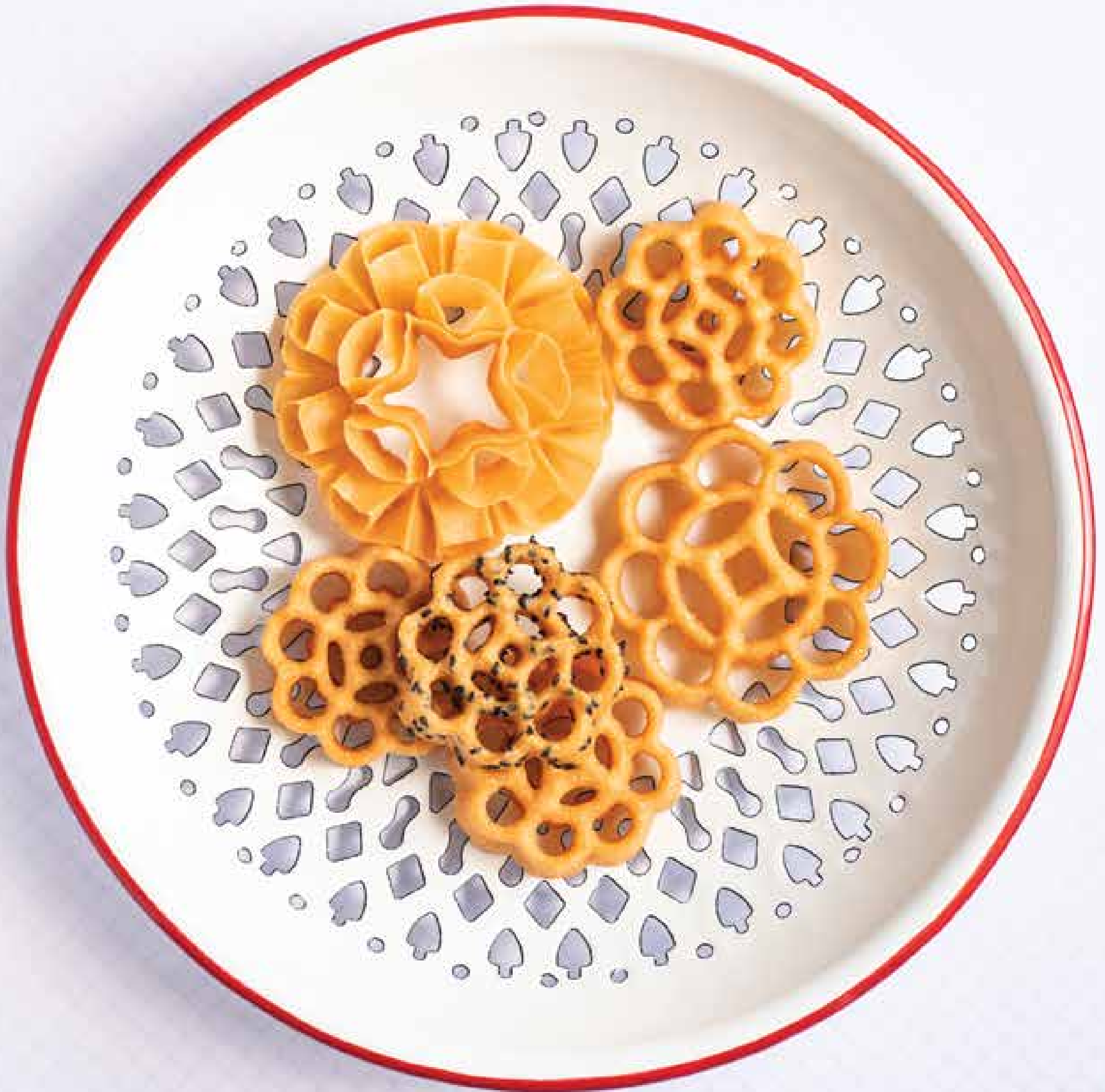
"This is a landmark...book." —Violet Oon, chef and culinary curator

THE WAY OF KUEH

SAVOURING & SAVING SINGAPORE'S HERITAGE DESSERTS



CHRISTOPHER TAN

Author of the bestselling *NerdBaker*

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Introduction

What is kueh?

The word 'kueh', loosely meaning 'cake', most probably comes from Zhangzhou, a Southern Min dialect from Fujian Province. Zhangzhou-speaking peoples were among the first Chinese to journey to and settle in Maritime Southeast Asia. Linguists theorise that as the Chinese diaspora in the region grew, local languages absorbed many Southern Min loanwords, including 'kueh', which came to refer to a diverse variety of sweet and savoury foods and snacks, mostly made with grains, tubers, fruits and nuts.

The word has been phoneticised in many ways across places, sources and times: koe, kwe, kwee, kweh, kwey, kuay, kuey, kway, koay, kuwe and kuweh can all be found in historical texts. Formally, Bahasa Indonesia now spells it 'kue', and Bahasa Melayu, 'kuih'. Its associated Mandarin character, '糕', 'gao', has also been rendered 'koh', also spelt as kou, gou, goh and go.

Throughout this book, I have used the spelling 'kueh', which was commonly used by local newspapers and many heritage cookbooks to refer to kuehs from all of Singapore's communities, for most of the 20th century.

Where I have quoted the proper names of kuehs from other countries, I have used the spellings accepted in those places—for example 'kue' for Indonesian items, and 'kuih' for Malaysian ones.

The reason for this book

My fervent hope is to encourage more of us to make kueh, that kueh traditions might not only be preserved, but revived and revitalised, to flourish into future longevity.

So many of my childhood memories centre on kueh: patting and pinching kueh tart and kueh bangket with my grandmother for Chinese New Year, fidgeting in feverish anticipation of eating them later. Chomping on a slightly stale but very fragrant kueh bahulu while staring at the family friend—the first Buddhist nun and bald lady I'd ever seen—who'd handed it to me; excitedly circling the steam-billowing trays of mangkok kueh a wandering hawker would bring to my block. I remember my mum layering kueh sarlat and my dad rolling logs of putugal. Kuehs, literally and figuratively, gave texture to my life.

I have been a food writer for a score of years and a culinary instructor for a dozen. Over this time, I have seen heritage food slowly occupy more of the national conversation, for which I am immensely thankful. I have seen more and more column inches devoted to heritage cuisine in the media and in cookbooks: I have even written some of those inches myself. However, in our public discourse, heritage food debates often focus on the death and/or revival of hawker food. This is rightly a vital topic of great concern. What is often overlooked is that hawker food, like all food, was once home food. To me, an even more pressing topic of enormous concern is the dwindling practice of home cooking, whose prognosis is uncertain and which is not receiving the triage it needs.

Compare the frenzied reaction to the rolling out of branded restaurant guides with the buzz (or more likely, subliminal hum) sparked by local cookbook releases, and you may deduce the relative importance to Singaporeans of eating out versus cooking in. From my perch as a culinary teacher, I do see people wanting to learn new recipes, but often it is the convenient, the trendy, the quick, the easy, and the novel things that they seek. The traditional, the painstaking, the local and unfamiliar—as opposed to the foreign and unfamiliar—have less pull, are less cool. The home cooking we do undertake now seems to be influenced more by restaurant trends, 'wellness' diktats, and cable TV than by our own family and community heritage.

And who could blame anyone for any of this? Singaporeans are famously cosmopolitan. The world is an exciting place, and we should indeed explore it. However, what worries me is that today's

Top: kueh tarts in the making; ***bottom****: Tan's Tu Tu (pg 64) antique tu tu kueh moulds*

cooks and consumers may spend more time curating food *encounters*, perpetually ticking off an infinitely trend-extended bucket list, instead of cultivating a food *perspective*. By the latter, I mean a coherent worldview grown from your cultural and family heritage and personal experience. A food perspective is an outlook and posture which steers your understanding of food and of your identity as a cook and an eater. It is a yearning for romance, not one-night stands.

Please take a breath, go back and re-read that last paragraph. Thank you. Do you see what I mean?

If heritage food is to survive and thrive, we must be more than curators of trends that are handed to us: we must recognise that we are all ourselves culture-makers, and responsible for the future shape of our heritage. What we recognise today as our heritage food and our 'national cuisine' was born in the homes of our forebears. What inheritance now brews in our homes for our descendants to savour?

Your taste preferences, eating habits and attitudes towards food are all shaped in the home, during the first few years of your life. You are, in a non-trivial and profound sense, what you ate. Many of the people I spoke to for this book emphasised the importance of parents consciously initiating their children into local food culture, both at the table and in the kitchen. In past eras, this was a given, out of necessity or custom. These days, more affluent and more time-pressed Singaporeans are less likely to invest time in such activities, I am told, finding it easier to capitulate to a child's immediate wants than to help them taste the bigger picture.

Says Nyonya Lee Geok Boi, cookbook author and veteran journalist: "People are quite well-to-do these days, unlike our mothers, who had to watch their dollars and cents but still wanted to give us a treat, so they took the trouble to make it themselves. For me, it's not the savings or end product, it's the *doing*." Lee made it a point to masak-masak [cook playfully] with her daughters in their youth, and hence "to this day, they both enjoy cooking, because of the happy memories. If you're very tidak apa [apathetic] about it, kids will never learn, will never see it as an enjoyable activity, which is what it must be."

To expand on a maxim of the Slow Food movement, we must not only 'eat it to save it', we must 'cook it to save it'. Food selfies and hashtags are nice, but not enough on their own to sustain food culture.

Kueh sera sera

In decades past, Singaporean families came together to make kueh on a regular basis. More than just cooking, those times were chances for relatives to catch up, affirm bonds and enjoy the delicious results of their co-labouring: no seasoning is sweeter (or healthier for you) than community.

However, as nuclear and extended families shrink, or disperse between far-flung households, communal kueh-making is becoming ever rarer. People are choosing to buy kuehs instead, delighting more in purchased variety than homemade quality.

Daniel Chia, food and wine educator and former convivium leader of Slow Food Singapore, thinks that heritage foods bought outside the home will assume a new luxury status, and in fact have already begun to. He elaborates: "There has been, for a very long time, a market segment that has wanted to enjoy traditional goodies in environments more comfortable and luxurious than hawker centres and kopitiams. So they will [survive] in more gentrified, expensive places, like hotels and upscale restaurants, as they become more uncommon at the hawker and small family business level." The latter rarity will arise from labour/rental/ingredient costs inevitably pushing prices past consumers' comfort zones and perceptions of what local food in heartland settings 'should' cost.

Azimin Saini, food journalist and founder of handmade tempeh business Tempeh Culture, agrees. "More brands are putting up elevated

versions of humble kueh and customers have been willing to pay for them. So far, these have been for very limited kueh types—often the crowd-pleasers—but I hope it will extend across the board." Lee Geok Boi likens it to the 'artisanal bread' movement happening in the US: "People will go out of their way to buy a loaf of bread...I think this will happen with kueh, it will become a niche thing."

Chia remembers that "as far back as 1988, the Hyatt was already buying kueh from Bengawan Solo for VIP guests, including royalty from neighbouring countries. Kuehs also featured in some of their buffets and banquets. Throughout the 1990s, many hotel buffets served kueh and other traditional dishes, but these began to disappear as the buffets went more upmarket in order to drive up revenues, featuring more Western, Japanese and seafood items." The current resurfacing of heritage food on many hotel menus is "a natural progression", he remarks.

Progression it may be, but is it progress? Can businesses with bottom lines and sales targets truly replicate the personality and soul of kuehs made with grandma magic and auntie power? I have my doubts, and I'm not alone. Baba Louis Chan (pg 199) and others I spoke to underlined the point that ready-made kuehs, even decent ones, were once understood by all as necessarily simplified versions of homemade kuehs, a trade-off of convenience for fidelity. Now, though, as we lose the finer points of making and appreciating kueh at home along with the last generation who knew and practised them, commercial kuehs automatically get bumped up to the perceived apex standard by consumers who simply, literally, do not know any better.

There is hope. Online sales platforms, social media and regulations friendly to small-scale, home-based businesses are helping kueh makers to find and work the sweet spot between hawker and hotel/hipster brackets. Without the worry of rental or advertising overheads, they can focus on offering homemade quality and broadcasting their heritage and mission. This may also help remind all of us that kueh really should not be saddled with that woefully oxymoronic status, 'cheap and good'. Truly excellent kueh requires no less and often more effort and attention than fancy patisserie, so "we need to raise the value of heritage food in our own eyes and thus be willing to pay more for better quality. There's no greater tragedy than seeing a customer happily pay $4.50 for a mediocre cupcake but gripe at paying $2 for three onde-onde," says Saini.

One for all, all for one

The word 'authentic' is often bandied about in food writing, but seldom qualified. It cannot be used in isolation or in an absolute sense. A food can only ever be 'authentic' to a specific context: a place, a time, a community, a family, a kitchen, a brain. The implication, at once both scary and liberating, is that cooks need not feel shackled by the authenticity of another place and time, especially if they cannot hew to it because of ingredients and equipment that cannot be duplicated or resurrected.

On the other side of the equation, we need the solidity of heritage to anchor and guide our efforts to determine what is authentic for each of us in our own time and space. Traditional recipes have endured because they distill the knowledge and craft of centuries of cooks. Without these polestars, meaning becomes arbitrary, connections garbled, satisfaction uncertain. Innovation that provokes the intellect has its place, but the soul and heart need nourishing more than the mind.

Louis Chan (pg 199) thinks: "Personally I'm not in favour of a person creating modern flavours without them even knowing what the traditional flavour was. As long as you know what it was, that will form the basis, then you can extrapolate."

Veteran domestic science teacher Madam Nancy Soh Seok Kaeng learned a dazzling variety of recipes from an Indonesian kueh expert in the 1970s. She recalls "sweet or savoury batters cooked

Vintage apom and kueh bahulu pans at Moh Teng Pheow Nyonya Koay in Penang

Devotees making yi bua (pg 144) with sweet potato skins at the Hainanese Twee Boey Teng Niang temple, on the eve of Chap Goh Mei (Spring Lantern Festival)

in clay moulds, banana leaf cases or small cups… batters made into wrappers, folded into small packages with delicious fillings." Back then, "people were resourceful, frugal, and were challenged to be creative [with] fresh-grown or foraged ingredients… for example, using different leaves to flavour, colour, shape, wrap and roll mixtures," she articulates. "Nowadays, we do not have to think or stretch our imagination—we just Google things. The challenge now is to be competitive [by] introducing flavours in the most absurd way—nasi lemak mooncake or sambal hay bee macaron?"

Kueh is special. Its virtue lies not in leaps of logic, but in the cheer of company. Its traditional techniques—grinding rice, frying fillings, kneading dough—are not meant for solo cooks. They require the arms of a family, the hands of a village, the strength of the young and the wise counsel of the elderly. This is why, once upon a time, the best and most intricate kuehs were reserved for festivals and rare occasions—not just because they took precious time to make, but because the effort itself represented precious bonds—in Malay, 'gotong royong', or kampung spirit.

Nyonya author Josephine Chia, whose autobiographical books chronicle a childhood shaped by gotong royong, says of her mother: "Even though we were very poor, she made kuehs for the neighbours, as they reciprocated during Chinese New Year, Hari Raya and Deepavali. When the dulang [tray] of goodies came to us, we would put in some sweets or sugar to say thank you and wish them a prosperous life. All our sharing generated wonderful kampung spirit." Every heritage cuisine grows out of community, diversity and shared emotion. Different palates, perspectives, senses and sensibilities are the soil, fertiliser and weather which bring a gastronomy to full maturity.

So you see, the wonderful thing about kueh is that it belongs to each of us and also to all of us. You believe that your grandma's kueh bangket was the best ever? I'll give you an amen! I believe the same of my grandma's kueh bangket, and we are both right—because both bangkets were baked with those ineluctably unique ingredients, love and family, which invalidate neither claim but elevate both kuehs, sui generis. With kueh, every 'best' is a personal best.

The recipes in this book are my interpretations of what I understand to be classic Singaporean kuehs. (My only concession to modern tastes has been to heighten flavours and lessen sweetness and stodge.) I do not present them as prescriptions to be gingerly complied with, or as puzzles to pit yourself against. Rather, I offer them as a box of conceptual crayons, as the joyful colours of our national food life, to help you create your own authentic takes on the kuehs that you cherish. For kuehs cannot live on a page: they can only breathe in your hands, in your eyes, on your tastebuds.

Because the story of kueh is forged and told in community, I met and spoke with local kueh makers from all walks of life. I also travelled to Penang to learn from exponents of kueh techniques once common in Singapore but now rare or extinct. The thoughts, memories and opinions of all these artisans pin these pages together as surely as a coconut lidi. Many of them did or do make their livings from kueh: some have walked a long road, some are taking their first steps. Some are nationally famous, some are legends in their own kitchens. All of them make, eat and think about kueh because they cannot imagine not doing so. May their sharings edify and encourage you as much as they have inspired me.

I dream of a ‘kuehnaissance’.

I dream of a day when homemade kuehs once again take pride of place on our tables, when festivals are heralded once more by flour-dusted hands, small and smooth, large and wrinkled, working together. I dream of classrooms full of students learning to wield banana leaves as blithely as they pen sonnets and code software. I yearn to see our kueh receive the kind of regard and favour already enjoyed by croissants and macarons, not just in Singapore but around the world. This can all happen, if we want it to.

This, then, is the Way of Kueh:

a way to exercise your creativity; a way to hone your senses; a way to celebrate special occasions and heed the passing of the year; a way to lovingly strum bonds with family and friends; a way to find coherence and meaning in a fractured, fractious world; a way to bless others; a way to hallow times past, enjoy the present, and sow seeds for the future. Won’t you join me on this way?

Clockwise from top left: *Haig Road putu piring photo op, putu piring, kueh lompang merah and kueh cara manis, kueh keria*

Malay Kueh

Singapore's Malay community is historically braided from groups of different ethnic heritage and provenance from across Nusantara, the Malay Archipelago. Chief among them are: Malays indigenous to Singapore itself and its offshore islands; Malays from Johor and other states further north in the peninsula; Malay, Minangkabau and Batak peoples from Sumatra; Javanese from Java; Baweanese (Boyanese) from Pulau Bawean; Buginese from Sulawesi; Banjarese from Kalimantan; and Arabs, mainly from the Yemen region. Malay kuehs in Singapore may display influences from all the above heritages, varying widely among families. Those sold commercially usually span only the most common or most popular items, which have come to be seen as 'pan-Malay'.

The prime annual occasion for making and enjoying kueh is Hari Raya Puasa (Eid al-Fitr), which concludes the fasting month of Ramadan. During Ramadan, food bazaars and stores usually offer kueh selections much wider than the everyday. Special kuehs may appear at ceremonial feasts called kenduri, held on milestone occasions such as weddings, births and so on. The communal labour of preparing a kenduri's food and other elements is called rewang, and is an important expression of solidarity taken on by the host's family and extended family. The preparation and the feasts are together valued as meaningful ways of honouring and strengthening familial and social ties, and handing down culture.

Broad categories of Malay kueh include: kueh basah ('wet' kuehs with moist textures, typically cooked on the stovetop); kueh kering ('dry' kuehs, typically baked or deep-fried); kueh kukus (steamed); kueh talam (cooked or set in trays); kueh bakar (baked); kueh lapis (steamed or baked in layers); and kueh apam (leavened by yeast or baking powder). Traditional kuehs are made chiefly from coconut, legumes, rice and tuber starches, while modern recipes are more likely to call on wheat flour.

Top: *putu bambu*; **bottom**: *abuk-abuk sagu*

Chinese Kueh

The largest waves of Chinese migrants to Singapore, in the 1800s and early 1900s (and likely earlier, smaller migrations also) were chiefly composed of people from Fujian and Guangdong—primarily Hokkien, Cantonese, and Teochew and Hakka, with smaller numbers of Hainanese, Foochow, Henghua and Hockchia. Each group brought their cuisine with them.

Canton, Rosedale & Morris' survey (pg 43) shows that by 1940 at least, all these dialect groups were represented among hawkers. Of all the Chinese items recorded, those sold by Cantonese hawkers ran the widest gamut, though most were pastry, bread or biscuit items: those which have survived to the present now dwell in dim sum eateries, small bakeries, and snack stalls. The majority of the Chinese kuehs sold at local hawker centres and shops today are of Teochew origin—soon kueh, png kueh, chwee kueh, chai tau kueh and so on—with ang koo kueh being the item most commonly identified as Hokkien. That said, many of the above call for batters, skins, fillings and star ingredients which could be considered pan-Fujian or pan-Chinese (for instance, ah balling or wu tau koh).

Southern Chinese kuehs are primarily based on rice and glutinous rice, tubers and tuber starches, legumes, vegetables and herbs: they use wheat less extensively than northern Chinese snacks. Chinese kueh traditions were established in accordance with the yearly cycle of the seasons, the Taoist/Buddhist religious calendar, ancestor veneration, and major life events such as weddings, the birth of children, and milestone birthdays. While these still have a role in governing how kuehs are consumed in modern-day Singapore, most kuehs are now eaten year-round. Rare kuehs like Hakka ban and Hainanese bua are predominantly found in private homes or at clan/temple events.

Top: *muah chee*; **bottom**: *black sesame ah balling*

Peranakan Kueh

Singapore's Peranakan* community are descended from Chinese immigrants to the peninsula who married wives from the region. Linguistic features of Baba-Nyonya patois (see below) suggest that at least some of those wives were Indonesian, though we know precious little else about them. The community's members usually refer to themselves as Baba-Nyonya, 'Baba' being the male honorific, 'Nyonya' the female.

Baba-Nyonya culture combines Chinese elements with influences from Malay, Indonesian, and colonial cultures, all of which are discernible in its kuehs. Many Peranakan kuehs carry symbolic meanings which dictate their serving context and their ritual or ceremonial presence. For example, according to Baba Kang, a pak andam (wedding adviser) from Melaka, at Melaka Peranakan weddings, goreng pisang and apom bokwah represent the groom and bride respectively, while the layers of kueh genggang (pg 230) portend many future generations of the new family.

Baba-Nyonya patois, a creole blending Malay, Indonesian and Chinese dialect terms, traditionally spells and pronounces many words differently from their Bahasa Melayu counterparts: for example, Peranakan 'pulot' and Malay 'pulut'. Gender also has an impact: words which Babas pronounce with a final 'ah' sound, Nyonyas modify to end in 'air'. Hence, as Baba William Gwee (pg 166) describes, "Kueh tart becomes 'kueh tair', kueh dadar becomes 'kueh dadair'. The 'air' sound is more ladylike," possibly because it requires only a half-opened, not gaping, mouth. Less clear is why some Peranakans say 'kutu' instead of 'putu'—'kutu piring', 'kutu mayam'.

**'Peranakan', which translates as 'native-born', can also refer to other people groups. Within the focus of this book, it is used interchangeably with 'Baba-Nyonya' for reasons of space and to sidestep awkward grammar constructions. I have also used Baba patois spelling when labelling or mentioning specifically Peranakan kuehs.*

Kueh pie tee

Multi-petalled bunga telang

Eurasian Kueh

Singapore's Eurasian community is small but richly variegated in heritage, with Portuguese, Dutch, British, Indian, Indonesian, Malay, Chinese and Burmese roots. Its cuisine laces together influences from all of the above. Desserts span Western-style items such as suji cake, torte cake, and fruit cake with almond paste and royal icing, as well as kuehs of Malay and Indonesian origin, like kueh koci, pulut inti and kueh dodol. "Eurasians usually make kuehs for tea," says Chef Damian D'Silva (pg 234), "And they're very particular about what time tea should be had. Always 4pm for my dad." Many signature recipes skilfully assimilate both east and west, such as pineapple tarts and toddy-raised bluder.

The community, and also the Portuguese-Malay patois spoken by many of its members, is also known as Kristang, an old Malay word for 'Christian'. The Catholic calendar's Easter, Christmas and feast days traditionally steered the making and eating of Eurasian kuehs and goodies. For example, at Christmas, Mary Gomes' mother (pg 216) would make bajeh, the Eurasian cousin of kueh wajik: "It was a bit chewy, but soft. She steamed glutinous rice halfway, then cooked it with thick coconut milk and white sugar until dry. She would put it on a plate lined with banana leaf cut into a pattern."

The historical proximity of Malay, Eurasian, Chinese Peranakan and Chetti communities in Melaka, a hub for all of these cultures, has led to their cuisines having many kuehs and other dishes in common.

Kueh tart

Kueh bakar

Indian Kueh

While the word 'kueh' has not been colloquially adopted by most of Singapore's Indian community, it does hold meaning for one segment of Singaporean Indians: the Chetti (also spelt Chitty or Chetty) Melakans, also known as Peranakan Indians. They are descended from South Indian merchants who migrated to Malaya during the Melaka Sultanate era in the 15th century, settling in Melaka and marrying local women (likely Malay, Chinese, Javanese and Batak). Singapore's Chetti community was seeded from Melaka over the 19th and early 20th centuries.

While they retained their Hindu religion, the Chettis adopted local modes of food, dress and language, speaking Malay at home and wearing sarong kebaya. Only served in private homes in Singapore, Chetti Peranakan cuisine is quite similar to Peranakan Chinese cuisine, with many of the same recipe types, names and preparation methods, but excluding pork dishes. Chetti kuehs closely parallel Baba-Nyonya and Malay kuehs, including items such as kueh tart, pulut tekan, sesagun, kueh koci, kueh bahulu, kueh bongkong and kueh dodol. Many are traditionally used for offerings at Chetti religious ceremonies and weddings. Certain details of some Chetti rituals, notably those pertaining to filial piety and prayers for ancestors, resemble Chinese Peranakan practices.

About The Recipes

After a long look at Singapore's kueh history and current kueh zeitgeist—what locals are (or are not) eating, craving, selling, buying, and making at home—I have chosen 98 classic kueh recipes to feature. The majority of them have common names including the word 'kueh' (or 'gao' or 'koh'). Also included are some items not named thus, but whose elements, flavour profiles, cooking methods or serving context place them within the kueh camp, for example putu mayam. Some are humble and everyday, some are elaborate and exalted: many are still common; many are now rare. A few are nearly extinct, but much too good to be forgotten. Concluding the book are a few original creations which embody my ideas of how kueh innovation might unfold.

I have created all these recipes from the ground up, aiming to make them as unambiguous and achievable as possible in a home kitchen, without sacrificing traditional tastes.

I have avoided artificial colours and essences, emulsifiers and unnecessary additives. I do not believe any of these are key to making good kueh.

Where different versions of a kueh exist, I have chosen the most familiar or most widely appreciated incarnation, or volunteered the version from my own family heritage vault, for example my grandma's lor pak koh.

I have not slavishly insisted on old tools or old methods—except where they are manifestly superior to modern alternatives or so-called shortcuts.

I have taken the liberty of tweaking tradition in those instances where modern savvy can add some polish.

Some kuehs are not within these pages simply because their extreme rarity means I have not yet amassed enough research or direct experience to properly do them justice—Nyonya kueh bijan, Malay bantal raja, Eurasian bajeh. Others are absent because their inclusion would open the floodgates to another domain. For example, I could not tackle kueh chang babi (Nyonya bak chang) in good conscience while omitting all the other wrapped rice cakes like larp, ketupat, lemang, burasak and such, which on their own could fill another entire book. Likewise, Chinese piah, mooncakes, and wet desserts like cendol must wait for another day.

Rice mill

General Tips For Success

Begin by reading the ingredient and equipment glossaries, and the basic techniques section, to familiarise yourself with the fundamentals.

Before embarking on it, read through a recipe several times to understand the process and step sequence.

The first time you make a recipe, follow it exactly as written, to grasp and experience the intention behind it. Every detail has been tested and is there for a good reason—nothing is arbitrary. Once you understand the kueh, then you can freestyle all you want.

A note on ambient conditions: 'room temperature' means 28 to 34°C, typical for a non-air-conditioned Singapore home kitchen; 'cool room temperature' means 24 to 28°C.

Ang koo kueh

One of the most common questions I field as a culinary teacher is 'how long can this keep?'. Virtually all kuehs were created and evolved during the pre-electric era, and hence nearly all of them are meant to be enjoyed as fresh as possible, or within a day at the very most. Many starchy kuehs also turn unpalatably firm when chilled. Our schedules and wants have changed, but the (additive-free) kuehs have not—be mindful of this, to avoid later disappointment.

The exceptions to the above are kuehs with low moisture and/or high sugar levels: kueh dodol, kueh rose, sesagun, and so on. Even these, however, are better consumed sooner than later.

The top five habits that will immediately improve your homemade kueh: measure everything precisely with a digital weighing scale, soak your rice flours (pg 34), hand-squeeze your santan (pg 34), fry your flours (pg 34) when needed, and lastly, be patient and persevere in the faith that all sincere and careful effort will be rewarded.

I wish you every joy in your kueh endeavours.

Clockwise from top left: Thai skinned split mung beans, Mongolian skinned split mung beans, roasted mung bean powder for kueh koya, roasted Mongolian mung beans, Indian split skin-on mung beans, small Australian mung beans, large Australian mung beans, Indian skinned split mung beans, and Myanmar skinned split mung beans (in the centre)

Clockwise from top left: red yeast rice, white sesame seeds, black sesame seeds, raw peanuts, red beans, semolina (suji), large sago pearls, small sago pearls, and water chestnut starch (in the centre)

Dried Ingredients

Mung beans (kacang hijau, moong dal, lu dou, lek tau) are the most ubiquitous legume in kueh-making. Their colour, size and flavour intensity can vary widely depending on their source and terroir. When fully and properly cooked, their aroma turns from musty and 'green' to nutty, almost milky.

Red beans (kacang merah, hong dou, ang tau, azuki) are a dessert staple across East Asia, in whole or paste form. They are mild, sweet and earthy, with a hint of bitterness.

Peanuts (kacang tanah, hua sheng) are best bought raw and roasted (pg 35) only when needed.

Dried spices, whole or powdered, or blends, should be bought in small amounts and used up fast.

Nuts and legumes become drier and harder as they age, so buy the freshest you can get and use them up promptly. Store all the above in airtight vessels, legumes in a cool, dry cupboard, and nuts in the fridge (but beware of condensation forming).

Malay and Indonesian cooks would traditionally cook and/or pound **candlenuts** (buah keras) to extract oil for greasing and seasoning kueh moulds, among other uses. The nuts keep for several months in the freezer.

Oil-rich black and white **sesame seeds** (bijan, zhi ma) slowly turn rancid at tropical room temperature, so keep them in airtight packages in the fridge or freezer.

Dried shrimp (udang kering, hay bee) keep best in tightly-sealed bags in the freezer.

Alkaline Agents

The Asian kitchen uses a few different alkaline ingredients as texture modifiers. They grant kuehs a resilient springiness and a distinctive fragrance/flavour that is an acquired taste.

Slaked lime or limestone paste (kapur sirih in Malay) is calcium hydroxide, sold as tubs of white paste at wet market dry-goods stalls. It is traditionally made by roasting seashells to obtain calcium oxide (quicklime), which is slaked by mixing with water. Thai groceries sell a pink version (bpoon daeng) whose colour comes from added turmeric. Kapur may be added directly to a mixture, or dissolved in water to yield a saturated alkaline solution.

Alkaline balls, solid white or yellow lumps of alkali sold at wet market dry-goods stalls, are also called 'abu chang' in Malay or 'kee' in Hokkien. Usually unlabelled, their chemical makeup is likely some combination of carbonates and/or bicarbonates. Crushed and dissolved in water, they yield a saturated alkaline solution (air abu in Malay, jian shui in Mandarin) used to make kee chang (Chinese alkaline rice dumplings), kueh lopes and other items.

Alkaline water, a ready-made bottled version of jian shui, is a solution of one or more alkalis: sodium carbonate, sodium bicarbonate and potassium bicarbonate are the most common. It is sometimes confusingly labelled 'lye water', despite not containing lye.

Soda ash is impure sodium carbonate made from the ashes of burnt plants, dissolved in water to make old-school alkaline water. Many plants are used around the world: seaweed, mugwort, lychee wood, pea husks, durian shells. Canton, Rosedale & Morris (pg 43) mention soybean plant ash.

Alkalis now banned for home food use in Singapore include **lye**, sodium hydroxide, a caustic chemical reserved for industrial and commercial purposes, and **borax** (peng sha), sodium borate, formerly used to give noodles, prawns, meatballs and some kuehs springy textures. Both are sometimes confused with the legal alkalis.

Clockwise from top left: Filipino alkaline water, Chinese alkaline water, kapur sirih, Thai red slaked lime, yellow alkaline ball, white alkaline ball

Kueh Kaswi

MAKES ONE 20 CM TRAY OF KUEH

batter

110 g cake flour
35 g tapioca starch
10 g sago starch
350 g water
1½ tsp alkaline water
¼ tsp salt

syrup

190 g finely shaved gula melaka, or muscovado sugar, or a mix
310 g water
25 g pandan leaves, cut into 1 cm shreds

wilted banana leaf for lining pan
150 g salted grated coconut (pg 36)

Cake flour lends this Malay-style kaswi a faintly softer, creamier set than cup-steamed kueh lompang/kosui (pg 46). The name kaswi/kasui/kosui is a little mysterious, as it has no clear meaning in either Malay or Chinese dialects. Some have proposed that it derives from 'kansui' (alkaline water).

1. Start the batter. Sift cake flour, tapioca starch and sago starch together into a bowl. Gradually whisk in water to make a smooth batter. Whisk in alkaline water and salt. Cover and set aside.
2. Get your steamer ready. Line the base of a 20 cm square cake pan, at least 4 cm deep, with a wilted banana leaf square, shiny side up. Lightly rub leaf with oil.
3. Make syrup. Combine gula melaka, water and pandan in a pot. Bring to a simmer over medium heat, stirring to dissolve sugar. Strain into a bowl, pressing on pandan to extract all the syrup.
4. Slowly whisk syrup into batter. Pour batter back into the pot, then stir slowly with a spatula over low heat until it thickens into a runny custard. Strain batter into lined pan. Steam over medium heat for 21 to 23 minutes, until an inserted toothpick comes out damp but clean.
5. Remove pan from steamer and let kueh cool completely. To serve, cut kaswi into pieces with a plastic knife and roll them in the salted grated coconut. This is best enjoyed as fresh as possible. It will keep in a covered container in the fridge for up to 36 hours, but will firm up as it chills.

***Top:** Kueh Awol Awol; **bottom:** Kueh Kaswi*

Ma Tai Koh

马蹄糕

MAKES ONE 20 CM SQUARE TRAY OF KUEH

starch slurry

225 g water chestnut starch
600 g water

syrup

650 g water
330 g sugar (see Notes)
25 g pandan leaves, cut into 1 cm shreds

200 g peeled fresh water chestnuts, cut up (see Notes)
15 g lard

more lard or oil for greasing pan

A Cantonese treat, mandatory for Chinese New Year along with lor pak koh (pg 52) and wu tau koh (pg 50). Mostly found in dim sum restaurants, it is easy to make at home.

1. Make starch slurry. Whisk water chestnut starch and water together until smooth, cover and let stand for 20 minutes.
2. Get your steamer ready. Lightly grease the base and sides of a 20 cm square cake pan, at least 5 cm deep, with lard or oil. (You can alternatively use two loaf pans, each of 1 litre capacity.)
3. Make syrup. Combine water, sugar and pandan in a pot, cover and cook over low heat, stirring occasionally, until sugar completely dissolves and mixture just reaches a simmer.
4. Strain syrup into a clean pot and set over medium heat. Add water chestnuts and lard, and bring everything to a full but gentle boil. Switch off the heat, cover and let the syrup sit for 2 minutes.
5. Give starch slurry a good whisk, then pour it into the pot in a *very* slow, thin stream while stirring constantly with a spatula. Batter will rapidly thicken into an opaque gloop. Turn on heat to low, and stir batter constantly until it thickens into a creamy, custard-like paste.
6. Scrape paste into the greased tin. Steam for 20 to 25 minutes over medium heat, until koh is translucent and fully cooked.
7. Transfer pan to a rack to cool. The koh will shrink and pull away from the pan sides as it cools, and should then unmould smoothly. Serve while still warm and soft. Alternatively, let it cool completely, cover with plastic wrap and chill for at least 3 hours, then cut it into 1.5 cm thick slabs. Dust slabs with fine sugar, then pan-fry over medium-high heat in a little lard or oil, until lightly caramelised and crisp-edged. Serve hot. Finish it up within 2 days, the sooner the better.

Notes

- The koh's colour comes from the sugar you use. White sugar makes it a very pale green; yellow rock sugar, greenish gold; demerara sugar, a deeper gold; and peen tong (pg 27), which I've used here, a moss-gold tint and resonant flavour.
- For a rustic look and mouthfeel, put the water chestnuts in a bag and gently bash them into pea-sized bits with a rolling pin. For the elegant look shown here, cut them into thin slices instead.
- The freshly steamed koh can also be rolled in steamed grated coconut to serve.

***Clockwise from top:** pan-fried Mee Sua Kueh (pg 53), freshly steamed Ma Tai Koh, freshly steamed Mee Sua Kueh, pan-fried Ma Tai Koh*

Kueh Keria

MAKES 12 TO 14 KUEHS

500 g	orange-fleshed sweet potatoes
as needed	plain flour
½ tsp	fine salt
oil for deep-frying	

syrup for coating

80 g	sugar
50 g	water

'Keria' means cheerful in Bahasa Melayu, and indeed few things inspire the same joy as a freshly fried and sugared kueh keria, a beloved Ramadan snack. Babas sometimes spell it 'kueh kuria'. These were a family favourite in my childhood.

1. Roast whole, unpeeled sweet potatoes in a preheated oven at 175°C until cooked through. Let cool slightly, then cut into chunks and press through a potato ricer. Discard skins and any fibres.
2. Let mash cool completely, then weigh it. Calculate 20% of the mash's weight, and measure out this much plain flour. For example, for 400 g mash, weigh out 80 g flour. Knead mash, flour and salt together into a clay-like dough, soft and only slightly tacky, adding a little more flour if needed (too much flour makes keria stodgy).
3. With flour-dusted hands and a dough scraper, divide dough into 35 to 40 g portions. Roll each one into a ball, flatten it slightly, and poke a hole through it with your finger **(a)**.
4. Heat oil for deep-frying in a pan over medium heat. It should be at least 5 cm deep.
5. When the oil is hot enough that a dipped-in toothpick tip sizzles gently, slip a few keria into the oil (fry them in batches to avoid crowding). They should sizzle steadily but not violently. Fry kuehs for 6 to 8 minutes, stirring and flipping occasionally, until they rise up in the oil, form a thin crust and puff slightly **(b)**. The oil should not get too hot, or kuehs might burst. As each one turns done, transfer it to a rack to drain.
6. Make the sugar glaze. Combine sugar and water in a wok or frying pan, bring to a simmer over medium heat, and cook until glassy round 'fish eye' bubbles form **(c)**. Add warm kueh keria to the pan and turn them gently in the syrup, stirring and flipping until the sugar re-crystallises into crisp white coats. Transfer kuehs to a rack and let cool.
7. These are best eaten warm and fresh. Finish them up before humidity dampens their sugar crusts.

Notes

- Kueh keria can be made with purple-fleshed sweet potatoes. As these have drier flesh, steam them instead of roasting, and use only 15% of the mash's weight in plain flour.
- For a caramel-flavoured brown sugar crust, use a mix of 55 g gula melaka and 25 g white sugar. It will not stay crystalline as long as a pure white sugar crust.

***Top and right:** white and black Getas Getas (pg 94);*
***left and centre:** purple and orange Kueh Keria*

Pulot Tartar

Pulot tekan, pulot tatal, pulot tai tai

MAKES ONE 20 CM TRAY OF PULOT

pulot

550 g	glutinous rice
70	dried or fresh bunga telang (pg 30)
75 g	boiling water
25 g	pandan leaves, knotted
360 g	coconut milk
1⅛ tsp	fine salt
1⅛ tsp	sugar
6 to 7	large pieces of wilted banana leaf

brown parcel paper

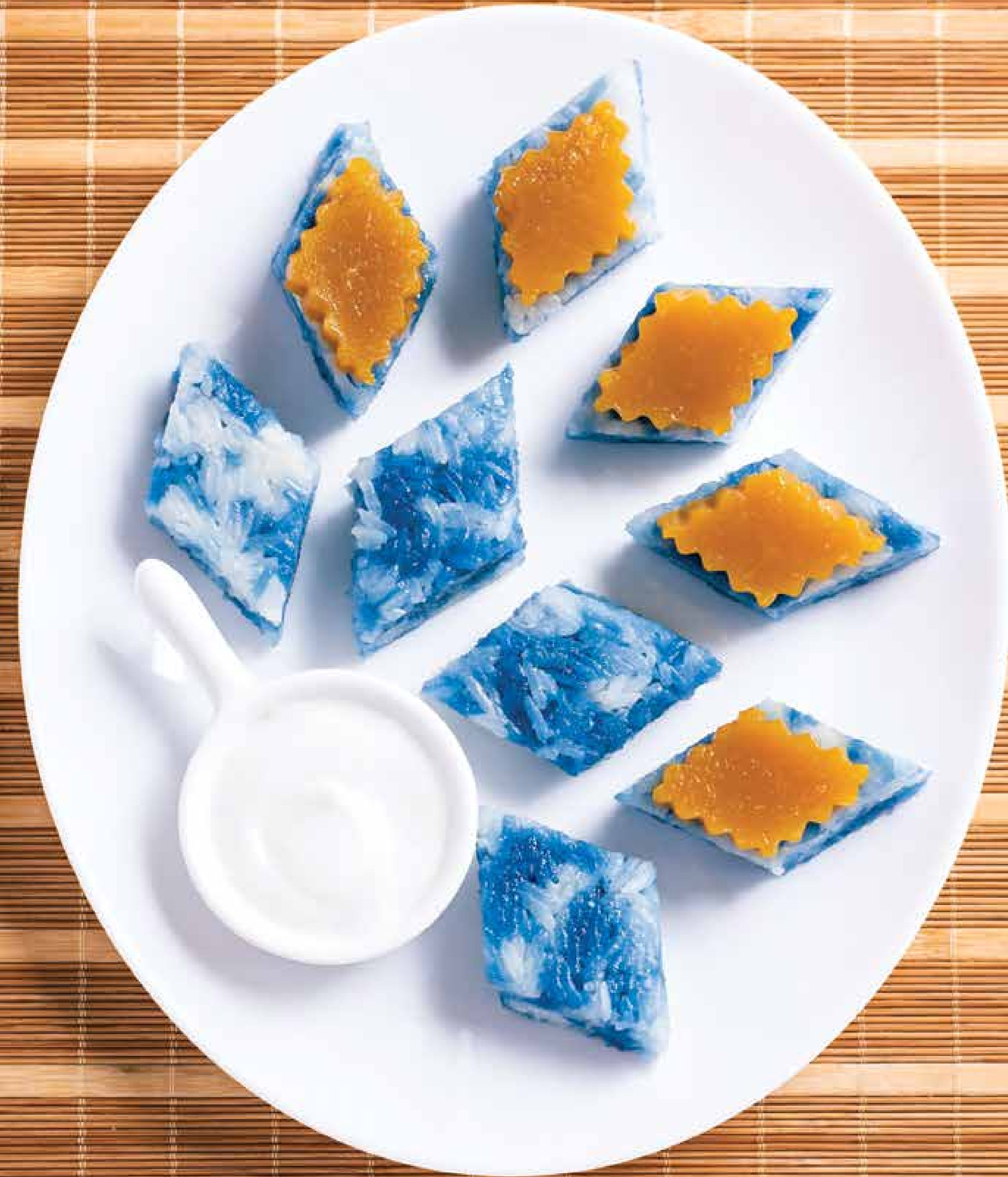
sauce

15 g	cornstarch
5 g	rice flour
45 g	water
330 g	coconut milk
½ tsp	sugar
¼ tsp	fine salt
15 g	pandan leaves, knotted

This Peranakan classic traditionally compresses the rice under heavy weights within a wooden frame with a loose base and cover. (The wooden frame and process are shown on pages 142-143.) Similar to Japanese oshizushi (pressed sushi) moulds but made of denser hardwood, such frames must be custom carpentered and are now very rare. Just pressing the rice into cake pans or plastic sushi rice moulds cannot give it the right solidity. My solution: a square, bottomless flan ring (entremet mould) made of heavy stainless steel, plus a straight-sided one-piece cake pan that fits very snugly inside the ring. Look for both at baking supply shops. In Singapore, coconut sauce was once the preferred garnish, but today has largely been supplanted by Serikaya (pg 248), which is the norm in Penang and Melaka.

1. Wash glutinous rice well, drain, cover with 3 cm water and let soak for 4 hours at room temperature.
2. Combine bunga telang with half the boiling water, cover and let steep for 15 minutes. Squeeze out and set aside the blue juice. Repeat steeping and squeezing with the same flowers and remaining boiling water. Combine all the juice, strain and measure out 55 g.
3. Cover a large, solid chopping board with 2 sheets of brown paper. Place a 20 cm square flan ring (see above) on top. Line base and sides of flan ring with a double layer of banana leaves **(a)**, leaving a sizeable overhang. Also cut out a 20 cm leaf square.
4. Get your steamer ready. Line a steamer tray with a damp cloth.
5. Drain rice and spread over cloth. Nestle knotted pandan in rice. Steam for 15 minutes over medium-high heat. Meanwhile, whisk 255 g of the coconut milk with salt and sugar.
6. Transfer rice and pandan to a wide, shallow dish or cake pan. Drizzle half the seasoned coconut milk over and mix gently. Steam for 6 minutes, then drizzle and mix in remaining seasoned coconut milk. Steam for 6 minutes more, until grains are only just tender.
7. Discard pandan knot. Place a generous ⅓ of the rice in a bowl and mix in bunga telang juice until combined, then stir in 30 g of the remaining (unseasoned) coconut milk. Mix the remaining rice with the last 75 g (unseasoned) coconut milk. Spoon blue and white rice back into the pan, marbling them together. Steam for a final 10 to 12 minutes to cook the coconut milk.
8. Spoon hot rice into the leaf-lined ring, spreading it evenly and compacting it tightly. Lay the banana leaf square on the rice, shiny side down. Press on it with a kueh lapis press (pg 238) or any flat, heavy tool, to smoothen rice further. Fold over the overhanging leaves from the sides.

Continued overleaf



From left: *Rempah Udang (pg 148), Pulut Inti (pg 146) and Kueh Dadar (pg 95)*

KUEH CULTURE

Leaf Wrappers

Before metal, ceramic, plastic and paper became easier and cheaper to procure, leaves were the materials of choice for cooking and packaging kueh and foods. These are just some of the leaf types used in our region.

The **areca palm's** fallen leaves have dry, broad ribbed sheaths at their bases. These are the 'opeh leaves' once commonly used to parcel up hawker dishes like chai tau kueh and fried noodles, and kuehs like kueh dodol. Modern packaging companies now compact and trim opeh to make eco-friendly disposable serveware (like the plate on page 113).

Arenga, nira and nipa palm leaves are used to wrap blocks of palm sugar made from their flower sap.

Banana leaves are used for many kuehs because they are thin, flexible, can contribute aroma and colour to foods cooked in them, and contain antioxidant and antimicrobial compounds which help food to stay fresh for longer. Pisang batu and pisang kepok leaves are traditionally favoured.

Bamboo leaves are used to wrap rice dumplings and package some kueh dodol types, while slim bamboo cane sections are used for putu bambu (pg 209) and larger canes for lemang rice. Bamboo fibre is woven into baskets and trays.

The **coconut palm's** young yellow-green leaf fronds are woven into cases for glutinous rice dumplings like Malay ketupat and Hainanese larp, and in Hainan are used to wrap yi bua (pg 144). They are tightly spiralled into skinny conical cases for kue clorot in Indonesia and kuih selorot in Sarawak. More mature fronds are used for lepat pulut and otak-otak. The leaf ribs are dried and split to make lidis, thin sticks used to pin and secure leaf wrappings.

Thin but strong **corn** husks bestow their gentle, sweet scent on food cooked in them.

Jackfruit tree leaves are shaped into cups or cones to hold various kinds of South Indian steamed dumplings, usually rice-based. In Hainan, they are sometimes used to wrap yi bua.

Lotus leaves, fresh or dried, are used to wrap Chinese rice dumplings and dishes.

Nyireh tree leaves in East Malaysia and Brunei are used to infuse a pleasantly distinctive tea-like fragrance into glutinous rice dumplings called kelupis, and other dishes.

The **palas palm** has feathery, fan-shaped leaves used to wrap ketupat and lepat kacang (sticky rice and bean dumplings), and in Terengganu, kueh dodol.

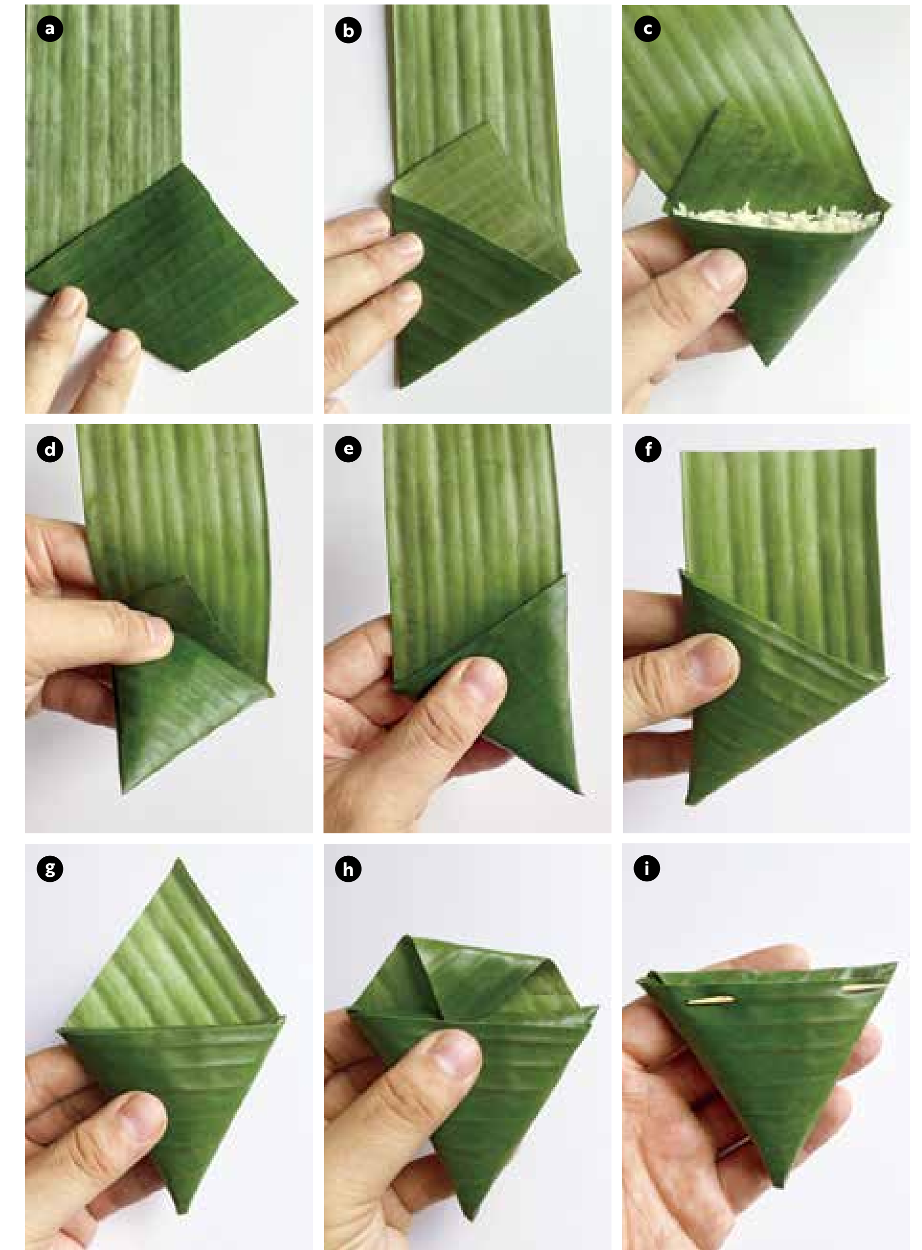
Giant **pandan** leaves (also called mengkuang) are most familiarly used in Singapore to wrap traditional Nyonya kueh chang (rice dumplings). In South India they are coiled into cases for steamed rice cakes called moode.

Pomelo leaves are used by Hakkas as a base for steamed ban.

Rambai tree leaves are folded into cups for steaming apam in Negeri Sembilan.

Rubber tree leaves are traditionally used to wrap tapai.

Simpoh ayer leaves are used to wrap tempeh and tapai, and in past decades, some hawker food items.



Notes

- To make gula melaka syrup, melt chopped gula melaka with some cut-up pandan leaves and a splash of water, simmer until reduced to a thick syrup, and strain. All quantities are to taste.
- The tighter you compact the soaked rice into the leaf pouch, the firmer the lopes will be. The pouch should be taut but not overly bulging with rice, or its corners may gape and leak.
- Some traditional recipes secure the lopes with looped and tied reeds or string **(j)** instead of toothpicks. In any event, the best safeguard against leaks or ruptures is tight shaping.
- You can also shape cylindrical kueh lopes, as for Rempah Udang (pg 148) but four to five times larger. Tie their ends with string (like a sausage), boil as above, then unwrap and slice to serve. This style is typical of Kedah and Banjarmasin, where lupis is tinted green with pandan juice.

About the Author

Christopher Tan (www.foodfella.com) is an award-winning writer, cooking instructor and photographer. He has been a commentator on and chronicler of food, culture and heritage for publications such as Singapore's *Sunday Times* and *Straits Times*, *The Peak*, and America's *Saveur* magazine. He has given talks and demonstrations at Singapore's National Museum, Peranakan Museum and National Library, the Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley, Paris' Le Musée Quai Branly, The Sydney International Food Festival, and at the annual Kueh Appreciation Day organised by Slow Food Singapore, the local chapter of the international grassroots association devoted to preserving heritage food and culture. He has authored and co-authored numerous cookbooks, most recently *NerdBaker*, a memoir-cum-baking book, and *Peacetime Kitchen*, about wartime foodways.

Christopher teaches cooking, baking and kueh classes regularly at The Kitchen Society in Singapore. Find him on Instagram at @thewayofkueh.

"There is no future without respect for the past and Christopher Tan's detailed ode to the treasures of Singapore's kueh heritage provides the first definitive tome featuring the history and culture of kueh, the authentic culinary techniques and complete recipes. This is a landmark academic and yet folksy food and recipe book for Singapore and culinarians around the world."

—Violet Oon, chef and culinary curator

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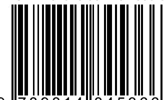
COOKBOOK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