

# *The Finches'*



## *Guide*

GHOSTS  
& MAGIC



*to*

# *Malaysia*



Hello! Welcome to the Finches' Guide to Malaysia. Here I'll introduce you a little to the country I come from while illustrating some of the elements you see in my story. While by no means an exhaustive guide, I hope it will encourage you to discover more about the beautiful, colourful place I called home.

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# MALAYSIA

**Malaysia** is a country of slightly over 30 million people located in Southeast Asia. We're right smack on the Equator, resulting in balmy weather year-round. The country itself has two geographical portions; Peninsular Malaysia, which juts out from mainland Asia, and the states of Sarawak and Sabah which occupy northern Borneo Island.

Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected government. The King is chosen every four years from among the nine historical Malay sultanates that comprised Malaysia. In their prime, the historical Malay kingdoms were major stops on the maritime trade route between India and China. Thusly, the descendants of travellers from throughout Asia, Arabia and Europe are represented in our population, each of them adding their influence to our shared culture. Malaysia's three largest ethnic groups are Malay, Chinese and Indian. We also have a multitude of indigenous peoples like the Orang Asli and Dayak, who have lived on these lands for thousands of years.

Most Malaysians are nominally bilingual, having been taught Bahasa Malaysia (our national language) and English as part of the national curriculum. A great number of Malaysians speak a third or even fourth additional language that might be a Chinese dialect (usually Cantonese or Mandarin), Tamil or an indigenous language. The news is broadcast in Bahasa Malaysia, Mandarin and Tamil daily, with newspapers also available in those three languages. Signage, especially in urban centres, is printed in at least both Bahasa Malaysia and English.



## Kuala Lumpur

Colloquially known as KL and the financial capital of Malaysia, the Kuala Lumpur I remember is a place with great food and terrible traffic jams. Rapid and hodgepodge development raised fancy shopping complexes alongside traditional villages, and our underlying infrastructure didn't always keep up. When it wasn't sweltering outside, it was monsoon season. Every time it rained, the area around my college in the old Indian part of town would flood—not only adding two hours to what was usually a 20 minute ride home, but also causing electrocution hazards. Not coincidentally, Kuala Lumpur roughly translates into “muddy delta” because the original town was built at the confluence of two major rivers.

# MALAYSIAN FOOD

Malaysian food is the best. It's made up of three major cuisines:

Malay, Chinese and Indian plus all our indigenous flavours and those of every other culture that has touched our shores. Beyond dine-in restaurants and local cafes, street vendors offering tables and chairs on the pavement or strictly 'take-away' street hawkers were ubiquitous while I was growing up.

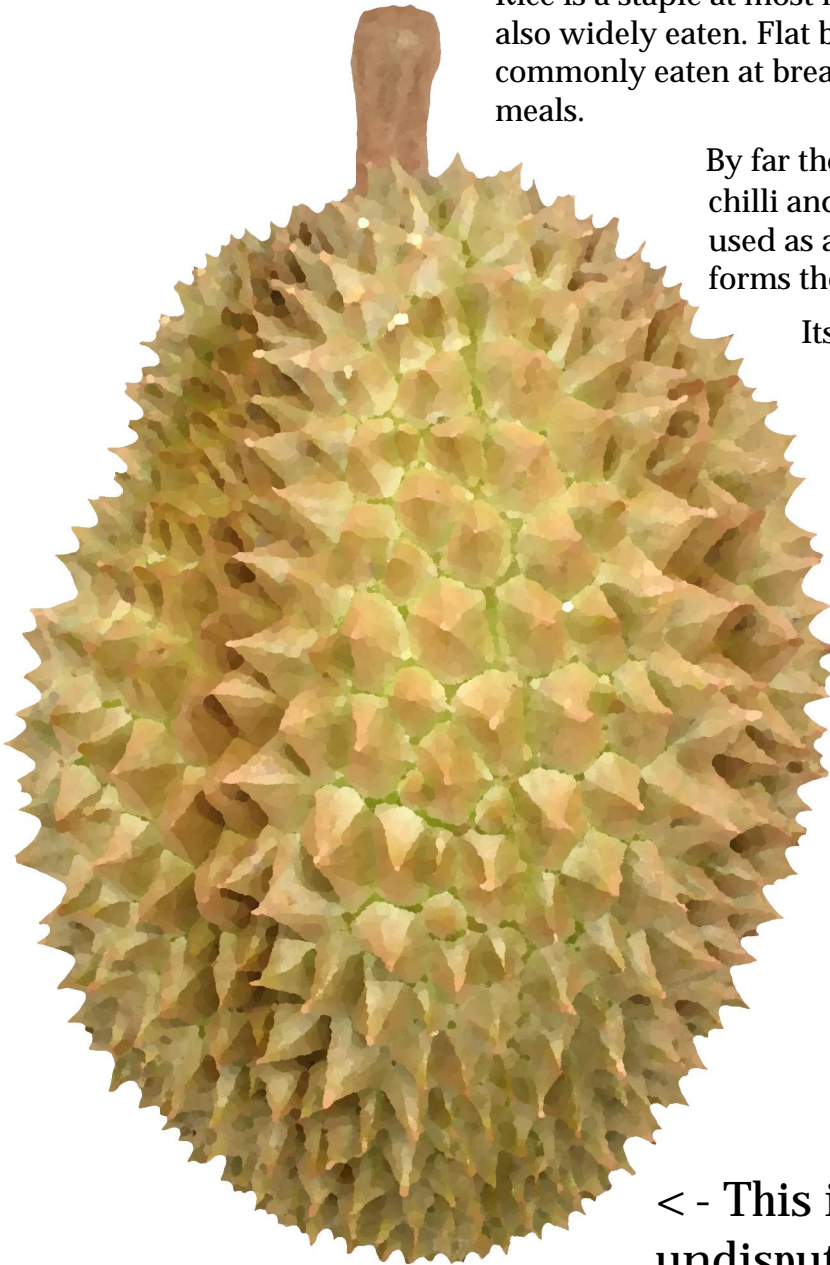
Rice is a staple at most meals, though noodles of many kinds are also widely eaten. Flat breads and steamed buns are more commonly eaten at breakfast or as snacks rather than main meals.

By far the most popular condiment is sambal—chilli and garlic paste. This versatile paste is used as a dip, fried with meat and veggies and forms the basis of many curries and gravies.

Its natural partner is belacan, fermented dried shrimp paste, whose strong smoky flavour is predominant in many Malaysian dishes. My husband once described it as tasting like "car exhaust". The Cantonese describe this taste more poetically as the "breath of a wok" (wok hei).

Tofu and soy sauce; cardamom, cinnamon and cloves; dried salted fish, coconut milk and lemongrass—at almost every meal, our different cultures meet at the table.

< - This is a durian, the undisputed king of fruits.



## MAMAK STALLS & 24-HOUR CURRY HOUSES

'Mamak' refers to Muslim Tamils of South Indian descent. Over centuries of trade, Indian spices have become an inseparable part of Malaysian cuisine. Virtually every ethnic group has its own style of curry. Typical Indian foods like biryani, roti and chapati are considered everyday fare.

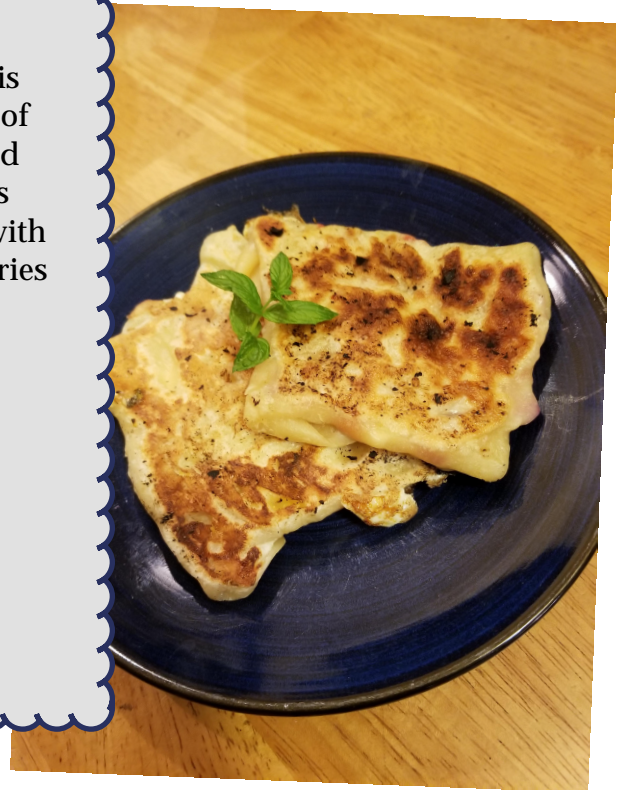
24-hour Mamak stalls and curry houses are incredibly popular in Kuala Lumpur. They're like heading to the pub, just non-alcoholic. Some curry houses even have televisions hooked up to live English football. Because they're so unfussy and affordable, Mamak eateries can be found in every neighbourhood, serving hot meals all day. Rich and poor Malaysians of all races eat at their local Mamak joint, making it a truly egalitarian experience.

### TEA

Tea is the caffeine of choice in Malaysia. The predominant styles of serving tea are sweetened with milk or Chinese tea drunk neat. The most popular form of tea is teh tarik (lit. pulled tea). Fortified with sugar, condensed milk and evaporated milk, hot black tea is poured between two metal mugs until frothy and served in a glass. A speciality of Mamak eateries, it's a vital source of caffeine for office workers, university students and World Cup Finals at 3AM.

## ROTI CANAI

Roti canai is what is most frequently ordered with teh tarik. It is most basic form of roti, an Indian flatbread. A simple dough of wheat flour, oil and water that is stretched paper thin, layered and fried on a hot grill, this crisp, calorie-dense food item has many beloved variations including fried with eggs, stuffed with bananas or filled with minced meat and onions. Mamak eateries typically sell it for breakfast and in the evenings for tea and dinner.



# MY PICKLED CABBAGE

## RECIPE (By reader request!)

When Malaysians talk about cabbage, they usually mean Napa cabbages. This vegetable is used everywhere from stir fries to stews. Pickled cabbage of the kind you see in Finches is more common in Chinese cuisine where it's used as a side dish and to flavour soups. My mother is part Hakka, so I developed a taste for salted greens early. Being traditionally farmers, Hakka cuisine is largely simple food that keeps well and requires little fuss. Pickled greens add excellent flavour to main dishes, especially anything that requires long braising.

I usually have a jar of pickled cabbage in the fridge where it stays fresh for months. Chilli flakes add colour and flavour to the final product. Use hot or mild peppers as you prefer. The sugar helps balance the salt, but it's skippable. I don't do the whole sterilisation process some people do when they pickle. You can do that, but if you're refrigerating the pickles for storage it's not really necessary. I use old pasta sauce and instant coffee jars to pickle. Any sturdy glass jar with a lid you can screw on works!

### Ingredients

1 head of Napa cabbage (washed and leaves separated)  
½ to 1 cup coarse salt  
3 to 4 cloves garlic (sliced thin)  
3 to 4 stalks green onion (sliced thin)  
Enough starchy water to cover the cabbage in their jars (see notes below)  
Several glass jars with airtight lids  
A few sealable bags or closable plastic containers to wilt cabbage in



### Optional:

1 tbsp red chilli flakes or 1 to 2 fresh chillies (minced)  
1 tsp sugar

### Method

1. Slice the bottom off the cabbage. This will help separate the leaves.
2. Wash separated leaves and shake off excess water.
3. Divide leaves and salt between the sealable bags or plastic containers you are using. Note: Salt can react with some metal containers so I do not recommend using them for this process. Ceramic and glass works fine though.
4. Leave the salted leaves to wilt overnight in a cool, dark place. If you'd like your pickles to be less salty, you can skip to the next step after 4 or 5 hours of wilting.
5. Drain any resultant brine and rinse excess salt off the cabbage leaves. If you're using sugar, add it to the starchy water and mix until combined.
6. Roll each cabbage leaf tightly. Layer some cabbage leaf rolls, garlic, green onions and chilli/chilli flakes at the bottom of a glass jar. Top this layer with some starchy water.
7. Continue layering the leaves, garlic onions and chilli as in Step 6, topping each layer with more starchy water, until the jar is filled to about 1 inch from the top.

## Method (continued)

8. When the jar is filled, add just enough starchy water to ensure all the vegetables are covered. This is important to prevent the pickles from spoiling. Press down the vegetables with a spoon to remove any air bubbles and ensure there are no gaps between the layers.
9. Leave about 1 inch clearance at the top of each jar as the cabbage will ferment and the liquid will bubble up.
10. Loosely screw on the jar's lid. Don't tighten it fully yet so the air released during fermentation can escape.
11. Place the jars somewhere you'll remember to check on them. It takes about 3 days for the pickles to start fermenting, longer if the weather is cold. Each day, open the jar and press down the vegetables with a spoon to release trapped air before loosely screwing on the lid again.
12. When the liquid begins to foam up pretty vigorously and the contents smell mildly sour, the jars are ready to be tightened and stored in the fridge. Wait about a week before using the pickles to let the flavours mature. The pickles can be stored for about half a year.

## Starchy water?

Water with a little starch helps kick-start the fermentation process. Traditionally, the water left over from rinsing white rice before cooking is used. I have found the water used to boil pasta works just as well. If the starchy water you have isn't enough to fill the jars, fill the jars with about half starchy water and the rest of the way with boiled water (wait till the water is cooled before using).

You can also use 1 part rice flour to 3 parts water to make a starch solution. Stir the rice flour and water together in a pan on low heat and keep stirring until the mixture begins to thicken. Use this to fill your pickle jars once it cools.

**Malaysia** is blessed with vast tracts of rainforest and mangroves that shelter extremely diverse flora and fauna. These dense evergreen forests still cover about two-fifths of the Malaysian peninsula and almost two-thirds of the states of Sabah and Sarawak in Malaysian Borneo. It's estimated we house approximately 20 percent of the world's animal species alone. Many of our most iconic species are endangered, like the orangutan, Malayan tiger, tapir and sun bear, with many more in a vulnerable state. The primary threat to our biodiversity is loss of habitat, where land is cleared for agriculture, such as for palm oil, development and logging.

## FINCHES

Given that this is my book's name, I endeavoured to educate myself about our local finches for this guide. Yet, in much the same way Darwin came home from the Galapagos Islands thinking he'd collected a whole bunch of different birds and a few finches—only to later find out they were all finches, 12 new species unknown to science—I found one true finch, the brown bullfinch, and a number of birds whose common names include the word 'finch' but are from a genetically separate family.

The brown Malayan bullfinch, *Pyrrhula nipalensis waterstradti*, ranges along the states of Perak, Pahang and Selangor on Peninsular Malaysia. Its habitat straddles the Titiwangsa Mountain range which runs through the centre of the peninsula. Within that area is one of the world's oldest deciduous rainforests, estimated to be about 130 million years old.

A handsome little bird with grey-brown head feathers and wing tips, and black feathers along its wings and tail, the brown bullfinch is listed as Vulnerable on the IUCN Red List.

Malaysia is home to over 800 species of birds, 16 of which are endemic and 63 of which are globally threatened. We are among just 17 megadiverse countries on the planet, defined as a country with at least 5,000 species of endemic plants and borders a marine system. Yet, since we collectively know about only 20% of the world's species, there's a high chance new species, even new finches, might still be hidden away in their Malaysian habitats.



Brown Bullfinch by PeiWen Chang from TAIWAN/Taipei, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

# CHICKENS



Ayam Kampung by Zamwan, CC BY-SA 3.0 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

about freely, oblivious to cars and people.

Chickens deserve a special note for their role within my book. Among Malaysia's many wild birds is the red junglefowl, one of the genetic lines from which modern chickens originated 8,000 years ago.

Apart from commercial broiler chickens, it is possible to buy a variety known locally as ayam kampung (village chicken). These birds are the result of cross-breeding between red junglefowl and domesticated chickens—true mongrels with no set pedigree. Lean, long-legged and capable of eating anything, cooks prize ayam kampung for their firmer flesh and richer flavour.

Being stringier and gamier than the average bird, they work best in recipes calling for long stewing, like curry! In villages all over the country and Finches, you'll find these chickens roaming

# MALAYSIANS & THE SUPERNATURAL

Malaysians are a superstitious lot. When I was growing up, people took at face value there were unseen things all around us. No one I knew ever disrespected a cemetery and known places of power, such as forest groves claimed to house spirits, were actively avoided.

People who can commune with the unseen are similarly respected. Every ethnicity and faith has its wise men and women. In Finches, there appears a Buddhist nun and a Malay bomoh. Bomoh use a syncretic system of indigenous beliefs and Islamic prayer to not just ward off unseen entities, but also charm, curse and cure. There are practices like inserting magic golden needles into women's faces to make them more beautiful. Famous bomoh have been invited to cleanse property of ill will, pray for rain during drought, even help search for missing flight MH370.

Many Malaysians acknowledge the existence of, if not outright fear, the restless souls of the dead. Among the most common reasons a place becomes haunted, other than being near a cemetery, is being the site of a WW2 Japanese killing field. I once lived in a company-owned housing complex said to have been built on a WW2 killing field. The company's nearby office building was replete with stories about people working late encountering strangers dressed in white who disappeared when approached. Security guards at the company's recreational club reported seeing disembodied heads swimming in the pools after dark.

## MALAYSIAN GHOSTS

### Toyol

Not all souls of the dead are made equal. Some bomoh create familiars from the corpses of infants called toyol. These short, fleet-footed familiars are used to spy on a household. Toyol being children, one of the ways to deter them is to scatter marbles on the floor. The toyol is obliged to stop and count the marbles one by one, and eventually forget what it was doing.

### Pontianak

Among the most feared type of ghost is the pontianak, the spirit of a woman who died giving birth. Pontianak take the form of pretty women to lure men wandering alone at night, only to catch them and eat their entrails. You can tell a pontianak is nearby if you smell frangipani followed by the scent of a decaying corpse.

### Orang minyak

A more modern ghost is the orang minyak (oily man), a naked man covered in black grease, which helps him evade capture. Rather than haunt or kill, the orang minyak rapes women. He seems to have entered the pantheon in the 1950s, roughly around the time when women first began studying and working in cities far from home.

# MASS HYSTERIA

By around the 1970s, young rural women migrated en masse to work in urban factories. This was a time when the Malaysian government attracted foreign investment by advertising how the small, delicate hands of our women were perfect for detailed electronics assembly. The tedious, repetitive work clearly took a psychological toll. Media reports began appearing where dozens of female workers would begin screaming, weeping and attacking others—one after another on the factory floor. These “mass hysteria” events were popularly blamed on spirit possession or ghosts. Perfectly American and Japanese corporations resorted to hiring bomoh to exorcise their premises.

As late as 2018, at least one all-girl boarding school in north-east Malaysia reported a “mass hysteria” event, this time in senior secondary school students studying for the notoriously difficult university entrance exams. The signs were the same: screaming, weeping young women needing to be escorted away by ambulance.

Hysterical women have plagued men since the ancient Egyptians. While that medical diagnosis has had its day, gender-based discrimination and misogyny hasn't stopped haunting women in any age. There is still immense emotional difficulty growing up female in my conservative country, where no one today would stop a girl from studying, climbing the corporate ladder or even entering public office as high as she can go.

Yet, women here are routinely blamed in their own sexual assaults for dressing wrong or being out late at night (for work or study!); women who shun marriage or children are ‘abnormal’; and people still whisper after women whose husbands have left them that they failed to be good wives. Are these possessed Malaysian women tapping into some primal mode of self-preservation when they go ‘hysterical’? By being the frightener, the one who distresses their corporate overlord and screams against society's expectations, they may yet be on to something.

And there we have it! I hope you’ve had fun learning a little bit about my country—I certainly had a great deal of fun writing this. In these pandemic times more than ever, I truly wished more people could experience all the wonderful and tasty things Malaysia has to offer first-hand. Someday, this will be possible again. Until then, thank you for reading and please enjoy my strange little book.

For more about me and my writing, please visit my website at:  
<http://www.ammuffaz.com>