

BALI: Food for the GODS

BY ALISON BONE

*There is more to Bali than sun, surf and shopping.
We take a culinary journey into the island's heartland
to discover the real flavour of Bali.*







Island of the Gods, surf mecca, a shopper's paradise, land of golden beaches, big smiles and Bintang beer, Bali certainly needs no introduction, but its cuisine does! In recent years the island has become a foodie destination, with trendy restaurants in the 'Eat Street' district of Seminyak serving up flavours from around the globe. Those in search of cheap and cheerful Indonesian favourites still head to the atmospheric night markets and *warungs* (local eateries), but finding traditional Balinese cooking can be surprisingly difficult.

While Balinese cuisine shares common traits with other Indonesian food – chiefly a fondness for fragrant spices, it has some very unique characteristics. From joyful ceremonial feasts that unite whole communities, to the ubiquitous *babi guling* (spit roast pig,) prepared whenever there is anything to celebrate and villagers foraging for fern tips and grinding fresh spices by hand, the Bali food story is rich in flavour, tradition and symbology.

At its heart is the notion of community, perfectly captured by *megibung*, a ritualistic style of sharing food, conversation and companionship. Men will slaughter a pig, and then join the women to prepare a feast. Food is served on giant platters lined with banana leaves and small groups will sit cross-legged on the ground to eat from the main plate. Unless you are lucky enough to be invited to a ceremony or wedding, it may be hard to find a true *megibung* experience. However, you can enjoy its spirit at Bali Asli in a sublime setting, overlooking emerald green rice paddies, lush tropical forests and picture-perfect Mount Agung – Bali's largest volcano. Asli translates as 'something created in a traditional way', and was inspired by chef Penny Williams' fascination for the island's culinary traditions. Authentic Eastern Balinese cuisine is offered in a daily-changing *megibung* platter that may include fragrant fish skewers, jackfruit poached in coconut milk and grilled chicken with turmeric, garlic and coconut. English-born Williams also offers customised Balinese cooking classes that include a glimpse into local life, such as hand-line fishing, a visit to the local market, or a hike in the rice fields.

Opening image: Women arrive at a temple with *gebongan* (offerings to the Gods), © Paul Beinssen.

Above: Dawn over Mount Agung, © Bali Asli.

Divine Inspiration

Known as Bali Dewata, which literally translates as ‘Island of the Gods,’ Bali is imbued with a deep-rooted Hindu spirituality. Beyond providing physical nourishment, special Balinese dishes are prepared as offerings to the divine. These include *babi guling*, *bebek betutu* (roast duck in banana leaves) and *lawar* (mixed vegetables, coconut, minced meat and lashings of chilli). The ritual known as *mebat* takes place before a religious ceremony and loosely translates as ‘chopping,’ but also implies chatting. The men of the village prepare meat and spices as they share stories, laughter and *brem* (potent rice wine). The women also gather together to create ornate offerings, such as the golden *gebongan* – multi-layered towers of fruit, sweet cakes and decorations.

Vibrant religious ceremonies are rich in pageantry and the streets are filled by long colourful processions. Women sheathed in lace shirts and brightly hued sashes gracefully balance *gebongan* on their heads as they make their way to the temples. It is the spirit of the offering, not the food itself that counts, so once it has been given to the Gods, it is taken home to enjoy. Bali is at its most beautiful during the biannual Galungan festival which celebrates the victory of good over evil. At this time, the island is adorned with *penjor* – ornamental bamboo poles decorated with rice, fruit and coconuts, symbolising the blessings of Mother Nature.

Clockwise from right: Waiting for guests at Bali Asli, © Jonathon Wherrett; A busy market, © Dan Avila; Lunch after a Bali Eco Cycling Tour, © Alison Bone.

You can enjoy the taste of divinely-inspired food at Kayun, a traditional-style restaurant in Mas. Try the *nasi saraswati*, served on a lotus leaf topped with eight dishes woven from banana leaf. Each is an offering paying tribute to the ocean, rivers, trees, earth and sky, and includes turmeric rice, river shrimp, spicy chicken and sambal (hot sauce.) Mas is famed for its wood carvings, so take a peek in the Bidadari Gallery at the entrance to the restaurant to see beautiful sculptures carved from single tree trunks.





Kampoeng Bali in Jimbaran is set up as a village-style market and includes a generous buffet, sunset ceremonial procession and *kecak* performance (trance/fire dance). Yes, it's a tourist experience, but it gives a fascinating insight into traditional Balinese culture, and the buffet serves up just about every authentic dish imaginable. Try the *rujak buah*, a spicy sour fruit salad, and make sure to sample the huge range of sambals (hot sauce). Bali's much-loved *sambal matah* is a raw and zesty blend of shallots, lemongrass and chilli (of course) and goes particularly well with fresh fish.

Hot and Spicy

A rich and intoxicating spice paste known as *base gede*, forms the basis of most Balinese savoury dishes and ignites the taste buds with a blend of freshly ground galangal, candlenut, shallots, ginger, nutmeg, turmeric, garlic, lemongrass and chilli. *Sate lilit ikan* is a must-try, made with minced fish mixed with shredded coconut and *base gede* then twisted onto lemongrass stalks and grilled over coconut husks. The village of Pesinggahan which hugs the palm-fringed black sand beaches on the east coast is famed for its *sate lilit*. Try Warung Mertha Sari for a full Balinese meal including skewers, fish soup, steamed fish in banana leaf parcels, and a fiery *sambal matah*.

Pesinggahan is also home to one of Bali's most important temples, 1000-year-old Pura Goa Lawah. It is known as the Bat Cave – there are thousands of them – and according to legend, its dark tunnels are home to a giant dragon-like snake that feeds off bats. The nearby beaches of Kusamba are also worth a look. Here you will find the island's traditional salt pans where farmers use ancient techniques to extract 100 per cent natural sea salt by sun and water evaporation.



Clockwise from left: *Sate lilit ikan* at Bali Asli, © Mata Boolan Photography; Balinese Rijsttafel at Bumbu Bali Restaurant, © Heinz Von Holzen; Early morning sunlight shines on a *jukung*, a traditional wooden fishing boat, © Bali Asli.

Catch of the day

Early each morning, fishermen around the island head out to sea on colourful *jukung* (traditional wooden fishing boats). To get the fresh-off-the-boat flavour head to Jimbaran's nightly seafood barbecues. Choose your fish, then take a candle-lit table on the beach and bury your feet in the sand while it is basted in Jimbaran's famous spice mix of garlic, black pepper, kaffir lime leaves and chilli, then grilled over coconut husks.

The infamous Babi Guling

While the majority of Indonesians are Muslim and do not eat pork, Balinese Hindus love it. A favourite dish is the rich, unctuous *babi guling* – a whole pig stuffed with cassava leaves and spices, then spit-roasted over a fire. Traditionally, *babi guling* was reserved for special occasions, these days it's easy to find but the quality varies enormously. Try Ibu Oka in Ubud, or better yet, Pak Malen in Seminyak. The setting is lacklustre but this is *babi* at its best, and a meal includes soup, crunchy pork rind and juicy succulent meat and sambal.

Get Cooking

One way to really get acquainted with Balinese food is to cook it. There is something quite sensual about grinding fragrant spices (it's all in the wrist) and then inhaling the heady aroma as they sizzle and pop in hot oil. Longstanding Bumbu Bali (Bali spices) offers excellent one day classes in classic Balinese




cookery starting with a breakfast of local cakes, tropical fruit and a trip to the local vegetable and fish markets. Then it's into the kitchen to prepare stocks, spice pastes and a range of tasty dishes like *ayam betutu* (chicken in banana leaf parcels). Lunch is a product of your morning labour, so there is good incentive to learn well! If you just want to enjoy the flavours of Bali without sweating it out in the kitchen, you can also opt for a meal in the Bumbu Bali restaurant. Try the Balinese *rijstaffel* which comes with a tasty selection of dishes.

A large advertisement for Viceroy Bali. The background is a photograph of a traditional Balinese thatched pavilion with a wooden deck and railing, situated over a lush green landscape. In the foreground, a person is swimming in a large infinity pool that reflects the sky and the pavilion. The overall scene is serene and luxurious.


Viceroy Bali

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www.viceroybali.com



Right: Discovering Bali's plant life with Bali Eco Cycling Tours.

Foraging

Bali's rich volcanic soil creates perfect rice-growing conditions, and the fringes of picturesque rice paddies are also home to a plethora of plants, fruit trees and spices. Found and foraged ingredients in traditional cookery include tender young fern tips, water spinach, wild berries, ginger flowers, star fruit leaves and banana stems. Westi and Lilir run Bali Herbal Walks and share their knowledge of herbs and edible plants while leading you on a fascinating walking tour through rice fields and forests. Their *jamu* classes are also great fun, as you learn to make your own *jamu* (health tonic), body scrubs and oils from herbs and spices. Nature walks are also offered by Bali Eco Cycling, as well as down-hill cycling tours, riding through rice fields, plantations of cloves, coffee, cacao and vanilla. Tours end with a traditional Balinese feast overlooking the rice fields.

A trip down memory lane

Back in 1969, when Kuta was just a sleepy fishing village nestled in the coconut groves, a 16-year-old girl called Made and her mother opened Bali's first *warung*, a simple shack serving up basic village food. Fast forward nearly 50 years and Made's Warung is an island institution. These days the menu is international, but still features a good selection of Balinese dishes, including a crunchy seaweed salad mixed with coconut, ginger and galangal. Made's black rice pudding with fruit salad is heavenly; as she tells it, this is the dish that captured her husband's heart back in the '70s. A Dutch photographer, his black and white photos of Kuta adorn the walls of the restaurant, evoking the magic of a paradise found. •

Photography by Alison Bone, Paul Beinssen and various establishments.

travel facts

GETTING THERE

Bali is well serviced by Jetstar, Virgin, Garuda and Air Asia from various cities in Australia. jetstar.com; airasia.com; virginaustralia.com; garuda-indonesia.com

WHEN TO GO

In 2017 the colourful festival of Galungan takes place on 2–4 April and 1–3 November. Bali's dry season from May to October has the coolest temperatures.

WHERE TO STAY

- Rumah Bali: +62-361/771-256; bedandbreakfastbali.com
- Elite Havens: elitehavens.com/bali
- Rimba Jimbaran Bali: ayana.com
- Viceroy Bali: viceroybali.com
- Karma Resorts: karmagroup.com
- Warwick Ibah Luxury Villas & Spa: warwickhotels.com

WHERE TO DINE

- Bali Asli – Discover traditional Eastern Bali cuisine while enjoying views of the volcano. bali asli.com.au
- Kayun Restaurant – Food is divinely inspired and served in a traditional garden setting: +62-851/0018-0708; resto.kayun-bali.com
- Made's Warung – Find Balinese favourites and a glimpse into Bali of old in Kuta: +62-361/755-297; madeswarung.com
- Pak Malen – Indulge in *babi guling* on Sunset Road, Seminyak: +62-851/0045-2968 or Warung Ibu Oka, Jalan Tegal, Ubud: +62-361/ 976-345
- Kampoeng Bali – An extensive Balinese buffet and cultural experience at Rimba Resort, Jimbaran. Monday, Wednesday and Friday from 6pm. +62-361/ 846-8468; ayana.com
- The village of Pesinggahan in Eastern Bali is the best place to try *sate lilit ikan*. Order from road side stalls or enjoy a full meal at Warung Lesehan Mertha Sari. +62-366/ 23-985

WHERE TO LEARN TO COOK BALI STYLE

- Bumbu Bali – Learn all about the flavours of Bali and how to prepare classic Balinese cuisine. balifoods.com/cooking-classes/
- Casa Luna – Join a cooking classes or gourmet food tour in Ubud. casalunabali.com/cooking-school/
- Paon Bali – Spend the day in a traditional Balinese village as you learn to create authentic Balinese food. paon-bali.com

THINGS TO DO

- Take a walk on the wild side with Bali Herbal Walks. baliherbalwalk.com
- Walk or ride through Bali's plantations with Bali Eco Cycling. baliecocycling.com

FURTHER INFORMATION

Bali Tourism Board: balitourismboard.org



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TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Min. Stay 2 Nights • Valid April 2017 - March 2018 • Booked Period Immediately - 31 March 2018 • Stay Period 1 April 2017 - 31 August 2018 • Blackout Date: (1 July 2017 - 31 August 2017 & 28 December 2017 - 4 January 2018) • Price are in thousands of Indonesian Rupiah and are subject to a 21% government tax and service charge.

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