

THE FIERCE AUNTY'S E-BOOK SERIES

8 Essential Nyonya Recipes You Must Learn

So that everybody would think you came from a fine family



TRADITIONAL MALAYSIAN CULINARY EXPERT

NAZLINA HUSSIN



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Who is a "Nyonya"?

A "Nyonya" is the wife of a "Baba", a Chinese immigrant who settled in the British Straits Settlement States namely of Penang, Malacca & Singapore from the 19th century and he took local wives who were then dubbed as "Nyonyas" from Malay, Burmese, or Thai descents. The name supposedly came from the Malay word "nona" meaning a young lady.

Their descendants are called Peranakan Baba and Nyonya. A Nyonya, being the matriarch of the family, wielded an iron rule in the kitchen. She was always immaculately dressed, and properly turned out, even when she was busy chopping ingredients.

She had a meticulous way of working, very particular about how to slice and dice things, and hey, do not even think of doubting her judgement, for she had a laser-sharp tongue that would cut you so thin that you would not even feel the pain when you slowly die. By the way, the ability to slice things finely indicates that you came from a fine family. A young nyonya-in-training was expected to look pretty, a skillful cook, a hospitable hostess, can embroider kebaya and "manik shoes" and most importantly, she did not talk back with sass when scolded by the Matriarch of the family.

As the Baba was normally a wealthy man, he would have had the luxury of having a multitude of wives, concubines and servants. So, the kitchen had many hands to create beautiful, delicate food, that would take hours and sometimes days to prepare.

So, in this book, the Fierce Auntie (fortunately for you, she is not a Nyonya, though she can cook like one), will guide you on how to create eight delicious Nyonya recipes that would make everybody thinks that you came from a fine Peranakan family.



A close-up photograph of several vibrant purple morning glory flowers with green leaves, serving as a background for the title.

Essential Nyonya Food Ingredients

A Nyonya kitchen and pantry would have the following items which came from her Chinese roots as well as locally grown Malayan produce:

- Dried or fermented stuff: belachan (shrimp paste), salted fish, salted egg, dried shrimps, dried squid and candlenuts (and *buah keluak* for Nyonyas in Malacca and Singapore).
- Rock sugar, jaggery, and palm sugar.
- Tapioca and rice flour, mung bean flour, local tubers such as cassava, sweet potatoes and yam. She made her own rice flour by soaking rice and grinding it manually with a grinding stone and then hung it to dry in a muslin cloth so she could make sweet kuih the next day. The tubers most likely came from her own garden because she was a very frugal and hardworking person, due to the hardship endured in her youth.
- Indian spices such as cinnamon, star anise, cardamom, cloves, coriander seeds, as well as dried chilies.
- As for fresh ingredients, her garden was well tended with fresh herbs such as daun kaduk (wild pepper leaves), bunga kantan (torch ginger), galangal, bunga telang (clitoria bush - yeah, you heard me right), bird's eye chilies, lemongrass, calamansi lime, kaffir lime and pandanus.
- Being a non-muslim, she cooked pork, always obtained fresh meat from the wet market, reared her own chicken or bought live ones to be slaughtered herself, and would cook fresh water fish, as well as those caught from the sea.






Nyonya Recipe #1: Penang Achar

- 1/2 cucumber (remove seeds and cut into thick strips, 2.5 cm long)
 - 1 small carrot (cut into the same shape as the cucumber)
 - 1 cup white vinegar
 - ¼ of a small cabbage (cut into squares)
 - 5 french beans (sliced diagonally about 1 inch in length)
 - 1 small cauliflower floret
 - 1 tbs peanuts (dry roasted, peeled and pounded finely)
 - 1 tbs sesame seeds (dry roasted)
 - 6 pieces of dried chilies (boil to soften them, remove seeds and pound finely together with 1 inch turmeric (or 1 tsp turmeric powder). This paste should make up about 1 tbs of ground spices.
 - 4 pips of garlic
 - 6 tbs cooking oil, salt and a generous amount of sugar (two tablespoons)
1. Coat cucumber with a sprinkling of salt to remove its water, set aside 30 minutes.
 2. Blanch all vegetables in simmering vinegar, one type after another. Open all windows so you would not choke in its fume.
 3. Let all veggie pieces dry on a tray to remove excess liquid. Leave them overnight in the fridge so that the vinegar is absorbed well by the vegetables.
 4. Heat oil, fry garlic slices till golden, remove from oil.
 5. Sauté chili paste with turmeric using the same oil until it looks “crispy” and the oil separates, take care not to burn it!
 6. Add in vegetables pieces, coat evenly with the spices.
 7. Add in sesame seed and peanuts and fried garlic.
 8. Sprinkle salt and a generous amount sugar because the vinegar is very sour and you must balance the taste.

This achar is good to be eaten the next day when all ingredients infuse together. It can be kept in a sterilized jar and would make a perfect gift too. In the old days, achar took two days to make as there were no fridges so the blanched vegetables had to be hung out to dry in the hot sun instead.



Nyonya Recipe #2:

Sambal Belachan

A meal without sambal belachan, for a Nyonya, is a meal not worth eating.

Good with any raw herbs and salad and use it as the dressing for a kerabu.

- 2 large fresh chilies (cayenne pepper or equivalent)
- 4 birds eye chilies
- 7 g toasted shrimp paste (belachan)
- Juice of two lime (or 5 calamansi lime, or 1/4 lemon)
- A pinch of salt
- 1 tsp sugar

1. Pound chilies with shrimp paste, then squeeze in lime juice, season with salt and sugar.

This sambal can be made in bulk and frozen in small containers. When it thaws, it is almost as good as freshly made.



Nyonya Recipe #3: Nasi Ulam

SECOND EDITION

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NASI ULAM

MIXED HERB RICE

Recipe Courtesy of

Puan Nazlina Hussin

SERVES 6

Ingredients

4 cups white rice
(cooked and cooled
to room temperature)

20g dried
Mergui fish

20g dried shrimp
(soaked in hot water
for 15 minutes,
drained and
pounded finely)

5g shrimp paste /
belacan
(toasted in a dry
pan over a low heat,
then crumbled into
small pieces)

1 cup toasted grated
coconut / *kerisik*
(grated coconut
toasted into a light
golden brown,
pounded finely)

Finely ground black
pepper, to taste

Salt, to taste

Fresh Herbs and Vegetables

3 kaffir lime leaves
(rolled and sliced finely)

2 stalks lemongrass
(sliced finely from the
base until the purple
rings)

2 long beans,
sliced finely

6 peppermint stalks
(leaves plucked, then
sliced finely)

10 shallot bulbs
(peeled and
sliced finely)

4 Thai basil stalks
(leaves plucked,
then sliced finely)

½ torch ginger flower,
sliced finely

15g turmeric root
(peeled and
sliced finely)

4 Vietnamese
mint stalks
(leaves plucked,
then sliced finely)

3 four-angled beans /
winged beans,
sliced finely

Method

- 1 Cook the rice and leave to cool to room temperature.
- 2 Deep fry the dried Mergui fish for a minute until crispy. Leave to cool and then shred into small pieces.
- 3 Thinly slice all the herbs and fresh vegetables. The finer, the better.
- 4 Combine all the ingredients together with the rice and serve with *sambal belacan*.

Tips

1. **Nasi Ulam** is a flexible dish. Feel free to experiment with other aromatic greens such as wild pepper leaves, *daun cekur* (sand ginger leaves) or turmeric leaves. The raw herbs used are essentially a source of potent antioxidants that are good for our body.
2. The main challenge of making this dish lies in the extremely fine slicing of the ingredients, especially the herbs, to ensure the fibres do not negatively affect the enjoyment of the dish.
3. The four-angled beans / winged beans can be replaced with other types of beans that are safe to be eaten raw.

I contributed this recipe to a compilation of festival food of George Town, "Eat Rite" published by GTWHI.

Nyonya Recipe #4:

Chicken Curry Kapitan

- 1½ chicken (cut into 10 and 5 pieces)
- 25 g belachan (prawn paste)
- 15 large red fresh chilies
- 3 tbs curry powder
- 1 inch galangal
- 3 inch ginger (peeled)
- 1 head of garlic (peeled)
- 4 onions, cut into rings, 4 mm thick
- 10 candlenuts
- 6 lemongrass
- 300 ml thick coconut milk
- 5 tamarind apple
- Juice of 6 calamansi lime (or 2 limes or 1/2 a lemon)
- 10 pieces kaffir lime leaves, sliced thinly
- Salt to taste (be careful because the belachan is already salty)
- 1 cup of water
- 3/4 cup of oil for sautéing



1. Marinate chicken with prawn paste and curry powder overnight in the fridge.
2. Process ginger, garlic, candlenuts, galangal and also red chilies to a paste.
3. Bruise lemongrass roots.
4. Heat oil and sauté the spice paste with lemongrass till it is fragrant over a low fire, and the oil floats to the top and the chilies no longer taste raw. Add 1 cup water and tamarind apple pieces.
5. Let simmer and add chicken pieces together and cover the pot until they are almost cooked. You may add a bit more water if the mix becomes too dry.
6. Turn down the heat, add thick coconut milk in stages with onion rings and kaffir lime leaves, stirring once in a while until the chicken pieces are tender. Leave the pan open to reduce the liquid. Once the coconut milk is in the pot, make sure fire is reduced, otherwise it will burn quickly.
7. Season with enough salt.
8. Add the lime juice at the end of the cooking because the sauce may become slightly bitter if added earlier.

Nyonya Recipe #5:

Ikan Sumbat Belakang



- 6 hard tail scads (or mackerel) – *ikan cencaru* in Malay.
- 2 ripe tomatoes – halved, and sliced into a half-moon shape
- 10 g shrimp paste – roasted over open fire to release the flavor
- 5 fresh big red chilies
- 2 small onions - halved, and sliced into C shape
- 2 tbs thick tamarind juice
- 1 tbs sugar
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp turmeric powder

Method:

- 1.Clean fish of its gills and innards. Use the pulp of the tamarind paste to clean its slimy cavity.
- 2.Make a slit on its back along its fin, ask your fishmonger to do this if possible.
- 3.Marinate the fish with salt and turmeric powder, set aside.
- 4.Prepare chili paste by pounding fresh chilies with shrimp paste. Mix in tamarind juice, tomatoes and onion.
- 5.Stuff the chili mix into the cavity along the fish fin. Grill or deep fry.

Nyonya Recipe #6:

Asam Tumis Ikan

- 1.5 kg Spanish mackerel steaks (stingray, red snapper and pomfret also work well in this recipe)
- 1 cup Vietnamese mint leaves (remove the stalks)
- 1/2 cup mint (remove the stalks)
- 2 torch ginger (chopped finely – use the flower part only)
- 2 heaped tablespoons of tamarind paste soaked in 600ml water for 20 minutes – strain and use the juice only
- 3 pieces tamarind apple (asam keping)
- 2 lemon grass stalks – bruised
- 1 tomato, cut into 8 wedges
- 2 green chilies
- 8 okras (slit at the top)
- 1 liter water
- Salt to taste
- 80 ml vegetable oil

Spices to grind:

- 2 heaped tbs dried chili paste (soaked 12 dried chilies in hot water for 15 minutes, remove seeds and process finely); for less spicy version, reduce the amount of dried chilies.
- 100g shallots
- 2 large red chilies
- 15 g belachan (toasted)
- 10 g fresh turmeric (or 1 tsp turmeric powder)
- 8 pips garlic
- 1.5 inch ginger
- 1 lemongrass, use up to the purple rings.

The Story of Tamarind



Method:

1. Grind the spices
2. Heat oil in a large wok/saucepan on medium fire.
3. Add in ground spices, stir well till the oil separates (pecah minyak) and till the aroma comes out.
4. Add water. Slow down fire to simmer the liquid.
5. Pour in tamarind juice and drop those tamarind apple pieces. Mix thoroughly.
6. Simmer till the soup reduces in half (about 20 minutes)
7. Add in fish steaks, and bruised lemon grass.
8. Sprinkle Vietnamese mint, mint and torch ginger.
9. Careful not to break the fish, turn over the steaks in the gravy when one side is done.
10. Add in the vegetables.
11. Simmer for 5 minutes or when the sauce completely is absorbed into the fish steaks.
12. Sprinkle salt to taste.



Nyonya Recipe #7:

Otak-Otak



Otak-otak is a special Malay and Nyonya dish. As usual, there are many variations to this delicacy. All of them have seafood in it. The version that I am making here is common to the West Coast of Peninsula Malaysia and uses prawns.

While on the East Coast of the Peninsula, otak-otak is ground fish with spices, mixed with shredded coconut, and grilled, instead of steamed. On the East Coast too, otak-otak is wrapped with coconut leaves, instead of banana leaves like what I make here.

You may have a hard time finding the fresh herbs in the recipes; I suggest you try substituting wild pepper leaves with spinach leaves. Turmeric leaf is almost irreplaceable, so just make do with kaffir lime leaves instead.

As for the banana leaves used to wrap it or made into “boats”, you can use aluminum foil or ramekin bowls as substitutes. This dish ideally should be served immediately but it can also be served cold within a day.



Ingredients to be processed finely using pestle and mortar or a blender (using the pulse function):

- ½ inch fresh turmeric
- 1 small onion
- 2 dried chilies (cut to remove seeds and then soaked in hot water to soften the skin); or 2 large fresh chilies.
- 4 candlenuts
- 1 inch ginger
- 1 inch lemon grass root

Fresh herbs:

- 10 wild pepper leaves (daun kaduk)
- 3 young kaffir lime leaves
- 1 young turmeric leaf (optional)
- A little chopped ginger flower (optional)

Other ingredients:

- 4 eggs
- 400g prawns (peeled and deveined) or fish such as mackerel, sea bass or snapper.
- 1 cup of thick coconut milk (quantity may vary to make a runny mix)
- 2 tbs thick tamarind juice (made of soaking 1 tsp of tamarind paste and ¼ cup of water).
- Salt to taste



Method:

- Grind all spices, set aside.
- Whisk eggs with tamarind juice, peeled prawns, ground spices and also fresh leaves and salt.
- Make little boats out of banana leaves or use ramekin dishes.
- Line the boats with 1 piece of wild pepper leaf.
- Pour the mix into a few of these boats/ramekin.
- Steam over high heat for 10 minutes.
- Serve hot or cold.



Friendly, Funny, Fierce Auntie serving Nyonya Food.

Nyonya Recipe #8:

Kerabu Ikan Masin



Salted Fish Kerabu with Beansprouts

- 50g fried salted fish (ikan kurau - mergui fish or ikan talang - queen fish); shredded into small pieces. You can also use fried ikan pekasam.
- 2 lemon grass, chopped finely, use up to till the purple rings only
- 1.5 cups fresh bean sprouts
- 1/2 torch ginger (ginger flower bud)
- 10 shallots, slice lengthwise thinly
- ½ bowl of lightly toasted fresh coconut or desiccated coconut (kerisik)

For the dressing:

- 3 large red chilies
- Juice of 2 lime
- 7 g toasted belachan (prawn paste)
- Salt and sugar to taste

Method:

1. Prepare dressing by pounding the chilies with belachan finely.
2. Squeeze in lime juice into the chilie paste, set aside.
3. In a large bowl, mix fried salted fish with beansprouts, shallots, and toasted coconut, chopped lemongrass and torch ginger.
5. Toss with the dressing of chilies and belachan paste.
6. Season with salt and sugar.

There you go, 8 essential recipes to start you off to be a better Malaysian cook! These recipes barely scratch the surface of a Nyonya's repertoire!

The Fierce Auntie will be back with more lip-smacking content.

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The Fierce Auntie private FB group!

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© 2021 George Town, Penang
nazlina.hussin@gmail.com

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