

BROUGHT TO YOU
BY LIFE & TIMESPULSE *living*

BACK TO BASICS

To be a food recipe specialist, it's vital to have the consumer point of view in focus at all times, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

JUST chop it up," I answer when asked how I'd like my onions.

This seems to confuse Alric Tong Kwan Seng, who proceeds to ask what I mean. His colleague, Cheong Wai Loon (known as 'Loon' to his friends), gives me more options to choose from: finely chopped, rough chop, sliced or minced. With finely chopped onions, the texture has no definite shape. But you must get a perfect square for each piece if the onion is diced. When the onion is minced, it's shapeless.

Both men describe themselves as food recipe specialists and work at F&N Dairies (Malaysia). Presiding as a judge at the F&N Bake-Off Challenge, Alric explains that the event was organised by F&N in collaboration with Taylor's University School of Hospitality, Tourism & Culinary Arts.

Having settled the all-important issue of the onion texture that I wanted, Alric tips a bowl of finely chopped onions into a shallow pan. As he prepares to make an omelette, he shares a little about himself. The youngest of four children, the youthful-looking 26-year-old can't remember a time when he didn't love cooking. One of his earliest memories is helping his mother make a family favourite, bak chang.

"It's like dumplings," he says, while pouring whipped eggs into a saucepan. "It looks simple. But there's a lot of work involved. You have to prepare the condiments. Wrap the rice properly... and the process of making it is long. But I didn't feel tired at all."

Flipping the omelette in the pan, Alric shares that he has a penchant for putting his own spin on traditional dishes. He says: "We used to make little balls of glutinous rice to celebrate Winter Solstice. I would add gula melaka or Nutella."

While Alric plates the omelette, Loon carefully pours rose syrup, milk and tea into a tall glass to create what he calls "3-layer bandung". Simple meal served, they make themselves comfortable for our chat.

LESSONS TO LEARN

Before they elaborate on the term food recipe "specialist", Loon (the cheekier of the two) confides that when he first com-



pleted his schooling, he was advised to get a job at a shop that sold branded goods. This way, he figured, he'd get a discount if he wanted to buy those goods.

Not keen on retail, he ventured into the food and beverage industry hoping the same logic would apply — that he'd get good food at a discounted price or even free of charge. Pouting, he says: "That's what I thought. We only got staff meals."

Changing the topic somewhat, Alric confides that he's inspired by celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay. The lesson learnt from watching Ramsay on television is to do things the correct way. Take something seemingly simple to cook — steak. It's not good enough to dump a piece of meat in the pan. "He'll baste it with butter," says Alric. "The meat is evenly cooked. Even

ALMOND MILK USING F&N SWEETENED CREAMER

Preparation Time:
15 minutes
Serves 4 people

Ingredients
160g F&N sweetened creamer
100g ground almonds
600 ml water

Method

1. Blend ground almonds, F&N sweetened creamer and 200ml of water until smooth.
2. Boil the remaining water in a pot. Once boiled, turn off the heat and add the blended mixture into the water.
3. Serve hot.

Tip

Spoon in an additional 100g of F&N evaporated creamer for extra creaminess. Prepare the drink early in the morning and chill in refrigerator.

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AYAM MASAK MERAH LASAGNA

Preparation time: 30 minutes

Cooking time: 1 hour

Serves 6 people

Ingredients

Ingredients A

1 kg boneless chicken, cut into cubes
200g F&N evaporated creamer
2 tbsp turmeric powder
½ tsp salt

Ingredients B (Blended into a paste)

3 yellow onions
5 red onions
5 cloves garlic
½ inch ginger
4 tbsp Boh chilli

Ingredients C

2 star anise
1 stick cinnamon
3 yellow onions
5 tbsp chilli sauce
5 tbsp tomato sauce
150g F&N evaporated creamer
100g water
3 tomatoes
Salt and sugar to taste
1 packet lasagna sheets
1 packet shredded Mozzarella cheese

Method

1. Pour Ingredients A in a bowl and marinate the chicken cubes for at least 3 hours in the chiller. Then lightly deep fry the chicken cubes until golden brown and set aside.
2. Heat up some oil in another pot. Saute star anise and cinnamon until fragrant, then add in sliced onions (from Ingredients C) and continue to saute until soft.
3. Pour Ingredients B, chilli sauce and tomato sauce into a sauce pan. Saute until the ingredients split from the oil.
4. Mix the chicken cubes, with water and tomatoes. Bring the mixture to boil.
5. Add in F&N evaporated cream and cook until the mixture thickens. Season to taste and set aside.
6. In a casserole dish, place a lasagna sheet followed by a layer of ayam masak merah. Before placing the next lasagna sheet, sprinkle some cheese. Repeat the process until you have four layers of ayam masak merah.
7. Place the casserole dish in a preheated oven at 180°C for 25 minutes. Serve while hot.



Alric (left)
and Loon.

PICTURES BY SHIRAZ ALI

the butter used is aromatic. It could have rosemary in it."

The person that 25-year-old Loon learnt from is closer to home, his mother, whom he describes as a Hakka Chinese housewife. "She used to make this dish, which was basically just pickled radish, minced meat, chilli and dark soya sauce," says Loon. Practically salivating at the thought of this dish, he confides that he tried to replicate the recipe some years back. He took only 20 minutes to make it, but sheepishly, he conceded-

ed that it didn't even turn out 20 per cent like what his mother made.

Duly humbled, Loon had an eye-opening lesson the next time his mother made the dish. "She bought the whole piece of pickled radish," he says. "Also, she didn't just buy ready-packed minced meat. She bought equal proportion of lean meat and fat. That was then minced by hand. All this preparation took about 40 minutes."

When it came to the actual cooking, the entire process took about 2½ hours. Recalling the strain, he says: "I had to stir the pot the whole time. My shoulder was aching."

FOCUS ON CONSUMERS

In their work, both chefs remain determined to see things from a consumer's point of view. Take something like making pizza. "Many people may not have an oven to make the pizza base," says Alric. Instead,

he offers a healthier option: An omelette. Also, there is no need for an oven because the omelette can easily be made using a saucepan and stove. "To make the mozzarella cheese melt, cover the pan with a lid." This mimics the conditions of an oven.

A specialist for a while now, Alric admits that he's had some near misses. The most disastrous took place some four years ago. At the time, he'd created a new beverage under the F&N banner called bru teh tarik and it was time to promote it at various supermarkets. It seemed simple enough.

Or so he thought. The event agency hired a promoter and everything seemed set. On the day of the promotion, Alric posed as a mystery shopper and visited one of the supermarkets.

Shaking his head, Alric says: "I couldn't believe that the promoter dared to serve such a drink. It was just brown and too milky. I was so angry. Now, I

treat everyone who receives our recipes as someone with zero knowledge."

This is the reason why their tasks are not restricted merely to writing recipes. They also have to conceptualise each dish and go as far as working with food stylists to help with the marketing of their final product.

Ultimately, both say that they see themselves as representing the younger generation. They see how overworked their peers are and how unhealthy their lifestyles are too. Speaking for both of them, Alric concludes: "We want them to start cooking and eating healthy again."

