



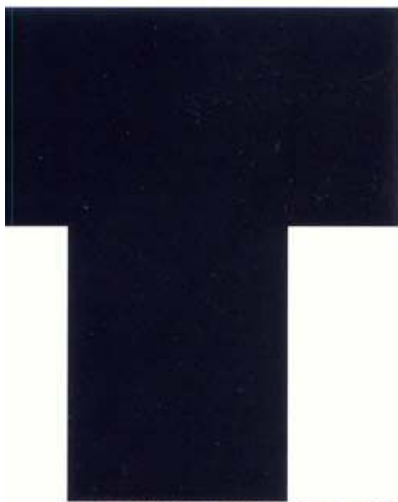
IN SEARCH OF THE CITY'S  
WILDLY SPICY AND SATISFYING  
FLAVORS, **BRETT MARTIN**  
UNCOVERS THE DELICIOUS BEST  
OF MALAYSIAN STREET FARE

THE TRAVEL ISSUE

# KUALA LUMPUR: STREET FOOD HEAVEN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEAN-LUC BÉNARD

Locals follow the busy street Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman to culinary nirvana, the Chow Kit market.



THE OFFICIAL NATIONAL MOTTO OF **MALAYSIA** IS *BERSEKUTU BERTAMBAH MUTU*, WHICH MEANS "UNITY IS STRENGTH;" THE NATION'S UNOFFICIAL MOTTO, THE ONE YOU ACTUALLY HEAR ON THE STREETS OF KUALA LUMPUR, IS A BIT DIFFERENT, AND FAR MORE LIKELY TO STIR THE HEARTSTRINGS OF THE GROWING LEGIONS OF FOOD LOVERS WHO HAVE MADE THE MALAYSIAN CAPITAL THE CURRENT FOOD DESTINATION OF CHOICE. IT IS *JALAN-JALAN CARI MAKAN*, OR "WALK AROUND, TAKE A LOOK. EAT."



As proud as Malaysians are of their multiculturalism (the country is roughly 60 percent Malay, 30 percent Chinese, and 8 percent Indian, with countless ethnic subdivisions within each group), they are at least as proud of the way that diversity plays out on the plate. It's a cuisine that features a bright, spicy, wildly varied mix of flavors and influences but still manages to cohere into something uniquely Malaysian.

And though laid-back "K.L." (as the capital is universally called) has emerged as an affluent, cosmopolitan city on par with Bangkok or Singapore, most citizens insist that its most serious dining still takes place at street level. There's even a kind of reverse snobbery in effect. Meena Periasamy, a 39-year-old CPA who blogs about the K.L. food scene under the name *Lyrical Lemongrass*, complains that she can hardly persuade her young professional friends to eat in upscale restaurants. "They'll always find something wrong, because they're looking for it," she says. "They believe everything is better on the street."

The only quarrel one could find with *Jalan-Jalan Cari Makan* is that the "walk around" part is difficult to achieve in K.L., which is spread across the Klang Valley in a sprawl more reminiscent of Los Angeles than New York. Luckily,





cabs are cheap, and any of the neighborhoods that follow will provide an excellent introduction to the glories of Malaysia's street-food scene.

### GOLDEN TRIANGLE

Calling the tourist heart of K.L. the Golden Triangle is less a geometric description than an evocation of the soaring, moneyed, brightly lit metropolis the city has become. Here, in the shadow of the eerily beautiful double-spired Petronas Twin Towers, is where most travelers first stay in K.L., and where they can get their first taste of eating street-side at the riot of stalls that line



Jalan Alor. If the flavors here are slightly geared to Western palates, the street nevertheless provides an excellent survey of dishes you'll find elsewhere.

The air is filled with billowing smoke from satay sizzling on charcoal grills. Piles of fresh fish sit in display cases, ready to be grilled for *ikan bakar* and served with spicy *sambal*. There are stalls selling *char kway teow* (pad-thai-like flat rice noodles stir-fried with egg, bean sprouts, shrimp, chiles, and plump cockles), *rojak* (chunks of tropical fruit, cucumber, and deep-fried dough under a sauce made with shrimp paste), refreshing *cendol* (shaved ice topped with rich palm sugar, sweet beans, and weird mung bean jellies), and *nasi* (rice) and *mee* (noodles) served in so many preparations it makes the head spin.

As they are in, say, New York, many of the best food stories in K.L. are really stories about immigration and family. So it is on a quiet corner at the edge of the Golden Triangle, where two nearly identical open-air restaurants, Soo Kee Restaurant and Soo Kee's Son, face off. The founder, Soh Hon, moved to K.L. from Guangzhou, China, prior to World War II and became famous for exceptional prawn noodles and beef noodles—the former consisting of enormous king prawns in a thick ginger-prawn sauce, the latter featuring beef so tender it seems to want to cuddle all night while watching *Must Love Dogs*. Both are served over chewy *kway teow* or rice noodles.

Hon's death, in 1984, sparked contention among his 11 children. Daughters No. 4 and No. 5, Jasmin and Jessica, took over the flagship location; Stanley (No. 10) set up shop across the way; and their siblings opened branches elsewhere in K.L. (There are nine in all.) Relations between the two downtown Soo Kees are chilly, but not hostile.

"To be angry all the time would be frustrating. So you forget," Jasmin Hon says. Luckily, the *glasnost* means you can move back and forth, enjoying each place's worthy tributes to a father's skill.

**CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT** / Co-owner Jessica Hon and manager Kok Ming Koh of Soo Kee Restaurant. Jalan Alor is a hot spot for late-night eats. A chef at a food stall in Chow Kit market prepares the popular breakfast dish *nasi lemak*—coconut rice topped with a fried egg, peanuts, cucumber, and dried anchovies. *Kway teow* noodles at Soo Kee. The double-spired Petronas Twin Towers in the Golden Triangle.





**ABOVE** / Lining up for fried chicken at a stall on Glutton's Street in Pudu.

## KAMPUNG BARU

"Not that long ago, the Maybank Tower was the tallest in Kuala Lumpur," Meena Periasamy said one night as we drove past the bank's squat edifice, now dwarfed by gleaming skyscrapers. "It's like Malaysia's been on a fast-forward adventure."

Nowhere is that pace of change so striking as in the Malay neighborhood of Kampung Baru, essentially a small village that has been swallowed whole by the sprawling city. The streets of "K.G." Baru (Malaysians would abbreviate the word "I," if given the chance) are lined with low zinc-roofed houses and stalls serving Malay specialties from all over the Malay Peninsula. It's a good place to sample one of the most universal Malaysian dishes: *nasi lemak*. Traditionally served for breakfast, its most basic form is a mound of coconut rice topped with a fried or hard-boiled egg, peanuts, cucumber, dried anchovies, and spicy *sambal*. In the morning, triangular paper or banana-leaf packets of these staples are sold all over K.L., a nutritionally complete breakfast for the equivalent of 30 cents.

At Nasi Lemak Mak Wanjor, counterwomen in colorful head scarves ladle on your choice of further toppings: fried chicken, beef *rendang*, stewed cuttlefish, and cockles. Westerners who think that sounds a bit heavy for breakfast will be pleased to learn that Mak Wanjor recently began reopening from 4:00 p.m. to 1:00 a.m., in part to accommodate young people who stop by on the way home from clubbing in the Golden Triangle.

## PUDU

Things take a decidedly porky turn in the area known as Pudu, anchored by a bustling wet market. It is here, in a collection of stalls on the corner of Jalan Pudu and Wai Sik Kai—a side street known, poetically, as "Glutton's Street"—that you find a cart serving Hakka *mee*. This specialty of



## IN THIS STORY

**BANGSAR FISH HEAD CORNER**  
Lorong Ara Kiri 3,  
Lucky Garden  
(no phone)

**CHUN KEE HAKKA MEE**  
Jalan Sayur, off of  
Jalan Pudu (no phone;  
no address)

**CURRY MEE STALL**  
Restoran Hong Seng,  
Jalan 17/29, Section 17  
Petaling Jaya, Selangor  
(no phone)

**NASI LEMAK MAK WANJOR**  
8, Jalan Raja Muda  
Musa Kampung Baru  
(no phone)

**PAK NGAH BIHUN SUP**  
Bazaar Baru Chow  
Kit, Jalan Chow Kit,  
off of Jalan Tuanku  
Abdul Rahman (no  
phone; no address)

**RAJU RESTAURANT**  
No. 27, Jalan Chantek  
Petaling Jaya, Selangor  
011-603-7956-1361

**RESTAURANT WONG KEE**  
No. 30, Jalan Nyonya  
011-603-2145-2512

**SOO KEE RESTAURANT**  
14, Medan Imbi  
011-603-2148-1324

immigrants from southern China consists of ramen-like egg noodles topped with sliced roast pork, fried minced pork, and a heap of crunchy pork cracklings, for good measure. Those who enjoy their lunch with a healthy side of euphemism will order theirs “dry,” as opposed to “wet” (in soup), and with “white sauce”—that is, lard oil.

I was brought to Pudu by Robyn Eckhardt, an American expat and enthusiastic eater who, with her photographer husband, David Hagerman, has entertainingly and encyclopedically chronicled K.L. street eats on the blog *EatingAsia*. “Malaysians take their noodles very seriously,” she said. “Easily as seriously as Italians do.” Indeed, between the perfectly al dente noodles, each strand slicked with oil but somehow ungreasy, and the deep, rich flavor of the meat, this is a pasta any Bolognese chef would be proud to serve.

The Hakka *mee* stall on Glutton’s Street often sells out by noon, but by that time you should be several blocks away, at Wong Kee, where you’ll wait patiently alongside a silent group of knowing eaters for the stroke of 12:30 p.m. At

that hour, and not a moment before, cooks begin ferrying glistening pork bellies to the kitchen from an alley around the corner, where they’ve been cooking all morning in a blackened steel drum. The meat is expertly hacked into succulent, bite-size napoleons of flesh, fat, flesh, and fat again, each topped with a perfect cap of crispy skin. I saw a man cut his with a spoon.

### BAZAAR BARU CHOW KIT

It is a minor culinary tragedy that K.L. sits just north of the equator, a latitude that ensures that the city’s array of steaming soups will never be enjoyed as they should be: on a cold winter day. That goes for a special Chinese *congee* (you pick a fresh fish from a cooler, then watch as the cook creates a quick clay pot stock with the head and a splash of rice wine); murky, deeply spiced mutton soup, a *mamak* (Indian-Muslim) specialty; and *assam laksa*, the glorious sour and spicy noodle soup imported from Penang.

It goes especially for *bihun sup*, made at a food stall at the center of the raucous Bazaar Baru Chow Kit market. You

smell this soup long before you see it: It teases the nose as you navigate between Indian spice shops; tables laid with plates of bright red chiles; and stall upon stall of fresh fish, roasted pork, live frogs, and luminous green bushels of herbs and greens. Reaching the source, you find a giant bubbling stockpot filled with beef bones, tripe, cinnamon, anise, cardamom, and other spices.

Sadly, instead of sipping the broth while staring out at falling snow, you'll more likely be reminded of one important rule of K.L. street dining: Carry tissues. A pack of Kleenex is vital not only for wiping your hands but also for mopping your face of inevitable streams of sweat. Stalls here rarely offer napkins, and if they do, they're of what I came to think of as the "amazing disappearing" variety, dissolving instantly upon contact with human skin.

**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT** / Roasted pork hanging in the kitchen of Restaurant Wong Kee. *Yong tau foo*, a Chinese Hakka dish of bean curd and vegetables stuffed with fish paste. Fish head curry at Fish Head Corner in Bangsar. Steven Kong with his wife, Oi Ling Ho, at their curry stall in Petaling Jaya. Limes, chiles, and vegetables at the Chow Kit market. A bowl of *curry mee* from Kong's stall.

## BANGSAR

Located to the southwest of downtown K.L., Bangsar is most often described as an expat enclave or a glitzy nightspot. But while the neighborhood does offer its share of international restaurants and overpriced bars, it also boasts another identity: eater's haven. It's hard, for instance, to find anything bourgeois about the Bangsar Fish Head Corner. There, predictably, is where you'll find a fine example of fish head curry, a straightforward name for a straightforward dish.

The head in question—usually that of a red snapper—arrives toothy and undisguised, except by a thick curry



## CHAR KWAY TEOW 2 SERVINGS

*A popular Malaysian street food dish, char kway teow literally translates as "fried flat noodles." The recipe also includes shrimp, sausage, and mung bean sprouts.*

- |               |   |               |   |
|---------------|---|---------------|---|
| 8             | ounces $\frac{1}{8}$ - to $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-wide fresh flat rice noodles* | $\frac{1}{4}$ | cup thinly sliced Chinese sweet sausage (lop chong)*                    |
| 6             | tablespoons lard or vegetable oil   | 2             | large eggs, whisked to blend  |
| 1             | large garlic clove, chopped   | $\frac{1}{2}$ | teaspoons chili-garlic sauce**  |
| $\frac{1}{2}$ | tablespoons (or more) black sweet soy sauce*                                | 2             | cups fresh mung bean sprouts (about 5 ounces)                           |
| 10            | uncooked medium shrimp, peeled, deveined, tails left intact                 | 6             | green onions (dark green parts, only), cut into thin 2-inch-long strips |

gravy filled with tomato and tamarind. You pick at the head with chopsticks or fingers (always of the right hand); the fatty flesh of the cheek and eye sockets are particularly prized. Squeamish diners may find the restaurant's other signature offering downright ordinary in comparison: whole baby squid tossed in chili and tapioca flour and flash-fried. It gives off a thrilling explosion of scalding, briny juice when first bitten.

### PETALING JAYA

Truly devoted seekers of street food will roam even farther afield, outside of K.L.'s official borders, to the suburb of Petaling Jaya ("P.J.," inevitably).

With shady courtyard seating and a constant flow of family customers, Raju's is considered the place to go for *roti canai*, another of Malaysia's most popular morning dishes. The fast-food-style uniforms may be disconcerting, but the cooks are grill geniuses, spinning flour, water, eggs, and ghee into perfectly flaky, charred *roti*. The steaming flatbreads are then served on an open banana leaf alongside a selection of toppings in silver containers: *daal*, vegetable curry, coconut chutney, and onion *sambal*. When finished scooping up toppings with the bread,

you fold your banana leaf toward yourself to express satisfaction.

Elsewhere in P.J., you'll find what is perhaps the most bewitching soup in K.L. It goes by the deceptively simple name of *curry mee*. Steven Kong, trained as an engineer, opened his noodle stall after he retired, mostly as a labor of love. In one big pot, he nurses a clear, fragrant broth of anchovies and ginger. A smaller pot contains a thick sludge of bright, rich curry. Kong combines the two over thick "rat tail" noodles, then adds some (or, if you follow my advice, all) of the following: tightly wrapped shrimp wontons; pork cracklings; deep-fried tofu; cuttlefish; shrimp; Chinese long beans; cockles; and whatever else was fresh at the market when Kong arrived at three o'clock that morning.

What is this dish? (Other than the obvious: delicious.) Is it Indian? Not quite, despite the curry, Chinese? No, although the wontons qualify, Malay? The pork says no, but the coconut and lemongrass say yes. The answer, of course, is "Malaysian." Unity is indeed strength. /■

*Brett Martin is a correspondent for GQ and has written for many publications, including Vanity Fair and The New York Times.*



Soak noodles in large bowl of warm (not hot) water 5 minutes. Using fingers, separate noodles and drain well. Heat lard in large wok or skillet over high heat until lard is very hot and smoking. Add garlic; stir 5 seconds. Add noodles and 1½ tablespoons soy sauce and

stir-fry vigorously 20 seconds. Using slotted spoon, quickly transfer noodle mixture from wok to medium bowl. Add shrimp and sausage to wok; stir-fry 30 seconds. Add eggs and chili-garlic sauce and stir-fry vigorously 20 seconds. Return noodle mixture to wok, then add

bean sprouts and green onions and stir-fry 20 seconds. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Divide mixture between 2 plates; drizzle lightly with more soy sauce, if desired, and serve. \*/ Fresh flat rice noodles and Chinese sweet sausage (slender, firm, preserved sausage) are

available in the refrigerated section of Southeast Asian and Asian markets. Black sweet soy sauce is available at Southeast Asian and Asian markets where other soy sauces are sold. \*\*/ Available in the Asian foods section of many supermarkets and at Asian markets.