

CHAR KOAY TEOW

Char Koay Teow is a Teowchew and Hokkien hawker food. *Char* means 'fried' in Penang Hokkien and koay teow is flat rice noodles. In Penang, koay teow is fried with beansprouts, prawns and other garnishes. Penang Char Koay Teow is distinct from that served in other parts of Malaysia or Singapore. What is special about the Char Koay Teow from Penang is that it includes fresh prawns and cockles, bak eu pok (fried lard cubes), ku chai (chives) and sliced lap cheong (Chinese sausages). Invariably, it is fried individually in a very hot pan.

Traditionally, duck egg is used instead of chicken egg which is normally used in most stalls today. Duck egg is creamier but, unfortunately, more sinful in terms of cholesterol. There are still a few stalls that use duck egg – like the one at the junction of Malay Street and Carnarvon Street.

The main difference between Penang and Singapore Char Koay Teow is that the Penang version does not have the sweetness from the black sauce and has chives and Chinese sausage. The koay teow used in Penang is also much thinner than that normally available in Singapore. Some market stalls in Singapore do sell the thinner koay teow but you have to specifically ask for it. The koay teow from Ipoh is even thinner. This could be due to the Cantonese influence there. Cantonese ho fun which traditionally comes in sheets and is cut into strips wider than koay teow by the cook, is generally thinner than koay teow. The texture of ho fun and koay teow are also slightly different. To appreciate the difference in texture between koay teow and ho fun, I would like to bring in chee cheong fun – rice sheets – which has the softest texture of the three. Koay teow has a texture that falls between that of chee cheong fun and ho fun.

It is best to use fresh koay teow while it is still soft. If kept in the refrigerator, it hardens and has to be warmed up in a microwave oven or steamed before use. It also doesn't keep for long as it tends to become mouldy. There are some good dried koay teow (described as sha ho fan) from China and Vietnam which can be re-constituted into a very credible fresh koay teow substitute.

I am not one for cockles (hum in Hokkien) with my Char Koay Teow but in the interest of food heritage I have included it in the recipe. Cockles remind me of a well-known Char Koay Teow stall that was once at the junction of Cantonment Road and Gurney Drive. We used to fish there and I remember an area of the beach that was covered with discarded cockle shells. As cockles have a muddy taste when they have just been harvested, they need to be soaked in water to gradually expel the mud. The Char Koay Teow man did this by leaving his cockles in a net bag in the sea. I suggest that it is more convenient to buy cockles which have been shelled.

Take-away Char Koay Teow was traditionally wrapped in a banana leaf placed over a newspaper and tied up into a cone with *kiam chow*, a string made from grass. The take-away fried koay teow took on the flavour of the banana leaf; that is why some stalls still serve their Char Koay Teow on a small square piece of banana leaf today.

A healthier cooking oil like canola can be used to fry Char Koay Teow but, once in a while, it would be nice, though sinful, to add bak eu phok as it is done traditionally. If you want to go the whole hog, you can cook with lard.

The amount of oil used in this recipe is kept to a minimum. Traditionally, more oil is added to prevent the koay teow from sticking to the pan. Here, water is used at different stages of the frying process for the same purpose. A very hot fire is needed to fry Char Koay Teow.