

Quentin Pereira's Eurasian feast extends beyond Devil's Curry

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Quentin Pereira shares the secret to perfecting Eurasian recipes.



Singapore, March 7, 2009 - Quentin Pereira is a chef, not a mathematician, but if there is one equation he is constantly seeking to disprove, it's that Eurasian cuisine = devil's curry.

"It happens quite often - when non-Eurasians are asked whether they know Eurasian food, they'll reply yes, they're familiar with devil's curry," grumbles the owner of the award-winning Quentin's the Eurasian Restaurant along Ceylon Road good-naturedly.

"And then when you ask if they've tried it, they'll say no."

The perception that Eurasian fare is a one-dish genre frustrates him, he says, because there is so much more to it than that sour-spicy-smokey curry.

After all, the cuisine is a melting pot of influences from regions such as Portugal, India and Malaysia, with dishes ranging from vindaloo to begedil (meat-and-potato cutlets that Pereira says a Brazilian embassy official once told him were similar to what he used to have in Brazil) and shepherd's pie.

Still, the chef acknowledges that the lack of education about his culture's cuisine is not surprising, considering the number of Eurasian eateries in Singapore: apart from Quentin's, there's perhaps only one other, Damian D'Silva's Big D's Grill at Holland Drive.

The barren culinary landscape is because "a lot of people who try doing Eurasian food give up after one or two years", he feels.

That and the fact that a lot of recipes tend to be kept within families and cooked only in the home.

Pereira's own formulae, in fact, were handed down to him by his father, who got them from his grandmother and her cousins.

"My grandma and two of her cousins were quite well known for their food; they used to cook for Eurasian weddings," he says. "If you were married in the 1950s or '60s and you were having a Eurasian wedding, you'd likely have gotten them to cook for you."

The ambassador for Eurasian food - who was recently featured in the People for Total Defence advertisement campaign (he's quoted as saying he wants to defend his recipes) - has other tales to tell about the cuisine, too.

"Lots of Eurasian food, which is basically a blend of European influences with Asian cooking style and ingredients, has a story to it...yes, even devil's curry, or debal curry as it's also known," he shares.

"Debal is Portuguese for leftovers, and the dish, which is usually prepared on Boxing Day, is so-called because of all the leftovers that go into it after Christmas.

There can be bacon bones, sausages, turkey - anything goes really.

There's no hard and fast rule to cooking this."

Two things that should not go into an authentic devil's curry recipe, though, are curry powder and chilli powder. Explains Pereira: "The dish should be made from fresh chillies, onions, dried chillies, mustard seeds and ginger blended together to get a fresher taste than normal curry.

It's a bit like assam pedas but thicker and with a smokey flavour imparted from the bacon bones, etc." To get the ingredients for this and other Eurasian dishes he recommends either Tekka Market (which has "very good buah keluak") or Geylang Serai. Despite the diversity of Eurasian fare, most of the dishes share some common threads when it comes to ingredients.

There's vinegar, which goes into everything from fiery hot vindaloos to thick stews called smores, as well as chilli and belacan (shrimp paste).

"Before the Portuguese reached this part of the world they stopped in Goa, so the influence of India is very strong in Eurasian cooking. Most dishes are either very spicy or very mild," says the chef, adding that there are different variations of each Eurasian dish depending on which part of Malaysia or Singapore it originated from.

"For example, there are two main versions of devil's curry, one with seven ingredients

and one with three ingredients, which are supposed to have come from Malacca and Penang, respectively."

The secret to perfecting most recipes is in the rempah (spiced paste), says Pereira.

"The rempah plays a very important part in Eurasian cooking, just as in Peranakan cooking.

It is the stirring, the time taken, the fire - which cannot be too big or the rempah will burn.

Too small and it won't give out the proper aroma either," he reveals.

While it takes lots of practice and experience to get this right, a good gauge of whether the rempah is done is to watch for the "pukol minyak, or the oil in the rempah".

Advises the chef: "You must stir the rempah until the oil comes up, and when that's done it means the rempah is cooked.

But you must make sure you put in enough oil in the beginning or the oil will never come up!"

Assuming you do that, however, bringing up the pukol minyak should take about eight to 10 minutes of constant stirring in the recipe here.

If there's anyone keeping his fingers crossed that you get it right, it's Pereira. "Eurasian food will just die off if nobody continues it," he says. "I believe future generations should get a chance to know what Eurasian food is really like."

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