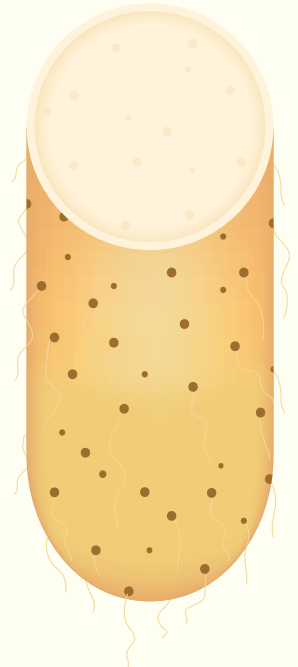
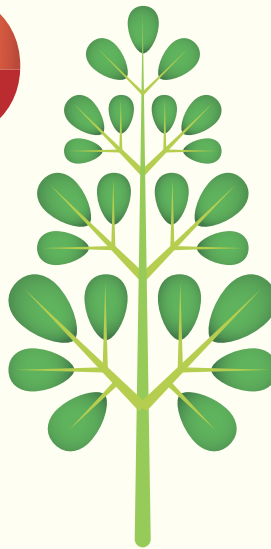
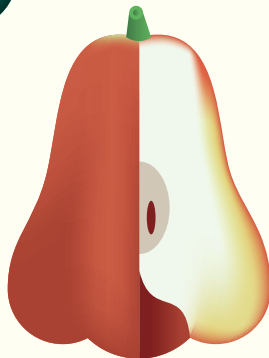
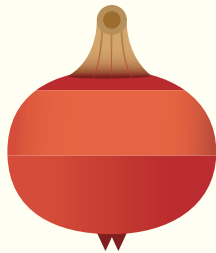
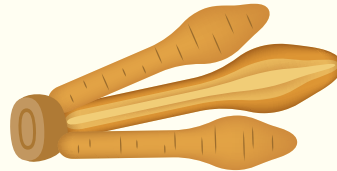
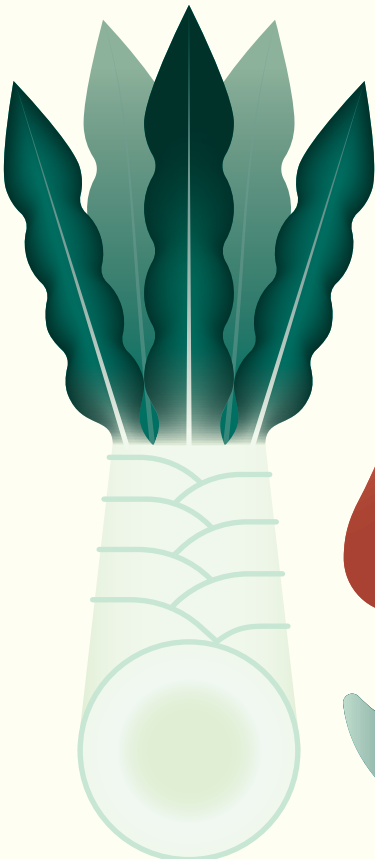


wet market to table

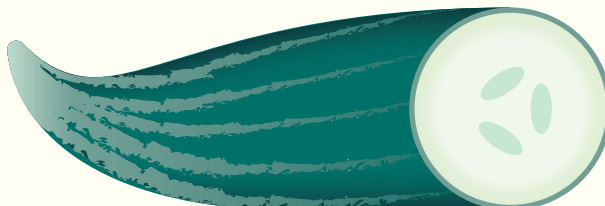
a modern approach
to fruit & vegetables

“Gem of a book”

—Willin Low, chef-owner of
Relish by Wild Rocket



pamelia chia







wet
market
to table

This book is dedicated to my mother, Amy Cheong, who used to take me to the markets when I was little. Those memories of me gnawing on a slab of char siu while you shopped will stay with me.

wet market to table

a modern approach
to fruit & vegetables

pamelia
chia

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foreword

by Malcolm Lee, chef and owner of
the Michelin-starred Candlenut

Pamelia.

This is the girl who almost burned down Candlenut by placing a piece of lit charcoal back in a bag of fresh charcoal to extinguish it. The cook who flipped a cincalok omelette over her body and shoes. The Pam who has left an indelible mark on the Candlenut family, which affectionately knows her as “Ah Pam”.

When Pam started working at Candlenut, her professional kitchen work was dreadful and below expectations. But through sheer grit and determination, she has grown exponentially and within a year, this petite girl was able to singlehandedly helm the curry and charcoal grill sections, alongside the burly boys in the kitchen!

I have always believed that Pam would write about food—she has a gift for words, an innate curiosity and a sincere love for food. She simply loves to cook and always desires to cook the best for the ones she feeds. I have had the great pleasure of savouring her delicious staff meals, from her laabs and curries to appams and son-in-law eggs. The heart and attention to detail that go into her cooking continually impress me. Like her cooking, this book is an expression of Pam’s raw, sincere, pure energy and infectious passion for what she loves.

Local wet markets have been, and continue to be, the bedrock of Candlenut. They are where I go in search of the freshest mackerel for otah or



beautiful blemish-free wing beans. The lesser-known ingredients at the markets, such as belimbing and buah binjay, are often the source of inspiration for the specials on our menu.

Like Pam, I learnt to navigate the wet markets the hard way and was often “cheated” by the uncles and aunties at the stalls who could sense my fresh naivety. However, I have learnt to push past my own introversion to learn the ways of friendly banter and negotiation. Soon, I was jostling alongside experienced aunties and market-goers, bargaining for the best quality and prices—the market vendors even began reserving the best ingredients for me! The daunting market experience evolved into something thrilling and delightful, like discovering a whole new world.

I cannot think of a better and more loving person to write about this often-overlooked cornerstone of Singapore’s colourful heritage, and am so proud that a young girl like Pam has taken a keen interest and love for Singapore and our food culture. This book is truly a local guide seen through the lens of a Singaporean, which should have been written a long time ago!

With this book as your companion, I am sure you will have lots of fun hustling with the aunties in Singapore’s wet markets, developing relationships with the vendors, bringing the market’s produce back into your kitchens and finding great joy in cooking with them as Pam and I have.

introduction

I never used to be a regular market-goer. Wet markets were foreign and intimidating to me. Aunties jostle and haggle in dialects just to get a few extra chillies thrown in for their efforts. There are no labels or price tags in sight. Vendors can be impatient and opportunistic, playing on my lack of experience and confidence. Compared to the market's cacophony, the supermarket was an organised oasis of calm, which met my grocery needs in one seamless, wordless exchange. There was little reason for me to step into a wet market, just a stone's throw away from home.

In 2017, my husband Wex was working as an urban farming specialist at a company that cultivated regional produce. Occasionally, he would bring me produce that he had a surplus of. Despite years of cooking at home and professionally, I was ignorant when it came to these vegetables and fruits. This fuelled a desire to learn more, and I figured that the best place to start would be the wet market.

Waking up early one morning, I stepped into the wet market that I had visited as a child with my mother. Instantly, nostalgia hit me. Everything was reassuringly familiar despite the lapse of time. That smell of fresh tofu, square slabs in a palette of beige. Chinese music crooning from the florist's radio. Tight pink buds of lotus in a pail. A heap of kabocha caught my eye, each with a rounded belly that fitted perfectly in the cup of my hands. I learnt from the gruff but helpful vegetable uncle that when steamed, the pumpkin's tough skin softens just enough to be eaten. When I enquired about the fleshy flowers next to the pumpkins, the vendor offered, "Luo shen hua. People use this to make Ribena." I remember drinking this as a child, a simple "tea" of roselle flowers, and it tasting remarkably similar to the blackcurrant cordial.





Asking vendors basic questions about their produce stung my ego, but it felt exhilarating to discover new ingredients and revisit familiar ones. The intoxicating perfume of soursop made me wonder why we often favour berries over the soursop when baking. Why do we only eat jambu raw—how is it like, baked? I began bringing market produce into my kitchen, tinkering with recipes, figuring out what works and does not. I wanted to show young Singaporeans how these old-school ingredients, familiar to my mother and grandmother, can be jumping-off points for modern and exciting dishes. I write this book with a sense of urgency as these ingredients are fading from our markets, making room for air-flown tomatoes-on-vine, tomatillos or radicchio, as there is simply no demand.

As much as it celebrates regional produce, this book hopes to be a young Singaporean's love song to the markets. In the course of writing this book, the market's beauty has grown on me. When I fumble with coins in my purse, the vegetable uncle always tells me that I can pay the next time. I learn cooking tips and recipes not only from the vendors, but also from fellow patrons—shopping at the wet markets is an interactive, immersive experience. I do not think I will ever tire of walking through markets, admiring the way the produce spills over baskets and cartons, relishing the way everything feels so organic, so raw and so real.

This book is the guide I wish I had when I first began navigating the markets, lost without the sure-footed and seasoned ways of my mother. Sprinkled with a smattering of stories, you will find information on how to select, store, prepare and cook with 25 ingredients that are unique to the wet market. Like me, the joyful discovery of an ingredient might have you falling back in love with the wet market, and change your mind on how relevant and important it truly can be.



tips for a wet market novice

It is intimidating and disadvantageous to be new to the wet market. I have had my fair share of bad experiences shopping there, which you can probably relate to as well. But hopefully by some trial and error, and with these tips, you will find what you need and develop a love for them.

1. bring enough cash & wake up early

Wet markets operate strictly in cash, so be sure to bring enough. Though most markets open till noon, I recommend going in the early hours of the morning (before 9.30am) to secure the best produce, fish or meat.

2. blend in with the crowd

There will always be unscrupulous vendors who prey on clueless novices. Such vendors might sing praises of fish that sharp regulars would never purchase, or slip a bunch of far-from-pristine Thai basil into your shopping bag and demand for payment before you can inspect the produce. Observe how everyone dresses and acts in the wet market, and follow suit. Dress casually and comfortably—not only would your shopping experience be more pleasant, you would be able to blend in with the regulars at the market. Like the aunties at the market who would never settle for sub-standard produce, be confident and know that you deserve to get what you are paying for. While I simply ask for my poultry purchase to be bagged, aunties often request for the chicken to be deboned, minced or chopped. Observe what your rights are as a paying customer and never be afraid to inspect the produce whenever possible.

3. don't be a snob

Always be humble enough to talk to the vendors and listen to their advice, since they are often more knowledgeable than you. If your butcher suggests braising a specific cut of pork or if the produce vendor says, “No one bakes this type of pumpkin—you should steam it!” you would do well to listen. At the same time, remember that just because no one has done something in the past does not mean that it would not work. Also, be open-minded towards unfamiliar ingredients. No matter how unconventional or scary-looking they appear, they might be delicious. Part of the joys of the market is purchasing the underrated parts of an animal or exotic vegetables caked unappealingly in mud, and discovering that it makes for good eating.

4. be flexible

Always be open to a change of plans. For example, you may have planned to make lotus root soup, but the lone root at the market is displaying early signs of rot. Or maybe you planned to prepare cassava fries, but when the market vendor slices off the ends for inspection, you see black streaks running through it. Be flexible enough to settle for an alternative. Also, some ingredients are seasonal or only available on certain days of the week. If you're organising a meal, talk to the vendors in advance and ask when a specific ingredient would be available and plan accordingly.

5. go regularly

Look for market vendors who care about selling the best produce and building a relationship with you. A good butcher or fishmonger will prepare the product the way you want and give you advice on how to cook it. When you find such a vendor, be a frequent patron of his stall. This kind of relationship takes time, but you can trust that the quality of the product you are getting will be good, and that you are being charged reasonably for it. In fact, over time, the vendors might even be willing to throw in some freebies with your purchase. Also, when you visit markets regularly, you will begin to familiarise yourself with the approximate prices of produce, meat or fish and be a less likely prey for vendors who are trying to make a quick buck.



phaseolus vulgaris

borlotti beans

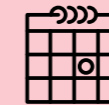
other names cranberry beans, zhen zhu dou, roman or romano bean, borlotto

possible substitutes pinto beans, kidney beans, chickpeas, cannellini beans

Of all the legumes in the world, the most beautiful in my opinion is the borlotti bean. In the wet market, I am often seduced by their pink marbled pods, which hide equally captivating magenta-flecked beans. As the beans dry, they naturally turn rose-brown with deep purple specks. Both fresh and dried beans are used extensively in the Western world and are particularly important in Italy, where it is a staple. It shows natural affinity for typical Italian ingredients, pairing brilliantly with cheese, pasta, tomatoes and sage. Borlotti beans are commonly used to make pasta e fagioli in Italy, a comforting one-pot dish that marries both beans and pasta in a broth or tomato-based sauce. On the other hand, in Singapore, these beans are often simmered with pork in Cantonese-style clear soups.

Whenever I cook these beans, I cannot help but feel a little deceived. While they may flaunt a beautiful mottled appearance, their markings fade into a dull beige brown when cooked. But what the cooked beans lack in outer beauty, they certainly make up for in taste and versatility. The cooked beans have a firm yet creamy, meltingly smooth texture. They taste slightly sweet, with mild earthy notes reminiscent of chestnuts. They are worthy additions to hearty soups, stews and braises. It is also possible to prepare a vegetarian version of ragù with borlotti beans. I love adding them to meals in place of the usual rice, pasta or bread, primarily because they are so good at absorbing the flavours of the braising liquid or sauce. You can toss a handful of boiled beans, along with a wineglass-full of stock and some herbs, into the tray of a slowly roasting hunk of lamb or pork. While they are certainly wonderful in a stew or braise, they shine when simply prepared. Coarsely mash some boiled borlotti beans and spoon it on hot crostini, and you'll have yourself an elegant snack, put together in minutes.

Diabetic patients can consider eating these beans as a staple, in place of rice or bread, since they are low on the glycaemic index. Borlotti beans are also high in folate, which can help to prevent neurodegenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's.



availability Borlotti beans are available year-round at wet markets. They are sold either as shelled beans or as whole pods.



how to select Choose beans that are fully mature; both the pods and the beans within should appear vibrantly coloured. The pods should look and feel lumpy, indicating that they are ready to pop.



how to store Borlotti beans, still in their pods, can be kept in the refrigerator for up to 5 days. Once shelled, the beans should be cooked within 2 days. Shelled or cooked beans keep well in the freezer.



how to prepare To prepare borlotti beans for cooking, simply pop open the pods and pick out the beans. Around 500g of fresh pods will yield 200g of beans.



how to cook Fresh borlotti beans can be boiled and simmered, braised or pressure-cooked. Unlike dried beans, freshly shelled ones do not require soaking before cooking and only need 10 minutes to become tender. As with all beans, it is highly recommended to refrain from adding salt until the end of the cooking process. Salt can toughen the skin of the bean, slowing the rate at which water can be absorbed and lengthening the cooking duration. To add even more flavour, I like to slip a few sprigs of herbs and a crushed clove of garlic into the boiling water.

borlotti bean hummus

Making hummus with borlotti beans was a revelation the first time. These beans are a snap to cook. Once the beans' beautiful purple specks fade and the creamy white turns a dusky brown, they are ready. So soft are the cooked beans that you'll hardly need an electric appliance as a pestle and mortar does the job. For almost no effort at all, you'll find yourself with the dreamiest, smoothest "hummus".

method Bring a medium pot of water to the boil over high heat. Remove the beans from the pods and add them to the water when it comes to a rolling boil. Lower the heat to a simmer and allow to cook for about 10–15 minutes until the beans are soft and yielding. Drain and transfer to a large pestle and mortar. Pound the beans to a creamy mash. Pass the mash through a sieve with a sturdy spoon to catch the skins. Add 2 tablespoons of water, olive oil, lemon juice, garlic and salt, adjusting the seasoning to your taste. Spoon the hummus onto a plate and garnish with fried shallots, edible flowers, seeds and an extra glug of olive oil.

serves 6

1kg borlotti pods or 400g shelled beans
2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
1 tbsp lemon juice
1 garlic clove, peeled and grated
 $\frac{3}{4}$ tsp salt
1 tbsp fried shallots, crushed
assorted edible flowers and seeds *(optional)*



fish in a skillet with rosemary & borlotti beans

This one-pot dish is the perfect comfort food when it is cold and raining outside. The fish is cooked in a creamy sauce of rosemary, anchovies and garlic. A little dried chilli adds a touch of heat while lemon zest makes the dish sing. When I don't have a good loaf of sourdough around to mop up the sauce, I enjoy tossing in some boiled beans to make the dish a little more substantial.

method Cook beans in same manner as for borlotti bean hummus. Drain and set aside.

Season the fish fillets well with salt and pepper. Warm the oil in a large frying pan over medium-high heat. When the oil begins to sizzle, add the fillets and fry on one side until they turn a lovely golden brown. Remove the fish from the pan and set aside.

Add the anchovies, chilli, garlic, rosemary and thyme to the pan. Fry for 2 minutes, stirring, until the anchovies break down. Return the fillets to the pan with the raw sides facing down. Add the cream and 2 tablespoons of water, and bring the liquid in the pan up to a simmer. Reduce until the sauce is thick and bubbling. Toss in the boiled beans and shake the pan gently to coat the beans in the cream sauce. Sprinkle over the lemon zest. Remove the pan from the heat and serve immediately.

serves 6

600g borlotti pods or 240g shelled beans
6 fillets of white fish such as sole or snakehead, each about 120–150g
1 tbs olive oil
8 anchovies in oil
2 dried chillies, snipped into 2cm lengths with a pair of scissors
8 garlic cloves, peeled and thinly sliced
5 rosemary sprigs, leaves only
2 thyme sprigs
75ml double cream
zest of a lemon, finely grated



squid & borlotti beans with chilli butter

This is a lovely, rustic dish that bursts with Mediterranean flavours. The warm juices from the squid, the herb-flecked chilli butter and the smoky sharpness of charred lemon meld together to form a sauce so good you'll want to slurp the last spoonful from the dish.

method Cook beans in same manner as for borlotti bean hummus. Drain and set aside.

To prepare the chilli butter, heat the butter in a small pot. Add the minced garlic, shallots, chillies and paprika and sauté until fragrant. Turn off the heat, add the lemon zest, laksa leaves and Thai basil to the pot. Stir well to combine and set aside.

Separate the squid bodies from the tentacles and wash the insides of the bodies thoroughly to remove the quills and guts. Slice the squid bodies into thin rings and cut the tentacles in half.

Heat a large cast iron pan until smoking. Place the 2 halves of the lemon on the pan, cut-side down. Allow the lemon to char for 1 minute or until deeply caramelised. Set aside. Add the oil and the squid, stirring briskly. Once the squid is opaque and milky-white, add the beans and the chilli butter. Quickly toss the mixture in the pan to coat the beans and squid evenly with the butter and turn off the heat. Serve hot with the charred lemon and crusty bread.

serves 6

400g borlotti pods or
160g shelled beans
120g butter
100g peeled garlic cloves,
peeled and minced
100g peeled shallots, peeled
and minced
60g red chillies, stems
removed, minced
2 tsp smoked paprika
zest of a lemon, finely grated
2 tbsp laksa leaves, chopped
2 tbsp Thai basil, chopped
6 medium squid, cleaned well
1 lemon, halved
2 tbsp canola oil





manihot esculenta

cassava

other names tapioca (misnomer; this refers to the extracted starch), yuca, mu shu

possible substitutes none

Belonging to the spurge family, cassava is a long tuberous starchy root about 5cm wide and 20cm long. It has brown fibrous skin that resembles rough bark, and white flesh within. When cooked, the flesh turns yellow and translucent. Cassava is the third-largest source of carbohydrates in the tropics, after rice and maize. It is a key crop in the developing world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, especially since it is extremely drought-tolerant and is capable of thriving in less than fertile soils.

Like the potato, cassava root is starchy and inedible when raw, and bland in flavour when cooked. What sets cooked cassava root apart from cooked potato is that it is slightly sweet and has a gummy chewiness that borders on being sticky. The root is often processed into starch by washing, peeling and grating it before pressing out the juice and drying the meal. The extracted starch, also known as tapioca, can be used as a thickening agent or to add a chewy texture to baked goods. Though very rich in starch, the tapioca root is a very poor source of protein and nutrients. However, it has a low glycaemic index, so it is hardly likely to result in a sharp spike in blood glucose when eaten in moderation.

Cassava is very popular in Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia as an ingredient in desserts, particularly in kueh. Kueh bingka ubi kayu (baked tapioca kueh) is a favourite of mine; the natural sweetness of grated tapioca and the flavour of coconut milk make for a blissful marriage. One of my favourite places to buy traditional kueh is Xing Xing, located at Maxwell Road Food Centre. The couple that runs this hawker stall specialise in an outstanding steamed tapioca kueh that has a pleasant mochi-like chew. In Indonesia, cassava is also fermented to produce tape, which can then be fried, deep-fried or even blended to a paste and baked into a cake. Fermented cassava is a staple in Africa, commonly eaten with soups and stews. In Singapore, cassava chips are a common snack, where they often come glazed in a fluorescent red sauce. Cassava is also an important crop in Mexico where it is fried as chips, added to stews or incorporated into desserts. One example is the buñuelo—a fried dough ball made from mashed cassava, served with or without syrup. The most nutritious part of the cassava is its leaves, which are a good source of protein. The leaves are cooked and eaten in Indonesia and the Philippines as a vegetable. The famous chicken dish in Bali, ayam betutu, is made by stuffing a chicken with cassava leaves and roasting it. Cassava root and leaves cannot be eaten raw or undercooked as they contain hydrocyanic acid, which causes cyanide poisoning. They can be fatally poisonous if eaten raw or undercooked. In 2005, a deep-fried cassava snack that had been insufficiently cooked by a vendor resulted in the deaths of 27 children in the Philippines. In fact, the plant can be so poisonous that the Taino Indians of Brazil were known to have eaten cassava that were intentionally untreated as a form of suicide, to evade the oppression of Spanish conquistadors.



availability Tapioca leaves and root are available year-round at most markets. Grated tapioca root is sometimes available at stalls that sell freshly grated coconut.



how to select Select firm specimens with no soft spots and are free from cracks or signs of mould. If possible, ask the vendors to cut the cassava at one end to give you a view of the flesh. It should be pure white. If you see dark streaks, the cassava is past its prime. Cut these pieces away or discard if the streaks run through the whole root.



how to store It should be stored in a cool, dark place and used within 4 days. It can be peeled, covered in water and stored in the refrigerator to extend its freshness.



how to prepare Cut the cassava into smaller sections before making a lengthwise slit. Look out for a pinkish layer of skin beneath the bark-like exterior. With a paring knife, peel off that layer and the rough skin with it. You can remove the fibre that runs through the centre of the root before or after cooking.



how to cook Cassava is incredibly versatile and can be cooked just like a potato. It can be boiled, baked, steamed, grilled, fried or braised. Cassava can be used to make empanada dough, tamales, chips and fritters. It can even be used to make gluten-free tortillas. Like taro, cassava can be used in desserts such as custards and cakes. Cassava leaves can be cooked in coconut milk to prepare gulai daun singkong or used as a stuffing for chicken in ayam betutu. It is crucial to cook cassava root and leaves thoroughly to remove hydrocyanic acid, which can be potentially fatal when consumed.

cassava falafels with beet yogurt

A falafel is typically a deep-fried ball of dried chickpeas that have been soaked and ground. As straightforward as it sounds, it can be tricky trying to get the amount of water just right. You do not want the mixture to be so dry that it falls apart in a crumbly mess, or too wet that shaping becomes difficult. This simple-as-pie technique is one that I have recently chanced upon—simply cook chickpea flour in milk like polenta and add to it whatever you fancy. This produces a falafel that is slightly crisp on the outside and creamy in the centre, with the same familiar chickpea flavour and spices.

method Prepare the falafels the night before serving. In a small pan set over medium heat, sauté the onion in 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Add cumin and allspice, and cook until the onions become soft and translucent. Set the onions aside. Bring a large pot of salted water to the boil while preparing a large bowl of ice water. Blanch the cassava leaves for 1 minute or until they wilt. Lift the leaves with a kitchen spider from the boiling water and plunge them into the ice bath. When completely chilled, remove the cassava leaves from the ice water and squeeze as much water as possible from the leaves using your hands. Chop the cassava leaves finely and add them to the onions.

In a medium pot, bring the milk and salt to a boil over high heat. Once it is boiling, reduce the heat to medium and gradually whisk in the chickpea flour. When it becomes too thick to whisk, switch to using a wooden spoon. Mix in the rest of the olive oil until thoroughly incorporated. Reduce the heat to low and continue to stir until the mixture is thick enough to pull away from the sides of the pan. Transfer the mixture to a large bowl and add the cassava leaf mixture, chickpeas and lemon juice. Taste the mixture and adjust the seasoning with more salt if necessary. Chill the mixture overnight.

Place the oil in a wok over medium heat. It will be ready for frying when bubbles stream from a dry chopstick inserted into the oil. Form the chickpea mixture into 16 balls, roughly the size of golf balls. Dredge each falafel in flour and deep-fry for about 5 minutes or until golden brown. Allow the falafels to drain on paper towels and season lightly with salt. Mix all the ingredients for the beet yogurt together and serve immediately with the hot falafels.

serves 6

for the falafels

½ small onion, chopped
1 tbsp olive oil
1½ tsp cumin powder
¼ tsp allspice powder
225g cassava leaves
240ml whole milk
¾ tsp salt
4 tbsp olive oil
70g chickpea flour
40g canned chickpeas
1 tbsp lemon juice
2l oil for deep-frying
Plain flour for dredging

for the beet yogurt

250ml Greek yogurt
1 tsp salt
2 tbsp lemon juice
1 small beetroot, peeled and grated
1 garlic clove, peeled and grated



cassava cheese puffs

When hosting a dinner, it is great to serve a snack before dinner begins so guests can nibble on something while waiting for the inevitable latecomers or the food to be ready. These yeasted beignets are just the thing to keep children and adults happy while waiting, but are also a wonderful showcase for great cheese. For children, mozzarella or cheddar is always a safe option that is guaranteed to please. But when I am serving these to adults, I like to use cheese that is a little more sophisticated such as Taleggio or even truffled brie. Using the cassava cooking liquid might seem peculiar, but this starchy liquid is the secret to a soft, pleasantly chewy interior.

method Place the cassava in a medium pot and cover with about 5cm of water. Bring it to a boil over high heat, then lower the heat and simmer until the cassava is tender and almost falling apart. This would take about 25 minutes. Reserve 240ml of the cooking liquid and drain the cassava. With a potato masher or a fork, mash the cassava, discarding any large, fibrous strands in the centre. In a medium bowl, combine the yeast, sugar and 180ml of the lukewarm cooking liquid. Set aside until it becomes frothy before mixing in the flour and salt. Finally, add the mashed cassava and olive oil. The dough should be very moist, but should not resemble batter. Adjust the consistency of dough by adding flour or the cooking liquid a tablespoon at a time until you reach the right consistency. Allow to rest until doubled in size, about 1 hour. Alternatively, allow the dough to rest in the fridge overnight.

Pour the oil into a wok and set over high heat. Test the oil's temperature by dipping a wooden chopstick into the oil. Bubbles should immediately stream from the chopstick. A small piece of dough dropped into the oil should bubble vigorously and rise to the top in a few seconds. To form the fritters, dip your hands in water and shake off the excess. Place a tablespoon of the dough on 1 palm and flatten it. Place a cube of cheese in the middle and smooth the dough over the cheese to form a ball. Drop the dough gently into the oil and repeat the process, taking care to not overcrowd the oil. Cook until the puffs are a light golden brown and look proudly puffed. If they are browning too quickly, turn down the heat slightly. Serve immediately.

makes 18–20 puffs

225g peeled cassava root
1½ tsp dry yeast
2 tsp caster sugar
105g plain flour
1 tsp salt
1 tbsp olive oil
2l oil for deep-frying
200g good melting cheese
such as brie, cut into
2–2½cm cubes



pani puri with cassava

Pani puri is one of my favourite dishes to order when I am at an Indian restaurant. Most restaurants serve store-bought puri and I have tried so many times at home to make these crispy shells and failed. The lightbulb moment came when I decided to switch cold water for hot to make the dough. The hot water denatures proteins and limits gluten formation, making it a dream to roll out. The thinner you roll the dough out, the higher the chances are of getting gossamer-thin, shatteringly crisp shells. A whole assortment of ingredients can be used to fill pani puri, the most common being boiled potatoes or chickpeas. I find that the chewy texture of boiled cassava is also wonderful against the crisp puri shells. With date chutney, yogurt and herb water, every bite is an explosion of flavours and textures.

method In a medium bowl, mix together the semolina, flour and salt. Create a well and pour in the boiling water. Stir the ingredients together with a wooden spoon until a ball begins to form. Turn it out onto a work counter and knead until smooth and supple. Place the dough back into the bowl and allow it to rest for 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, prepare the pani by placing all the ingredients and a third of the water in a blender. Blend until a smooth paste results. Transfer the paste into a pitcher or a bowl and add the rest of the water. Stir to mix well and taste for seasoning, adding more salt if needed.

Pour the oil into a wok set over high heat. The oil is hot enough for frying when bubbles stream from a dry wooden chopstick inserted into it. To make the puri, divide the rested dough into 3 pieces and flatten each into a disc. Roll each disc out as thinly as you can before cutting out rounds with a 6cm cutter. Working in batches, depending on the size of your wok, gently lower the rounds into the hot oil. Immediately, with the back of a kitchen spider, push the rounds down into the hot oil gently. This step is crucial as it keeps the rounds fully submerged in the oil, allowing them to puff evenly. Cook until the puris are fully puffed and golden brown on both sides, flipping them over occasionally during the frying process. Lift them out of the oil with the kitchen spider and place gently on kitchen towels to drain excess oil.

Meanwhile, peel the cassava to remove the tough outer skin and cut it into 2.5cm slices. Place in a pot and cover with salted water. Bring to a boil over high heat, reduce to a simmer and cook the cassava until it is tender and beginning to fray, about 15 minutes. Drain and mash coarsely with a fork.

To assemble the pani puri, make a hole in each puri and fill it with the mashed cassava. Top the filled shells with red onion and coriander, and drizzle over the date chutney and yogurt. Right before eating, pour a liberal amount of the pani into each cavity and consume in a single bite.

serves 6

for the puri (shells)

240g semolina
90g plain flour
1½ tsp salt
150ml boiling water
2l oil for deep-frying

for the pani (herb water)

1l water
4 green chillies, stems removed and sliced thickly
5cm piece of ginger
juice of 2 lemons
1 tbsp honey
a handful of mint leaves
a handful of coriander leaves
1 tbsp salt

to serve

1 large cassava
date chutney (*see recipe for moringa vadai, page 162*)
plain yogurt
1 red onion, peeled and chopped
a handful of coriander leaves





lactuca sativa var. augustana

celtuce

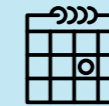
pronounced “sell-tuos”

other names cai xin (misomer), wo sun, celery lettuce, stem lettuce, asparagus lettuce

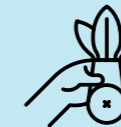
possible substitutes cucumber, kai lan stems

Show a Chinese Singaporean a picture of celtuce, and he or she might be hard-pressed to identify it. But what many do not know is that this odd-looking vegetable is the same pickle, named “preserved cai xin”, that the Chinese often eat with porridge. Native to China, celtuce is a cultivar of lettuce grown mainly for its thick stem, rather than the typical green leaves. The stem resembles a broccoli’s stalk, but is much longer, thicker and more gnarly. It can span up to 30cm in length, and often comes with a few leaves attached to the top. The slightly bitter leaves are definitely edible, though that is not the best part of this vegetable. Despite its rough-skinned exterior, it has a surprisingly elegant jade interior that is crisp in texture. Traditionally, in China, celtuce is stir-fried or served as a chilled salad, often with a spicy and numbing sauce. In recent years, however, many chefs in the Western world have become enthusiastic fans of this vegetable, marvelling at its ability to retain its crispness when briskly cooked. April Bloomfield calls it “the most underrated vegetable” while Dan Barber features celtuce on the tasting menu of his restaurant.

The very first time I tasted celtuce, I was not impressed. I had bought it minutes ago at the market and had eagerly sliced off a chunk to sample. Though it is commonly described as nutty and similar to celery, to me, it tasted unmistakably of pandan. Experiencing the flavour of pandan in such a pure context, without coconut milk or sugar, was foreign and completely new to me. At room temperature, it had a texture that was in between limp and slightly crisp. However, when chilled, it becomes incredibly refreshing, being more turgid and crunchy than a cucumber, which can often taste too watery and limp. For this reason, it is great served raw as part of a crudité platter. It is also stupendously good as a cold pickle, where it offers a refreshing crunch unrivalled by most vegetables. Another thing I like to do is to pass it through a mandolin, so that the long strips of celtuce resemble pale green, slightly translucent pasta. It is known to be beneficial for maintaining good skin as it is rich in manganese and vitamin C, which are responsible for collagen production, and tissue growth and repair respectively.



availability Celtuce is available year-round at wet markets with a large Chinese community, such as Chinatown market.



how to select Choose celtuce with fat stems, with no trace of rot or bruising. The leaves should look healthy and vibrant, with no signs of wilting.



how to store The celtuce can be kept for 3–4 days, wrapped in a paper towel and refrigerated. When peeled and sliced, it can be stored in the refrigerator for 2 days.



how to prepare To prepare celtuce, begin by removing any leaves at the top of the stalk. The tough exterior of the celtuce’s stem should be peeled with a peeler or a knife to reveal a pale green, slightly translucent core. Shave the peeled core thinly with a mandolin or slice into coins or matchsticks.



how to cook The peeled stem of celtuce can be pickled, boiled, roasted, grilled, stir-fried, smoked or served raw. For the crispest texture, serve the raw vegetable well chilled. Raw celtuce can be spiralised into noodles and served as a mild, crisp pasta alternative. When the stem is simmered for a long time, it becomes tender and develops a gourd-like texture. The leaves tend to taste a little bitter and can be tossed in a salad, but are best dunked into hot soup and simmered to eliminate some of the bitterness.

chiangmai curry noodles with celtuce pickles

Of all the dishes in the book, this is probably Wex's favourite. His obsession began when he had his first bowl of khao soi in Chiang Mai. Verging on the consistency of a broth, khao soi manages to be rich yet light on the palate. Unlike the one-dimensional curries that we often get with noodles in Singapore, this one not only tastes lively with fresh turmeric, but also has a wonderful fragrance from the toasted ground spices. Top that off with assorted condiments and a crown of crispy noodles, and you get a bowl that is richly textured and incredibly layered in terms of flavour. Adding celtuce pickles is my personal touch to khao soi. I find that it adds a refreshing crunch like no other pickle and offers a much welcome relief to the rich broth.

method Prepare the celtuce pickles a night before. Place the sliced celtuce in a small jar. Combine the vinegar, sugar and salt in a small pot over high heat, stirring until the sugar and salt dissolve. Once the mixture comes to a boil, pour the seasoned vinegar over the celtuce. Allow to pickle in the fridge overnight.

For the curry noodles, begin by adding the cardamom, coriander, cumin and belacan to a medium-sized pot over high heat. Once fragrant but not burnt, tip the spices and belacan into a blender or spice grinder and blend until a fine powder results. Add the garlic and shallots first, followed by the chillies, lemongrass, galangal, ginger, turmeric and coriander roots. By placing the ingredients with the most moisture closest to the blade, you eradicate the need for additional water in the blending process. Blend until a fine, ruddy brown paste results. Transfer the spice paste to a pot and add the oil. Fry over medium-low heat for 15 minutes or until fragrant. Add the fish sauce, soy sauce and gula Melaka and continue to cook until the sugar has fully dissolved. Turn the heat up to high, and add the chicken pieces, stirring to coat well in the seasoned spice paste. Once the chicken turns slightly opaque, add the water, coconut cream and pandan leaves. Continue to cook over high heat until the mixture comes to the boil, before turning the heat down to a simmer. Cook for 30 minutes, or until the meat is tender enough to come off the bone easily.

serves 6

for the celtuce pickles

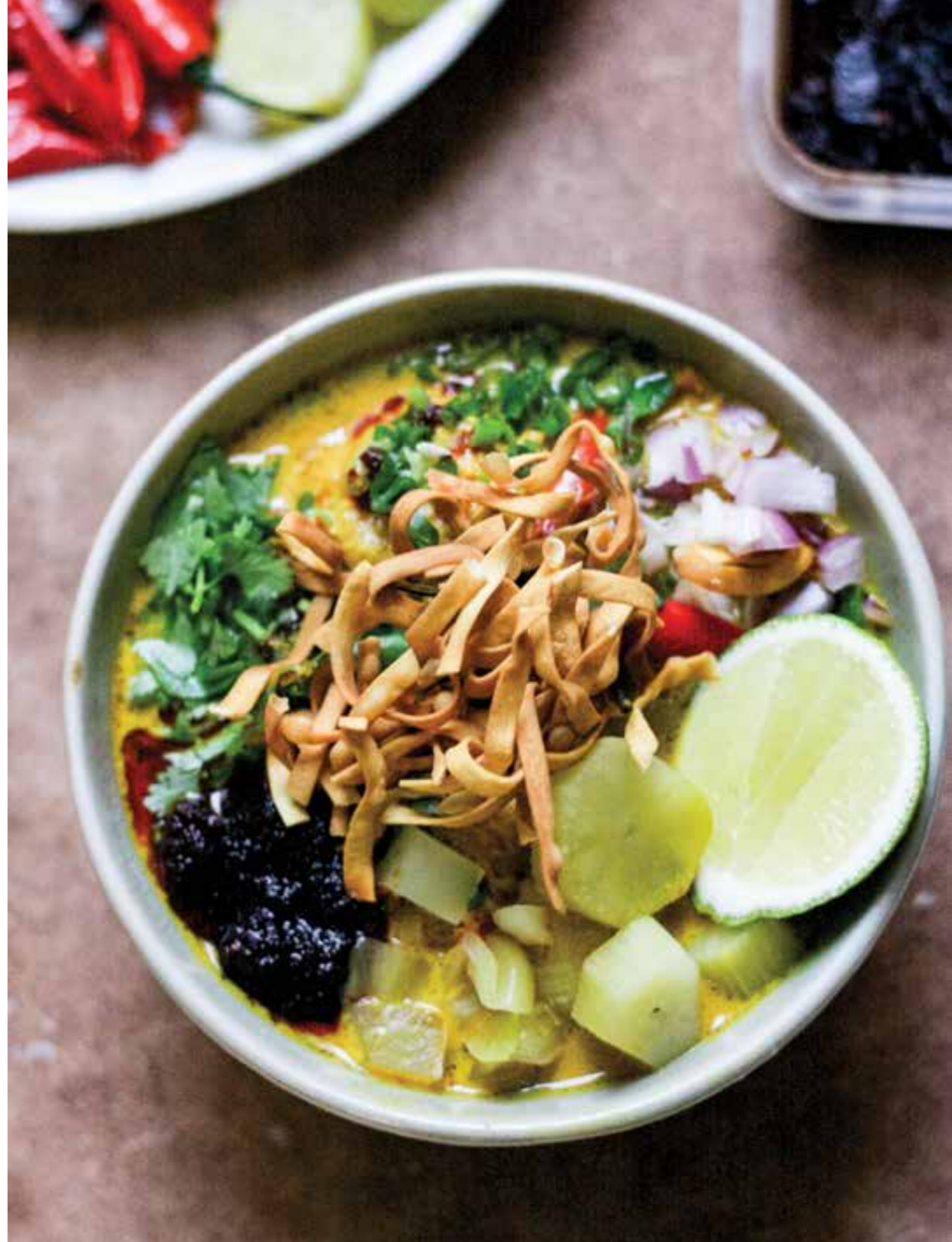
1 celtuce stem, peeled and sliced into 3cm-thick coins
120ml rice vinegar
50g sugar
1 tsp salt

for the curry noodles

1 black cardamom pod
 $\frac{3}{4}$ tbsp coriander seeds
 $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp cumin seeds
1 tsp belacan
4 garlic cloves, peeled
6 shallots, peeled
8 dried chillies, soaked in hot water for 20 minutes, drained and squeezed of excess liquid
1 lemongrass stalk, white part only, sliced thinly
2½cm piece of galangal, peeled
2½cm piece of ginger, peeled
70g turmeric, peeled and chopped
6 coriander roots, scraped and chopped coarsely
5 tbsp oil
60ml fish sauce
2 tbsp light soy sauce
85g gula Melaka
1 large chicken, about 1.6kg, chopped into bite-sized pieces
1l water
600ml coconut cream
5 pandan leaves, knotted
2l oil for deep-frying
450g fresh meepok (flat egg noodles)
1 tsp salt

for the garnish

1 red onion, peeled and diced
3 limes, halved
6 sprigs of coriander, leaves only, chopped coarsely
3 spring onions, roots removed, sliced thinly
10 red chilli padis, deep-fried
chilli jam (see larder recipes, page 283)



Pour the oil into a wok and set over high heat. Test the oil's temperature by dipping a wooden chopstick into the oil. Bubbles should immediately stream from the chopstick. Place a dry metal strainer or kitchen spider in the wok and working in batches, deep fry 50g of the noodles. Flip the noodles once with a pair of tongs, and remove the strainer from the oil as soon as the noodles turn a rich golden colour. Transfer the noodles onto a paper-lined tray to drain before breaking them up into smaller pieces. Allow the crispy noodles to cool and set them aside until ready to eat.

When ready to eat, bring a large pot of salted water to the boil. Blanch the rest of the noodles for about a minute until tender. Drain the noodles in a colander set in the sink and divide among 6 serving bowls. Season the curry with more salt and adjust its consistency with water if necessary. It should resemble a slightly thick broth more than a traditional curry. If the curry were to be too creamy, it would be too rich and heavy to eat with the noodles. Ladle the chicken pieces and curry over the noodles and top with the pickled celtuce and other condiments, ending with the crispy noodles. Serve immediately.



cashew & celtuce curry with appam

Cashew curry is an unusual dish unique to Sri Lanka, typically served at special occasions such as weddings. It is a wonderful vegetarian curry made with cashews that have been slowly subdued into tenderness. I like to add celtuce, finding that its grassy, pandan-like flavour melds well with the richness of the coconut milk. In place of the usual white rice, I find that appam—fermented rice pancakes—makes a good partner to this curry. Though completely optional, when I have extra beetroot in my fridge, I like to grate a little into the batter to turn it powder pink. You will need an appam pan for this recipe. It resembles a mini nonstick wok and is available at Mustafa Shopping Centre.

method Begin by preparing the appam batter. Combine the yeast, sugar and water in a small bowl and set it aside for 15 minutes. The yeast mixture should look frothy and active. Place the flour and the yeast mixture into a large bowl. Gradually stream in the coconut milk, while whisking, until the batter appears thick but still runny. Allow the batter to ferment for 30 minutes in a warm area of your kitchen.

Meanwhile, drain the cashew nuts and pour them into a saucepan, together with water, onions, garlic, curry leaves, ginger, chillies, cinnamon and spices. Bring to a boil and lower the heat to medium. Cook the cashew nuts for 20 minutes or until they are soft. Add the coconut milk, salt and celtuce. Simmer for another 10 minutes or until the milk has thickened, stirring occasionally. In a small skillet, warm butter over low heat. Sauté the onions and curry leaves until the onions are soft and light golden. Tip the onions and curry leaves into the curry. Remove from the heat and stir in the lime juice. Season with more salt if necessary.

When the batter is sufficiently rested, add the salt, grated beetroot and stir well. At this point, the batter should resemble a thick milkshake and should fall off a ladle with ease. Place an appam pan over high heat. When the pan is hot, lower the heat and pour a ladleful of batter into the centre of the pan. Immediately swirl the pan to coat its base with batter. Cover the appam pan and cook for 2–3 minutes or until golden and crispy on the edges but cooked in the centre. When touched, the middle shouldn't stick to your fingers. Serve immediately with the curry.

serves 6

for the curry

450g raw cashew nuts, soaked for 1 hour
450ml water
1½ onions, peeled and finely diced
3 garlic cloves, peeled and finely chopped
10 fresh curry leaves
3cm piece of ginger, peeled and finely chopped
3 green chillies, tops removed, halved lengthwise and deseeded
1 tsp cinnamon powder
1½ tsp cumin powder
1½ tsp turmeric powder
¾ tsp fenugreek powder
¾ tsp cardamom powder
375ml fresh coconut milk
¾ tsp salt
150g peeled celtuce, diced
3 tbsps unsalted butter
1 onion, finely chopped
10 fresh curry leaves
juice from 1 lime

for the appams

7g dried yeast
3 tsp sugar
50ml warm water
400g rice flour
800ml fresh coconut milk
½ tsp salt
1 tbsp grated beetroot (optional)



mouthwatering chicken with celtuce ‘noodles’

When Wex and I came to Melbourne and experienced our first winter here, we fell hard for belly-warming, lip-numbing Sichuan food. As the days got warmer, I missed Sichuanese flavours but craved for something more refreshing. This dish was the answer. Mouthwatering chicken, or kou shui ji, is a favourite of mine—my only gripe is that the oily dressing often slides off the chicken. Thin ribbons of celtuce in this version soaks up the dressing while remaining crisp, providing a refreshing counterpoint to the succulent, silky chicken. This is a dish great served cold or at room temperature, the perfect make-ahead main course for a dinner party.

method In a large wok or stockpot set over high heat, combine the water, wine, salt, sugar, ginger and spring onions. Bring to a rapid boil before adding the chicken, sitting them breast-side down. Cover the lid and bring the mixture back to a boil. Turn off the heat and allow the chicken to sit in the hot poaching liquid for 20 to 25 minutes or until the internal temperature reaches 70°C. If you do not own a thermometer, you can pierce a chicken thigh with a skewer. If the juices run clear, the chicken is ready. Fill a sink or large pot with ice water and plunge the chicken into the ice bath to arrest the cooking.

Mix all the ingredients for the dressing in a bowl, adjusting for taste if necessary. Remove the skin of the celtuce stems with a peeler and form noodles with a spiraliser or a julienne peeler. Alternatively, cut the celtuce stems into thin matchsticks. To assemble, spread the strips of celtuce over a large serving platter. Cut the chicken up into bite-sized pieces and lay attractively over the celtuce. Stir the dressing together well and pour over the chicken. Top with peanuts, sesame seeds and spring onion. Serve cold or at room temperature.

serves 6

for the poached chicken

4l water
640ml Shaoxing wine
100g salt
10g sugar
50g ginger, smashed with the back of a knife
2 spring onions, roots trimmed and smashed with the back of a knife
2 whole chickens, weighing 1kg each

for the dressing

3 garlic cloves, peeled and grated
120ml light soy sauce
90ml Chinese vinegar
2 tbsp sesame oil
20g sugar
180ml chilli oil (*see larder recipes, page 282*)
1 tsp salt

for the toppings

4 celtuce stems
50g roasted peanuts
4 tbsp sesame seeds, toasted
4 spring onions, sliced on the bias thinly





sechium edule

chayote

pronounced “cha-yo-tay”

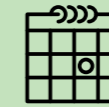
other names choko, vegetable pear, fo shou gua, Buddha’s hand melon, sayote, mirliton

possible substitutes zucchini, summer squash, gourds, apple

Chayote is a member of the gourd family, and a relative of melons, cucumbers, zucchini and pumpkins. Unlike the other members of this family, it has one large central seed about 2.5–5cm long within its fruit. Weighing an average of 225g, the fruit grows on a vine to the size and shape of a pear, earning the name “vegetable pear”. Though some chayote fruits are white, and can be smooth or prickly, the most commonly found variety has a smooth green skin and shallow vertical indentations on its surface. Beneath the skin, the flesh of the chayote is firm, crisp and whitish. The whole chayote, including its skin and stone, can be eaten.

Being native to Mexico and Central America, chayote features prominently in Caribbean, Cajun and Mexican cuisines. In Mexico, it is often served with mole, a flavourful sauce comprising twenty or more ingredients that takes hours to complete. Also, raw chayote has a subtle grassy flavour and can add crispness and crunch to salads and salsas. When sliced into thin matchsticks, it is an incredible substitute for green papaya in som tam, or green papaya salad. To prepare a quick appetiser, simply season peeled and sliced chayote generously with salt. Allow the salted chayote to sit for an hour before wringing the slices well to remove excess water. The shrunken slices can then be tossed with a numbing chilli oil dressing and served cold or at room temperature.

When cooked, its mild flavour can act as a sponge for the flavours from other ingredients, especially when added to casseroles or gratins. Its soft and edible seed is often described as tasting nutty like an almond. In Singapore, chayote is often enjoyed as a stir-fry, with mung bean vermicelli and dried shrimps. It is the perfect food for dieters as it is low in calories, has no cholesterol and has high water content, which promotes satiety. Interestingly, it is widely used in place of apple in pies. Apart from being a healthier option, it retains its shape better than apple when cooked, yet tastes similar.



availability Chayote is available year-round at most wet markets.



how to select Choose fruits that are firm to the touch and have smooth skin. Minor scratches and mild bruises are perfectly fine, but those with cracks or surface cuts should be avoided. Also, avoid any chayote that appears excessively wrinkled or whose skin feels loose. Select smaller chayote as they will be more tender.



how to store Chayote can be kept refrigerated in a ziplock bag and used within 2 weeks. Sliced, chayote can be stored airtight in the fridge for up to 5 days.



how to prepare Wash chayote thoroughly in running water before cooking, as dirt can be lodged within the deep grooves. Peeling the chayote's skin is not necessary with young, tender fruit. However, you might want to lightly peel larger and over-mature fruits. Raw chayote exudes a sticky sap when peeled and can cause skin irritation or numbness in fingers. Hence, it is advisable to peel the fruit under running water or while wearing protective gloves. The chayote's core has a flat central seed that is edible but typically discarded. Use a paring knife to remove the seed before slicing or cubing.



how to cook Though it is a fruit, chayote is used like a vegetable. In cooked preparations, chayote can be substituted for zucchini. It can be baked, boiled, stuffed, grilled, sautéed, steamed, stewed or eaten raw. As its flesh is dense, it can take up to 30 to 40 minutes for a whole chayote to be cooked. Do not overcook the chayote to retain its crisp texture.

roasted chayote tostada

This dish is so delicious in its simplicity. It is a study in textural contrasts—the crunch from the tostada, the yielding tenderness of the chayote and the creaminess of the home-made cheese work together so well. It also happens to be vegetarian, and makes for a good snack or light lunch.

method Preheat the oven to 220°C. Toss the chayote with olive oil, salt and pepper. Spread it out onto a baking sheet and roast until browned and tender, about 25 minutes, stirring occasionally. Place the garlic cloves, green chillies, coriander, olive oil, salt and lime juice into a blender. Blend until homogenous but still slightly chunky.

Combine the masa harina and water in a bowl and knead until a dough forms. It should look slightly dry and feel firm to the touch. Pull off 1 heaping tablespoon of dough and roll into a ball. Flatten into a disc and roll out into a thin round between 2 pieces of parchment. Place a dry pan over medium-high heat. Working in batches, place each round in the skillet and cook until charred in spots and the edges begin to curl, about 1–2 minutes. Flip the tortilla and cook for another half a minute. When all the tortillas are cooked, fill the pan with oil until the base is completely covered. When the oil begins to sizzle, add the tortillas and fry until golden brown on both sides, once again working in batches. Allow the fried tortillas to drain on paper towels. Arrange tostadas on serving plates and top with the roasted chayote. Crumble the cheese and place little dollops of the salsa all over the tostada. Garnish with edible flowers and serve immediately.

serves 6

for the roasted chayote

8 chayotes, cut into 2cm dice
4 tbsp olive oil
1 tsp salt
a pinch of freshly ground
black pepper

coriander salsa

5 garlic cloves, peeled
4–5 green chillies,
stems removed and
chopped coarsely
a large bunch of coriander
leaves
200ml olive oil
2 tsp salt
juice from 1 lime

for the tostada

180g masa harina
270ml water

to serve

200g soft goat's cheese or
home-made cheese (*see
larder recipes, page 283*)
edible flowers (*optional*)



mexican corn & chayote salad

Chayote tends to be a little shy flavour-wise, so I like to think of it as playing a supporting role rather than being the main star of the dish. This salad is inspired by elotes, Mexican street corn. When blistered in a hot pan, the kernels of corn and chayote start to char, accentuating their natural sweetness. This is just wonderful against the acidic tang of the lime juice, the salty crumbly cheese and the kick of chilli flakes. This is great warm or at room temperature, making it the ideal dish for a potluck or picnic.

method Heat 1 tablespoon of the oil in a large non-stick skillet until it shimmers. Add the chayote and a pinch of salt, and cook over high heat until softened and a little charred. Transfer the chayote to a large bowl. Add the remaining tablespoon of oil to the empty skillet over high heat. When the oil is hot, add the corn. Season the kernels with salt, and leave to cook until charred on one side. Stir and continue to cook until the corn develops a char on all sides. Transfer to the bowl with the chayote. Add the mayonnaise, feta, spring onions, coriander, mint, garlic, lime juice and chilli flakes to the bowl and toss to combine. Adjust the seasoning with salt and more chilli flakes if desired.

serves 6

2 tbsp olive oil
1 chayote, cut into 1cm dice
a pinch of salt
4 ears corn, kernels removed
4 tbsp Japanese mayonnaise
60g feta cheese, crumbled
3 spring onions, roots removed, sliced thinly
3 sprigs coriander, leaves only, chopped
3 sprigs mint, leaves only, chopped
1 large garlic clove, grated
juice from 1 lime
1 tsp chilli flakes



sweet potato & chayote mash with indian spices & papadum

Mash made from solely sweet potatoes can be too dense and dry, so the addition of chayote helps to lighten it up and add moisture. This mash is an exhilarating jumble of tastes and sensations: rich, cool, spicy and aromatic. The real point here is its inherent sweetness that plays so well with the yogurt's tang and the papadums' bitter edge.

method Place the purple sweet potatoes and chayote in a microwave-safe bowl. Wrap tightly in cling wrap and microwave on high for 15 minutes or until tender. Remove the skins of the sweet potatoes and the seed of the chayote. Mash well while still hot until fairly smooth. Spoon onto a platter, then make little dips in the mash with the back of a spoon. Pour the oil into a small pot over high heat. Add the coriander seeds and chilli powder and allow this to cook until the coriander seeds begin to pop and the oil takes on a red hue. Dollop Greek yogurt onto the mash, and drizzle the infused chilli oil and coriander seeds over the entire plate. Finally, sprinkle with sesame seeds, minced chilli and herbs. Serve with lime wedges and crispy papadums.

serves 6

2 purple sweet potatoes
2 chayote
4 tbsp oil
2 tbsp coriander seeds, crushed
2 tsp chilli powder
150ml Greek yogurt
½ tsp sesame seeds
1 chilli or 2 chilli padis, deseeded and minced
2 tbsp coriander leaves, sliced thinly
2 tbsp mint leaves, thinly sliced
1 lime, sliced into wedges
6 papadums or more



Celtuce? Fingerroot? Tatsoi?

Learn to navigate Singapore's wet markets and pick the best produce. All 25 uncommon ingredients in this book will surprise you with their versatility and potential. Pamela Chia, who traded in a food scientist's lab coat for chef whites, takes inspiration from her travels, her previous work at Lollapalooza and Candlenut restaurants, and the wisdom of wet markets. Her recipes are a true celebration of the future of local cooking.



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