

AUTHENTICALLY

ASLI

EXPERIENCE THE ZENITH OF YOUR BALINESE CULINARY JOURNEY

Written by **ALISON BLAKE**
Photography by **LIVIA KURNIADI**

A day trip to Bali's lush hinterland is always a good idea, especially when a tasty meal and scenic views are involved. And so we find ourselves at Bali Asli, in the north-east of the island, not far from the evocative water palace of Tirta Gangga. With a stunning setting high on a ridge, we are treated to an idyllic tropical panorama while enjoying a feast of authentic Balinese food.

Picturesque rice paddies and thick tropical forests spread out before us, ducks waddle around the fields, cows rest in the shade of papaya groves, and Mount Agung makes a majestic backdrop.

The restaurant was built to a traditional design, with richly textured interiors created from extensive use of slate, stone, wood, bamboo and mud brick. Chunky wooden bench tables fill

the dining area, which is open-sided to allow unobstructed volcano views. You can also sprawl out on cushions in the open-air alcoves tucked into the sprawling wooden deck.

A meal is always more interesting when it comes with a story, and the tale of how an English chef – who apprenticed at the Savoy in London – came to be cooking Balinese food in her own beautiful restaurant on a remote hill in Bali, is a good one. After the Savoy, Penelope Jane Williams honed her skills in some of Sydney’s top restaurants, before arriving on the island as the executive chef for Alila Mangis. “Being a chef, I wanted to experience the culture through the food,” she says. When invited to help prepare a feast for a local cremation ceremony, she found herself happily thrust right into the heart of Bali. At these Balinese

ceremonies, the whole community turns out to work side by side, slicing and dicing vegetables by the bundle, grinding fragrant spices and butchering livestock. She loved every minute of it, and a spark was ignited.

“Asli” in Balinese refers to something created in a traditional way, and Bali Asli is all about “Getting back to grass roots, rediscovering old dishes, and recreating them.” Penny describes herself as a “Food anthropologist,” and still loves visiting villages, joining ceremonies and discovering Balinese dishes. Food differs considerably from region to region in Bali, owing to different ingredients. She describes her menu as “Pure Eastern Balinese cuisine made with food that is found here and grown here, and which supports those who fish, farm and forage in the nearby fields, ocean and jungle.” From my vantage point high on the deck I



CHEF PENNY'S TOP TEN TIPS

ALWAYS COOK WITH TRUE PASSION, YOUR HEART AND YOUR LOVE, BECAUSE YOUR ENERGY WILL BE REFLECTED IN THE FOOD THAT YOU SERVE.

ALWAYS USE THE FRESHEST INGREDIENTS. IF THEY'RE NOT FRESH, YOUR FOOD WILL NEVER TASTE FRESH, NO MATTER HOW GOOD A CHEF YOU ARE.

ONCE YOU HAVE COOKED A DISH THAT YOU LOVE, WRITE IT DOWN IN YOUR RECIPE BOOK.

NEVER COOK WITH OIL THAT'S NOT FROM THE COUNTRY OF THE CUISINE THAT YOU ARE COOKING.

VARIETY IS THE SPICE OF LIFE.

DON'T OVER-COMPLICATE A DISH BY ADDING TOO MANY INGREDIENTS. LET YOUR DISH BE A CELEBRATION OF ONE OR TWO KEY INGREDIENTS.

LISTEN TO EVERYONE'S POINT OF VIEW BEFORE YOU SPEAK. YOU MIGHT LEARN SOMETHING.

REMEMBER THAT A MEAL WITHOUT DESSERT IS LIKE A PRETTY WOMAN WITH ONLY ONE EYE.

IT'S OKAY TO BE IN LOVE WITH THE PURE BEAUTY OF A VEGETABLE – HOW IT LOOKS FRESH FROM THE EARTH, HOW IT FEELS, HOW IT SMELLS WHEN GENTLY SAUTÉED, HOW IT CRUNCHES BETWEEN YOUR TEETH.

TO BE HEALTHY, ALWAYS EAT PRODUCE THAT IS IN SEASON IN THE PLACE WHERE YOU LIVE.

to.dinefor



look down at thriving garden beds flourishing with sweet potatoes, lemongrass, long beans, cassava, sweet corn, galangal and *kemangi* (lemon basil).

The daily menu is inspired by what's ripe in the garden and what's on sale in the local market, and written up on a lontar made of traditional palm leaf. Coconut oil is used for cooking and is made by a chef's mother, while *arak* is brewed by the bartender, Wayan's dad. There are no commercial suppliers, no electrical appliances. It's slow food all the way, or as Penny describes it, "Cooking for the moment." Spices are ground with mortar and pestle, and everything is prepared using traditional techniques. The cooking is done on wood-fired, mud brick stoves. To enjoy the full experience, order the *megibung* menu, a customary sharing platter still popular during ceremonies in north-eastern Bali. You can also opt for a smaller *nasi campur* or morning or afternoon tea.

Customised cooking classes include a little adventure, such as hand-line fishing in a *jukung*, a visit to the local market, or a hike in the rice fields. I am keen to return for the "Healing herbs and spices of Bali" workshop where you create "delicious food for you skin", such as a body scrub with organic chocolate powder, coconut, cinnamon and avocado, and a honey face mask.





TOASTING THE VIEW

Our welcome drink, a pleasant portent of things to come, is a delicious elixir made from poached *salak* (snake fruit) flavoured with cinnamon and star anise. It comes with a stem of freshly plucked sugar cane for stirring (and munching). There is also homemade “beer”, which is actually more like a cider, and comes in all kinds of flavours, including apple, chilli, and zesty ginger. Cocktails are made from *arak*.

GETTING STARTED

A basket brimming with big crispy *kerupuk* arrives first. Some are made with puffed rice, others from soybean. And there are also moreish tempura-style local *bayam* (amaranth) leaves. The *sambal* are excellent. There’s a fragrant *sambal bongkot* made with torch ginger, the ubiquitous *sambal matah*, and a spicy tomato *sambal*. The *jukut kelor meliklik* is wonderful sweet corn soup flavoured with young coconut, and green leaves from the moringa tree that grows in front of the deck.

FEASTING

The *megibung* arrives on a big ceremonial platter. A *tumpeng* (cone-shaped rice tower) features *nasi sela*, mixing rice with purple and orange sweet potato, which adds sweetness and soft texture to the rice. Each little surrounding dish is woven with banana leaf and includes a divine *tempe manis* of soybeans stir-fried in a sweet chilli caramel, tender jackfruit poached



in coconut milk, and a *sate kablet be pasih* – juicy ocean fish skewers, marinated with garlic, ginger and shallots. *Pesan telengis* are banana leaf parcels filled with smooth and spicy coconut curd, while grilled chicken is infused with a tasty blend of garlic, turmeric and coconut oil and dressed in coconut sauce.

FINISHING

Perfectly ripe mango slices and juicy rambutan make up the fruit component of dessert. Sweets are *tape goreng* – battered deep-fried cassava, and *sumping* – made with jackfruit, glutinous rice flour and coconut milk wrapped and steamed in banana leaf to create a soft sticky dessert. Both go well with organic Bali coffee, chai made with coconut milk, or dharma tea brewed with garden herbs and spices.

► Bali Asli

Jl. Raya Gelumpang
Gelumpang Village
Amlapura, Karangasem
T: +62 828 9703 0098
baliasli.com.au
Daily 10am-6pm

TEMPEH MANIS

INGREDIENTS

250g tempe (fermented soybeans)
4 large red chillies
4 cloves of garlic
3 lemon grass sticks
150g raw peanuts
100g white sugar

bumbu bali ingredients a

2 large chillies
3 cloves of garlic
3 red shallots
1 small red chilli
½ candlenut (can be substituted with almond)
1 pinch of nutmeg (freshly ground)
2g fresh ginger
1g fresh turmeric
1.5g fresh galangal
¼ tsp tamarind puree
¼ tsp dark palm sugar
1 tbsp coconut oil (or peanut)
1 cm roasted shrimp paste
1g *kencur*

bumbu bali ingredients b

100ml water
1 salam leaf
1 lemongrass (crushed)

METHOD

To make the *bumbu bali*, roughly chop all the ingredients A and then grind them to a smooth paste using mortar and pestle. Lightly fry them in the coconut oil until fragrant. Add the water and ingredients B, and simmer to infuse the flavours. Reduce the water until a smooth paste is left. Store in an air-tight container in the fridge covered with a thin layer of oil for up to one week.

To make the Tempeh Manis put the sugar into a pot with a little water and make it into a caramel. Add the *bumbu bali*, chillies, garlic, and lemongrass, and stir through. Add the peanuts and tempe and stir to coat. Remove from the pot and cool.

