

LESSONS BALINESE COOKERY

Calling all spice cadets

Samantha Brown
foodandwine@scmp.com

A *bumbu* is on the stove; a pivotal ingredient in Balinese cuisine, the paste of chillies, garlic, shallots, candlenut, nutmeg, ginger, turmeric, palm sugar, shrimp paste and lemon grass bubbles away.

But you won't find *bumbu* being used in most of the tourist restaurants around the island, warns our teacher, Swiss chef Heinz von Holzen, who brushes off our guesses at what Bali's indigenous dishes might be. Forget *gado gado* – mixed vegetables with peanut sauce, originally a Javanese dish. *Nasi goreng* and *mie goreng* – fried rice and fried noodles – are a Chinese import. And some form of satay, meat on a stick, is pretty much found in every major global cuisine.

Though as with many cuisines it's about getting four flavours in the right balance – sweet, salty, sour and hot – Bali's cuisine is different and if you don't know what you're looking for, how are you going to find it? A cooking class is a good first foray into the world of fresh spices that Balinese food blooms from. Here are some choices; all classes cook meals as a group rather than individually.

Bali Asli

Jalan Raya Gelumpang, Gelumpang Village, Amlapura, Karangasem, tel: +62 828 9703 0098
bali.asli.com.au

This earthy restaurant looks out over emerald green paddies and up to majestic Gunung Agung, Bali's highest peak – but don't let the incredible view distract from the encyclopaedic knowledge that Western-trained chef Penelope Williams shares with her students.

Whether she's getting you to taste a raw peanut for the first time (it tastes, as the name suggests, just like a green pea) or explaining how to tuck grated fresh turmeric into your belly button for an upset tummy, you'll learn something new here on the ingredient front alone.

Then there are the dishes, usually five or six, which we prepare though the ingredients are mostly already peeled, chopped and sliced. Sip a



A class at Bali Asli



The view from Bali Asli cooking school run by Penelope Williams in Gelumpang village in the northeast of the island

glass of the snake fruit beer after you fold your banana leaf packages of *pesan be pasih*, or spiced fish fillet steamed in banana leaf. And forget using implements when it comes to tossing Balinese salads; our *urap paku kacang merah*, or fern tip salad with coconut and red beans, is mixed by hand.

Classes usually begin with either a farm walk, local market visit or a boat trip with a fisherman, and cost 800,000 rupiah (HK\$650).

Bumbu Bali Cooking School

Jalan Pratama, Tanjung Benoa, tel: +62 361 771 256
balifoods.com



Bumbu Bali

Heinz von Holzen's classes are dizzying. The long-time Bali-based chef and author of five Balinese cookbooks is in turn stern, hilarious, informative and entertaining.

Von Holzen takes a scientific approach to his cooking, which is reassuring if you don't know your galangal from your ginger. Everything is prepared with military precision here – you won't touch a knife, but you will get a chance to grind spices in the open-faced mortar and pestle typically used in Bali, or have a go at stir-frying in the open-air kitchen. You'll make up to two dozen dishes.

Do take the early morning market tour, which takes in a wet market as well as Jimbaran's fish market, where most of the island's restaurants source their seafood. (Classes with a market visit cost 1.03 million rupiah.)

Hotel Tugu

Jalan Pantai Batu Bolong, Canggu Beach, tel: +62 361 473 1701
tuguhotels.com/bali

Hotel Tugu on Bali's west coast offers classes in a replica of an Indonesian *warung* or streetside restaurant with Ibu ("mother") Soelastris from Malang in East Java. She speaks little English; this is more about watching her in action, although another hotel staffer will help translate your queries.

You'll select five dishes to prepare, which the class will make from scratch – my favourites are *jukut ares* or banana stem soup, and *ayam pelalah*, Balinese shredded chicken. Although you'll get recipes at the end, Soelastris does everything from memory and taste.

I love the authenticity combined with a lack of pretension here; while purists might recoil, "chicken powder" or stock powder, is one of the ingredients Soelastris uses with feisty chef's pinches – these days, it's clearly part of the Javanese and Balinese cooking vernacular.

Classes can include a visit to Pasar Badung in Denpasar (1.04 million rupiah with a market visit.)

Casa Luna Cooking School

Jalan Bisma, Ubud, tel: +62 361 973 282
casalunabali.com/cooking-school

Australian hotelier and author Janet de Neefe runs the most popular cooking school in the hill town of Ubud. Our class is taken by Balinese chef Inengah Oleg Sudira, who has worked with de Neefe for nearly two decades; experience has not diminished his enthusiasm for Balinese food, which he shares with students on a morning market tour.

Oleg knows the women serving *nasi campur bungkus* or rice with a mixture of dishes to go – "It's like your McDonald's," he quips. He'll tell you exactly how many cups of coffee you get from a bag and that you should buy vanilla in Bali, but avoid "saffron" – it's more likely to be safflower.

Back at the Honeymoon Guesthouse-based school, he leads the group through its paces, ingredients ready to go. My favourite dish here is an anchovy sambal, a crunchy concoction whose star is the deep-fried, tiny fish.

Meats such as chicken, pork and duck are usually only eaten by Balinese on ceremonial days, Oleg says. Everyday fare is more likely to include anchovies, tofu, tempe or smoked fish.

Still, whatever's on the menu, a *bumbu* will likely be there to fire up the dishes. (Classes with a market visit cost 300,000 rupiah.)



Nasi campur at Bali Asli

SIGNATURE DISH

Did you pack your own snacks, ma'am?

Susan Jung
susan.jung@scmp.com

A couple of weeks ago, a little beagle came sniffing around me. Normally, I would be on my knees attempting to pet the dog, which is one of my favourite breeds. This time, I stared at it, hoping that if I concentrated hard enough, it would just go away.

The dog was being led around by a customs official at Los Angeles airport, and it was sniffing my bags for contraband items. I had packed a fair amount of food for my parents and relatives: dried scallops, dried mushrooms and fried lotus seeds.

None of it, to my knowledge, was contraband. The problem is that the US changes its list of illicit products so often that I never know from one trip to the next if what I'm bringing in is still legal.

After questioning me about what the beagle had found in my luggage that was so interesting, the customs official went away without making me open my bags.

I've never smuggled food into the US – smuggling is, by definition, a deliberate attempt to bring in illegal items.

I have been caught with food that I had to throw in the bin, such as pork floss and prawn crackers from Thailand, *laap yuk* (Chinese bacon) and Yunnan ham. But because I had declared these on the customs form, I wasn't fined. I wouldn't have tried to bring them into the US if I had known they were going to make me throw them away.

But often, the list of illegal items doesn't make sense. Why, for instance, have I been able to import *laap cheung* (Chinese wind-dried sausages) but not *laap yuk*?

Visiting people abroad can be a trial when it comes to gifts.

When I went to France in July, I packed lychees at the request of a friend. I worried about it, because we weren't sure if it was legal to bring fresh fruit into the EU. But nobody at customs asked me any questions or checked my luggage.

I know that when travelling to Australia, it's best not to bring in any food at all. They'll just make you throw it away. It's understandable, because they want to ensure that the continent is safeguarded against the intrusion of non-native wildlife, which they worry will decimate the native plants and animals.

But the officials tend to treat people like criminals, asking the same thing over and over again, thinking that they'll trick you into admitting something.

After a holiday, it's such a relief to come back to Hong Kong, where the only prohibited items (that I know of) are raw meat and plants with soil.

When I'm getting ready for the return trip home, I pack my bags without worrying.