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OpenHouse elevates Malaysian cuisine to levels of opulence



By Brian Cheong

OpenHouse at Suria KLCC titillates the senses the moment you step through its somewhat inconspicuous entrance, located right in between ABC and Delirium Café. You'll arrive first at an elegant landing with a spiral staircase that recalls the ascent of a lighthouse complete with warm back-lit walls.

At the top is a space so richly appointed that it would fit perfectly in the movie *Crazy Rich Asians*. The restaurant is essentially divided into three separate spaces – the cocktail bar, the Plantation main dining area and the Baba Nonya private room.

Needless to say, the furnishing is stunning and most, if not all, were made-to-order. Owners Andrew Wong and Brian Quirk have been quoted as saying there are 172 different fabrics decorating the interior. "We were thinking what we could do if we were on steroids," quips Wong. "It's maximalism to the nth degree."

In theory, this may sound horrifying but Wong and Quirk come from a strong design background, and they were able to rein it in with their sensibility. The bar, for instance, is a wonderfully lavish composition of velvet, gorgeous prints, golden fans and Chinese silk screens.

The adjoining Smoking Room features a wall of, quite literally, charred wood. This bespoke fixture is achieved via a Japanese wood torching technique. And yes, a smoky scent lingers in the air, which Wong assures is from the wall and not last night's cigars.

We move on to the main dining hall, an airy space filled with natural light. The sun-rays are filtered through screens with an intriguing rope pattern.



Andrew Wong



Chicken Jeruk Kemaman (top) and Barramundi (below)

The chandelier's design is inspired by the *merinjis* apparatus at Malay weddings. Unlike the bar with its opulent touches, the décor here is far more restrained, with the seats in rustic bamboo. In the back is the Baba Nonya room, which beckons with its scarlet walls, floral prints and crystal "lantern"

Overall, the design has fulfilled Wong's desire to create an interesting dining experience. "We want diners to feel transported. dining out is not just about the food; it should be a full sensorial experience, creating an environment where you want to hang around in a little longer. We believe that this is an important aspect of the modern urban lifestyle."

Authentic taste

In contrast to the elaborate interior, the food is stripped down to its essence. Traditional home recipes lead the way here, put together by a kitchen team that mines the nostalgia of homecooked meals made by their grandmothers and mothers to great effect.

"Brian and I have always toyed with the idea of opening a restaurant serving modern Malaysian cuisine. But we didn't want it to be gimmicky or molecular," says Wong.

Ingredients are sourced from local farmers who farm or forage them while cooking methods are faithful to the old ways. "For the team, it felt like homecoming," Wong smiles.

"They grew up with these flavours but were later trained to cook Western cuisine for their jobs. So we gave them the task of bringing back old home recipes, retaining their essence but with a modern twist."

It took a lengthy research time of 10 months to come up with the final menu, during which Wong, who also runs ABC and Delirium Café downstairs, discarded everything he had learnt previously about operating an F&B outlet.

"We wanted to feel that same fearlessness and foolishness that first led us to opening our first restaurant eight years ago. There was no rule; everyone gave their ideas and we took it from there."



The Umami Prawn Borneo and rice

The experience left Wong more intrigued than ever about what constitutes Malaysian food. “There is such a rich diversity of ingredients in our own backyards,” he exclaims. This is particularly evident in the condiments and curries, all of which are prepared in-house and made from fresh ingredients.

Among the exotic variety that find their way into the dishes are the *cendawan kukur* (jungle mushroom) and the *temu pauh* ginger root with a fragrant green mango scent, both of which are used in the *sambal*.

Then there is the *buah kulim*, a jungle fruit with a light truffle-like whiff that adds an appetising flavour to plain steamed rice.



Horseshoe Crab Roe Kerabu

Same but different

To add the modern touch, Wong and his team experimented with unexpected additions. Let's begin with the starters, for instance, the *ummai* prawn Borneo that switches out lime juice for calamansi for a zestier kick. The humble *kerabu* salad gets a luxe touch with the addition of horseshoe crab roe.

As for the mains, the grass-fed Australian beef *rendang* is taken to the next level with its complement of rice that has been cooked – and served – in a pitcher plant. And instead of the usual *patin* fish, OpenHouse elevates the popular leaf-wrapped pais with barramundi.



Plush interior that spells opulence

Other mouthwatering highlights include the chicken *jeruk kemaman* of turmeric-marinated chicken thighs pickled in kemaman shoots; mango pandan chicken with lemongrass; and the sinfully good river lobster *tempoyak*. The small bites are a delight, too, and much of the credit goes to the homemade sambal.

There are five types of relish to choose from – *tempoyak ikan bilis terung pipit* (fermented durian with baby aubergine), *kulat kukur* (wild jungle black mushroom), *isi rong* (rubber seed kernel), *temu pauh* (mango ginger) and *hitam kepayang* (black jungle nut). They make great accompaniments with the fish skin crackers and *ulam* with seasonal greens from the village.

Surely one must have something to wash down all these rich flavours with. Stay with the theme of using jungle plants with the aptly named jungle tonics selection that includes *akar kebayan* (jungle herb root, earl grey and honey), *salak sedap satu* (thorny palm and butterfly pea flower) and *bidara rimba* (jungle herb root, rosemary, grenadine and honey).

Looking at the spread before us, Wong beams: “I’m really proud of my team and what they have done. Who knew that Malaysian food could be so refined?” And, we’re compelled to add, enjoyed in such a fine environment.

(Source: <https://www.star2.com/food/2019/05/07/invitation-indulge-openhouse/#PUvZ947SIVAf27yo.99>)