

GAVIN KOH

illustrated by Qin Yi

Agak-agak,
Chukop Rasa

Agak-agak, Chukop Rasa

Recipes and Stories from
My Peranakan Childhood



Gavin Koh



EPIGRAM

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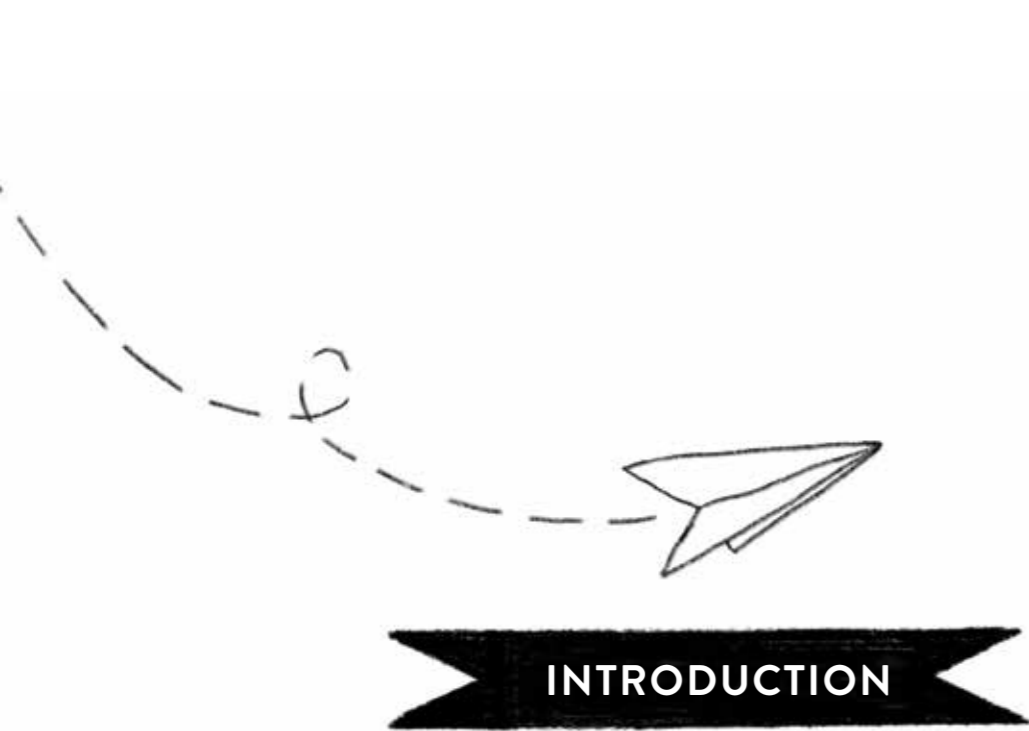
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Although I grew up in Singapore, I live and work in the UK. When my father’s health started to decline, I spent a lot of time flying back and forth between the UK and Singapore. This was during the pandemic, and travel restrictions meant spending weeks and months in quarantine. This was fine by me because I enjoy my own company, and my research allows me to work remotely; provided I have a decent internet connection, I can do my job from pretty much anywhere in the world.

My stay in Singapore was at the Carlton Hotel on Bras Basah Road. The entire planeload of returnees was decanted into the hotel lobby and processed. I was given a room key, which I was warned would work only once. When I got into the hotel room, I was welcomed by 14 bottles of water lined up on the table—one for each day I would spend there!





I even spent my first pandemic birthday in the hotel. My family cooked food and dropped it off for me; friends ordered local Singaporean dishes to be delivered; and gifts were sent to my room by the hotel staff: the bell would ring, and I would find all manner of treats and goodies sitting on a chair outside my room. One of the most precious birthday presents I received was a ring binder filled with my grandmother's recipes, painstakingly written by my mother on index cards. It was this collection of handwritten recipes that precipitated this book.

I took cooking lessons from my mother and aunt so I could recreate the dishes when I returned to the UK. In those lessons, I found laughter and stories that made each ingredient and dish so much more than just a texture or flavour. Our time together brought us closer as a family, even as the pandemic tried to force us apart, and as I jotted down notes about all the recipes, stories of our past were scribbled down too.

Agak-agak, Chupok Rasa is not just a cookbook with delectable recipes, it is also a memoir. I want to tell you the story of my family. Our laughter and the tears are indispensable ingredients to every recipe, while the recipes in this book add seasoning and spice to every story.

Gavin

Chapter 1

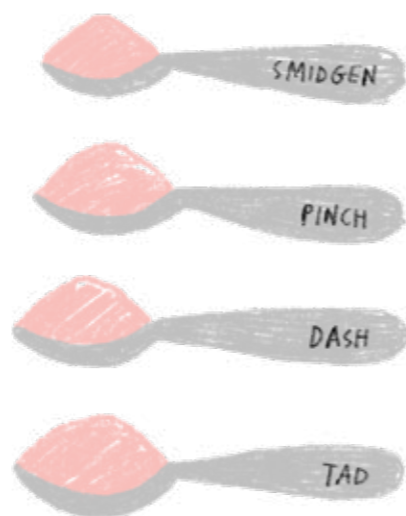
Mama



My grandmother was born in 1915 into a middle-class Chinese family as a British subject on the island of Singapore, which was part of the Straits Settlements administered from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London. A hundred years later, she died a great-great-grandmother and a Singaporean citizen. She lived through two world wars, the growth of an independent Singapore and fed four generations with her cooking. I called her Mama.

This is a book of Mama's recipes—well, sort of. My grandmother's recipes were never recorded in a way that someone other than my grandmother could follow. In fact, Mama herself never wrote any recipes. What I have was written on index cards by my mother and aunts. Some recipes have survived only as lists of ingredients with no quantities specified. Others have been tenuously recreated from memory and educated guesswork.

When specified, the quantities of the ingredients are listed in a dizzying mix of units: imperial (pounds and ounces), Chinese (taels and cattys) and metric (millilitres and grams). More often, they are listed vaguely as "a thumb-sized piece" or "a handful". Interpreting my mum's note to add "a



big bowl of water" means finding the relevant bowl in her kitchen, filling the bowl with water and then tipping the water into a measuring jug. Trying to work from my Aunt Sylvia's notes, I realised that the measurements she used could not possibly be right. Her "one cup", I discovered, referred to an old condensed milk tin by her kitchen sink, which turned out to have a volume of 450ml. Another strange quantity I came across was "10 cents of chillies from a stall at Serangoon Garden Market"!

But the most common and the most intimidating quantity is specified as *chukop rasa* or "to taste". This makes any recipe impossible to reproduce because unless you know what taste

you are aiming for, you cannot use taste as your guide. This instruction, *chukop rasa*, means a list of seasonings is sometimes entirely absent from some recipes; it is understood that you know by taste alone whether to add salt or sugar or whatever else is missing.

When it comes to quantities, I've converted weights and measures to metric, but this can be misleadingly precise. An imperial cup is 284.13ml, but it isn't paramount to get recipes down to the last fraction of a millilitre. If you add 250ml of dark soy sauce instead of 280ml, it won't change things too much, and so the ingredients may say "a cup" because a teaspoon more or less will not change the dish. In other words, one has to *agak-agak* (estimate) with most recipes. If the recipe says a tablespoon of sugar (which is 17.76 ml, if you want to be exact), you have to taste (*rasa*) and add roughly a

tablespoon (or whatever spoon you have in your own kitchen) and then taste again. If the dish needs a bit more sugar, then add some more and taste again. When it tastes just the way you like it, it's perfection or *chukop rasa*.

Let's not forget that no two homes will prepare the same dish the same way. Each cook will add ingredients and seasonings according to their own taste, and so, even with the same list of ingredients, I will never eat Mama's food again because my mother's taste, my aunt's taste and my taste are not the same.

Therefore, there is no definitive version of any of Mama's recipes. Throughout her life, Mama herself adapted her dishes, sometimes by simplifying steps, and sometimes by substituting or adding ingredients. Recipes were exchanged, passed back and forth between sisters, daughters





Seow Seok Kim

15 JAN 1915 - 6 APRIL 2015

and cousins, evolving and changing with each iteration. For instance, Mama's version of *garam asam* has pineapple (which seems to be her innovation because the Malay version of the dish does not have pineapple). My mother's version, on the other hand, adds tomatoes to Mama's recipe, and this adds colour, plus a little more acid and fruitiness.

Maybe it is foolish to aim for some nostalgic version of a dish when a "perfect" version never truly existed. But I can tell you that fish fried in coconut oil, for instance, tastes very different from fish fried in sunflower oil; so, why not try the best version of a dish?

Mama passed away in 2015. My guide is my memory of the dish and how it should taste. In my mind, I am eight years old; it is Tuesday after school and I am running from Uncle Roland's car through the front door to the back of the house to the kitchen. I can smell beef simmering on the stove and I hear the rhythmic bell-like tinkling of the rice cooker lid with fragrant rice bubbling within.

Mama is there with her curly, bright white hair framing the smile on her round face and her sarong tied around her waist is a richly patterned batik cloth. I hug her and she bats me away

saying, "Peloh! Don't hug me! I'm all hot from cooking."

I sit down at the dining table with a glass of iced water. Lunch is butter beef and white rice. The beef is presented in a light blue enamel dish, in a sauce of black and yellow swirls; it is sweet and rich, and we eat it once a week.

As far as we can tell, this dish was my grandmother's invention. Nobody remembers eating this at anyone else's house. The recipe doesn't appear in anyone else's cookbook either. I've never seen it on the menu of any restaurant in Singapore. We eat it in our home and nowhere else. It is a kids' dish with strong, simple flavours, something for Mama's grandchildren.

The recipe is unlikely to have been born anywhere else but in the melting pot that is Singapore. Butter is a foreign thing, a Western thing, which means butter beef probably is not a traditional Chinese recipe, since traditional Chinese cooking generally does not use butter (or any dairy). It's unlikely a Malay recipe because Malay cooking often uses palm sugar instead of white sugar. It's unlikely an English recipe because it uses soy sauce. In fact, it uses dark soy sauce, which is very much a Southern Chinese ingredient that associates the dish with my grandmother's Hokkien origins. So,



I would like to believe that this recipe can only be Mama's creation.

When Mama died, butter beef kind of disappeared. My aunt tried to cook it a couple of times, but it just didn't turn out the same. We always thought of it as a simple everyday dish, so simple that we never served it to guests because we didn't think it would impress. We didn't even bother to write the recipe down. So, the task of recreating this seemingly simple dish was not easy. I started by thinking back to when Mama used to make it for me.

When I was about 10 years old, I asked my grandmother to show me how the beef was prepared. She had severely arthritic hands, but she still did all the cooking in the home. She mixed the ingredients with her crooked fingers then tilted the bowl to show

me what she was doing. It has been two decades since Mama last cooked this dish for me, and all I have to guide me is this memory of a bowl and my grandmother's hands from more than thirty years ago.

In trying to recreate the recipe, I discovered two important elements: First, I needed to include baking soda. Now, baking soda was not something my grandmother often used and it appears in no other recipe in this book. Probably for that reason, my aunt omitted it from her record of the dish. I only realised that baking soda was missing when I tried using the recipe for a Cantonese stir-fry.

The second unusual aspect is the use of very low heat; Chinese frying usually needs a cast-iron wok over a raging charcoal fire and molten pork lard. But the use of butter demands a gentler treatment. And since beef and butter were expensive luxuries, it's fair to say that baking soda was probably used to tenderise cheaper cuts of beef.

Maybe it's a tall order, but when I eat this dish, it has to taste of my childhood: the end of the school day, of hot afternoons in Singapore and my grandmother's kitchen.

Butter Beef

This dish is deliberately sweet and buttery since it is for a child's palate. If catering to an adult, you may wish to halve the amount of sugar used. If you are feeling extravagant and have access to a Japanese supermarket, then you can use Japanese beef that has already been sliced for sukiyaki. Mama would never have approved of the expense!

Serves 2-4

200g beef chuck or skirt (half-frozen beef is easier to slice)
1 tbsp dark soy sauce
1 tbsp white sugar
½ tsp baking soda
½ tbsp cornflour
25g butter

Special Equipment

Blue enamel dish

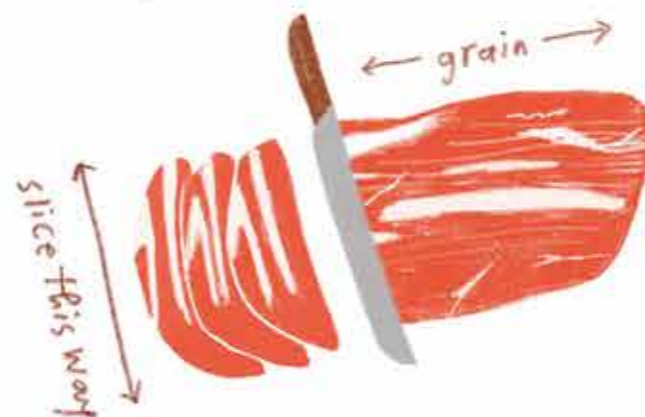
- 1 Slice the beef as thinly as possible across the grain (1-2mm thick). This will allow the beef to cook evenly and quickly.
- 2 In a small bowl, add the soy sauce and sugar to the beef and mix well.
- 3 Mix the baking soda into the cornflour. Add just enough of the cornflour mixture to coat the beef slices. Cover the bowl and leave to marinate at room temperature for 20 minutes.
- 4 In a wok, over low heat, melt the butter and wait for it to bubble. The fire must be low or the butter will burn.
- 5 Add the beef to the wok and turn constantly until the beef is cooked through (about 5 minutes). Dish out and serve hot in a blue enamel dish.



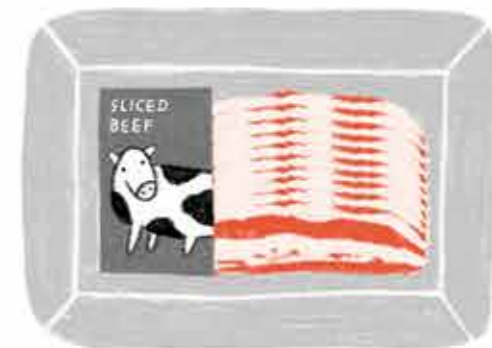
HOW TO

TENDERISE ECONOMY BEEF CUTS for QUICK- COOKING DISHES

1. Slice the partially thawed beef thinly across the grain. Beef is easier to slice when it is still frozen.



Japanese ready-sliced sukiyaki beef is a handy shortcut if cost is not a problem.



2. Transfer to a bowl and add soy sauce and sugar.



3. Coat beef slices with a mixture of cornflour and baking soda.



4. Cover the bowl and leave it to marinate at room temperature for 20 minutes.

Chapter 2

Soy Sauce



Acknowledgements

This book was a family effort. It involved kitchen table conferences and arguments among my aunts over dinner, telephone calls to cousins and other extended relatives, and index cards in shoeboxes that were scrubbed-out and filled-in.

A big thanks to my godmother Aunt Sylvia. Mama's methods were often omitted from the recipes with the argument that they were "obvious". For example, it was never highlighted in the recipe cards that peanuts and sesame seeds are always dry fried in a wok until golden brown before use. When I challenged my aunt about this, she responded with, "Who uses raw peanuts?" I really did learn so much from watching Aunt Sylvia cook!

This book could not have happened without the records from my mother Siew Luan and my aunt Siew Lian. Thanks to Auntie Margot for reading and laughing. Thanks to Auntie Fan, Auntie Shirl and Auntie Anne for the recipe reviews, corrections and hilarity. Thanks to Alice for sharing her deep knowledge of embroidery and needlework. Thanks to Anton for proofreading and for making suggestions on style, and to Marc Tan and Himal Gurung for their keen observational eye. Thanks to the Foodie Translator group for translation advice, in particular Kenneth Quek, Taghi Bigdeli, Kathy Knaus and Sara Pereira. And last but not least, thanks to Alison Webster for allowing me to work remotely.



Gavin and Mama

Glossary

A

AGAK-AGAK

[Malay] To estimate or guess.

AH KONG

[Peranakan Malay and Hokkien Chinese] Grandfather. The Malay word is datuk.

ASAM

[Malay] Tamarind; *Tamarindus indica*.

ASAM JAWA

[Malay] Tamarind. More commonly just referred to as asam.

ASAM KEPING

[Malay] Tamarind slice; *Garcinia atroviridis*. A jungle fruit native to Southeast Asia. The fruit is sliced and dried before use. Despite its name, it is not related to tamarind.

AYAM

[Malay] Chicken.

B

BABA

[Peranakan Malay] Polite form of address for a Peranakan man.

BABI

[Malay] Pig or pork.

BATU

[Malay] Rock or stone.

BATU LESONG

[Malay] Mortar and pestle made from solid granite.

BAWANG

[Malay] Allium species. When unspecified, it usually refers to bawang merah.

BAWANG BESAR

[Malay] Red onion; *Allium cepa* var. *cepa*. Stronger than the white onion, but not as strong as the shallots. It is still sweet enough to use sparingly in salads, but is used mainly in cooking. It grows as single bulbs, not clusters like garlic or shallots.

BAWANG MERAH

[Malay] Red shallots; *Allium cepa* var. *aggregatum*. Shallots are smaller than onions and as they grow, they characteristically split into clusters of daughter cloves, similar to garlic. Unlike European grey, pink or echalion shallots, the small, round red shallots are very strong and will kick you in the teeth. They are therefore always eaten cooked, not raw. If you need a substitute, then go for a strong red onion.

BAWANG PUTEH

[Malay] Garlic; *Allium sativum*.

BELACHAN

[Malay] Fermented krill. Contemporary Malay spelling is belacan.

BELANGKAS

[Malay] Horseshoe crab. There are two species found on the beaches of Southeast Asia (*Tachypleus gigas* and *Tachypleus tridentatus*) and only the roe is edible (the yellow-green eggs). The mangrove horseshoe crab, *Carcinoscorpius rotundicauda*, is poisonous and cannot be eaten. However, it is unusual to come across this species on sandy beaches.

BIBIK

[Peranakan Malay] Polite form of address for a Peranakan woman.

BUAH

[Malay] Fruit.

BUAH KELUAK

[Malay] The seeds of the tree, *Pangium edule*.

BUAH KERAS

[Malay] Candlenuts; *Aleurites moluccanus*. These nuts are grown throughout Southeast Asia and Polynesia. They are called candlenuts because when threaded on a wick, there is enough oil in them to burn like a candle. Candlenuts must be cooked and are never eaten raw as they will make you vomit if you try. They are also purgative. They add richness to a dish and will thicken a sauce. If you cannot get candlenuts, macadamia nuts are a good substitute. You can replace them one-for-one in any recipe. Almonds also work. Substitute two blanched almonds for each candlenut.

BUBUR

[Malay] Rice porridge.

BUMBU

[Indonesian] Spice mix. See rempah.

BUNGA

[Malay] Flower.

C

CALAMANSI

See limau kasturi.

CANDLENUT

See buah keras.

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About the Author and Illustrator



Gavin Koh's job as a medical researcher has taken him from the Philippines to Peru. But between sisig and ceviche, it was his grandmother's cooking that he missed the most. Gavin's desire to document and reproduce the dishes he grew up eating as a child led to him fumigate whole apartment blocks with toasted belachan and to wake the neighbours with the sound of spices being pounded in a granite mortar. Out of this chaos, *Agak-agak, Chukop Rasa* was born.



Qin Yi is an art director, illustrator and letterer with a decade's experience in the publishing industry. Her corporate clients include The Istana, and National Gallery Singapore, amongst others. She has also illustrated two children's books, *Tilly's Under the Weather* and *Kali's Frog in the Throat*. Qin Yi learnt to draw by drawing. Apart from art and design, her interests include waking up early to jump rope and eating kueh lapis layer by layer.



Medical researcher Gavin Koh's engaging cookbook-cum-memoir contains over 60 heirloom recipes from his grandmother that include Nyonya classics, festive favourites and dishes for children. With detailed, easy-to-follow instructions and charming illustrations, Gavin shares his grandmother's kitchen wisdom and secrets along with many humorous, intimate stories – all of which will stay with you long after you have cooked that last dish.

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