

# upgrade

|| TRAVEL SMARTER ||

## Street Eats

From the steamy streets of Bangkok to the higgledy-piggledy alleyways of Hanoi to the rambunctious hawker centers of Singapore, Southeast Asia is acclaimed for having the finest street food on the planet. Overflowing with flavor, steeped in history and cheap as chips, it offers not only nourishment for the masses but stories of trade, migration and shifting identities. A new tour in Java teaches us about the beguiling, sometimes baffling, tastes of Indonesia, then we get a primer on some of the must-try open-air meals elsewhere in the region.

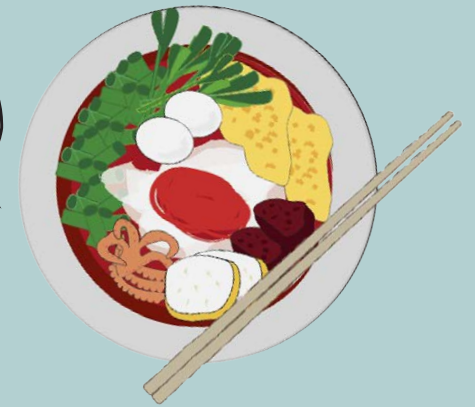
Smoky satay  
at Warung  
Ondemohen  
in Surabaya.



# MUST-EATS ON THE STREETS ACROSS ASIA

BY ASHLEY NIEDRINGHAUS

YEN TA FO



## THAILAND

Thailand's internationally famous food is a tour de force for tourism, leaving an indelible mark on visitors willing to trade white linens for plastic street-side tables. But going well beyond *pad Thai*, this shape-shifting cuisine reveals itself in a new way nearly every time it crosses a provincial border.

In the north, Thai food is defined mostly by what it's not—five-alarm spicy—and Thailand's mildest dishes are found in Chiang Mai and surrounding hamlets. The region's signature item is *khao soi*, an egg-noodle dish where coconut milk cuts through a spiced curry broth. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Chinese-Muslims from Yunnan brought a halal version of this dish to Burma via a spice trade route. Most chefs agree the addition of coconut milk came from the Burmese since *khao soi* is one of only a few northern dishes to use it, but some local institutions, like Chiang Mai's family-run Khao Soi Lamduan Faham, say the coconut milk was added to appeal to wealthy Bangkok patrons.

In the nation's capital, you can find Chinese influences everywhere, starting with the woks that sizzle beside endless roadside food stalls. Ground zero for Chinese-Thai fare is Bangkok's cacophonous

Chinatown, established in 1782 when Rama I relocated Chinese merchants from the banks of the Chao Phraya River to Yaowarat Road. *Kuay tiaw* noodle soup is ubiquitous and served in countless forms. Classic *kuay tiaw* is stringy rice noodles with a rich pork broth, springy fish balls with coriander, bean sprouts and white pepper. Other quintessential dishes fall under this umbrella: *bamee* (egg noodles served with roasted pork), *yen ta fo* (a locally loved sweet soup with red fermented tofu broth) and *guay jab* (rolled rice noodles with a peppery broth, pork organs and crispy pork belly).

Southern Thailand loves fiery cuisine with a hearty dose of local crops, like cashews and coconuts, and an abundance of seafood. Local delights reflect the region's immigrant communities, like Thai-Muslims, who produce cracking biryanis, spicy soups with prawns, and coconut milk curries with crab. In Phuket, street eats are inspired by the Hokkien Chinese who settled on the island, and signature dishes include Hokkien-style oyster omelets, known as *o-tao*, with a topping of taro and deep-fried pork rinds.

**Go with a pro:** [tasteofthailandfoodtours.org](#), from **Bt1,950**.

## HUNGRY IN JAVA

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN LLOYD NEUBAUER

FROM LEFT: *Rawon* is a traditional beef soup with a dark black broth from East Java; Bali-based chef Will Meyrick; Yogyakarta's markets are lined with fresh food.

**HAPHAZARDLY CONSTRUCTED** to accommodate tens of millions of migrant workers, Java's cities aren't exactly pretty, many lack definitive centers and the traffic is a joke. But the island's natural attractions—verdant hillsides and endless tropical beaches—haven't yet been overexploited for tourism, and the dining scene here, both traditional and high-end, is a major draw card. Encompassing East Asian, South Asian, Arab and European, Javanese street food is fascinatingly diverse, plus it's sold not on the street as in most Southeast Asian countries but in *warungs*, family-run eateries set in homes.

And now, Indonesia-based chef Will Meyrick is determined to broaden our palates to the tastes of the most populous island in the region. Though he hails from Scotland, Will's name is synonymous with gastronomy in his adopted home of Bali, where he operates some iconic restaurants like Mama San, a gentrified nod to Asian street food, and Sarong, a high-end curry house that mirrors the interior of a sultan's palace. Will spends weeks traveling to investigate the roots and variations of traditional foods before recalibrating them for fine diners. Will also runs street-food tours in Denpasar, Bali's capital—and this year he's expanding to Java with a new weeklong food and cultural excursion that takes in Surabaya, Malang and Yogyakarta, the ancient ruins of Borobudur, luxury heritage accommodation, and some of the funkier street food on the island. I road-tested the first trip.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHOTIKA SOPITARCHASAK

IAN TROWER/JOHN WARBURTON-LEE PHOTOGRAPHY/GETTY IMAGES

**AS ONE OF THE FIRST PORT** cities of Southeast Asia, **Surabaya** in East Java is a cultural melting pot writ large. "There's been more mixing of races and religions here than anywhere else in Indonesia—Malay, Chinese, Indian, Tamil, Dutch, Thai and Arabic," Will says. "And because of that, it has the country's most diverse street food."

Our first stop is Jalan Mas Mansyur, home to the descendants of Yemeni traders who sailed to Surabaya to trade spice and textiles in the early 20th century. There we visit Zaheer Ahmad, the Pakistani owner of Parata House Restaurant. "How did I end up here? It's a long story," he says, explaining how he hit the streets selling *roti*—Indian flatbread—in 2011 after his once-successful import-export business went belly up, working day and night until he saved enough dough to lease this shop. "I always loved cooking at home and

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entertaining friends with traditional Muslim food like *keema* (minced beef fried with onion, tomato, cinnamon, cumin and chili).

“But these people are not genuine Arabs,” Zaheer says of his customers. “They’ve been here for so many generations they no longer eat their ancestors’ cuisine; if I tried to sell it to them I’d go broke again. So I do Indian food prepared the Indonesian way—it’s easier, everyone loves it and when tourists or business travelers from Pakistan or other Muslim countries walk through the door, they’re so happy. They order the *nasi biryani kambing* straight away. I’ll make you some now.”

“What this actually is,” Will says as we share a bowl of long-grain rice flavored with cinnamon, cardamom, cumin, coriander powder, star anise and a pinch of saffron, “is an Indonesian version of a traditional biryani. Normally the rice is half-cooked with a masala and chicken or lamb, mixed all the way through and baked, whereas this is basically rice that is stir-fried in ghee with spices. They’ve braised the lamb separately and put it on top.”

Our next stop is Warung Ondemohen—Surabaya’s most famous satay joint—established in 1945 by the late Lady Wasii and now run by her daughter. Out front, two young women lay handful after handful of chicken and beef satay sticks over roaring charcoal grills to feed a never-ending procession of office workers and students who pay the equivalent of US\$1.50 for a quality meal of half a dozen satay sticks, a dollop of peanut sauce and serving of rice.



TOBY WILLIAMS/GETTY IMAGES

FROM LEFT: The secret to the tastiest satay: turmeric and coconut marinade; a street vendor in Yogyakarta sells, *gudeg*, a slow-cooked jackfruit stew.

crispy, almost caramelized texture I’ve never experienced in 12 years of travel in Indonesia. I knock back a plate and then another without dipping my satay sticks into the peanut sauce once. There’s really no need.

**DURING INDONESIA’S DUTCH** colonial period, cool-weathered hill town **Malang** was where plantation masters went to escape the hustle

and bustle of Surabaya. Many of the Yemenis who first settled in Surabaya came to Malang, too—not for the fresh air but to seek out new business opportunities. We meet one of their descendants, Abu Salim, at a small grocery overflowing with pistachios, chickpeas and dates in Malang’s colorful Yemeni Quarter. “The best dates I have are from Saudi Arabia,” he says. “They grew in an orchard planted by the Prophet Mohamed himself.” I’m unable to challenge this enticing claim, but the sticky fruits do taste sweetly blessed.

Next door is Warung Do’an, a Yemeni restaurant where customers sit cross-legged on plush red carpets and eat from knee-high tables as in the Middle East. The menu is cut from the same cloth, with items like pita bread, hummus and *shakshuka*—spicy eggs baked with tomato and capsicum. But the pita turns out to be fried flatbread, the hummus is out of stock and the *shakshuka* is a plate of scrambled eggs with diced onion and curry powder. “One way to describe it is a fusion of Indonesian street food with the memory of a recipe someone’s relatives brought here a century ago,” Will says. “Another way to describe it is overcooked eggs.”

We have better luck with the *nasi kebuli*, which adds the sweetness of sultanas to Indonesia’s iconic *nasi goreng* (fried rice). Yet it’s the *gulai kambing kacang hijau* (braised lamb curry with soybeans and cloves) that really hits the spot—the perfect merger of Southeast Asian ingredients and Arabic spices, a multi-layered flavorsome broth that would’ve taken hours to prepare and years to perfect.



“Meat on a stick is the oldest form of cooking. The cavemen invented it,” Will says. “It’s also the national dish of Indonesia. The secret to this *warung*’s popularity is the marinade. They soak the meat in a mixture of coriander seeds, garlic, turmeric and grated coconut... and then freeze it overnight so the coconut sticks to the meat.” The condiments enliven the flavor but the grated coconut adds a

## TAIWAN

Populated by indigenous people until the 17th century, Taiwan then spent centuries under foreign rule—mostly Chinese and Japanese, but nearly every major western country camped out there for a while. Today, the years of immigration and colonization have permeated the culture, art and cuisine of Taiwan, and the country offers an array of Chinese delights and

outstanding Japanese food. One could, and should, spend an entire trip snacking on the endless regional delicacies. Here are a few great dishes not to miss.

Taiwan was an essential pit stop for sea-based traders traveling to ports in China such as Fujian and Macau, as well as Japan and Manila. Much of Taiwanese food has roots in Fujian province, and immigrants and traders brought Hokkien cuisine to

Taiwan in the 18th century. The most enduring dish from the region is the now-famous street food snack of oyster omelets, with a distinctive flavor from tapioca starch, chrysanthemum leaves and local chili. Heartier, more sustaining Chinese dishes come from the Hakka people, a migrant farming community with recipes designed to power a long day of work in the fields. Fuel up for a day of touring and exploring with a

Hakka classic like *ke jia xiao chao*, made with stir-fried squid, tofu, pork belly and fresh leeks.

The Japanese occupation lasted from 1895 to 1945, and during that time Japanese essentials, like ramen, yams, tofu and bonito fish flakes all worked their way into mainstream Taiwanese cuisine. Today, the Japanese precision in presentation and use of high-end local ingredients is alive and well,

and the country has a stronghold of Japanese restaurants, from sushi bars to *izakaya* gastropubs.

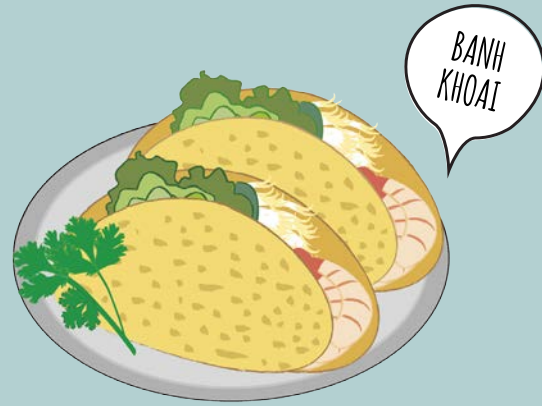
For many outsiders, stinky tofu is the best-known Taiwanese dish. And it is true that, beyond the *I-did-it-for-the-Instagram* mentality, this deep-fried fermented bean curd represents the heart of Taiwanese cooking—which centers around fermented meats, fish and vegetables, and the use of offal. Locals

use acids, sweeteners and spice to cut through the fermentation, and toppings of vinegar, sugar and chili are common. *Oh-ah mee sua* is an oyster vermicelli dish that brings together pig offal, bonito flakes, chili oil, pepper, garlic and cilantro. Try both these sour-meets-fermentation dishes at the Miaokou Night Market, Taipei’s mothership food market.

**Go with a pro:** [taipeiats.com](http://taipeiats.com), from US\$45.



OH-AH MEE SUA



**VIETNAM**

Years of occupation by foreign powers created a diverse and dynamic local cuisine. To truly discover Vietnamese food is to notice Chinese, French, Indian and even Japanese elements, along with a strong local influence. Use this primer to decode the many delicious street meals.

Long before the 1954 Geneva Conference split the country into two, there was a culinary line in the sand that divided Vietnam. The north has a proclivity for traditional and straightforward versions of national dishes, and the south proclaims a love for more complex flavors. For example, take the country's most enduring culinary contribution: *pho bo*, a beef noodle soup popularized towards the end of the 19th century. The bone-broth soup is a mash-up of cultures, taking rice noodles from the Chinese and red meat from the French. Another East-meets-West nod: it's eaten with chopsticks and a spoon. In the north, chili and lime grown by the region's hill tribe farmers flavor the *pho*; in the south, Thai basil, herbs, coriander and an extra dose of chili add complexity.

Vietnam's varied topography shapes nearly every meal as well, and a tropical climate in the south fosters a year-round growing season that yields lush rice paddies and coconut groves. As a result, southern food is sweetened with coconut milk and palm sugar, and menus

include a variety of fruit-based salads and fresh herbs. Enduring cuisine from the French colonial tenure is most readily available in the south. The ubiquitous *banh mi* sandwich is the epitome of street food, and obvious French ingredients are the baguette, pâté and smear of mayonnaise; barbecue pork, or *char siu*, adds a Chinese touch.

The geographical heart of the country toes the line between traditional and modern, and soups, seafood dishes and French-inspired rice-flour crepes, called *banh khoai*, are all available—most with a spicy kick. *Cho lao* is found most authentically in Hoi An, a one-time trading port that drew a host of international ships. The dish's dense noodles are a take on Japanese udon, crispy wontons and thick cuts of pork are from China, while a topping of Vietnamese herbs keeps it local.

Northern Vietnam spent centuries under Chinese occupation, and you don't have to be a Michelin Guide inspector to taste the lasting Chinese imprint, like stir-fry dishes with heavy-handed doses of soy sauce, black peppers providing the spice factor, and a proclivity for simple, locally grown ingredients. Chili doesn't grow well in the mountainous north, so expect mongers to dish out milder meals.

**Go with a pro:** [saigonstreeteats.com](http://saigonstreeteats.com), from VND456,000.

We stay the night at Hotel Tugu Malang, a luxury property home to the largest private collection of art in all of Indonesia. Following a typical Peranakan breakfast of sweet black *kopi*, *laksa*, fried chicken, and toast with coconut jam, we take a stroll down Malang's wide Parisian boulevards to Warung Rawon Rampal. Established in 1957, it makes the city's best *rawon*—a traditional beef black soup with lemongrass, lesser galangal, garlic, shallots and *keluak* nuts that give the dish its strong nutty flavor and dark color.

“Surabaya and Malang always fight over who makes the best *rawon*, though Surabaya's is more watery and always served with salted duck eggs,” Will says, referring to the beef rib *rawon* we ate the night before at Sarkies Restaurant in Surabaya's Hotel Majapahit—a heritage hotel built in 1910 by the famous Sarkies brothers who were also behind the Raffles in Singapore and The Strand Yangon.

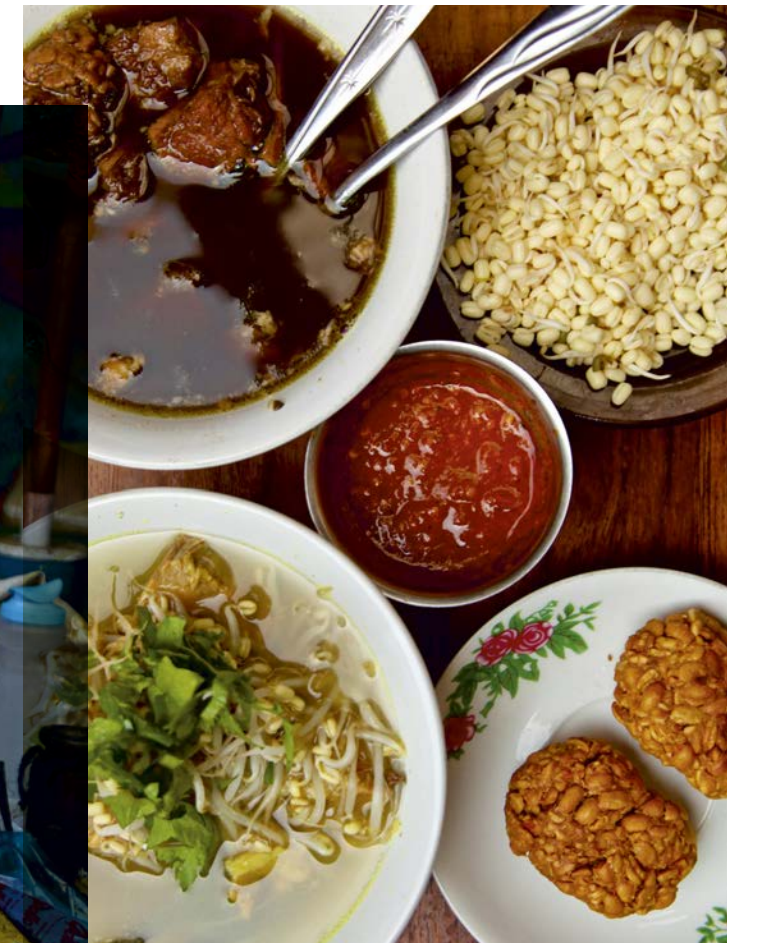
That meal went down swimmingly even after all the coconut-rolled satays I'd just had. But today's *rawon* is too rustic for my liking: bits of sinew, bone and fat swim in the soup, while the nutty flavor is overpowering.

Will acknowledges the presentation is rudimentary. By contrast, the *rawon* sold at his restaurants in Bali is made from Australian Wagyu. His chefs also go to town removing all the off-cuts from the meat before compressing them into a natural gelatin that melts into the soup. “But the flavor is the same,” he says. “That way, if a local comes in and orders it, they'll say, *This guy knows his stuff.*”

**THE ONLY PART OF INDONESIA** still ruled by a pre-colonial Sultanate, **Yogyakarta** is its own administrative entity. “It has its own culture and a distinctive cuisine to match,” Will says. “The flavors are *very* strong. Not spicy... just strong and earthy.”

Our first stop in “Yogya” is a *warung* called Gudeg Yu Djum, famous for *gudeg*, a signature Yogyakarta stew made using slow-cooked unripe jackfruit. Will walks me through a dimly lit, smoke-filled medieval industrial kitchen where thick-armed women use giant wooden spoons to stir big black cauldrons bubbling on charcoal flames. Chicken, jackfruit, duck eggs and coconut husks simmer in separate pots, each filled with a red-brown palm-sugar reduction accented with garlic, shallots, candlenut, white pepper, coriander seed, galangal and bay leaves. After 12 hours on the fire, the ingredients will be served with fluffy white rice and *sambal krecek*, a spicy paste made from reduced beef-skin, soybeans and tempeh. Weird is probably the best way to describe the dish: it's super sweet, stringy and pungent—not my cup of tea but fascinating nonetheless, in part because of its backstory.

FROM FAR LEFT: Preserved salted fish in the Surabaya market; all smiles at the wet market; *rawon* (top left) is often served with short bean sprouts, *tempeh* and chili *sambal*.





“Tbu Djum, the lady who founded this place, started her career collecting straw to feed people’s cows,” Will says. “She used the money she made to buy a few cooking pots and a food cart and sold *gudeg* in the streets until she saved enough to buy this *warung*. Over the years she opened five more venues in Jogja. She died a few years ago but her legacy lives on. Her children and grandchildren run the empire now.

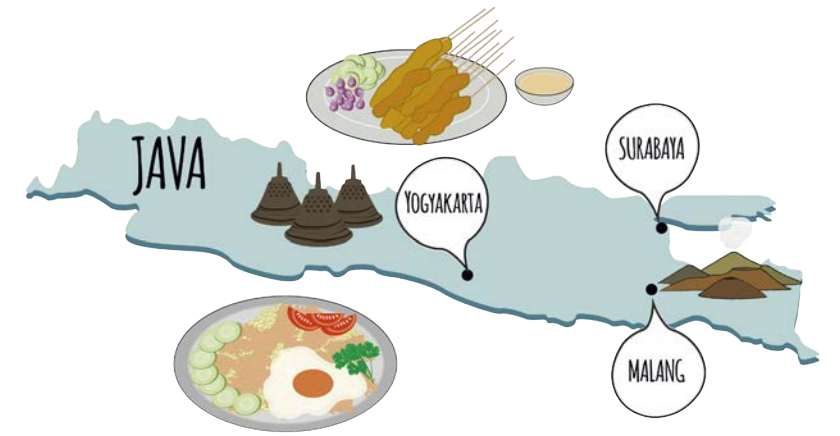
“That’s what I love about Indonesian cuisine,” he continues. “Everything comes from small beginnings: home-schooled chefs



who become mini-celebrities by perfecting home-style dishes that people in this country will travel hundreds of kilometers to eat.”

I travel further outside my culinary comfort zone at Warung Tambak Segaran, where Will orders goat satay wrapped in goat offal. The meat is marinated in a *kecap manis* (sweet soy sauce) that is crawling with ants that pop and sizzle on the grill. It doesn’t taste half as bad as it sounds. It is similar to a sweet and sour pork sausage with extra-tangy barbecue sauce. Boiled lamb bones are another popular order, but I draw the line at sucking out the mucus-like marrow from the bones though all the other customers seem to be relishing it.

“The whole purpose of these tours is not to fill your stomach or eat the foods you’re used to,” my guide and now friend tells me at the end of the week as we sit down to a kingly *kaki-lima* smorgasbord dinner in the colonnaded restaurant at the Amanjiwo Resort an hour’s drive north of Yogya. There are eight food carts to choose from, each serving tidy versions of traditional Javanese soups, salads, stir-fries, satay and grills made from the finest ingredients—and not a single ant in sight. “It’s about traveling to educate yourself, to feel you’ve learned something about the locals and touched their culture. Because if you go home without having learned anything new, what have you done other than temporarily escaped your life?”



## THE DETAILS

### GETTING THERE

**Garuda Indonesia** is now offering multi-city promo fares from Bangkok-Surabaya-Yogyakarta-Bangkok for US\$658. The same route using Hong Kong as a base starts at US\$703; use Singapore as a base from US\$715. [garuda-indonesia.com](http://garuda-indonesia.com).

### WHERE TO STAY

**Hotel Majapahit’s** suites in Surabaya are furnished with elegant period pieces. [hotel-majapahit.com](http://hotel-majapahit.com); doubles from US\$102. **Hotel Tugu Malang** is set in the heart of Malang’s old town. [tuguhotels.com](http://tuguhotels.com); doubles from US\$129.

### D’Ombah Boutique

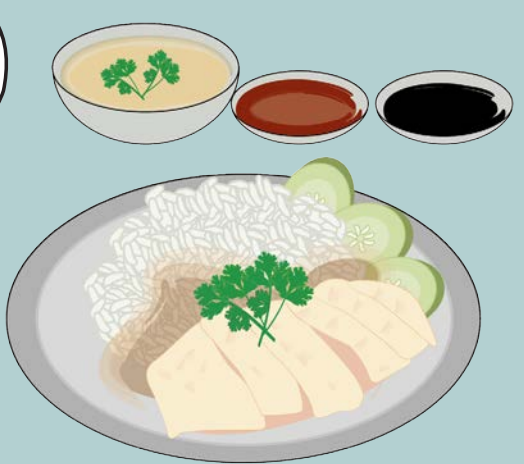
**Village Resort** offers charming, wallpapered cottages in a garden. [yogyakartaaccommodation.com](http://yogyakartaaccommodation.com); doubles from US\$71. **Amanjiwo Resort’s** villas overlook the ancient temple of Borobudur. [aman.com](http://aman.com); doubles from US\$700.

### THE TOUR

**Will Meyrick’s** weeklong street-food tours of Java, including Surabaya, Malang and Yogyakarta, are US\$1,550 per person. Discounts apply for groups of three or more. Flights and accommodation should be booked and paid for separately. [willmeyrick.com](http://willmeyrick.com).

OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: Peeling shallots at Surabaya’s Pabean market; dried chickpeas in the Yemeni quarter of Malang.

HAINANESE CHICKEN RICE



## SINGAPORE & MALAYSIA

To the untrained palate, Singaporean and Malaysian cuisines seem “*same same but different*,” but food-loving locals adamantly disagree. As a testament to how closely linked these culinary heavyweights are, tourism authorities from both countries have argued in the past over who gets to claim heritage of popular dishes. Before you proffer an opinion on who is correct, hop from one side of the Johor Strait to the other try to discover the distinctions at hawker centers

in the region. We’ve grouped them together here for ease of comparison, not to reignite any turf wars.

Thanks mostly to their geographical proximity, both cuisines are heavily influenced by Indian, Malay and Peranakan cultures, with a large Chinese stronghold. As early as the second century, Cambodian royalty created port kingdoms in the northern peninsula and opened routes with Chinese traders where the Hokkien and Teochew subgroups dominated Singapore, while the Cantonese had a large impact

in Malaysia. Collectively, these countries share a handful of can’t-miss specialties that deviate mostly in cooking techniques. Start with *laksa*, a many-faced soup that carries regional pride, and is most commonly found Malay-style, with a spiced gravy and a base of sweet coconut milk or sour tamarind. But such a complex dish cannot be simplified by a single origin, and street vendors pride themselves on serving a secret recipe that is unique to them. Officially, there are nearly a dozen takes on this national dish with each one adding regional elements,

such as types of spices, fish, or noodles.

Hainanese chicken rice, the national dish of Singapore, arrived in the 19th century via Chinese traders from the Hainan province. This simple comfort food, like most street-food dishes, has adapted to local taste. Singaporean chicken rice is elevated with broth made from tofu, and tamarind, a thick soy sauce and even mustard leaves, while Malaysians add boiled sprouts and hot chili. Another Chinese-inspired dish that traveled a similar route is *bak char mee* or minced pork egg

noodles. Oil, black vinegar, all sorts of pork—from dumplings to thick-cut slices and lard—are included, along with a hearty dollop of homemade chili sauce.

Widely considered Malaysia’s national dish, *nasi lemak* uses coconut cream rice as a vehicle for hearty sides like deep-fried anchovies, grilled fish paste, egg, peanuts, cucumber and spicy chili *sambal*. Fish cakes, chicken drumsticks or curried vegetables are more Chinese-influenced add-ons, and are found most often in Singaporean *nasi lemak*.

Singapore and Malaysia’s pervasive Muslim presence is represented in a street-side pancake meal called *murtabak*, a crepe-like dish stuffed with sweet or hearty ingredients. In the Lion City, pancakes come loaded with eggs and green onions, a familiar mashup to the country’s sizeable Chinese population. In Malaysia, the *dosa*-like dish’s fillings skew Indian, and it is accompanied by a spicy dipping sauce. **Go with a pro:** [foodtourmalaysia.com](http://foodtourmalaysia.com), from US\$31; [indiesingapore.com](http://indiesingapore.com), free.