

FOOD NATION: FACES OF JAKARTA'S EPICUREAN DELIGHTS

Over the past decade, the dining scene has exploded in the capital, thanks to the increasingly modern lifestyle, which has strongly contributed to the rapid growth of Jakarta's culinary industry. Once considered as an eclectic world of casual local eateries, fast food joints, and *kaki lima* vendors, Jakarta is now a gastronomic haven in progress. With the help of several highly credible experts, NOW! Jakarta's Ayudita C. Ajani has tried to make sense of the current culinary craze and make some future predictions along the way.

As Laksmi Pamuntjak, food critic and celebrated author of *The Jakarta Good Food Guide* cleverly describes, "If there's something Jakarta hasn't stopped doing, it's eating." The bustling capital is in fact bursting with over 600 restaurants ready to welcome all types of diners nowadays. Quickly flip through the pages of Laksmi's food guide book, drive along Jalan Kemang Raya, walk around the many malls or head to Kota district and Kelapa Gading area --both located in North Jakarta and home to many passionate foodies by nature, and you will witness the astonishing diversity of Jakarta's culinary scene.

Defining the Capital's Diners

These days, Jakartans are definitely more receptive towards new foods. They are "brave warriors" who detest any limitations in expanding their culinary knowledge. "Similar to what happened to some culinary cities all over the world, from New York City, Sydney to Singapore, 20 to 30 years ago, Jakartans have now gained better understanding about the culinary practice than ever before. They like to taste many different cuisines that are presented by a variety of restaurant concepts in terms of style or origin of food," explains William Wongso, one of Indonesia's best known culinary experts and food consultants.

Basically, the continuous flow of information in the media, mostly contributed by the international TV networks, has significantly influenced people's perception of food in various different ways. These TV culinary shows are not only showing recommended venues to dine out, but also go 'behind the plates'. "There are two types of TV culinary programs. One encourages you to try new places and another persuades you to experiment at home. More and more diners like to expand their repertoire, so it's always good to know what new restaurants are out there. And while people get to improve their own cooking skills at home, increased exposure to new flavours and sensations only enrich people's culinary appreciation on the whole. This means people will still eat out and seek new dining experiences," says Laksmi Pamuntjak. Aside from the constant culinary campaign carried out by the media, exquisite encounters with world cuisines through extensive travel and increased variety of restaurants opened in the city has fuelled Jakartans to be smart, open-minded diners. "On top of that, our particular strengths --a great regional food tradition, including casual eateries, street food/*kaki lima*, outstanding, distinctive seafood and Chinese/*babah* cuisine-- help us maintain our edge in the region," says Laksmi.

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Laksmi Pamuntjak



Wahjudi Rahardja



William Wongso

Many dining spots have also taken the all-in-one concept to attract more customers and at the same time, to stay abreast of the ongoing trends. Meaning, they are going beyond just presenting exciting menus. “Nowadays, dining venues incorporates a lot of things, such as combining restaurants with a bar or hangout area for after dinner chats, which really show the more casual and relaxed lifestyle in Jakarta,” describes Wahjudi Rahardja, owner of Emilie, French fine dining restaurant in Jakarta. Although, it’s always cool to operate within the current fashion, this kind of establishment has a limited lifespan written all over it. “I see a lot of dining places that combine everything and tend to be in the ‘now’ but only survived three to four years. After that period of time, they need to refresh things up with renovation or even altering the whole restaurant concept with a total new look to bring back the customers,” says Wahjudi Rahardja. Jakartans are more aware of what they’re looking for in a dining spot, so if the venue has failed to keep the customers’ interest, a closing down sign can soon be put on the front door.

Laksmi Pamuntjak also points out that the food and beverage menu, service, ambience, décor, hygiene, value for money are still priorities for diners. Even though sometimes diners are just looking for great atmosphere and warm service rather than the menu, Laksmi Pamuntjak still believes that the majority of Jakartans value quality of food above all. For this, she adds bonus points if the dishes have the ‘value-for-money’ factor. Because, she admits that there is nothing like the surprise and delight when low expectations are met with unexpected gourmet quality!

The Current Rising

After the rushing waves of Japanese/sushi restaurants swiftly popping up in Jakarta a while ago, two new culinary trends are unexpectedly fighting their way up to the ‘most wanted’ list amongst diners. In the last six years, Nonya/Peranakan and high-end Indonesian cuisine movement are quietly stirring a newfound frenzy. “Meradelima, Penang Bistro and Kedai Tiga Nyonya have shown the way. Suddenly *ayam siyao* and *bihun Pecinan*, *ngohiong* and *Rujak Penganten*, the sort of staples that resulted from the culinary marriage of Chinese, Dutch and Indonesian, have become all the rage,” says Laksmi. “Babah cuisine, as it is also known here –an interesting bit of sociological detail, for it doesn’t just place women (for which the designation Nonya, or Nyonya is intended) in the kitchen— has been practiced for ages and it is still there. But Dapoer Babah Elite stole the show around six years ago, at least for a certain kind of market, and thus hatched the beginnings of the Malang-based Tugu Group’s grip in this city, with Lara Djonggrang, Warong Shanghai Blue and Samarra quick to follow,” Laksmi continues. “The winning formula –emphasis on ambience, elegant plating, refined food– continued with the twin success of Boenga Rampai and Kembang Goela.” Then there are the affordable and

more casual local Indonesian restaurants, including Satay Senayan, Bumbu Desa and Warung Daun, which are becoming regular choices for many families on the weekend.

Simultaneously, several modern Western restaurants are making their way in the right direction, as Laksmi Pamuntjak explains, “They are sharing a promising tendency towards fresh ingredients, lightness, simple treatments and a measured openness to outside influences. The New York-style brassiere, Loewy, is gaining strength with its combination of solid French bistro food, even more solid pan-Asian fare and great cocktails; the Capoccaccia group has just come up with a new, very competent French bistro called Bistro Baron; Antoine Audran is still doing his stuff at the much-loved Java Bleu, and Chef Benoit Clayes maintains a steady hand at Cork & Screw, Koi and Loewy.” The Ismaya Group (Blowfish, Puro, Social House, Pizza e Birra) has also implemented this positive development in its big expansion plan, whereas the humble Japanese restaurants bundled up in Little Tokyo, Blok M, are still ruling the town with their unbeatable standard of quality and service.

Inventing the Chef Culture

There is no doubt that to execute a fine dish that can meet or even surpass international standards, real professional hands in the kitchen are absolute mandatory. Although there is no better period than now to bring forward top-notch professionals to the capital, a strong chef culture is something that Jakarta still barely recognises. “We have many good Indonesian cooks but still hardly any Indonesian chefs as conductors and food creators! But most of all, Indonesia is lacking of good professional chefs who understand and cook varieties of popular regional local cuisines, due to the fact that our culinary education is usually Western-based,” comments William Wongso. Even more exasperating is the treatment of the average chef (or ‘cook’) who, Laksmi reminds, is being treated like “everybody else” or an ordinary employee and not as an essential part of the restaurant’s identity and pride.

Hip venues with avant-garde interiors have now to be supported with fully equipped, clean kitchens and most importantly, well-trained staff that hold good education and an undying passion to develop Jakarta’s culinary industry. “We have to focus on strengthening the chef culture in Jakarta. The sooner we allow these chefs to experiment with tradition, hone their craft, improve standards and skills and introduce new flavours, styles and techniques, the quicker we will take greater pride in their role as standard-setters and standard bearers. And thus we will better appreciate our potential as a culinary city to be reckoned with,” explains Laksmi. Principally, great restaurants bolster the prestige of a city, and if there are many of those alike showing up in Jakarta, there will be more and more travellers flock to the capital for a culinary adventure.

CULINARY ADVENTURES

Developing Local Treasures

Being the strongest asset of Jakarta's culinary scene, the local food industry is showing no signs of becoming extinct. Still, there are things that need to be enhanced to achieve better food quality, service, and atmosphere. "The peddlers of high-end regional or "Indonesian" cuisine should focus on improving professionalism, service and staff knowledge of ingredients and wine to make it more in line with 'international standard'. But these innovations should not sacrifice the taste bud, or the privileged diners' willingness to pay for glamour. They can be expensive but not *that* expensive," says Laksmi. Then again, good food only comes from good quality ingredients. Therefore, developing local farms to produce fresh, top quality ingredients for restaurants is increasingly vital. "I totally support local products, especially vegetables. I believe many restaurants will be more than happy to promote local products, as long as they're up to good quality standard. It basically forms a mutual benefit for both parties," says Wahjudi Rahardja. Moreover, with the raising of 'think green' awareness in the restaurant business around the world, the increased use of local products will also help reduce carbon emission prints resulting from air flown imports of products. Additionally, Jakartans can have more choice of good quality local ingredients to buy in the supermarket.

What's more, having a clean, nice environment should definitely be the most basic necessity. As Wahjudi Rahardja admits, "To me, serving good food in a clean and comfortable place matters the most. When I go to a restaurant, the first thing I look for is the cleanliness of the place, because when it's clean, that means they respect the food and are neat when working." William Wongso also confesses that he prefers simple, clean local food restaurants with unique and good value dishes for his daily consumption.

Having said that, William Wongso realises that Indonesia is actually lacking the confidence in how to introduce world's most diverse culinary tradition domestically and internationally. "Only *nasi Padang* is known and available in fast growing of Padang restaurants all over Indonesia," tells William Wongso. Perhaps, we can start the campaign by finding the most suitable standard formula for each regional Indonesian cuisine to the world arena, as mentioned by Laksmi Pamuntjak, "Personally, I am not in favour of any attempt to standardize, or, in this case, to politicise cuisine. Imagine if we were to choose which type of soto is most representative of '*soto Indonesia*' – soto Kudus, Lamongan, Banjar, Medan or Madura? They're all different to start with! And yet, to introduce Indonesian cuisine to the world, we cannot avoid this process of selection, especially because the Indonesian Diaspora is significantly smaller than that of the Indian, Chinese, Thai or Korean. Like it or not, we have to 'simplify' Indonesian cuisine for the world platter." Who knows, soon we might find a Padang restaurant in a corner of Times Square, New York City. Wouldn't it be wonderful if bringing various Indonesian cuisines to its deserving limelight were a reality not a mere wishful thinking.



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Kaki Lima Dilemma

Amongst tourists and the expatriate community, eating out in *kaki lima* vendors has resulted many mixed opinions. Principally, it comes down to the unresolved issue of hygiene. Being portrayed as some kind of scary food that can only be found in *Fear Factor* TV game shows, the *kaki lima* food has fallen short in winning hearts of a wider customer base outside of Indonesians since decades ago. It's a heartbreaking situation that not everyone can enjoy the delectable taste of a multitude *kaki lima* food, which arguably, is way more delicious than their other counterparts in the region. In fact, *kaki lima* food had recently garnered attention and praise in a world-class event, which was attended by the most respected culinary professionals in the world, as told by William Wongso. "Last November 2009, I was invited among 90 chefs from all over the world to be the presenter who represented Indonesia on the annual occasion of World Food Conference organized by Culinary Institute of America at Greystone St Helena, Napa Valley, USA. The theme was *The World of Street and Comfort Food* and was attended by reputable food professionals. It turned out to be the best and most interesting international food event that I have ever participated in and I never tasted so much real authentic food in one place at the same time. I did a presentation of authentic *rendang* as caramelized beef curry, *sate Padang* using veal cheek, *sate kelapa Madura*, and *cumi hitam Pekalongan*. Most of the participants commented that they never once encountered that kind of taste in their culinary repertoire before, but all loved it very much!" recalls William Wongso.

What is unique about *kaki lima* food is that they are the unofficial benchmark of taste for authentic Indonesian cuisine for most Indonesians. And the matchless value-for-money factor that comes with the food has made *kaki lima* vendors the place to go for a lot of local diners. So, it would be wise for the local government to support Jakarta's largest culinary asset and make them the 'star' in their own city. "*Kaki lima* vendors deserve financial support from the government to improve their kitchen, location and standards of hygiene as well as to gain more exposure," suggests Laksmi Pamuntjak. In this case, the government can set aside a certain location for them to sell their food in one large area, each with proper space, water and electricity supply. "I don't mind eating *kaki lima* food, as long as the place is clean and hygienic. That's why the government should create health and safety inspections for *kaki lima* vendors so that this can be actually beneficial for the public," explains Wahjudi Rahardja. Singapore has done it, so why not Jakarta, which currently is the home of the largest number of *kaki lima* vendors in the region?

The Future Shall Unfold Now

Although El Bulli restaurant has caused a big stir with its molecular gastronomy sensation, Jakarta still hasn't been shaken with all those cutting edge culinary ideas. Because as William Wongso affirms, "Jakarta doesn't need all that molecular food, we actually need real food. Therefore, there will be a lot of good franchise restaurants opening up here in the near future. That way, Indonesian cooks can directly learn new cooking techniques that they don't learn from hotel school."

More and more investors are developing good restaurants and that means more competitions rising on the horizon. But, competition is healthy and required to keep the culinary industry alive in Jakarta. "I think competition is always positive, as long as it's healthy. That way, restaurateurs have to keep themselves on their toes and want to improve all the time," admits Wahjudi Rahardja.

Improving the strong fundamentals of Jakarta's restaurant business from the ground up has become the centre of attention for Laksmi Pamuntjak. She strongly recommends the need for more culinary schools committed to learning and knowledge exchange in Jakarta. "Waitstaff, assistant chefs and kitchen hands have to be drawn from a new generation weaned on new domesticated tastes and for whom a career in the restaurant industry is not seen as second-class. This will also help foster a new egalitarian ethos so critical to any restaurant revolution to take place," suggests Laksmi Pamuntjak.

The recent Jakarta International Food Festival organised by The Ismaya Group also shone the light to more exciting culinary events in the capital over the next few years. Exchanging ideas and knowledge about local cuisines with world-class chefs and international food writers has definitely boosted Jakarta's gastronomic industry to spread more widely into the international arena. From here, we can only rest assured that the capital's food scene is heading towards a prosperous future ahead!

Practical Culinary Adventure

Want 600 restaurants to choose from every day in the palm of your hand? *The Jakarta Good Food Guide* by Laksmi Pamuntjak is now available on iPod Touch and iPhone. Download this must-have bestseller from the iTunes Store now!!