

Meals on wheels

CASPAR VAN VARK IDLES IN INDONESIA

AS A SIX-YEAR-OLD, NEWLY ARRIVED WITH MY family in Jakarta, I remember being frightened by the mysterious noises on the street outside our house. At dusk, as the mosque's call to prayer ended, the air would gradually fill with haunting cries, rattles and knocks. I didn't know then that it was just the streetfood vendors, trundling along with their carts and announcing themselves to possible customers.

They're known as *kaki lima* ('five legs') for the two wheels, backstand, and the vendor's own two legs. Each type of vendor had his own call, and trained ears would know what was on offer. It's like culinary birdsong. The 'ting, ting, ting' of a spoon hitting a wok meant there was *mie goreng* (fried noodles), *nasi goreng* (fried rice), or *bakso* (meatballs with noodles) going past.

An eerie 'teeeeeee' call alerted listeners to *sate* (chicken satay, skewered onto thin bamboo sticks and cooked over coals), and the 'tek-tek' of a stick hitting a hollow bamboo tube told you there was a portion of *mie ayam* (chicken noodles) in the neighbourhood.

and releases a heady cloud of sweet, garlicky heat.

Indonesia is a vast country, made up of around 17,500 islands and a population of 200 million. It's the most populous Muslim-majority country in the world, but there's still a huge diversity of ethnicities and religions. Over 700 languages are spoken on these islands. There are Christian areas on Kalimantan (the Indonesian part of Borneo), and the island of Flores, while Bali is predominantly Hindu. In northern Sumatra, you're only a short hop from Singapore; from there, it's a long way to the dense jungles of Irian Jaya, just above Australia.

Besides the sprawling geography, a long history of trade and colonisation means that Indonesian food is hugely diverse. The Dutch arrived seeking the wealth of spices to be found here – nutmeg, pepper, cinnamon – and also brought flavours of home with them. Cabbages, cauliflowers, carrots, beans, potatoes and corn were added to the already vast array of indigenous vegetables, and they found their way into the *gado-gado*, and other dishes such as *gulai buncis*, a stew of green beans, potatoes and coconut milk. The word *buncis* (green beans) actually comes from the Dutch, *boontjes*.

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Indonesian food awakens all the senses – and to the uninitiated it can sometimes be a rude awakening. The pungent, fermented smell of *terasi*, an Indonesian shrimp paste, comes as a shock. It's made in dark slabs and is used as a flavouring in soups such as *sayur asam* (fresh sour vegetable soup) and in curries and salads, such as the well-known *gado-gado* (vegetable salad with peanut sauce). Like some cheeses, it tastes better than it smells.

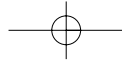
The durian fruit is another example. Often banned on public transport, the fierce spiky husk of this football-sized fruit makes it menacing even just to look at and hold. When it's sliced open, the whiff of sour, sweaty socks can disperse a crowd. But the segments inside taste relatively mild and creamy.

Fortunately, for every stinky durian there are a dozen more enticing smells to compensate. It might simply be the aroma of finely chopped shallots fried into brown crisps before they're scattered over a soup. Or of beef slowly braised in coconut milk and *kecap manis* (pronounced like ketchup) – the thick, sweet soy sauce used all over the country. Or of a spoonful of *sambal*, the chili paste found with every meal, as it hits shimmering oil

Before this, there had already been centuries of trade within Asia, particularly India and China. The soy products found all over Asia are just as popular in Indonesia, and they appear in new forms. *Kecap manis* is an obvious example, although *kecap asin*, the unsweetened version, is also used.

The other main use of soy is in *tempeh*. Like tofu, *tempeh* is made of soybeans. But it's a whole soybean product, made through a process of fermentation which binds the soybean particles into cakes and gives it more flavour. This fermentation process, and the use of the whole bean, makes *tempeh* particularly high in protein, fibre and vitamins. It's a staple food on Java, often eaten as *tempeh gurih* (curried), where cubes of the cake are fried in oil, then simmered in coconut milk with chillies, garlic, *terasi*, turmeric, shallots, ginger and *galangal*, a root related to ginger.

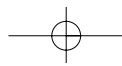
If you travel anywhere in Indonesia, you're likely to find yourself in a Padang restaurant at some point. Padang is the capital and largest city of West Sumatra, and Padang restaurants can be found all over, serving the food of the Minangkabau people. They're famed for their spicy food and for a particular way of



PICTURE: PETER HORREE/ALAMY



PICTURE: MORE IMAGES/PHOTOLIBRARY



servicing it. You sit down, and a vast array of small dishes are set before you: you tuck in, but pay only for the dishes you eat.

One of the best known Padang foods is *rendang*, a dish of meat (usually beef) cooked very slowly in coconut milk with spices until most of the liquid has evaporated and all the flavours absorbed into the meat. There might also be curried fish, fried *tempeh*, liver and chicken. It can be hard to work out what everything is. Some travellers report Padang restaurants serving deep-fried gecko and baked lung, but such adventurous fare isn't standard.

A final word on pork. You won't find it much in Muslim areas – which is most of Indonesia – but it's eaten within the Chinese communities, parts of Sumatra and Sulawesi, Irian Jaya and on Bali. In fact, Bali's signature dish is *babi guling*, a suckling pig roasted on a spit over a corn husk fire. The dead piglet is smeared inside and out with a spice paste made of ginger, turmeric, cardamom, chili, nutmeg, *terasi*, lemongrass, cloves, candlenuts and coriander. The meltingly soft flesh comes with crispy skin glowing yellow from the turmeric, and is served with rice, *sambal*, and maybe a few side dishes of vegetables. No one selling *babi guling* needs a cry, rattle or knock: the queues form all by themselves.

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SAMBAL TERASI

Many Asian supermarkets will stock *terasi*, the Indonesian dried shrimp paste. Here it flavours a *sambal*, which you can use as a condiment, in stir-fries, or however else you fancy it.

INGREDIENTS

- around 15 red chillies, sliced
- 2 tbsp *terasi* (dried shrimp paste)
- 2 tomatoes, chopped
- 2 shallots, peeled and sliced
- 2 cloves garlic
- 2 tbsp oil
- 1 tsp sugar
- 1 tsp salt
- juice of 1 lime

Heat oil over medium heat and sauté the first five ingredients for approximately 2-3 minutes. With a mortar and pestle, grind the sautéed ingredients along with the rest of the ingredients.

SOTO AYAM (CHICKEN SOUP)

INGREDIENTS

- 2 cloves garlic, sliced
- 1 tsp turmeric
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 1 tsp fresh ginger, chopped
- 1 chicken
- 2 bay leaves
- 8-10 shallots, finely chopped
- 3 tsp salt
- 2 stalks lemongrass
- 2 packs vermicelli
- 1 tbsp vegetable oil

FOR SERVING

- Lime wedges
- 4 hard-boiled eggs, sliced
- Crispy fried shallots
- Sweet soy sauce (*kecap manis*)
- *Sambal*
- Bean sprouts

Pound turmeric, garlic, ginger, and pepper into a paste, then stir-fry for a minute or two until fragrant.

Put the chicken in a large pot and cover with water. Add the bay leaves, salt, lemongrass and the fried spice paste. Cover and gently poach for 30 minutes. Turn off the heat, and let the chicken stand in its broth for about 15 minutes. Remove the chicken and let it cool off. Then remove the meat from the bones and cut or shred into bite-size pieces. Save the broth.

Boil the vermicelli according to the manufacturer's instructions. Finely chop and fry the rest of the shallots until brown and crispy.

To serve, layer the chicken and vermicelli into serving bowls, and pour over some stock. Leave the shallots, egg slices, *kecap manis*, *sambal*, lime wedges, and bean sprouts on the table, for people to add to the soup.