 tsp salt
½ cup grated coconut
2 tbsp butter

Tips

- If fresh tapioca is unavailable, you can use frozen tapioca, which is available in most Asian grocery stores.
- To squeeze out excess water from grated tapioca, scoop a handful with clean hands and press.

Method

1. Preheat oven at 200° C. Meanwhile, combine all ingredients together, except for the butter, in a large bowl.
2. Pour mixture into a medium-sized greased baking dish and spoon pats of butter on the top.
3. Bake for 1 to 2 hours, or until the cake is firm and has a golden brown crust. Alternatively, you can also place the cake under a hot grill to brown the top.
4. Allow the cake to cool completely before cutting it into pieces.

CHAPTER TWO

Remembrance of Things Past

In his novel *Remembrance of Things Past*, Marcel Proust writes about food that had the power to evoke memories of the past pleasures one had enjoyed. In his essay "The Cookie", he explained that however distant the experience, we would still be able to call back old memories. Even after the passing of time, Proust believed that "taste and smell alone, [which are] more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, [can] remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection."[1]

This same concept of remembrance applies to conversations as well, especially if one is talking about the past. My chats with my sisters about our childhood bring back memories of experiences, which are sometimes more powerful than the experience itself.

My sisters remember the sandwiches Mumma used to pack for them for school recess, which consisted of white bread that would be filled with egg, luncheon meat, corned beef or sardines. Celine remembers sandwiches filled with mashed potatoes that were mixed with salt and butter. We wondered how our Mumma had gotten the idea for this strange filling, but it made for a pretty tasty sandwich. This simple childhood fare became more exotic and festive in our adult years; we would put the same fillings between slices of multi-

My chats with my sisters about our childhood bring back memories of experiences, which are sometimes more powerful than the experience itself.

OPPOSITE
Enjoying a picnic with my family in Perth. In bottom photo, Aunt Mary Cecily with her helper in Kerala.

grain bread, pack them in a picnic basket with a bottle of wine and seat ourselves under a tree in the garden. And they became delectable! How we feel is inevitably dependent on atmosphere, environment, ambience, mood or setting. Perhaps it is psychology that transforms the simple sandwiches of school days and gives them a new taste. The simple fried bee hoon that Mumma used to make for us—with its minimal ingredients of eggs, onions and soya sauce—was what my niece Sunita would always request on her annual family visits from Berlin to Singapore. This bee hoon is an indelible part of her memories of her grandmother and of Singapore. My own happy memories focus more on the experience of chatting at the table with my family rather than of the food itself. Nevertheless, the one food that has a Proustian effect on my memory is appam.

Breakfasts

Oddly enough, appam is one of the last things from my mother's breakfast dishes that I attempted to make, thinking it was too difficult. How could something so delicious, so appealing to the eye and so desirable to eat be easy to make?

Nowadays, I like having breakfast with friends and family. I find that it is easier and less complicated than organising dinners, plus the process of preparing breakfast is very special. I often invite friends over for breakfast, which usually extends into brunch as we chat on and on. It is a meal that is not very demanding and the combination of dishes takes me right back to the celebratory meals of my childhood.

Appam, a Keralan pancake, can be eaten for breakfast or as a main meal. As a breakfast meal, Mumma would offer bananas or break an egg over the appam while it was being cooked. Stew is a favourite accompaniment. I love appam with fish curry, but there are other ways to enjoy it as well. For example, my brother Raymond prefers appam with maasi sambal (a Sri Lankan dish made from dried tuna) and stew. Alternatively, you can ladle thick coconut milk and gula melaka over a steaming hot appam and it becomes a yummy dessert. Because appam are best eaten hot, I am always positioned at the stove to serve piping hot appam to my guests. It is also the mainstay of traditional celebration breakfasts in our community. These are usually on days of celebration in the Catholic calendar, which include Christmas breakfast, First Holy Communion, Confirmation or weddings.

Oddly enough, appam is one of the last things from my mother's breakfast dishes that I attempted to make, thinking it was too difficult. How could something so delicious, so appealing to the eye and so desirable to eat be easy to make? It seemed way too daunting! Just by reading Madhur Jaffrey's tantalising description of appam in *The Oxford Companion to Food*, you will understand what I mean:

"I have often said that if a French crepe were to marry a crumpet or an English muffin, they would probably become proud parents of appams. Appams are rice flour pancakes designed miraculously to have soft, thick, white, spongy centres and thin, golden, crisp, lacelike edges resulting in a 'delightful balance of textures'."[2]

Mumma often made appam for Sunday breakfast but after she died, we rarely ate them except after my sister, Eileen, started making them. About 10 years ago, I heard that our youngest sister, Caddy, who is 18 years younger than I am and who is living in Perth, was making appam for her children. Not to be outdone, I felt that I just had to learn how to make it. Mumma's method was to grate the coconut at home. I can't remember her ever using anything else except the freshest of ingredients. When she eventually became familiar with the electric blender, she would blend the flesh of the coconut to obtain the milk.

I followed the traditional process, starting off by soaking the the grains of rice in water in the morning, a day before cooking it. The next step was to finely blend the rice in the evening with an electric blender, adding a teaspoon of yeast. In the days when toddy was available, Mumma would add it to the mixture as the raising agent, before beating it with her hands and leaving it overnight to ferment. The next morning she would squeeze freshly grated coconut for its milk, and beat it into the fermented rice mix. The mixture should be of a similar, albeit slightly thicker, consistency to pancake mixture. A little salt was added (salt was always added, even to sweets) with an appropriate quantity of sugar, and the mixture is beaten once again. The appam was now ready to be cooked. We would cook it in a small version of the kwali known as cheena chatti or appam chatti, a version of the wok introduced to Kerala by early Chinese traders.

I have now become such an expert at making appam that I have simplified the process. One change I made was to use packaged rice

flour. I find the Thai Elephant brand the best for appam. To make them, I add the yeast in the morning and leave the mixture to ferment in the afternoon as it requires humidity. By the afternoon, the mixture will have fermented and is ready for refrigeration. By making them this way, I can ensure that the appam doesn't become too sour. The next morning, I take it out of the fridge, and instead of rushing off to the market to buy freshly grated coconut, I have started using packaged coconut milk. Although the result is slightly less flavourful, the appam still tastes pretty good. More importantly, much labour is saved by this process. I once visited my friend Rebecca in Shanghai, and there was no fresh coconut to be obtained but we were fortunate to find packaged coconut cream so we could make the appam.

The appam I make is just the way I like it, which is sweet and coconut flavoured, with crispy edges and a deliciously spongy and soft centre.

The appam I make is just the way I like it, which is sweet and coconut flavoured, with crispy edges and a deliciously spongy and soft centre. I remember making it at Sunday lunch for an old family friend and my brother Raymond and his family—his wife Mariette and their daughters Joanna, Juliana and Jacinta. My family's favourite accompaniments to appam are chicken stew with lots of potatoes and maasi sambal. The menu for the lunch included dry beef curry (which I've always thought was an oxymoron), Mumma's style prawn varuval, lady's fingers cooked Keralan style and a cucumber salad that was previously left in the fridge and had escaped my notice.

One day when I was in Perth, I promised to make appam and chicken stew for lunch. But I ended up failing miserably. My niece Sonia's children (Grace, Matthew and William) are the new generation of foodies in the family and had requested appam. Sure, I thought, and why not invite my sisters as well? Despite having some doubts about the kind of flour Perth had to offer, I went out and bought a bag, knowing that I would have to experiment with it. Fermentation always depends on managing unseen and unpredictable forces. It may not ferment, their grandmother, Shirley, warned me. But it did. The moment of failure came when I was actually cooking the appam. The mixture would not rise to produce the spongy centre uniquely characteristic to appam. It was soggy and flat and refused to perform. I called the plan off and told my sisters that the appam was simply not working. I had to pour the entire mixture (made with 500 grams of flour) down the drain, and turned the stew into another favourite: curry served with paratha.

On my next visit, the weather was warmer and the Thai brand of rice flour was available. The result was appam as tasty and as delightful as the ones I succeeded in making in Singapore.

I wondered why the Thai fine rice flour seemed to yield the best appams and turned to my friend Rebecca, who is a food technologist, for an explanation. "There are two methods of grinding rice into flour," she said, "the dry method and the wet." The brand of flour I use for my appams is the product of the wet process.

The workings of yeast is also a mystery to me. But it's a mystery that is throughly investigated and explained in Michael Pollan's book *Cooked: A Natural History of Transformation*. If you want to understand the science behind the making of a naturally leavened bread[3], the book spends 50 pages detailing the process and makes for an interesting read. It is a lesson in chemistry and biology, and how bacteria, microbes and air work together in the making of bread. If I had studiously read and reread those pages, I'm sure I would understand why the appam I made in Perth failed and why I always succeeded in Singapore. But I share Wordsworth's sentiment that we murder to dissect. The magical workings of leavening shall therefore remain a mystery.

With my sister (*left*) on a boat in Kerala.

Kerala Memories

My first clear memory of food and celebrations takes me back to my mother's village in Kerala, when I was about five years old. We had just arrived from Singapore, and I was attending the First Communion celebration of one of my cousins. I was seated with other cousins on the veranda, holding a plate loaded with local cakes and

SWEET STAPLES

The standard fare for local cakes and sweets at celebrations include aluwa, a labour-intensive and time-consuming mixture of flour, sugar, ghee, milk and sometimes cashew nuts. Its closest Western relative in taste and texture is toffee. Variants of the aluwa can be found in Sri Lanka and Malaysia where it is known as kalu dodol and dodol respectively.

sweets. To my utter astonishment, a crow flew towards me over the heads of the others and picked one of the sweets off my plate. It flew away as swiftly as it had come. I was left with a sense of awe and astonishment at the crow's audacity. This might have taken place 75 years ago, but it left a deep impression on me. I can still recall the scene in the veranda, hearing the sounds of chatting and seeing the bustle of people around me. As a child I was experiencing the strangeness of being in a new place, among a group of relatives I was meeting for the first time, amidst the babble of an unfamiliar language, Malayalam.

Whenever there was a celebration in that Keralan village, such as weddings and religious rituals, the women of the village would be summoned a week in advance to prepare the food. The women would come together to chat and gossip as they worked. The marquee, also known as the panthal, would be erected early to shelter the women from the sun. The preparation would begin with the basics, like pounding rice into flour to make the sweets and the savoury dishes.

The first and only time I experienced the immense preparation and logistics needed for a wedding was at my cousin Rita's wedding. Everything had to be brought over on a large scale. Flocks of ducks were herded down the back waters, pigs and cows were slaughtered and green ferns arrived by the boatload to decorate the panthal. Above all, I remember the chatter and laughter of the women preparing the feast.

Village women gathering to make aluwa.

Mock Dodol

Serves 4 to 5

Ingredients

300 g gula melaka, chopped
1 cup water
250 g glutinous rice flour
100 ml coconut milk
¼ tsp salt
50 g butter

Method

1. Dissolve gula melaka in a bowl of water. This can be done by microwaving on high for 1 minute. Strain the resulting gula melaka syrup to remove sediments.
2. Combine glutinous rice flour with coconut milk. Stir well to form a smooth batter.
3. Add gula melaka syrup to the glutinous rice flour batter. Mix well and add salt.
4. Cook in the microwave on high for 2 to 3 minutes. Remove and stir to mix well.
5. Return to the microwave and cook for another 2 minutes.
6. Add butter, stir to mix well. Return to the microwave and cook for another 2 minutes. You may need to repeat the process of cooking and stirring every 2 minutes till the dodol is glossy, smooth and firm.

Malayan Travels

My first encounter with genuine hospitality from strangers was during our first holiday when we visited our uncle and aunt in Ipoh. Uncle Gerard, our mother's brother, was a gregarious man. He took us on a driving trip from Ipoh to Taiping, Cameron Highlands and Penang. During the drive we left the main roads and headed into the plantations and estates where relatives of my uncle and aunt lived. They were people whom I had never met and was not likely to meet again.

Our visits were usually unplanned and unannounced. It was akin to stopping along the highway at a guesthouse for a meal and some much needed R&R. Telephones were not always available, but we always received a warm and generous welcome. I remember watching servants chasing hens in the garden to prepare lunch. Lunch would take two hours to cook and we would be famished by then, but it would be a feast of chicken curry, dry chicken peratal, fresh garden vegetables and rice. I remember relishing these meals, which were spicier than my Mumma's curries and made my lips smart and eyes tear.

But my cherished early memory of Malaya was not of the danger of encountering communists but of driving into the plantations.

But this was the early 1950s, when rubber plantations were mainly owned by the British and where the managers tended to be Malayalees. The pace of life was relaxed and leisurely even though there was a guerilla war waged against the British by communist insurgents lurking in the Malayan jungles. Singapore was under what was known as the Emergency, and there was always the danger of life being disrupted by the insurgents.

There was the day when I wandered to the edge of the forest in the Cameron Highlands, and was warned to stay away as bands of communists had been sighted in the area. To me, the idea of communists (who were called bandits!) conjured up images of strange, dangerous men who were demonised by British propaganda. In fact, the communist insurgency was a resistance movement against British colonial rule. Back then, my late husband, Singam, was a reporter for the Malayan Tribune, and had met some of the leaders. He held them in high regard for their determination and patriotism.

PREVIOUS PAGE
A fishing scene in Kerala.

But my cherished early memory of Malaya was not of the danger of encountering communists but of driving into the plantations. The driveway that stretched out before us was lined with large, overhanging trees, with yellow and red canna flowers in bloom and an abundance of red hibiscus plants. Beyond this was a chaotic mass of trees, plants and vegetable patches.

While the days of the Emergency brought about restrictions, we never felt discomfort as we travelled. My mind focused on what was good and worth storing in my memory. Malaysia was a land of plenty and to this day continues to be a place of good food where people of different races (Malay, Chinese and Indian) can be seen eating amicably together. To my delight, during a recent visit to Kuala Lumpur I found such a café that had a great atmosphere and was open and unpretentious, with people spilling outdoors and under trees. It served excellent dosai and mutton curry, and I always make it a point to eat there whenever I visit Kuala Lumpur.

BREAKFAST FAVOURITES

A traditional breakfast menu is appam and stew (my mother used to call this "ishtoo"). Mumma used to make a very simple beef stew, which I have adapted by using chicken, something which I learnt from my kitchen helper, Helen, whose recipe also added ingredients such as cinnamon and coconut milk.

One of the best things about the stew is that it spans food groups, with ingredients like onions, potatoes, carrots, cabbage, peas and meat. Fresh, coarsely ground pepper adds extra zing and aroma. On one occasion in Perth when I made this stew with appam for the family, my grandnephews Matthew and his brother William (who must have been six or eight years old at the time) came into the kitchen to help themselves to more stew. Like the little food connoisseurs that they were, they picked the bones with their fingers with relish, while spooning up dollops of gravy. Another brownie point of my chicken stew is that it makes for a perfect one-dish meal.

Appam also known as Palappam

Makes 10 to 15

Ingredients

½ tsp yeast
4 tbsp sugar
2 tbsp lukewarm water
4 cups (about 500 g) rice flour
(we use the Thai Elephant brand)
1½ cups plain water
1 cup coconut milk
(I prefer to use the Kara brand)
Pinch of salt
2 tsp baking powder

Method

1. Dissolve yeast and 1 tablespoon sugar in the lukewarm water. This mixture might take a few minutes to foam. When you see bubbles on the surface, the foaming would have started.
2. While waiting, pour flour into a deep mixing bowl, add remaining sugar, plain water and foaming yeast to the mixture. Beat mixture until it is lump-free. Cover and leave overnight for fermentation to take place. Once the mixture has doubled in size, it's ready to use.
3. Add coconut milk, salt and baking powder to the mixture and beat till smooth. It should be slightly thicker than pancake batter.
4. Heat the appam pan (a small wok works just as well). Grease the pan lightly if it is not non-stick.
5. Pour a ladleful of the mixture into the hot pan. Swirl the mixture around so it spreads into a circle with a thicker centre.
6. Cover the pan and cook for 1 minute or until the centre is firm and the edges turn golden brown.

Chicken Stew

Serves 4 to 5

Ingredients

4 tbsp oil
Half sprig curry leaves
(discard the stalk)
1 large onion, sliced
2 cinnamon sticks
450 g chicken fillet, cut into 4-cm pieces
3 potatoes, cubed
(I usually finely slice one potato to help thicken the stew)
2 carrots, cut into wedges
2 cups water
¼ small cabbage (about 120 g), sliced or shredded
Salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
⅓ cup coconut cream
(I prefer to use the Kara brand)

Method

1. Heat the oil in a heavy pot. Add curry leaves, onions and cinnamon sticks. Stir-fry for 30 seconds.
2. When the onions are almost translucent, add the chicken pieces and stir for 5 minutes to mix well.
3. Add potatoes, carrots and water.
4. Cover and simmer for 30 to 45 minutes. When it is almost cooked (in the last 10 minutes), add cabbage and continue to simmer.
5. Once chicken is tender, add salt, pepper and coconut milk. Mix well.

Constance Singam is an author and civil society activist. Her career path took her into journalism and teaching. She took a degree in English Literature in her 40s, and a Master's degree in her 60s. In the last 30 years, Constance has led women's organisations, co-founded civil society groups, been a columnist in several national publications, contributed to and co-edited several books. Her works include *Building Social Space in Singapore*, *Singapore Women Re-Presented* and her memoir *Where I Was: A Memoir from the Margins*. She blogs at: *http://connie.sg*.

Advance Praise for *Never Leave Home Without Your Chilli Sauce*

"Constance Singam's food memoir is a captivating read and, in relating the experiences of her family, evokes many memories of a bygone era."
— Wong Ah Yoke, food critic, *The Straits Times*

"Her memoir echoes many stories familiar to Singaporean families… These shared experiences showcase a valuable part of Singapore's cultural and culinary history that is not just important for those of a certain vintage, but also for those who are much younger."
— Violet Oon, chef and restauranteur

"This book offers a rare glimpse into Singapore's diverse culinary heritage and is written in a style that is as warm and inviting as the recipes that it contains."
— Dr Leslie Tay, author of *Only the Best! The ieatishootipost Guide to Singapore's Shiokest Hawker Food*

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"Connie inspires. And she does exactly that as she shares vivid memories of tastes, smells, the origins and sharing of food."
— Alan John, author of *Good Grief! Everything I Know About Love, Life & Loss I Wish Somebody Had Told Me Sooner*

"Constance Singam truly knows that the way to the heart of Singapore is through its ample stomach."
— Philip Holden, author of *Heaven Has Eyes* and Professor of English, National University of Singapore

"Having a place set for you at Connie's can seem akin to having your place in the world. This slim volume is the next best thing."
— Dana Lam, artist and author of *Days of Being Wild: GE2006 Walking the Line With the Opposition*

Constance Singam's love affair with food began with her mother's Keralan cooking. For Constance and her family, a good meal is evocative. After decades of social activism, travel and kitchen mishaps, food is still able to transport her back to a time of street hawkers, wet markets and when spaghetti was considered strange and foreign. In this memoir, Constance recounts the evolution of food against a backdrop of Singapore's social fabric over the last 70 years.

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