

**THE FOOD OF THE SINGAPORE MALAYS: GASTRONOMIC  
TRAVELS THROUGH THE ARCHIPELAGO BY KHIR JOHARI.  
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**BOOK REVIEW**

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Khiri Johari's remarkable book ventures into the uncharted realms of documenting the evolution of Malay cuisine from the locus of his Singaporean origins and the proximal surroundings of the Southeast Asian archipelago. This volume is the fruit of 11 years of intricate research, inspired from epiphanous moments, when Johari realised that "food can help us realise who we are" (p. 19). In tandem he perceived that the legacies of Malay cuisine were "under-researched" and became apprehensive about losing "the heritage we still have" (pp. 18–19). Johari's work is arguably a forerunner in documenting with visionary scope, the fecund assemblage of cultural influences, history and legacy; that the permeating cuisine of the region has always articulated about.

*The food of the Singapore Malays* is not a cookbook nor a mere compilation of exotic recipes for culinary aficionados' collections. This tome is a kaleidoscope of gorgeously procured visuals of food, its peoples, historical images, local instruments, cultural and gastronomic practices. They are related to 32 carefully curated recipes. Johari cartographises by mapping Singapore and its archipelagic neighbours, who were collectively known before boundaries and colonial markers were imposed, as the legendary Nusantara. His more than decade-long research, chronicles the Singapore Malays' culinary heritage and is linked to the wider exegesis of Nusantara inhabitants' legacies. Johari perceives Singapore as "a creative kitchen hub", foregrounding its distinct Malay food identity, and the notion of its association with the archipelago's multivalent diversity (p. 19). Indeed, the book's sub-title, *Gastronomic travels through the archipelago*, implies Johari's acknowledgment that physical journeying is integral to unravelling Singapore's heritage from the cuisine of Nusantara. Travelling through the routes

of ancient Nusantara or what is now Indonesia, Malaysia, to its outlying islands, Johari scoured for pertinent facets that would fit into articulating his food-infused narration. Ultimately, Johari steers the narrative focus towards his Singapore Malay food roots, documenting its origins and archipelagic affiliations whilst delineating its progression to its present day status.

Encompassing a broad sweep, the text traces Malay food's origins in the region from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, through the rise and fall of kingdoms, sultanates and empires to 21<sup>st</sup> century Singapore. Before launching into his gastronomic narrative, Johari devotes the entire first chapter, entitled "Malaya Irredenta: Malays, Malayans and Malaysians" to elucidating the myriad ways of perceiving the Malay identity, its beginnings, belonging and fragmented dispersal throughout the Nusantara region. The Malays have not only been defined by themselves, but also by others, including foreigners whom the Trade Winds ushered in during the times of enterprise and colonial conquest. For instance, the "Malay Archipelago" was the address given by the Europeans, who called this "the homeland of the Malay-speaking peoples" (p. 33). Similarly, Stamford Raffles, the colonising envoy of the British East India Company observed that "the Malay nation" despite speaking a similar language, have been dispersed over "so wide a space", occupying "maritime states" which lay between "the Sulu Seas and the Southern Oceans" (p. 35). Notably, the narrative also reminds us about the diverse non-Malay ethnicities, such as the Indians, Chinese, "Orang Asli groups, Eurasians", Middle Eastern and other minorities (p. 29). Integrated within society, they too call the archipelago 'home'. Whilst Nusantara groups such as the "Javanese, Bugis, Makassarase, Banjarese and Minangkabau", who despite having their own languages, have been drawn under the umbrella of being Malay (pp. 40, 43). Johari identifies Kampong Gelam, the historic Malay district in Singapore as "the incubator" of "the Nusantara kitchen" (p. 54). He notes that Kampong Gelam had a "eclectic mix of people" from the Nusantara regions (p. 66). The Bugis, for instance "brought *Burasak*", a coconut rice banana-wrapped food, whilst the Bawean contributed "*Kelah Chelok*, a tamarind-based broth" (p. 67). Kampong Gelam had pre-colonial royal connections as "Sultan Hussein Shah" and his royal court resided there, building a palace and a mosque (p. 54). This district historically served as an important "point of exchange" of commerce "within the Malay Archipelago" (p.55). Spelt as Kampong 'Glam' today, its palace and royalty are long gone but the area's legacies and vibrant food scene continues to draw visitors as well as locals.

Johari's book is arranged into four parts, namely: "People, space and place", "Indigenous ingenuity", "Food as civilisation" and "Food and the politics of identity" (pp. 16–17). These are disassembled into detailed chapters. He

distinguishes between four types of Malay writing, choosing the archaic “Za’ba spelling” to bring out the “Johor-Riau” nuances spoken in Singapore (p. 21). The book’s fascinating appendix, includes categories like “Malay Fishing Gear”, “Common Malay Market Fish and Other Edible Aquafauna”. (p. 572 – 586). The Malay people’s symbiotic relationship with the seas is thus apparent. Fishing sustained Nusantara’s communities for eons, as they constructed their lives around this. Johari notes that as “a maritime people inhabiting littoral regions”, seafood is inherently ubiquitous “to the Malay table” (p. 165). He shares the “fiery hot and sour” recipe of “*asam pedas*”, which is popular from Melaka to the Riau Islands (p. 47). This dish uses piquant *asam* or tamarind water which is cooked with local fish such as stingray, ikan merah and catfish. Local spicy condiments such as black pepper, belachan, daun kesum, dried chillies are added to complete its signature taste.

Besides seafood, the Malays’ ingrained respect for the sea and their approaches to fishing is also detailed. Traditional methods of fishing include using “*the kelong*”, where wooden huts on stilts hovered over the waters with its fishing trap system (p. 170). Johari observes that the Malays employ numerous methods of fishing, including the “*jala*” (net), “*memancing*” or rod fishing (still widely used), and the “*bintoh*” to trap crabs (p. 170). Malays who are seafarers, maintain a complicated relationship with the sea, viewing it as “a potent realm”, and believing in the existence of “*hantu laut*” or sea spirits (pp. 172 -173). Local fishermen often chant protective mantras to “seek permission” and protection (p. 173). Lamentably, traditional fishing and their customs have almost disappeared, unable to withstand pressing competition from modern fishing methodologies and commercialisation.

Today, many exacting procedures of preparing Malay food have either vanished or been corrupted by short-cut versions, which Johari decries over. The loss of this impacts the present gastronomic landscape of Singapore Malay cuisine. However, they prevail as part of the continually evolving Malay food scene. Fortuitously, Johari has undertaken the task of extensively documenting and memorialising, including lost or uncommon victuals and their related practices. One indigenous method of cooking measurement entails Johari’s mother using her hand as a “measuring cup” (p. 222). For instance, “*secubit*” means “a pinch” of salt or “*garam*”, “*segengam*” means “a fistful” of “*kachang hijau*” or mung beans, and “*seibu jari*” or “a thumb’s length” of “*kunyit*” or fresh turmeric (p. 222). Aside from this, attention given to special Malay utensils and cookware. Although some have lost favour and are no longer widely used. Devices such as the “*kukor kelapa*” used to be commonly employed to grate coconut, whilst the “*kawah*” is a gigantic “cast iron” Malay pot was utilised for cooking ceremonial feasts (pp. 223–224). These

devices and kitchenware articulate the labour and creativity that Malay cooks invested into producing their gastronomic masterpieces. They remind us that the art of Malay cooking is fully self-sustaining, supported by its own ethos, approaches and resources.

Elusive, rare versions of now-commercialised Malay dishes are examined by Johari. He identifies for instance, three distinct types of ‘*mee siam*’, a popular rice noodle dish which is enjoyed across cultures. Whilst two versions are well-known, the fried “clotted-coconut cream” *mee siam*, concocted by “Mak Jarah” is “near extinction” (p. 83). Johari also devotes an entire chapter to desserts, ranging from delicious *kueh* or sweetmeats, *bubor* (sweet porridges), and the crowd-pleasing *serikaya* or coconut jam. He observes their mind-boggling variety, and concurs that Malay sweets and desserts “encompass a broad range of genres” (p. 307). In addition, Johari does not forget to discuss the significances of plating and presentation known as “Elok, the aesthetics of Malay cuisine” (p. 344), for Malay food should not only tantalise by taste and smells, but also by its visuals.

Towards the book’s denouement, Johari acknowledges Malay cuisines’ “shifting borders” (p. 506). He endorses Malay food’s vibrant relationships with its non-Nusantaran neighbours, such as Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia (pp. 508–510). Ruminating upon his prolific research, he recommends that the “future revival” of Malay cuisine should begin by “a turn to the past” (pp. 538, 543). Saliently, *The food of the Singapore Malays*, despite its deceptive ‘coffee-table book’ appearance and hefty weight of around 3.2 kilograms, is a resolute work of scholarship. It is a paean to the gastronomic heritage of Singaporean Malay cuisine and its archipelagic affiliates. Johari’s endeavour is an eminent milestone, imbuing a sumptuous overarching framework from which further studies, dialogue and reflection on the foods of the Malay archipelago may be perused.

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