



## Penang: Palate-pleasing Paradise!

By Dr Martin Chio



After a busy month comprising the Society Annual Scientific Meeting, my Bastille Day celebrations, a seminar for family physicians and my back-straining BCLS re-certification, I really wanted a relaxing break. I knew my weekend trip was off to a good start when I chanced upon Tanqueray 10 while in the airport lounge for a pre-flight drink. We were off to Penang at the kind invitation of Auntie Mary whom I met during university days in Bristol.

The SilkAir flight touched down in the late afternoon and Auntie Mary was there to greet us with a big hat and an even bigger smile. While discussing the itinerary, she declared that we were not going to do any of the tourist stuff, but would focus on our common passion: food! (Bit of trivia: Penang was voted the place with best street food in Asia by *TIME Magazine* in 2004). I had barely recovered from the Melaka *makan* mission but relented in the face of her enthusiasm. Initially, I was hoping to re-visit the Snake and Kek Lok Si temples but perhaps that could be accomplished on another trip.

True to her word, we stopped for a bite even before we arrived at her condominium. Ah Soon *char kway teow* is Auntie Mary's favourite, and conveniently situated outside her Tanjung Bungah



Ah Soon *char kway teow*

condo. The *kway teow* was fried over a charcoal-fired wok and gulped down in a flash. The food inhalation had started ☺. On the way to the condo we cooled down with some roadside Aroma *tao huay* drink with *gula melaka*. I am not sure if there is such a phenomenon but food consumed while on holiday invariably tastes a lot better... perhaps it's the different cooking oil used?

After a quick freshening up, we proceeded across the road for a pre-dinner aperitif at the Penang Swimming Club, which was established in 1903. The clubhouse bar was a veranda overlooking the sea, a perfect way to enjoy the sunset with a gin and tonic. With appetite whetted, we popped over to the Sea Pearl Lagoon Café situated next to the Tanjung Tokong Thai Pak Koong temple. Under the shadow of a World War II watchtower, we sampled two specialties: baked crab and oyster omelette. For dinner part deux, we allowed our

stomachs a rest while driving northwards to Batu Ferringhi and searched out the Beach Corner Restaurant, part of Kafe Summer Beach near the Grand Plaza Park Royal Hotel. We wolfed down crisp Penang spring rolls, *assam* fish curry and *sambal kangkong*. After all that spicy food, we decided to walk it off and the cool sea breeze provided a soothing end to a very warm day.

The problem with my circadian rhythm is that it functions even while



Penang spring rolls

on holiday, and I awoke fairly early the next morning. It however did give me an opportunity to watch the various water-crafts in the Northern Channel with Kedah Peak providing a slightly misty backdrop. We later trooped off for breakfast around the corner at the Kedai Kopi Sin Lee Hin (Jalan Tanjung Bungah). From what I recall, a few of the stalls are involved in the Penang food festivals held regularly in Singapore, and I had a delicious

*Hokkien mee* and *chee cheong fun* with prawn paste. The portions in Penang are a tad smaller than what we are used to locally, but that's an advantage as tasting portions allow one to sample more varieties, even at breakfast. Having had our fill, we decided to do a driving tour of the environs while listening to 70s music which Auntie Mary particularly enjoys. We also stopped at Him Heang (162A Jalan Burma) to stock up on local Tambun biscuits and durian cake.

Auntie Mary had made arrangements to meet some friends for laksa at Balik Pulau which is situated in the middle of

The original plan after laksa was to eat durians in a plantation. However as it was the end of the season, arrangements were made to proceed to the plantation owner's home to eat instead. Balik Pulau durian is also regionally famous. We opened approximately 20 fruits, ate beyond our fill and packed six large ice-cream boxes to take away. We also sampled very sweet *chempedak* and *duku-langsat*.

Barely able to walk after that, we drove and arrived at the base of Penang Hill/Bukit Bendera at 5pm. The hill is 833 m (2,723 ft) above sea level and there was no way I was going to walk



*Ice kacang with nutmeg*

*char siew wonton mee* washed down with gula melaka-flavoured iced coffee. After breakfast, we walked around the market after and chanced upon one of my favourites: *ban chean kuih* along Jalan



*Balik Pulau durian*



*Duku-langsat*



*Penang Hill flora*

the island. En route we stopped at the tropical fruit farm (Batu 18, Jalan Teluk Bahang) and enjoyed a cooling local fruit punch amid *jambu air* trees. Nan Guang (67 Jalan Balik Pulau) is famous for its laksa, serving both the *assam* (tamarind) and the *lemak* (coconut) variety. We were served iced white nutmeg juice with sour plum, which awoke my taste buds in preparation for the very tasty and fragrant laksa. I dripped a generous amount of prawn paste into my *assam laska* and savoured every last drop of the thick gravy.



*Jambu air*

up. Thankfully the funicular railway was working that day but we only managed to get tickets for 6:30pm. However, Auntie Mary managed to charm the attendant into allowing us on the 5.30pm slot☺. She later decided to plonk herself down at David Brown's Strawberry Hill for a cuppa tea while the rest of us walked around the summit to explore the flora and enjoy the cooler temperature. I am not sure how we found space in our stomachs for more food; for a change, we decided to share a steak and mushroom pie with asparagus in Hollandaise sauce for dinner. We then rounded dinner off with *ice kacang* flavoured with nutmeg at the hawker centre outside the condo and fell into a deep slumber very happily indeed.

Auntie Mary invited us to accompany her to Mass the next morning and we happily obliged. Thereafter we had breakfast at the nearby Pulau Tikus market and had 'degustation' portions of *koay teow th'ng*, carrot (radish) cake and

Solok Moulmein, which coincidentally was featured that same morning in the Sunday papers. We later retreated to the Penang Swimming Club for our last breath of calming ocean breeze and then made our way to the airport. As a small token of thanks, I presented Auntie Mary with something everyone should use regularly: sunscreen! **SMA**



*Ban chean kuih with gula melaka*

*Martin aspires to be a food and travel writer and photographer*