

LIFE&TIMES HERITAGE

Sous chef, **Ricky Chiang Chia Teck.**

Hainanese fusion delights

Sampling a Hainanese spread offers **Aneeta Sundararaj** an insight into its history

WHEN I accepted an invitation to visit the kitchen of the Colonial Cafe at the Majestic Hotel Kuala Lumpur, several questions emerged.

What will a place that is famous for serving food from the colonial era be like? Will it be vast? Will there be state-of-the-art kitchen equipment? Will the clanging of pots and pans be so loud as to drown conversation?

Actually, the kitchen is small and compact, like that of a coffee shop, and much cleaner. Ricky Chiang Chia Teck, 50, stands by a very hot wok. At his side is an enormous pot of chicken stock which has been bubbling all morning. One of the staff accompanying me whispers in my ears: "Good food comes from a small kitchen."

It is not easy to pinpoint exactly what Ricky does. Officially, he's the sous chef or the second-in-command

in the kitchen. He is also a speciality chef because he's the one who's able to cook Chinese food. Further on, he is described as the "custodian of Hainanese cuisine" at the hotel.

The description this father of three adult children is most comfortable with is that of "disciple". Although the Pangkor Island native has been cooking Hainanese food since he was 15 years old, he admits that he is still learning the craft from the "matriarch of the family which

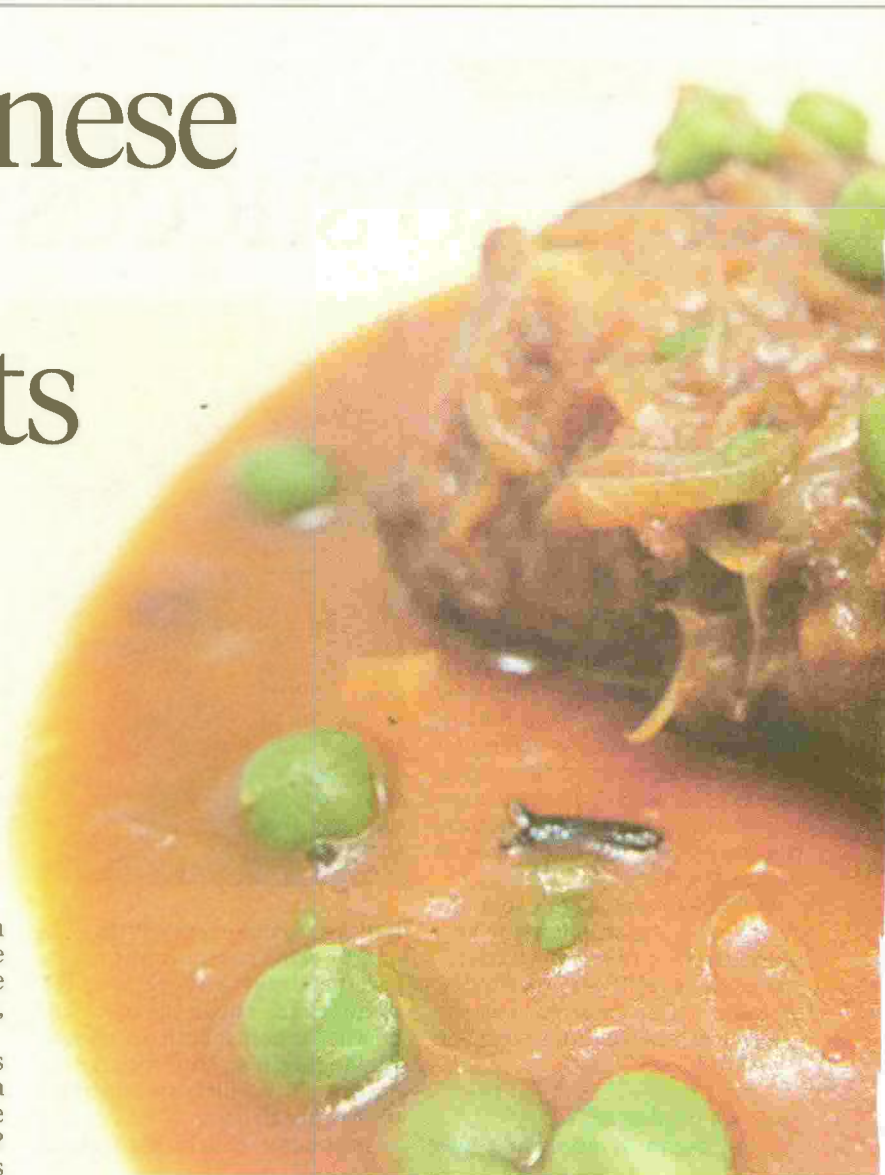
owns the hotel".

He says: "Like me, she is Hainanese and she shows me how to make some of the dishes better."

THE ORIGINS

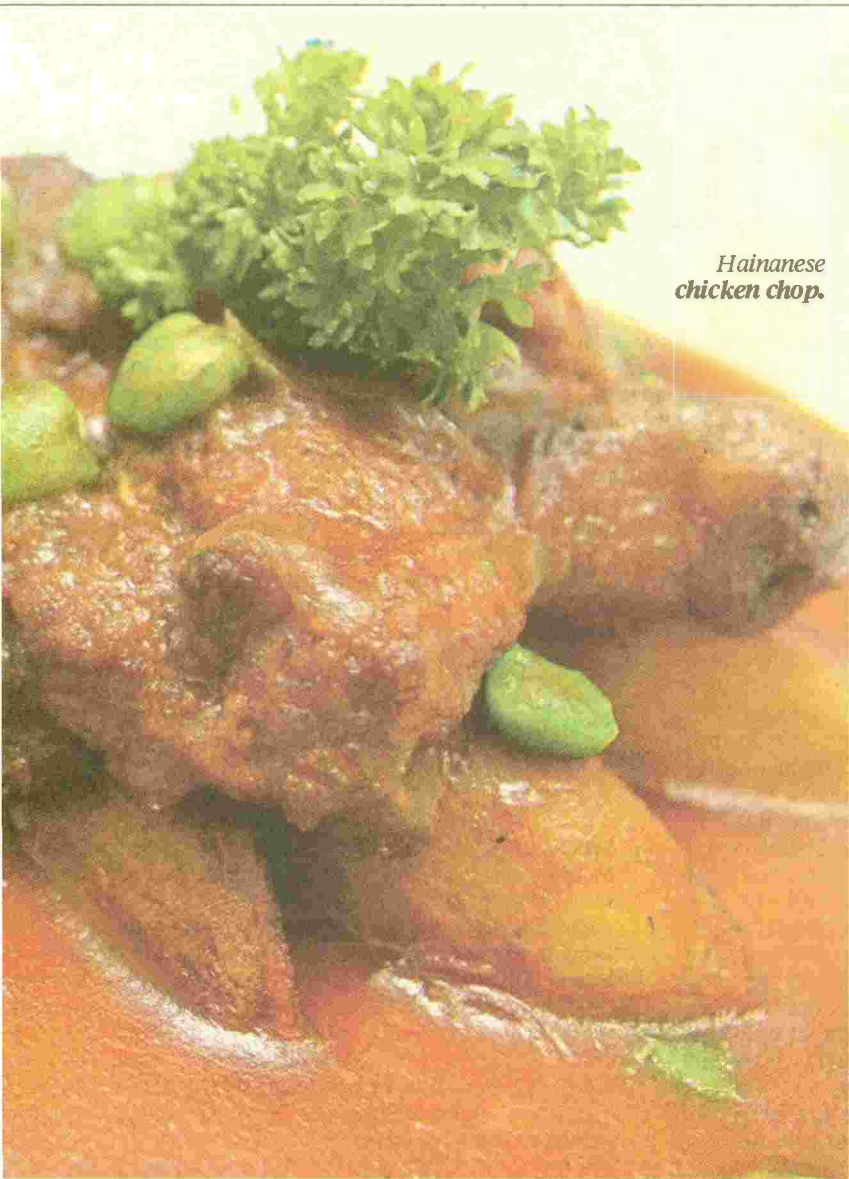
All this information is an introduction to understanding that the four signature dishes Ricky will present are unique to the Colonial Cafe and are probably different from that offered elsewhere.

"It's a reinterpretation of some



Hainanese **boiled beef.**
PICTURES BY AZIAHAZMEE

Hainanese **chicken rice ball.**



Hainanese chicken chop.



Hailam noodles.

of the classical dishes in Hainanese cuisine," says Ricky.

The best example has to be the quintessential Hainanese dish, chicken chop. Ricky describes it as a "fusion of Chinese and Western flavours". The deep fried chicken is served with hand-cut fries and peas. It's the accompanying sauce that makes or breaks the dish. Ricky dispels all my attempts to obtain the recipe, saying it's "based on a closely-guarded family recipe, handed down

over three generations."

This begs the question, how did Hainanese cuisine develop here? In the 19th and early 20th century, the tin-mining and rubber industries in British Malaya were considered particularly profitable for the colonial masters. To protect their interests in these lucrative trades, many British expatriates were given posts in British Malaya. They were followed by a large migration of labourers from India and China.

Initially, migrants from China were mainly from Hokkien, Hakka, Cantonese and Teochew. Ultimately, the people of Hainan Island (which Ricky describes as Hawaii of the East) on the southern coast of China could no longer endure the ravages of war and started to venture elsewhere in search of a better life.

By the end of the 19th century, many Hainanese, including Ricky's grandparents, came to British Malaya. As the last of the migrants from China to arrive, they found few opportunities for employment.

"We had to take what was left and this was cooking," says Ricky. They worked in the kitchens of the British military camps, homes of British expatriates and wealthy Chinese. Yearning for food from England, many of these expatriates asked their Hainanese cooks to replicate some of the dishes in English cuisine, such as roasts, mushroom soup and crispy chops.

He imagines that many of the first wave of Hainanese cooks must have been amused at having to create traditional British meals. After all, the ingredients they had to use weren't ones they were familiar with. The food from Hainan is "lighter, less oily, and more mildly seasoned than that of the food from mainland China".

"I mean," he says, "how many

Chinese people use tomato paste in their cooking? Until today, we still call Lea & Perrins sauce, Mat Salleh soya sauce."

In time, these same cooks and their descendants opened their own restaurants and adapted their cooking to suit the local palate. They began to use local ingredients in their cooking such as pandan leaf, lemon grass and turmeric. The dish that epitomises this at Colonial Cafe is ayam kunyit. Served with glutinous turmeric rice, the chicken is braised in a sauce with a hint of lemongrass. There is a distinct Peranakan flavour.

Ricky and his team take three hours of continuous stirring to come up with the perfect sauce.

From chicken and rice dishes with exotic flavours, the next dish that Ricky presents is traditional Hainanese boiled beef. He says: "You can choose sirloin, brisket or back ribs. It takes us between three and four hours to prepare this dish."

When he was growing up and being the eldest among four children, Ricky says he was often tasked with helping his mother in the kitchen. This worked to his advantage when he went to work in a Chinese restaurant.

JOURNEY TO CUSTODIAN-SHIP
Although Ricky's been with YTL

Hotels since 2009, he started from the bottom, beginning as a kitchen helper. He developed his "chopping-board skills" which he says includes being a "cutter" and "runner".

One of the most important lessons he learnt was that the presentation of a dish was as important as its taste.

In fact, he insists that, "if you julienne one ingredient in a dish, everything else has to be julienned as well."

Of the four signature dishes, the one that appeals most to those seeking comfort food is old-style Hainanese chicken rice ball. The chicken is poached whole and the meat chopped into slices and served with a dipping sauce made with fragrant ginger and fresh chilli.

"It's the rice that is most unique," says Ricky of the tennis ball-sized orbs of rice steamed in oily chicken-enriched stock.

Apparently, Hainanese chefs argue over the origin of these unusually-shaped rice servings. Some maintain that the rice was so shaped because it allowed the rice to stay warm longer. Others believe that it was a memory of life in Hainan Island where it seems, rice balls were easier to pack and bring along for those who worked in banana plantations. But, Ricky says: "You may not find food like this in Hainan Island."

