

LIFE&TIMES **FAMILY**

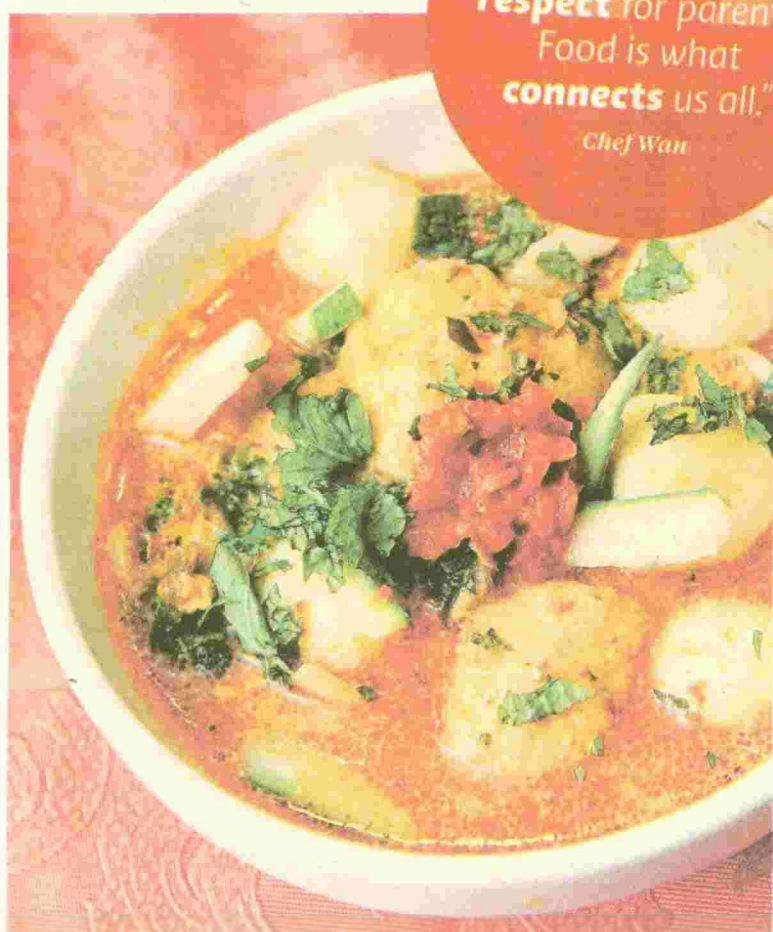
United by food and passion

At the launch of his latest book, celebrated food ambassador Chef Wan shares with **Aneeta Sundararaj** his culinary journey



"When I think of food, I think of respect for parents. Food is what connects us all."

Chef Wan



Chef Wan regards the **curry laksa Bibik Neo** as part of our food heritage.

THE family wants you to replicate the nasi kerabu they had at a recent party. You whip out your recipe book, follow the instructions to a T and make a grand presentation for dinner. At the end of the meal, despite your repeated, "but I followed the recipe," everyone agrees your dish doesn't taste the same as the original.

According to many in the audience during the launch of *400 Resipi Terbaik Chef Wan*, (Seahorse, Popular Bookstore, 426pp) this is never the case when you follow recipes by Datuk Redzuawan Ismail (or better known as Chef Wan).

The 56-year-old chef was accompanied to this launch by his mother, Puan Noraini Abdullah, his grandchildren, friends and family.

The book honours 40 years of Chef Wan's culinary experiences and he has handpicked 400 of his best recipes. "The aim of this book," says Chef Wan, "is to connect all Malaysians and showcase the importance of family. Take a look at my own family. My great grandmother was Peranakan from Singapore. My mother is Peranakan and became a Muslim when she married my father. We were very wealthy and my grandmother — Bibik Neo — used to entertain a lot. We had black pepper orchards in Borneo. But when the Japanese came, we lost everything and started from scratch. She died when she was 96. I was there by her side."

His anger is still evident when he says: "You know, her son put her in

an old folk's home. I was so upset. I took her out and looked after her for the last 10 years of her life. She used to teach me how to cook. She would say, 'You bikin macam ini' (This is how you do it). I used to follow her to the market. When she was dying, she asked me what I wanted. She thought I would want her kerongsang or kebaya. I told her I didn't want all of that. I wanted her *batu iesung*."

This mortar and pestle has become his prized possession. There is no denying that he would like to hand this heirloom to his grandchildren. "My grandson, Tristan, he loves to be in the kitchen with me. But his father is trying-lah to make him become a footballer." With a cheeky smile,



Spices are very important.

PICTURES BY NIK HARIFF HASSAN

Chef Wan adds: "I tell his father, 'You wish!'"

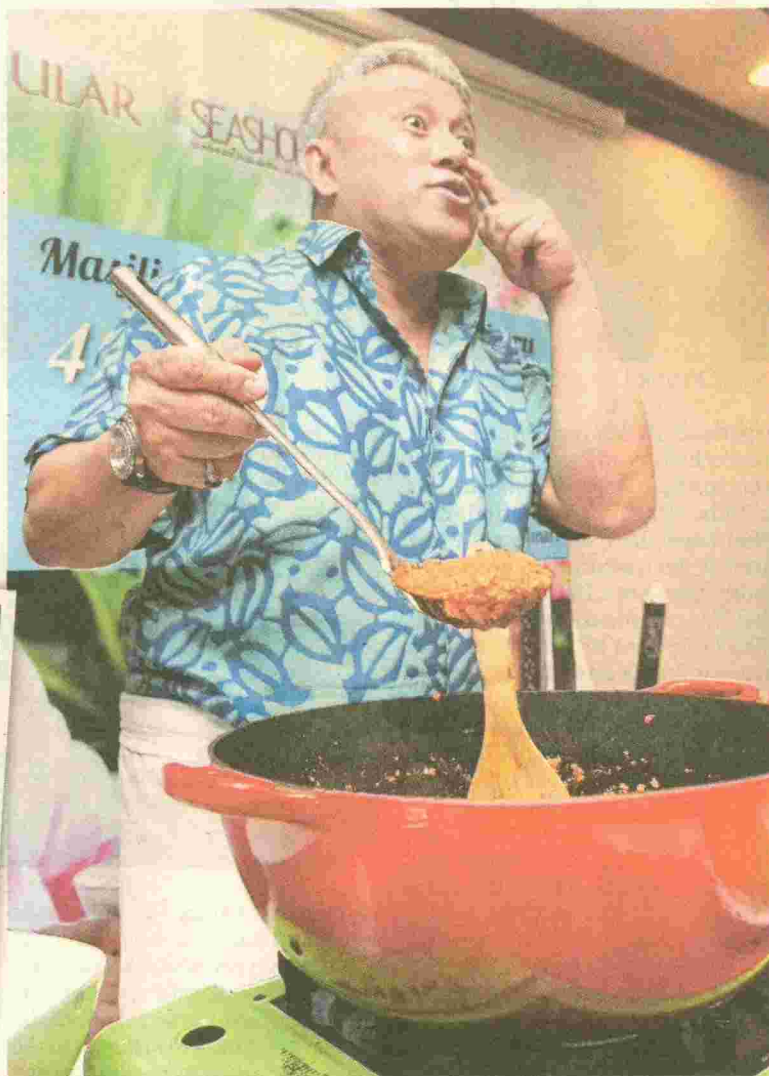
CULINARY JOURNEY

Chef Wan's earliest memory of learning to cook from his mother is when he was 8. "My mother had just delivered her fifth child. There are seven of us altogether. She couldn't

move. So, I had to cook the meals. I used to bring that *batu lesung* to where she was lying down. She told me what to pound and what to do. In the evening, I made nasi goreng for the family. After that, I got so excited. Every day, by the time my father came home, we had nasi goreng — one day with sardine,



Chef Wan's latest book is dedicated to his mother, Noraini Abdullah. At right is Tristan, future footballer.



Chef Wan, a man of obvious talent and sharp business acumen.

acumen. Nothing says this more than the story of how he helped his mother supplement the family's meagre income. "In the morning, we had to sell nasi lemak. Then, in the afternoon, we sold kuih. But many were also selling kuih. I couldn't wait all day to sell the kuih. I had only two hours after school before we went back home for homework and then to prepare for the next day. So, I knew we had to have a good brand. So I asked my mother to produce quality kuih. Soon, everyone was asking for Cik Ani's kuih. See, I knew about branding even then."

DEDICATED TO MUM

With such admiration for his mother, it seems only appropriate that it is to her that he has dedicated his newest book.

"When I think of food, I think of respect for parents. Food is what connects us all. Food is not just what is on the plate. It's about taking care of ourselves and goes beyond nutrition. It is clean and prepared with love. Then, food becomes beautiful. You must share this with people and go back to basics."

While demonstrating how to make his favourite curry iaksa Bibik Neo, he shares some tips: "What is important are the spices. Also, you must cook slowly. And the secret to good iaksa is good stock. You don't just throw away the *kulit udang*. You boil it and create stock. The 'wow' factor comes from using fresh herbs like daun kesum and daun limau purut."

He regards curry iaksa Bibik Neo as part of our "food heritage", and insists that we (and the future generation) should preserve the recipes of our forefathers. "We shouldn't change the dishes. You never see Italians change the way they make something. Why do we Malaysians need to do that all the time?"

Emphatically, he concludes: "Food is about love and friendship. Food unites families; it unites people."

another day with ikan bilis and so on. I even started to cut the chilli into a floral design for decoration. After one week, my father said, "Enough. I cannot take anymore nasi goreng. Try something else."

His mother smiles before chipping in: "Wan loves to cook, but he was also very naughty. His father was working in TUDM and the truck used to come to the house. He would let out the air from the tyres. When they asked who did it, he would say, 'Noraini's son', and

not his name. The thing is, I have four sons."

Cooking and food are integral parts in the life of Chef Wan and his family that all of them find it impossible to think of what else they would do if they didn't cook. "It's our passion," says Chef Wan. "We look forward to it every day. That brings us happiness and contentment. It helps us be creative."

Other than the obvious talent and mischief, there is no denying Chef Wan's sharp intellect and business

