

PENANG ASSAM LAKSA

SERVES: 4



In Malaysia, there are a few variations of laksa, a noodle soaked in seafood broth, but I would definitely say that Penang assam laksa triumphs above all. This sour fishy noodle broth was made popular by the Peranakan community of Penang but its origins are Malay.

Growing up my mother had a hard time making me eat seafood as I was born a carnivore, it took years before I could eat a bowl of laksa. After I finished my first steaming bowl, all I could think was, "Why did I wait so long?!"

In Penang, you can find assam laksa in almost any hawker centre, but there are few that can claim to be the very best. My favourite stall is a tiny little kopitiam in Taman Emas run by two sisters. Since I'm not always able to visit this hidden treasure of a stall for a golden bowl of bliss, I decided to recreate the dish at home. I find the balance of sour, sweet and spicy flavours of assam laksa most appealing, like everything else in life, balance is important.

BROTH PASTE

8-10 shallots
3 garlic cloves
2 stalks of lemongrass
1 thumb-sized galangal
5 fresh red chillies, deseeded for less heat
5 dried red chillies, soaked
1 thumb-sized belacan (dried shrimp paste) toasted

BROTH

350g ikan kembung (Asian mackerel) or ikan parang (wolf herring)
1.25 litres of water
1 stalk of lemongrass bruised with the back of a knife
1 teaspoon tamarind pulp mixed with 100ml water
3 pieces of asam keping (tamarind peel)
3-5 sprigs daun kesom (laksa leaves)
Salt & sugar to taste
400g fresh laksa noodles blanched

FRESH CONDIMENTS

½ cucumber, sliced into thin strips
¾ pineapple, sliced into thin strips
1 onion, thinly sliced
1 torch bunga kantan (ginger flower) finely chopped
1 fresh red chilli, thinly sliced (this is optional)
3-5 sprigs mint leaves
Hae ko (prawn paste sauce, see page 15)

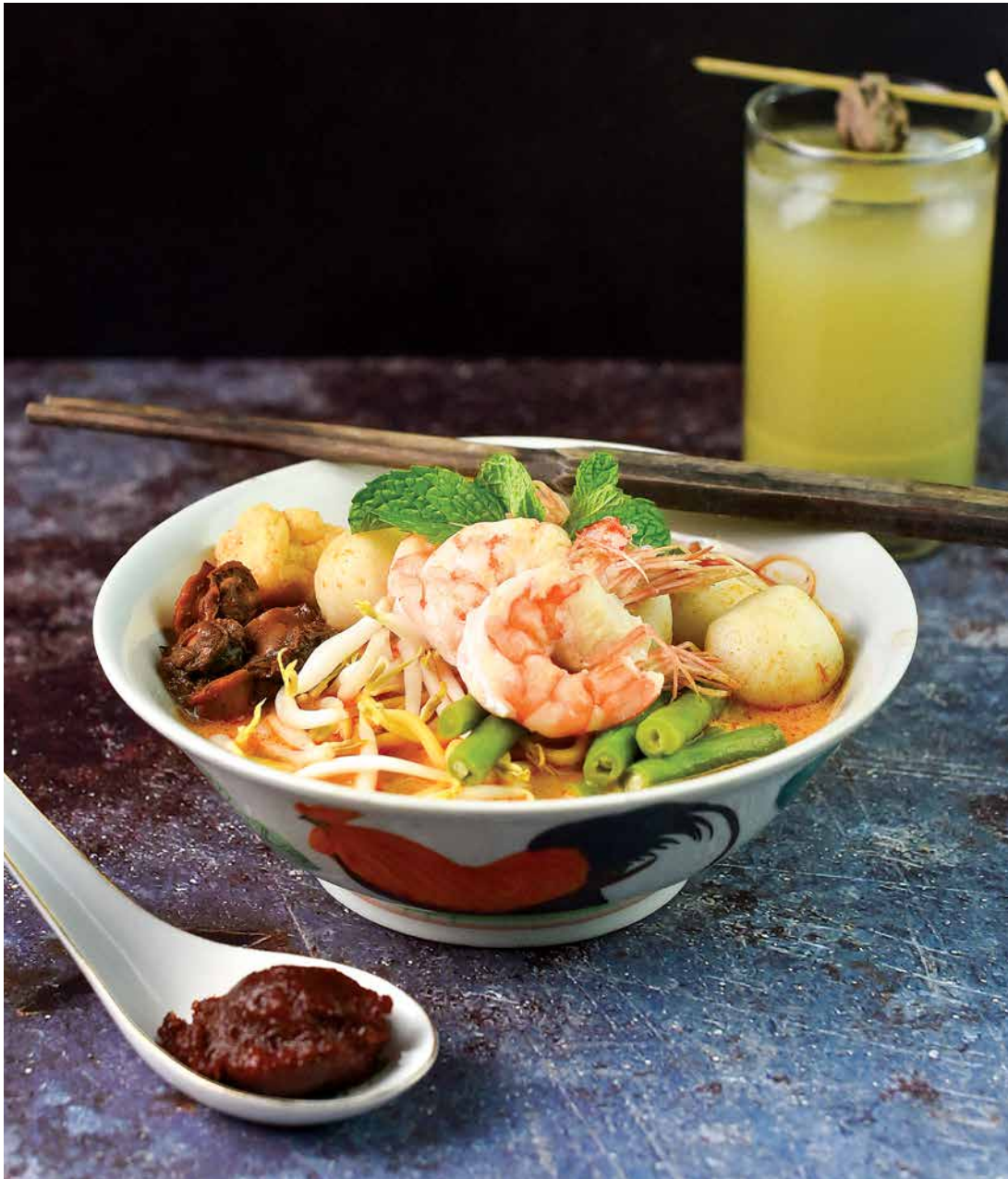
In a food processor, blitz all the broth paste ingredients into a smooth paste. Gut and clean the fish. Bring water to a boil and add the lemongrass and fish. Boil for 5 minutes or until the fish is just cooked. Remove the fish and leave aside to cool. Once cooled, debone and flake. Strain the fish stock into a clean pot then add the fish broth paste to the stock. Simmer over low heat for 30 minutes until the gravy is aromatic.

Add the fish flakes, tamarind paste, tamarind peel, laksa leaves and add back the lemongrass stalk. Bring the broth to a boil. Season to taste with salt and sugar. If you have the patience, let the broth simmer on a low heat for about 20 - 30 minutes longer for all the ingredients to infuse each other and make the broth taste better.

To serve the laksa, place laksa noodles in a bowl and top with the fresh condiments before ladling the fish broth over the bowl. Serve with a spoonful of prawn paste sauce.

PENANG CURRY MEE

SERVES: 4



BROTH PASTE

10 dried red chillies, soaked and deseeded
2 stalks of lemongrass, bruised with the back of a knife
10 shallots
5 garlic cloves
2 tablespoons ground coriander seeds
1 thumb-sized belacan (dried shrimp paste) toasted
Ground white pepper to taste
2-3 tablespoons cooking oil

BROTH

1 litre water
500ml coconut water
100ml thick coconut milk
1 teaspoon chicken stock granules
10 fried beancurd puffs (curry mee is not complete without this)
10 fishballs
250g prawns
Sugar to taste (if you are using coconut water you will not need to add as much sugar)
Salt to taste

GARNISH

400g yellow noodles blanched (to remove oil and vinegar)
400g dried rice vermicelli (cooked according to packet instructions)
150g beansprout, blanched
1 cuttlefish, cleaned and blanched (this is optional as fresh cuttlefish are hard to find and are expensive!)
100g blood cockles, blanched (optional)
3-5 long beans cut into 3cm strips
2-3 sprigs of mint leaves

CURRY MEE SAMBAL

20 dried chillies, soaked and deseeded
2 fresh red chillies
8 shallots
4 garlic cloves
2 tablespoons, dried shrimp soaked
Salt & sugar to taste
3-5 tablespoons cooking oil

Curry mee unlike its counterpart - Hokkien mee - has a coconut milk-based broth. The choice of toppings in a bowl of curry mee differ from region to region in Malaysia; in Penang hawkers usually serve it with a side of coagulated pig's blood. Therefore, Penang-style curry mee is not as thick and has a more aromatic curry broth. The spiciness level of the broth depends on the chilli paste that is served on the side of the bowl. As a Malaysian, I love everything curry based, so my rendition of Penang curry mee is slightly creamier. You can always adjust the quantity of coconut cream you use to suit your preference.

Blend the chillies, lemongrass, shallots, garlic and spice powders into a paste and add some water to loosen the paste. Heat oil in a wok and fry the paste until fragrant. Add coconut milk, coconut water. Add water and chicken stock granules. Bring the broth to a boil. Season the broth with sugar and salt. Add prawns and let the broth simmer for 20 minutes or so.

Add beancurd puffs and simmer for a few more minutes and continuously stir to prevent the coconut milk from curdling.

To serve place some yellow noodles, rice vermicelli, beansprouts and long beans and other preferred garnishes in a bowl. Ladle the hot milky broth over the bowl. Garnish with sprigs of mint leaves and serve with a spoonful of the curry mee sambal.



DUCK KUAY CHAP

SERVES: 4

Many of the popular noodle dishes in Penang are soup or gravy-based and kuay chap although well-known, is rather hard to find on the island. The traditional version of kuay chap uses pork broth as its base but I was inspired by a Penang stall that uses duck as the base of their broth. This recipe is ideal for duck lovers and is an excellent alternative to the original.

The 'kuay' part refers to the rice noodle sheets, and 'chap' is the herbal soy sauce-based broth. This is usually served with a tangy chilli sauce and offal (definitely not for the faint of heart!). Instead of using pork belly and offal, I'll be using duck meat and optional duck offal.

1 whole duck (cut to pieces if your pot isn't big enough)
1 cup light soy sauce
1 cup dark soy sauce
1 cinnamon stick
2 star anise
5 cloves
8 garlic cloves, bruised with the back of a knife
3cm fresh ginger, peeled and sliced
1 teaspoon white peppercorns
1 teaspoon black peppercorn
30g rock sugar
1.5-2 litres water (enough to cover the duck and other ingredients in the pot)
3 boiled eggs, shelled
2 firm tofu, thickly sliced
800g thick kuay teow (flat rice noodles)
A bunch of coriander leaves, finely chopped
Garlic oil and bits (see page 24)
Garlic chilli sauce (see page 21)

In a large pot, add all spices - cinnamon stick, star anise, cloves - garlic, white and black peppercorns, rock sugar and whole duck. Pour in the light soy sauce and dark soy sauce. Pour in enough water to cover all the ingredients in the pot and bring it to a boil. Turn the heat down and simmer for at least 1 hour. Stir occasionally. Add boiled eggs and firm tofu then simmer for another 1 hour. Stir occasionally. When the duck meat falls off the bone easily, remove the duck, boiled eggs and tofu and set these aside.

In a new pot, pour the dark broth through a sieve to remove all the bits and pieces of spices. Place the broth over a low heat to keep it hot. Once the duck is cool to the touch, slice it up and halve the eggs. To serve place a handful of thick rice noodles in a bowl. Ladle the dark herbal soy sauce broth over and add sliced duck meat, firm tofu and half an egg. Sprinkle chopped coriander leaves and add a teaspoonful of garlic oil and bits. Serve with chilli garlic sauce. Alternatively you can eat the duck and broth with steamed white rice (I've also seen it eaten with yam rice or porridge).

BANANA FRITTERS

SERVES: 4

Although typically sold by street vendors as an afternoon snack you can now find fritters served in restaurants and jazzed up with ice cream and syrup. Growing up in my grandparents' house, we would either have banana fritters or cucur udang (see page 36) as a teatime treat with black tea or coffee. Yum!

The secret to great banana fritters lies in choosing the right banana and the batter. The number one banana to use is 'pisang raja'. But if you can't find these any local bananas will do. Do not be tempted to use cavendish bananas as these are not cooking bananas and are best eaten raw.

6 bananas, peeled and halved lengthwise
½ cup plain flour
¼ cup corn flour
1 tablespoon rice flour
½ teaspoon baking powder
100ml cold sparkling water (optional) or cold still water
Salt to taste
Cooking oil for deep frying

In a medium sized bowl, mix all the flour and salt. Slowly add the cold water and mix well. You are aiming for a smooth consistency and make sure there are no lumps. If the batter is too thick, add more water but make sure that the batter is not too runny. Dip your halved bananas in the batter one by one, so that they don't stick to each other. Heat up your oil in a wok or pan that's deep enough for deep frying, at a temperature of 180C. Gently slide the batter covered banana into the oil once it's hot. Deep fry until golden brown while flipping on each side. Do not overcrowd the oil. Once these are ready remove the fritters from the oil onto some paper towels to absorb excess oil. Serve while hot with coffee or tea or if you have a sweet tooth, with a scoop of ice cream.





AIS TINGKAP

SERVES: 2

Found only in Penang, ais tingkap is a soda drink made of rose syrup, coconut water and everything sweet. Ais tingkap or window sherbet began when a drinks vendor decided to start selling his concoctions through the window of his shop.

Ice cubes for two glasses
600ml coconut water (fresh if possible)
6 scoops of coconut meat
4 tablespoons of biji selasih (basil seeds) soaked in water for at least 30 minutes or left overnight in the fridge
4 tablespoons of getah anggur (almond gum) soaked in water for at least 2-3hours or left overnight in the fridge (optional)
6 tablespoons of rose syrup

ROSE SYRUP

5 cloves
1 cinnamon stick
2 star anise
3 cardamom pods
1 ½ cup white sugar
1 pandan leaves, washed and knotted
500ml water
Red food colouring

In a pot bring all the ingredients (except for the red food colouring) to a boil. Turn down the heat to medium and simmer until the syrup thickens. Add red food colouring and stir well. Remove from heat and let the syrup cool completely before removing the spices and pandan leaves. Transfer to a sterilised glass jar or bottle and store in the fridge (up to a month).

Fill one third of a large glass with ice cubes. Spoon in the getah anggur and biji selasih. Add rose syrup (to suit your preference). Pour in coconut water and stir well. Scoop out some coconut flesh and add to the glass.