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Bali Asli

Tucked away in the highlands of east Bali is a scenic gem that is conserving the Balinese culinary tradition. Text: Stephanie Mee. Photos: Lucky 8.

FOR over a year now, whispers have been circulating about an almost mythical restaurant hidden in the foothills of Mount Agung halfway between Candi Dasa and Amed. According to those in the know, the views from the restaurant are unrivalled in Bali, the owner is a world-class chef with a CV that boasts some of the top restaurants in London and Sydney, and the food is superbly fresh and authentically Balinese. Some simple sleuthing revealed the name of the restaurant was Bali Asli, and I was determined to find out if the rumours were true or nothing more in fact than whispers. Bali Asli translates to “original” or “genuine” Bali, and a quick look at their website tells you that this is the guiding vision behind the concept of the restaurant. All of the dishes at Bali Asli are prepared in the traditional way, using simple tools like mortars and pestles, wood-fired mud brick stoves and baskets for steaming. Everything is made by hand, the ingredients arrive fresh from the gardens or market each day, and no electrical appliances are used in food preparation. Moreover, Bali Asli offers a unique cooking school that combines culture, nature and cuisine to allow students to develop a true understanding of where the food comes from, how it is made and why it is made the way it is. Each cooking class at Bali Asli is themed to give students a taste of a day in the life of the local people who make up the fabric of the food industry, including fishers, farmers, foragers, and market vendors, and the classes include excursions that go off the beaten path and straight to the source of the ingredients used in Balinese cuisine. Typical excursions include trekking for fresh herbs, planting rice in the paddies and bargaining for produce in the traditional market.

Never one to resist giving in to my culinary curiosity or an opportunity for adventure, I soon found myself setting out early one morning to make the trip to sleepy Amlapura. From the outside, Bali Asli gives away nothing more than a simple black stone wall with a carving of Saraswati—goddess of knowledge and art—in white stone under the name of the restaurant. Behind the wall, a set of stairs leads you up to a traditional Balinese entranceway with intricately carved wooden doors set in a bamboo wall. Inside, the space opens to a vast dining room with polished wood floors and soaring pillars, backed by a natural stone wall shimmering with gently trickling water. Wooden tables and benches are strategically placed in front of the open-concept circular kitchen, and one whole side of the restaurant is open, which allows for sweeping views over a sea of rice paddies spread out below the hulking brown mass of Bali’s most sacred volcano, Mount Agung. After accepting a complimentary glass of snake fruit juice flavoured with cloves and cinnamon and garnished with a sugar cane stick, I joined the other students in the class in an almost obligatory gawking session at the stupendous scenery laid out before us. After living in Southeast Asia for nearly seven years, it takes a lot to blow me away when it comes to scenery. However, words and photos don’t begin to do justice to the panoramas here. In fact, it was only when our host – owner and executive chef Penelope Williams – greeted us that we were able to tear our eyes away. Penny, as she is known, started her culinary career at the Savoy Hotel in London, where she trained with the likes of Gordon Ramsay and Marco Pierre White. After a five-year stint there, she returned to her hometown of Sydney and landed positions at a slew of renowned restaurants, such as the Bayswater Brasserie, the Boathouse on Blackwattle Bay, Restaurant 41 and Bather’s Pavilion. When Alila Manggis in East Bali offered her a position as executive chef, Penny was quick to accept the challenge. “You know, I didn’t see a chilli for my entire apprenticeship,” Penny says. “When I worked in Sydney I was working with Asian produce a little, so I knew some of the ingredients. But I didn’t really know any of the classical dishes. “I learnt the basic fundamentals of Balinese cuisine, not Southeast Asian cuisine or even Indonesian cuisine, but Balinese, by helping the men prepare food for ceremonies in the wee hours of the morning. “I can’t begin to describe how amazing this experience was. I quite often take my chef friends to take part when they come, just to see their eyes light up like mine did.”





During her time at Alila Manggis, Penny developed a deep respect for the freshness and vitality of the produce that could be found just outside her doorstep in East Bali. Inspired by this passion for fresh local flavours and the way the Balinese work with them to create “a unique tapestry of flavours”, Penny set out to create a restaurant that could promote Balinese cuisine and culture without exploiting it or the people. Some may reckon it’s a risky venture building a restaurant so far off the well-travelled tourist trail, but Penny believes that Bali Asli’s remote location is a critical component to the restaurant’s success. “Bali Asli just wouldn’t be the complete package if it didn’t have a view like it does. Imagine Bali Asli on Jalan Petitenget in Seminyak. The market tour would be pretty boring, not to mention the trek,” she says. Our excursion that day was a trip to Pasir Putih, also known as White Sand Beach, to go fishing in a traditional Balinese jukung outrigger boat helmed by local fisherman Pak O’Neil. As we crossed the beach, clambered into the wooden boat and pushed off to sea, visions of hooking the mother of all fish were in the forefront of my mind. As Pak O’Neil killed the motor, we balanced on the small wooden benches inside the boat, hooked the bait—meaty pieces of fish with silvery scales—cast our lines, and waited for something to bite as we gazed out over the water at Lombok and Nusa Penida on the horizon and the black and white sand beaches of Bali behind us. To say that our motley crew of students did not wow Pak O’Neil with our fishing skills would be an understatement. Not only did we not catch anything, but the fish seemed to be outsmarting us each time, neatly cleaning the bait off the hooks without so much as a tug on the lines. Whether this is due to our poor fishing skills or the particular wiliness of the fish off of Pasir Putih is still open for debate. Back at Bali Asli, a table laden in coconut bowls full of exotic roots, herbs, seeds and pastes awaited us. Uninitiated as we were in the majority of the items on the table, Penny spent a great deal of time explaining each ingredient and having us taste the subtle flavours of each, particularly the ones that make up bumbu, a spicy paste that is the basis of many Balinese dishes. She also imparted the importance of balancing sweet, sour and salty flavours in Balinese cuisine with ingredients like palm sugar, tamarind and terasi (shrimp paste). The menu at Bali Asli is based on a type of

meal called megibung, which has its roots in the 17th century when warriors from the Karangasem region invaded the Sasak kingdom on Lombok. Joining the warriors was the king of Karangasem, I Gusti Agung Ketut Karangasem Anglurah, who insisted on sitting down with



the soldiers for every meal and sharing his food and drink with them on communal platters. The result was a boost in morale for the soldiers and a tradition of communal eating and gustatory egalitarianism that still endures today. The dishes we prepared were typical of megibung cuisine, in that they were easy to serve together on a communal platter and were made for sharing. Much like the way it is eaten, Balinese cuisine is prepared mostly by hand, so we spent a great deal of time grinding ingredients into pastes in a ulekan (Balinese mortar and pestle), mixing and tasting ingredients by feel, wrapping meats into banana leaf parcels and cooking over a grill fuelled by coconut husk coals.

With Penny's guidance and keen eye, we pulled off passable, and more importantly, edible, versions of Chicken Satay on Lemongrass Skewers, Spiced Fish Fillet Steamed in Banana Leaf, Fern Tips with Grated Coconut and Red Beans, and Spiced Tofu in Banana Leaf Parcels. And, of course, no Balinese meal is complete without rice, so a simple Nasi Goreng finished off the repertoire. As we devoured our hard work, the conversation turned to the complexity of Balinese cuisine, in particular, the myriad ingredients used in the dishes, the delicate balance of flavours and the sometimes labour-intensive preparation involved. Penny is the first to admit that even she is still learning, taking time out of her day to chat with her "cultural advisors", who consist of her friends, colleagues, and even the ladies selling their wares at the market, and asking them how to cook different things or swapping recipes. Although she believes that you can never truly master a cuisine that is part of such a complex culture, she says: "I've had some chefs come and do work experience at Bali Asli, and they always leave a changed person. They stay in the village and live and breathe Bali for a month or sometimes more. That is the ONLY way to really learn it. However, if you are passionate about anything, you pick it up easily, and passionate is an understatement to describe how I am about the cuisine and culture here."