

PENANG LAKSA ASSAM LAKSA

This Assam Laksa recipe produces my mother's home-cooked version, similar to that served by hawkers in Penang, except that there is more fish. This is the recipe used in her cooking demonstrations to members of the YWCA and to the Penang Methodist Girls' School Old Girls' Association.

Recently, I heard someone complain to a hawker that there wasn't enough fish in her Penang Laksa. Could she have more fish if she was prepared to pay more? What the customer did not know is that in hawker-style Laksa, the fish is all mashed up and it is not easy to separate from the soup. The advantage of cooking your own Laksa is that you can not only have as much fish as you want, but you can also choose the type of fish. Various fish can be used for Laksa: Lait Hu (Ikan Pupu), Ikan Parang (Wolf-herring), Ikan Kembong (Mackerel) and Ikan Terubuk (Shad). Small fish used by hawkers are Chee Ya Hu, which looks like a small Mullet, and small Kembong (Chubb Mackerel). Chee Ya Hu used to be cheap in my youth but it is not so today and it is more labour intensive to remove its tiny bones.

Penang Laksa is a Nonya dish adopted from the Malays; the ingredients are very similar to Ikan Assam Pedas (see page 42). There is another version which I refer to as the Nonya *kuih* version cooked by the Nonyas and sold by the *kuih* man. In this and some other family recipes, sliced bunga kantan (torch ginger bud) is boiled in the Laksa soup.

I find the fresh Laksa bee hoon available in Singapore better than the ones served in Laksa stalls in Penang because they are more *al dente* or *khiew*; the ones from Penang are too soft and tastes like bee thai bak. We used spaghetti or suome, a dried Japanese noodle, when we were in London.

Penang prawn paste, heh ko or petis udang, is added to give Assam Laksa its special taste. Unfortunately, I find that certain stalls spoil their Laksa by adding too much heh ko. *Polygonum* is what gives Assam Laksa its distinctive flavour. In Penang, it is generally not eaten; the leaves and stalks are removed from the soup before serving. Interestingly, chopped up kesom is added as a garnish in Singapore Laksa. Generally, lengkuas (galangal) is not one of the ingredients in Assam Laksa but it is used for Laksa Lemak. Tamarind (assam) is used to give Assam Laksa its sour and sweet taste. Sliced assam phoi (assam gelugor) is also added if the tamarind used is not sour enough.

Most stalls in Georgetown, Ayer Itam and Balik Pulau serve only Assam Laksa. A few serve both Assam Laksa and Laksa Lemak. Generally, the stalls that serve both – like the one at Burma Lane opposite the Pulau Tikus police station – have a strong Thai or Burmese influence. Traditionally, in our family, the *assam* and *lemak* versions are cooked and served together, such that we have difficulty deciding which to eat first. Personally, I start with Laksa Lemak, then the Assam Laksa and then a mixture of both. The last approach may explain why the Laksa from Johor, Kelantan, Melaka and Pahang are both *lemak* and sour. Both Penang Assam Laksa and Laksa Lemak are fish based, but the latter has ingredients like prawns and crabs, depending on each family's recipe. My mother's recipe uses chopped prawns.

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