

CHRISTOPHER TAN

**Merid
Bakers**

**EXTRAORDINARY
RECIPES, STORIES &
BAKING ADVENTURES
FROM A TRUE
OVEN GEEK**



NERDBAKER



CHRISTOPHER TAN

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FROM A TRUE OVEN GEEK**



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FOREWORD

In the early 2000s, while researching a cookbook-cum-memoir, I made umpteen trips to Southeast Asia. I had heard from food guru colleagues that there was a journalist in Singapore who really, really knew his stuff. I emailed to propose we meet. “Raffles Place train station, just outside the turnstiles,” he returned. “I’ll be the chubby Asian guy in glasses”—a characteristically self-deprecating description that helped me spot Chris immediately. We ended up eating far more than we had good reason to. As we sat there, I could tell we’d be friends for life.

Since then, I’ve discovered that every encounter with Chris is an uncommon adventure in food.

When I was putting together an article on pandan, a beloved Southeast Asian aromatic leaf that’s underappreciated elsewhere, I travelled to Singapore to seek Chris’ help. We started at Tekka Market in Little India, where, he’d forewarned, the particular variety of pandan he’d specially ordered was gigantic. I was expecting big leaves. I wasn’t expecting them to be nine feet long. We bought a sheaf, along with regular pandan and all sorts of sweet and savoury dishes that used pandan as a flavouring. We somehow convinced a taxi driver that we could get these monstrous tropical leaves and all this food into his car. At my hotel, we made it past the front desk to my room, where we photographed all of it. Then we ate what we could. And then we ate some more. By the end, we had created this phenomenal, nestlike mess—a foodie take on the kind of disarray rock stars used to leave their hotel rooms in. It took at least five increasingly hilarious calls to housekeeping before someone was willing to cart our pandan jungle away. I was a bit put out. Chris, having feasted, was in heaven.

The Chris that you, too, will get to know through this intensely personal, incredibly useful book is one of the most fervent food lovers on any continent. His expertise in Southeast Asian cuisines can fairly be called obsessive, but what sets him apart is his exploratory knowledge of so many of the world’s cooking traditions—he’s lived and travelled all over the globe.

A passionate home baker and cooking teacher, he seems to me a kind of food whisperer, divining after one bite what a particular dish is all about, what went into its creation, and what its influences are.

His culinary intelligence, generous spirit and exquisite sensitivity to provenance fills these pages, whose deep-dives into such diverse dishes as a classic French boule, a Japanese curry bread, and, yes, a Portuguese pandan pão de deus, explode what you thought you knew about baking while stoking your appetite, your imagination and your desire to cook.

—James Oseland, editor-in-chief, *Rodale’s Organic Life*, and author of *Cradle of Flavor*

INTRODUCTION

Why do I bake?

I am the child of many ovens. My family oven, for which I helped my grandma prep hundreds of Lunar New Year cookies, in which my mother would bake kue lapis legit that steadily, stripily rose in its tin, layer by fragrant layer. The oven of my childhood neighbour Mrs Chong, whose amazing pies and curry puffs I could smell from over the fence. The oven of our small suburban bakery, which in the 1970s was all about custard puffs, chocolate-riced rum balls and how many plastic ornaments one could possibly cram onto a thickly buttercreamed birthday cake. Rather more posh hotel bakery ovens—how I miss the Marco Polo Cake Shop’s strawberry tarts and hot cross buns. The oven at Yaohan department store, rolling out red bean anpan buns for ravenous hordes.

As a kid, I was picky about vegetables and spices, but vacuumed up any starchy thing not nailed down—pancakes, biscuits, buns without end... I was omnivorous. My food world expanded after I moved to London with my family in my early teens. To ease the culture shock, I inhaled books, TV, music and more books. When not in bookshops, I sought solace at supermarkets, where ingredients abounded in a variety I’d never before seen, even staples like sugars and flours. And the milk! The milkman—a nursery-rhyme abstraction now made real—left our glass bottle order on the doorstep every morning, contents encoded by its foil cap: blue was skimmed (yuk), striped blue semi-skimmed, red normal, silver richer, gold top the best of



Clearly the pear was unsatisfactory.

all, an inch of thick cream floating at its zenith. Baked into custards and quiches, it made my awkward teenage phase more palatable, if no less awkward.

At high school, the cool kids went in for drama, covert smoking and doing everything ironically, even walking. I dove deep into biology, chemistry and advanced maths by day, and churned out chocolate roulades by night. I went on to study psychology at university, a fact which surprises many people until I point out that baking is the most affordable form of therapy there is. (Had you asked me “What’s

your major?”, I would have replied, “Kenwood.”) The healing regimen I inflicted on university mates included pizza, lasagna, pies, naan, and once (but never again), baked Alaska for 40 people. I learnt a lot in those years, less from the hits than from the failures, like the blueberry-orange sticky buns at which a friend exclaimed “Oh these are so nice!”, followed by “They smell just like soap!... but really nice soap!”

After graduation, my writing job at a food magazine afforded me a grounding in European baking’s formal rules, as well as a ringside seat for how chefs had started breaking them.

I hung out at professional pastry competitions and interviewed mad geniuses who electrified audiences with their command of the whisk.

I watched the dividing walls between modern patisserie, performance art and high-tech engineering stretch as thin as filo. I also sat at the feet of traditional cooks, and began collecting old recipe texts for their time-tested perspectives. I became more determined to improve the rigour and artfulness of my home baking.

Eventually I went freelance, which let me balance writing stints with teaching, speaking and penning cookbooks. And the bake goes on.

In today’s culinary ecosystem, home cooks look to chefs for inspiration and trend cues, while chefs look to other chefs and farmers. However, in old cookbooks and memoirs, I glimpse eras when home cooks drove a lot of innovation, when some of the most interesting, creative gastronomy happened in private. I believe the tide is slowly turning that way again. Hobby bakers are reclaiming the home kitchen as fertile ground, now with blogs, social media, and even reality shows to make their

efforts visible. I salute them. They are my tribe.

It’s important to me to stand on my tribal inheritance as an Asian and a Singaporean, too. Informing my baking with traditional Asian culture always leads me in fruitful directions. Yet I see so many cooks eagerly grasping the latest cheffy trends from abroad and adopting them wholesale, rather than unearthing their own roots for inspiration (which ironically is what often motivates their foreign chef heroes). Why hyperventilate about the ‘molecular’ method of spherification, when cendol—a starch gel set with controlled temperature and pH conditions, if you want to get technical—is a similar, equally riff-worthy recipe that was there all along? Of course, it’s not about whose foodway is more correct or more ‘authentic’





**I AM NERD,
SEE ME THINK.
I AM BAKER,
HEAR ME ROAR.**

(a word by now bled dry from wanton use). It's about looking for greener grass at home as well as elsewhere; about viewing traditions not as fetters, but as rich soil in your own backyard, deep and firm enough to anchor and nurture your growth.

A friend once told me of how he went on a getaway to have lunch at England's The Fat Duck, only to be seated near three tables of Singaporeans, instantly identifiable by their chatter. The anecdote illustrates two things: we get around, and we have distinctive accents. Likewise, Singaporean baking is an exuberantly cosmopolitan tradition, yet with a style all its own. Our status as a port, former colonial outpost and immigrant hub has left a legacy of multiple official languages and gastronomies, and freewheeling eating habits. We cross many borders and tour many cultures within a single day's or hour's noshing, and think nothing of it. Doing likewise when I bake comes as naturally to me as breathing.

There are many fine books out there that will hone your skills on excellent classics, but my mission is to offer you new ideas and different paths into the grand world of baking.

We live in an age of recipe glut, where a single finger swipe accesses dozens of tutorials or orders a hundred cookbooks. But just as a writer can cook up a novel of startling freshness with the same words we use every day, so too a baker can use familiar ingredients to express new and striking thoughts, create an original narrative. This book is mine.

Why bake?

Baking is fun. Indeed, I think it's the most fun you can have with an apron on.

Baking is a craft. The more time you spend on it, the better you get at it. Expertise grows with rehearsal and experience—that's how craftspersons become artisans.

Baking is also an art (try denying this to anyone who's successfully made a croquembouche for the first time, and you will get smacked down), one whose works are easy to access and consume, in all senses.

Baking is meaningful and emotionally satisfying. More than just self-expression, it is elevated by the participation of others. It can strengthen our ties to our own and others' traditions, and our bonds with other people.

Baking focuses you. In many baked recipes, the methodical flow of preparation steps encourages a focus of mind, and a connection of mind and hand, that can be both soothing and energising. Pardon the spa-speak, but it's totally true.

Baking teaches you virtues, such as patience (laminated pastry), foresight (rustic bread), alertness (cookies burning in the oven!), precision (everything), and generosity (you gonna eat all those doughnuts yourself?). And faith: you trust in your preparation, close the oven door, and pray. This is not even a metaphor.

Baking things yourself is good for you. Industrial baked goods often rely on extremes of taste and richness to hook our attention and create unworthy cravings. When you hold the reins, you can showcase aromas, flavours and textures first, and return sugar, salt and fat to their proper places. Your body will thank you for it.

Baking is not difficult. It truly isn't. If you can read and follow a sequence of instructions closely, you can bake.



What you won't find in this book

- The use of weird additives or flavour enhancers. I do not believe these are ever needed.
- Recipes created chiefly for speed, convenience, or ease. Some of them are indeed fast and easy, but that is never their main point. Deliciousness is, always and every time. I want to show you how to cook with care and attention, not merely assemble prefab items.
- A restaurant-led perspective. I am a self-taught home baker—I use ingredients and equipment within the compass of a home cook with a decent kitchen, and access to physical and online baking supply stores and supermarkets.
- Secrecy. In my day job, I have had to read, road test, review and edit a lot of cookbooks, so I know how infuriating it is when recipes omit essential details or precision. I have tried my best to give you all the info you need for success.



How to use this book

- Read the opening chapters first, particularly the notes on ingredients, equipment and baking conditions. All these things differ for readers in different locations, and so I have described what I work with, to help you adjust the recipes and their requirements to your own circumstances.
- Read each recipe through a few times before embarking on it, so you get familiar with its logic and flow, and are not caught unawares by waiting times or equipment needs. This will save you from last-minute dashes to the shops, or having to abandon a half-made recipe for want of a crucial element.
- The first time around, make a recipe exactly as written. If you start altering it to your whim from the very beginning, you will not properly appreciate its original intention and its intended form. Get to know it first, and freestyle all you want afterwards.
- Bring this book into the kitchen with you, dog-ear the pages, annotate and splatter and stain them, love them into ragged-edgedness.

**WITH GREAT
BAKING
COMES GREAT
RESPONSIBILITY.
USE YOUR
POWERS
FOR GOOD.**

1.

OBSESSIONS, ADDICTIONS & ENDANGERED SPECIES

These subjects and recipes aren't necessarily the most white-knucklingly thrilling or the most appallingly decadent or even the most decorative in the book. But they are the ones on which I have gained the most weight and lost the most sleep, the ones I have tested to carb coma and back. (I have the stray burns to show for it.) They are the treasures which have stayed on my mind the longest, and back to which I always wander again and again. I love to bake them because I can tinker with and elaborate on them according to my mood. They are a pleasure—and a challenge, which is inseparable from the pleasure—to make. They are as much a part of me as my handwriting.



BUNHEAD

From bread I came, and to bread I will always return.

In my tweenhood, my self-propelled forays into the kitchen were rare at best. I was most happy just to eat, not cook. Then, when I was 14, while idly reading magazines lying around the house, I ran across a recipe for hot dinner rolls.

Entranced by the warmly lit, sharply angled photos (the 1980s, y'all) of shiny, golden, sesame-bedecked buns, I set forth to make them. Thus began my baking obsession, along with a season of boredom for my parents as I inflicted humdrum rolls on them repeatedly for weeks.

I have lived my life with floury hands ever since. As my baking repertoire expanded, so did the transient fixations. Marble cake one month, choux buns the next, followed by Scotch pancakes, chicken pie, kue ambon... but I find myself constantly drawn back to breads. It's something about working with yeast, perhaps—each bake is a collaboration, not a monologue; grown, not just made. I think this is why so many of the expert bread bakers I've met have been generous, easy-going, nurturing people—they know their success rests on the sloping shoulders of several million tiny friends.

MAKES 15 OR 16 ROLLS

INGREDIENTS

230 g	water
100 g	diced, peeled potato
75 g	caster sugar
30 g	milk powder
1 tsp	salt
2	egg yolks
2	egg whites
500 g	bread flour
2 tsp	osmotolerant or regular instant yeast (page 15)
50 g	unsalted butter, cubed and softened
	oil and butter, for greasing and brushing

EQUIPMENT

- a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook
- a deep 25cm round cake tin

POINTERS

- Use a floury textured potato for the best results. Waxy textured varieties won't disintegrate as readily.
- The knead-rest-knead-rest-knead sequence builds structure in the dough without overworking it, which is good for flavour. You can knead it with your hands, in which case alternate 2-minute kneadings with the 5-minute rests—use a dough scraper to help you knead, to avoid incorporating too much extra flour into the dough.
- As you shape the buns, the dough should feel silky, springy and alive under your fingers, as if it can't wait to slip the surly bonds of earth and surge for the heavens. It should stick to your oiled fingers and work surface just enough to assist in shaping—that is, hardly at all.



- These are generously-sized rolls. If you wish, make them smaller, but place them in a pan of such size that they crowd together—this close snuggling encourages them to rise up high before they set, yielding the airy, shreddy crumb.

- Don't cut them apart or in half—tear them with your hands to enjoy their texture.
- Store buns in a resealable plastic bag at cool room temperature or in the fridge. They will stay fresh-tasting and soft for at least 3 to 4 days.
- I gave some of these rolls to a friend, who rang me the next day to report a Proustian moment: their aroma and flavour had unexpectedly “transported” her back to Dong Log Wee, a venerated and long-gone Hainanese bakery that once stood on Killiney Road in Singapore. I may not ever better that compliment.

CHRIS' HOT ROLLS

My rolls have since improved.

Asians like soft breads. I don't think I'm being unfairly stereotypical. It's difficult to walk two blocks in downtown Singapore, Seoul or Tokyo without passing at least one bakery piled high with buns and small loaves. Some will likely be excellent versions of European breads, but most of the others will have softness as their central virtue. And I don't mean soft-as-compared-to-say-a-hearty-German-rye soft—I mean really soft. Princess-and-the-Pea-feather-mattress soft. Scary soft. Bordering on evanescent soft.

Some commercial bakeries doubtlessly achieve these textures with dough 'improvers', conditioners and other additives I'd rather not think about. But the home baker needs no inscrutable powders to make plush, cushiony breads, as this recipe demonstrates. It showcases three techniques which I use often in my kitchen and throughout this book: using potato to boost softness, lightness and shelf life; hydrating and pre-cooking a small portion of the dough's starch (the potato, in this case), which also promotes a softer texture; and short bursts of kneading alternated with short rests, an old French practice described by famed baker Raymond Calvel in his book *The Taste of Bread*.

Together, they allow me to make the hot rolls of my dreams, three decades on. Tender, light and 'shreddy'—which means you can easily pull their crumb apart into long, airy shreds—these have personality beyond their softness.





PACKET WATCH

When I moved to England in my teens, one of the most comically jarring cultural dislocations was between what the British meant by ‘biscuit’ versus what the word meant in Singapore.

The biscuits I grew up with were distant descendants of Anglo originals, filtered through Asian taste preferences and hazy ingredient substitutions. Powdery coconut-cassava shards which rained dander everywhere and tasted like plaster of Paris; supposedly cheese-flavoured batons, crunchy and oddly addictive despite a merely tangential likeness to cheese; chewy piglet-shaped treats in



plastic baskets, occupying an agreeable zone between pastry, cake and biscuit. Some I actively loathed. Kueh koya, gritty nuggets of ground mung beans, could crack a tooth, a jaw, a skull if bitten into recklessly, and tasted to me of centenarian tortoises, full of minerals and accumulated disgruntlement.

Some had an authentically English connection, like the Horlicks biscuits doled out stingily at school sports events. Marie biscuits I inhaled in massive quantities, but paid zero actual attention to; like kids everywhere, I picked the royal icing bullets off iced gems and ignored the biscuit part.

We seldom ate Jacob's cream crackers with cheese in the British manner, but more often crushed them to coat things destined for deep-frying, or slathered them with butter and drifts of white sugar—a treat which is to a hyperactive child as a propane tank is to an arsonist.

Then England changed my world with the rustle of a Hobnobs wrapper. Jaffa Cakes undid all my self-restraint. Rich Tea biscuits made me forget Marie forever. Jammie Dodgers turned out to be the Narnian versions of the cardboard-and-creosote 'jam'-centred biscuits sold at old Chinese provision shops. Sainsbury's chocolate chip digestives fuelled studying binges in my uni days.

But the ones which really won my heart were custard creams. These were custard in a biscuit in a wholly more exalted, rapturous way than Chicken-In-A-Biskit was ever anything like chicken in a biscuit. I would open a pack in front of the TV, lose myself in Christmas Day specials, then suddenly come to my senses hours later, surrounded by crumbs and shreds of plastic. Good times.

Opposite, clockwise from top left: Chinese spiral biscuits; goldfish crackers; wafer biscuits filled with durian cream; iced gems and cream crackers; wafer envelopes folded around peanut powder; 'ngau kok pang', 'buffalo horn' biscuits from Ipoh, filled with peanut powder.



**MAKES 25 TO 30
COOKIES**

INGREDIENTS

Dough

160 g	cake flour
75 g	icing sugar
60 g	cornstarch
¼ tsp	double-acting baking powder
½ tsp	fine salt
125 g	cold unsalted butter, diced
3 tbsp	chocolate rice
1	egg yolk
1½ tsp	vanilla extract or natural banana extract

Filling

200 g	sun-dried bananas
2½ tbsp	honey
1 tbsp	water
1	egg white, beaten, for glazing

EQUIPMENT

- a cake mixer fitted with the paddle attachment
- a baking sheet lined with baking paper

BANANA MAAMOUL

Sticky sun-dried bananas have a wonderful ‘banoffee’ flavour and a fudgy, chewy consistency much like dates, and hence make a brilliant filling for these unconventional maamoul. Look for them in health food shops or Thai grocery stores.

METHOD

1 Make dough. Sift cake flour, icing sugar, cornstarch and baking powder together into a mixing bowl. Add salt and mix on low speed for 1 minute to blend.

2 While beating constantly on low speed, add butter to bowl. Mix until it has dispersed and mixture looks like very fine crumbs. Add chocolate rice and mix to combine.

3 Add egg yolk and vanilla to bowl and beat for several seconds on the lowest speed, until dough comes together into a ball. Knead dough briefly by hand to even it out, then wrap in plastic wrap and chill it for at least 4 hours or overnight.

4 Make filling. Finely mince dried bananas, then stir together with honey and water in a small bowl. Cover tightly and let stand for 1 hour to let the bananas hydrate a little.

5 Preheat oven to 170°C. Place a shelf in the middle position.

6 Divide dough into portions of 16 to 18 g each. Sandwich a portion between two sheets of plastic wrap and roll it into an oval about 6.5 cm long by 4 cm wide. Peel off top sheet of plastic wrap. Spoon about ¾ teaspoon of filling down the long axis of the oval, shaping it into a neat, skinny log. Using the bottom sheet of plastic wrap to help you, roll the dough around the filling, making a cigar shape. Pinch seam and ends to seal. Place the maamoul on a baking sheet, seam downwards, curving it like a banana. Repeat with remaining dough and filling to make all cookies. Space them about 2 cm apart on the baking sheet, as they will expand slightly.

7 Brush maamoul lightly with beaten egg white. Bake for 16 to 18 minutes, until pale gold. Transfer baking sheet to a rack. Let maamoul cool completely before transferring them to an airtight container for storage. They will keep for at least 10 days in the fridge.



THE BINGKA EMPIRE

If you've eaten widely around Asia, you may have noticed the prevalence of different cakes and kueh called 'bingka' (or spelling variations thereof).

There are Filipino bibingkas, made from a rice or wheat batter leavened with yeast or baking powder, baked in banana-leaf cups.

In Macau, bebinca de leite is a thick-set custard of coconut milk and cornstarch. Many-layered Goan bibinca is laid down and grilled one decadent strata at a time. Southern India also has several rice cakes which are bingkaks in all but name, such as Kerala's savoury-sweet kalathappam, dusky with jaggery and studded with chunks of coconut, ginger and shallots. Malay and Indonesian cuisines have many bingkaks, bengkaks and bikaks: among the most famous are Medan's kue bika ambon, lavishly endowed with citrus fragrance and air bubbles, and Malaysian/Singaporean kueh bengka, buttery and dense with grated cassava. What the members of the extended bingka family have in common: they are invariably baked, usually stodgy from well-hydrated grain or tuber starches, and often quite rich from quantities of eggs, coconut or sugar.

Clockwise from far left, bottom: Chris' plain bingka; cheese bingka; brownie bingka; and blueberry bingka.

MAKES 16 BUNS

INGREDIENTS

Topping

115 g	plain flour
10 g	rice flour
20 g	sugar
½ tsp	salt
20 g	fresh curry leaves, washed and stems removed
20 g	curry roux, crumbled
30 g	cold unsalted butter, diced
½ tsp	ammonium bicarbonate (page 16)
2 tsp	water
1	egg

Dough

240 g	boiling water
60 g	curry roux, crumbled finely
60 g	sugar
30 g	unsalted butter
15 g	milk powder
¼ tsp	salt
400 g	bread flour
1½ tsp	instant yeast (page 15)
1	egg

EQUIPMENT

- a blender or food processor
- a stand mixer fitted with the dough hook
- a baking sheet lined with baking paper

JAPANESE CURRY MELON PAN

Sweet melon pan walk on the mild side, but these savoury melon pan have a (polite) kick from a very Japanese ingredient: curry roux. Anglo-Indian curries were reputedly introduced to Japan by the British Navy in the 1800s, and quickly propagated through military and institutional kitchens before gaining ground in restaurants. A pre-cooked blend of fat, flour, spices and condiments, curry roux was created in the 1950s, and rapidly became an enormously popular home pantry staple: you simply dissolve it into a pot of broth and cooked ingredients to reconstitute the curry. Curry roux adds pre-gelatinised starch (page 135) to the soft crumb of these pan, and also flavour to their crumbly topping.

METHOD

1 Make topping. Combine flour, rice flour, sugar, salt, curry leaves and curry roux in a blender and pulse-blend until leaves are finely ground. Add butter and pulse until it disperses and mixture looks like fine crumbs. Tip mixture into a bowl. Whisk ammonium bicarbonate with water to dissolve it, then beat in the egg. Pour into dry ingredients and mix to a soft dough. Wrap dough in plastic wrap and chill for 1 hour, until firm.

2 Make dough. Whisk boiling water and curry roux together in a bowl until roux dissolves, then add sugar, butter, milk powder and salt and whisk until smooth. Let cool completely.

3 Whisk bread flour and yeast together in a mixing bowl. Add curry mixture and egg and mix on low speed until dough comes together into a ball. Cover bowl with a damp tea towel and let dough rest for 30 minutes.

4 Knead dough on medium-low speed for 1 minute. Re-cover bowl with the tea towel and let dough rest for 5 minutes. Repeat the kneading and resting once more. Finally, knead for 1 to 2 minutes, until the dough is elastic and starts to clean bowl sides. Re-cover bowl and let stand at cool room temperature until dough has doubled in size, about 70 to 90 minutes.

5 Rub your hands and a work surface lightly with oil. Turn out the dough and press it gently all over to deflate it, then divide it into 16 portions. Shape each into a tight, compact round ball by cupping it under your oiled palm and dragging it in small circles on the work surface. Place dough balls on the paper-lined baking sheet, spaced about 4 cm apart. Cover with greased plastic wrap and let proof at cool room temperature until just doubled in size, about 30 to 40 minutes.

6 Preheat oven to 190°C. Place a shelf in the middle position.

7 While buns proof, divide topping into 16 portions and roll each into a ball. Dust a ball lightly with flour, sandwich it between two small sheets of baking paper, and roll it into a thin disc about 8 cm in diameter. Peel off top paper sheet. Lift the dough on the bottom sheet, and invert it over the top of a risen bun. Gently pat it flush against the bun, so it hugs it all round. Peel off paper. Drape all buns with topping likewise.

8 Bake buns for 15 minutes, until the topping has crazed and lightly browned, and bun undersides are golden brown.

9 Transfer baking sheet to a rack. Let buns cool slightly, then serve warm with butter. They go well with creamy vegetable soups, and make great beds—futomos?—for burgers. Best eaten within a day of baking, as the topping eventually softens.

POINTERS

- Fresh curry leaves brighten the topping with their warm peppery-citric fragrance.
- Japanese curry roux is sold in boxed blocks at Japanese supermarkets. Its considerable slew of ingredients may include fruit, such as banana or apple, peanut butter for creaminess, cheese for more umami, as well as animal fats like lard or beef dripping, so read labels carefully if you have allergies or other objections to such. 'Java-style' curry roux, which tends to be spicier, suits these buns well.



SERVES 4 TO 6

INGREDIENTS

- 1 small purple or red onion, peeled and chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped
- 2 hot green chillies
- 2 tsp minced ginger
- 2 tsp sea salt
- 1 tsp fennel seeds
- 1 tsp cumin seeds
- 1 tsp black peppercorns
- ½ tsp ground turmeric
- 6 sprigs curry leaves, stems removed
- 1 tbsp Dijon mustard
- 500 g buttermilk
- 10 chicken pieces on the bone (see pointers)
- 150 g plain flour
- 250 g masala cornflakes (roughly 4 cups)
- 75 g panko breadcrumbs (roughly 1½ cups)
- oil, for greasing

EQUIPMENT

- a blender or food processor
- a large roasting pan
- a wire roasting rack

POINTERS

- I cut one chicken breast (from half a chicken) into two chunky pieces. Drumsticks and thighs I count as one piece each. Wings tend to end up having too little meat in proportion to the coating—a bonus for some diners, a minus for others.
- For a slightly crispier crust, spray the coated chicken pieces with oil before baking.

MASALA BUTTERMILK OVEN-FRIED CHICKEN

I once went on a press junket through parts of the American Midwest. After several meals' worth of meat-and-potatoes bonhomie, and finally given a free evening, all us Asian journos made a beeline for the nearest supermarket to resolve our fruit and salad deficit. I kept getting side-tracked along the way: by the homewares section, where light weaponry and Varmint Hunter magazines sat alongside craft materials; by an entire aisle of potato chips; and by the deli counter's hot, crusty, thunder-thighed and buxom-breasted freshly fried chicken. I brought some back to my motel room to garnish my salad. It was bliss.

Fried chicken, my heart's desire and arteries' nemesis, how do I resist thee? Baking is a partial solution. In America, 'buttermilk' is a cultured product akin to runny yoghurt, much used in baking, and to marinate Southern fried chicken. In Singapore, 'buttermilk' is a refreshing savoury South Indian drink accented with curry leaves, ginger and pepper. This recipe brings the two worlds together, imbuing an American buttermilk soak and cornflake crust with Indian spices. A popular component of chivda and murukku (crispy snacks), masala cornflakes are sold at Indian supermarts. If you can't get them, just use regular cornflakes.

METHOD

1 Grind first 9 ingredients (onion through turmeric) together into a fine paste in a blender or food processor. Add curry leaves and mustard and blend until leaves are ground into tiny bits. Scrape paste into a deep bowl and whisk in buttermilk, then add chicken pieces and mix well—they should be submerged. Cover and let marinate in the fridge for 4 to 5 hours.

2 Preheat oven to 190°C. Place a shelf in the lower third of the oven.

3 Line a large roasting pan with foil. Place a wire rack in the pan that stands at least 2.5 cm above the pan bottom, so that air can circulate around the chicken as it cooks. Grease the wire rack well with oil.

4 Spread flour out on a tray. Crush cornflakes into small crumbs with your hands, combine with panko, and spread out on another tray.

5 Wipe excess marinade off a chicken piece, then roll it in the flour to coat lightly. Dip it back in the marinade to coat thinly but thoroughly, and finally roll it in the cornflake mixture to coat well. Place it on the greased wire rack. Coat all chicken pieces likewise. Space them out at least 3 cm apart on the rack.

6 Bake chicken for 45 to 50 minutes, until golden brown and cooked through. Depending on their size, breast pieces may be done slightly earlier, after about 35 to 40 minutes—if they are, remove them and put the drumsticks and thighs back in to finish cooking.

7 Serve chicken piping hot. Leftovers can be oven-reheated, but don't let them dry out.





FRANCE

I needed 15 minutes of pacing and angst-ridden rehearsal to mutter my first French words ever to a French person: “*Une gaufre au chocolat, s’il vous plaît.*”

I was on a school history trip to World War II sites in Northern France, with a bunch of fellow students baying to get tanked on cheap Orangina and a bunch of teachers equally eager for stronger bottled stuff. It was *incroyable*, all of it: getting lost in a cavernous *hypermarché*; climbing around a crumbling war bunker on a deserted beach; tasting gross French boarding house seaweed soup; goggling at the Bayeux Tapestry, 900 years old but looking fresh from a craftsman’s hands; on another beach, bumping (not literally) into the boarding house waitress sunbathing topless. (We asked her to pose with our rotund, pink-faced form teacher Mr CJ for a photo, and she obliged with sunny insouciance.)

Three other things I cannot forget. Feeling something numinous brush my mind amid Bayeux Cathedral’s shafts of light and stone. The sight of the Normandy American Cemetery’s sweeping, numberless white crosses hammering home the fact of the war in a way that the classroom never could. And, after two semesters of lip-twisting *leçons*, forcing myself to *parler français* for the reward of a chocolate-sauced gaufre, or waffle. Like my French, it was under-cooked and far from perfect, but came garnished with a glow of triumph.

Left: Autumn in a Parisian park.



Things escalated from there. My French reached conversational level, and more importantly, cookbook level. I watched chefs Michel and Albert Roux bake a golden Gateau Pithiviers at a showcase—a seminal moment on my own journey to bakerhood. I learnt to love raw-milk cheeses. I sipped cognac in Cognac, where an auberge cat brought me a mouse for breakfast.

And as I grew to love French food, it changed how I cook. In 2010, I accompanied a contingent from the Singapore Peranakan Association to Paris, to conduct cultural activities alongside an exhibition of artifacts loaned from Singapore's Peranakan Museum to the Musée Quai Branly.

For my cooking demos, I took the chance to reframe flavours from my heritage *à la française*. Peranakan nasi ulam, an aromatic herbed salad, I made with couscous instead of rice. Pineapple tarts and sago pudding I combined, de- and re-constructing them as a verrine (dessert in a glass) of tapioca pearls bathed in creamy coconut, topped with caramelised and spiced sautéed pineapple. The Parisian visitors finished every crumb.

Et enfin, to visit me at the exhibition came a French pen-friend. I'd connected with food expert and cookbook author Marie-Claire Frédéric months before via her blog, *Du Miel et Du Sel*, and we'd kept in touch ever since. Via her Singapore-based daughter and online translators, we traded thoughts and recipes, illuminating our respective gastronomic worlds for each other. Seeing her at last in person, I felt the circle close.

Here I was once again, speaking about food in French with a French person, only this time without angst, and the sure promise of *bien manger*.



Left, top to bottom: I love cheese; a cellar in Cognac; mouse for breakfast. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** a vineyard in the south; cooking at the MQB; wild mushrooms; baked custards; at the Salon du Chocolat.



MAKES ONE RICH TART,
SERVING 8 TO 12

INGREDIENTS

Crust

90 g	plain flour
90 g	cake flour
¼ tsp	salt
85 g	cold unsalted butter, diced
80 g	mature cheddar cheese
2 tbsp	ice-cold water

Filling

330 g	coconut water (see pointers)
130 g	caster sugar
20 g	cornstarch
20 g	water chestnut starch (see pointers)
85 g	coconut cream
¼ cups	coconut flesh, cut into small pieces or strands
¼ tsp	salt
1½ tbsp	unsalted butter, cut into small bits

EQUIPMENT

- a 20cm round springform tin, or loose-bottomed tart pan

POINTERS

- Coarse and granular water chestnut starch gives the tart filling a soft but faintly resilient gelled set. Look for it at Asian or Chinese grocery shops, packed in cardboard boxes. If you can't find it, substitute wheat starch, or more cornstarch, though the filling will be a bit softer.



BUKO COCONUT AND CHEDDAR TART

One thing about Filipino cooking that I find quirkily charming is how cheese can pop up almost anywhere, often played off against sweet or sour flavours. I have a compilation of winning recipes from a nationwide Filipino cooking competition in the 1980s, and cheese appears in nearly half of them. Not just in a Corned Beef Bake, a Pork Luncheon Meat Foldover, and a Wonka-worthy casserole with 50 ingredients (including nine different meats), but also in a chocolate and candied bilimbi (sour starfruit) chiffon cake, and a Rainbow Surprise Cake with fruit cocktail and coconut. In the same spirit of invention, I've turned classic Filipino buko pie—a two-crust pie filled with smooth, slippery young coconut meat—into a tart with a nippy cheddar pastry.

METHOD

1 Make tart dough. Sift plain flour, cake flour and salt into a bowl and whisk well to mix. Add butter and rub in with your fingertips until mixture resembles fine crumbs. Grate cheese as finely as possible into the bowl and toss well to mix it in. Sprinkle water over and stir with a spatula until dough comes together. Knead briefly to help it cohere into a ball, then wrap in plastic wrap, flatten into a disc and chill for at least 2 hours.

2 Sandwich dough between two sheets of baking paper. Roll it out to 3 mm thickness. Chill it again for 15 minutes. Peel off paper and transfer dough to tin. Without stretching it, gently press it across the base and at least 4.5 cm up the sides. Trim edges and prick base all over with a fork. Cover with a sheet of foil, shiny side down, pressing it flush against the dough, across the base and around the sides. Chill shell for at least 6 hours. Cut any trimmings into decorative shapes for garnish, and chill them too.

3 Preheat oven to 200°C. Place a shelf in the middle position.

4 Bake tart shell for 20 minutes. Remove foil, return shell to oven and bake for 5 to 10 minutes more, until it is well browned. Transfer pan to a rack and let shell cool completely. Place any decorative trimmings on a paper-lined baking sheet and bake for 5 to 10 minutes, until browned.

5 Make filling. Whisk coconut water, sugar, cornstarch and water chestnut starch together for 1 full minute, until smooth. Cover and let stand for 20 minutes to let the starches hydrate.

6 Strain coconut water mixture through a fine-mesh sieve into a pot, forcing through any starchy lumps. Add coconut cream, coconut flesh and salt to pot. Set pot over medium heat and stir constantly with a heatproof spatula, scraping the pot base and sides, until the mixture simmers and thickens. Taste it. It is done when the chalky

(continued on the next page)



SERVES 6 TO 8

INGREDIENTS

1	small pumpkin, about 15 to 16 cm across
180 g	medium-thick coconut milk
100 g	Thai palm sugar
¼ tsp	salt
2	eggs
2	egg yolks

EQUIPMENT

• cake pans

POINTERS

- Kabocha and kuri squash are good for this, but use whatever small pumpkin is flavourful and in season. For best results, its flesh should be no thicker than 2 cm all around, and should not be too watery or loose-textured.
- Using a pumpkin that is squat in shape, and halving it vertically instead of horizontally, yields narrow and deep cavities for the custard, which then cooks through at the same time as the pumpkin flesh. In the wide, shallow cavities of a horizontally halved pumpkin, the custard might be overcooked by the time the pumpkin is done.
- Thai palm sugar is lighter in colour and flavour than Indonesian or Malaysian palm sugar, with a honey-like timbre. If you can only get the dark kind, mix one part of it with two parts white sugar, by weight.
- If you're lucky enough to have fresh duck eggs, use 2 duck eggs in place of the 2 chicken eggs + yolks. The custard will be extra lovely.

BAKED SANGKHAYA FAK THONG

Sangkhaya fak thong, hollowed-out whole pumpkins filled with coconut custard then steamed, are common sights at Thai markets. I have seen variations with sliced pumpkin and custard simply mixed in a tray and steamed, then cut into squares. Either way, though it may taste good, the custard is often overcooked, with bubbles and grainy zones. I halve the pumpkin and bake it in a steamy oven instead, yielding a smoother custard with the bonus of a slightly caramelised top. The combination of rich egginess cradled in soft squash is deliriously lush.

METHOD

1 Preheat oven to 160°C.

Set a shelf in the middle position. Set another shelf in the lowest position, and place on it a small cake pan half-filled with boiling water, to generate humidity.

2 Halve pumpkin vertically—i.e. cleave it through its stem end and south pole. Scrape out seeds and fibres with a sharp-edged spoon, leaving walls about 2 cm thick. Place pumpkin halves in a roasting tin or shallow cake pan. If necessary, brace their undersides with crumpled foil so that they sit firmly, without rocking.

3 Combine coconut milk, palm sugar and salt in a non-stick saucepan. Stir over medium heat until very hot and sugar has dissolved. Taste it—it should be just a tad too sweet.

4 Whisk eggs and egg yolks to blend in a mixing bowl. Pour in hot coconut milk mixture gradually, whisking constantly just until smooth. Strain mixture into pumpkin halves, filling them to the brim.

5 Bake pumpkin halves on the middle shelf for 45 to 55 minutes or until custards are just set—their surfaces should be lightly browned, and a toothpick inserted into their centres should emerge damp but clean. Carefully remove pan from the oven and let pumpkins cool undisturbed.

6 Serve pumpkin warm or lightly chilled, cut into wedges, with spoons so that diners can scoop out custard and flesh together. Best eaten within 2 days of baking.





BABA BABAS

Rum babas are yeasted French cake-breads tailored to be spongy and light, the better to soak up a post-bake bath of alcoholic syrup. Polish in ancestry but Parisian in their modern form, they can be very elegant if well made.

Nonetheless, I avoided them for years, not on any particular principle—rum is my go-to liquor for booze-inflected baking—but because most renditions I'd tried were sugary and flat, hardly interesting beyond the rum itself.

My mind changed when it dawned on me that a baba could be a *multi-purpose liquid conveyance vehicle*. Why just syrup and alcohol? Why not soak it in custard? In dal? In curry? Why not add a dried-fruit core to help absorb even more liquid? Behold the power of Peranakan*-Polish-French fusion!

*'Baba' is also the masculine honorific in Peranakan Malay.



This serving plate is actually a spoon rest. Used to cradle a sauce-soaked cushion, it lets me channel every last precious drop of gravy into my waiting mouth.

SERVES 4

INGREDIENTS

200 g	water
2	cassia or cinnamon sticks, broken into small fragments
12	cardamom pods
10	cloves
½ tsp	black peppercorns
¼	nutmeg, in fragments
2½ tbsp	black tea leaves
80 g	condensed milk
250 g	milk (see pointers)
80 g	old ginger

EQUIPMENT

- 4 glasses or ramekins, each about 150 ml capacity
- an instant-read thermometer

POINTERS

- The ginger must be freshly grated and juiced—its posset-setting power wanes if it waits around. Use thick-skinned, plump-bodied old ginger.
- High-calcium, low-fat milk yields a slightly firmer posset; full-cream milk gives a more tenuous but more velvety texture, as fat weakens the gel slightly.
- To serve the possets cold, let them cool completely, cover them with plastic wrap, and chill for an hour or so. Serve them within 24 hours.

MASALA CHAI POSSET

Strictly speaking, this is an Anglo-Sino-Indian dessert. I've added masala chai's warmth to an iconic Hong Kong dessert—ginger milk pudding (hot sweetened milk mixed with freshly-squeezed ginger juice). The ginger's protease enzymes act on milk proteins to form a posset so fragile, so ethereal, that it's more like the idea of custard than actual custard—it should shiver apart into tiny, silken curds even as you dunk in the oat snaps.

METHOD

1 Combine water and all the spices in a small pot with a tight-fitting lid. Cover and bring to a simmer over low heat. Simmer for 5 minutes, then add the tea leaves, cover, and simmer very gently for 4 to 5 minutes. The infusion should be potent and aromatic.

2 Strain tea into a clean pot, pressing on the solids to extract as much liquid as possible. Add condensed milk and milk, and whisk well to blend. Set aside momentarily.

3 Scrape the skin off the ginger with the edge of a spoon. Grate ginger very finely, then squeeze out its juice. Strain the juice through a fine-mesh strainer. Place 1½ teaspoons of ginger juice in each glass.

4 Set the masala chai over medium-low heat. Monitoring it with the thermometer, bring it just up to 65°C—higher temperatures will weaken the set.



5 Ladle the chai into each glass, pouring from a height so that it mingles thoroughly with the ginger juice—do not stir once it is in the glass, as this disrupts the set. Let the possets stand undisturbed for 15 minutes, until lightly gelled. Serve immediately, while warm.

MAKES ABOUT
40 SNAPS

INGREDIENTS

90 g	unsalted butter
2 tbsp	golden syrup or maple syrup
½ tsp	salt
1 tbsp	ground coriander
55 g	sugar
1	egg white
⅛ tsp	orange extract (optional)
60 g	plain flour
½ tsp	baking powder
100 g	oatmeal (see pointers)

EQUIPMENT

- baking sheets lined with baking paper

POINTERS

- I like a medium-coarse stone-ground oatmeal—sometimes labelled 'Scottish'—for these. Alternatively, grind rolled oats to a similar consistency in a blender. Avoid steel-cut or instant oats, respectively too chunky and too insubstantial.

CORIANDER OAT SNAPS

Coriander's scorched-orange nuances suit the thin-and-crisp snap biscuit format beautifully. If possible, use lightly toasted, freshly ground coriander seeds to maximise their citrus aspect, which the orange extract further underlines.

METHOD

1 Stir butter, golden syrup and salt together in a small pot over low heat, until butter has just melted. Add coriander and stir well, then take pot off heat. Stir in sugar. Let mixture cool until tepid, then stir in egg white and orange extract.

2 Sift flour and baking powder into a mixing bowl, then add oatmeal and whisk well to blend. Scrape butter mixture into bowl and stir with a spatula to make a soft, sticky dough. Cover bowl with plastic wrap and chill dough for at least 4 hours.

3 Preheat oven to 165°C. Place a shelf in the middle position.

4 Spoon teaspoons of dough onto a baking sheet. With the back of a wet spoon, or damp fingertips, smear the dough out into oblongs about 7 cm long and 2 to 3 mm thick, leaving at least 1 cm space between them. Bake snaps in multiple batches, one sheet at a time, for about 12 minutes per batch, until deep golden brown.

5 Transfer baking sheets to racks to cool. As soon as the snaps are completely cool and crisp, transfer them to an airtight container.

(OVEN + NERD)² × GEEK = EXTRAORDINARY

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