

Malay Food: Innovate or Perish?

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Abstract

Food is considered one of the most fundamental elements of culture. On the same token, it is a significant indicator of ethnic or national identity. Food is one of tangible means of expressing our identity. In any community, be it Malay community or otherwise, food plays a very important role in promoting their identity besides other cultural activities for example handicrafts, architectural designs or dances. On the other hand, food is never a fixed event as it is always adjusted to suit to the relevant social structural transformations such as the impact of both modernization and globalization. Hence, Malay culinary culture is always in active mode in innovating and responding to the constant influx of food and other culinary elements that flow from outside into their gastronomic microcosm. This microcosm reflects the community's unique cultural identity. In gastronomic tourism, chefs play an important role in preserving the local gastronomic journey. To understand how the Malay chefs respond to these phenomena, this research will analyze the activities taking place in restaurant kitchen. The ethnographic analysis of activities taking place in the kitchen of restaurant can signify the transformation at the macro level in term of modernization and globalization into micro practices of everyday activities. The findings are able to explain the paradox of globalization and how the local response to the food trend.

Keywords:

Malay food; Malay restaurant; diffusion; innovation

1 Introduction

Every culture has established its conventions and customs about what is food and what is not. Culture influences the way we perceive food, preferences, habits, diets and our behavior in general. Thus, culture is a major determinant of our food consumption. Our culture tells us what is fit to eat and our ethnocentricity ensures that we obey (Fieldhause, 1995). Culture is an integral part of our value system, and it provides guidelines of what and how to eat. Shared cultural norms built our common identity and means of relating to one another. It continues to be followed as long as it yields satisfaction. Hence, culture synonymously refers to local or traditional practices identified with specific ethnic groups that become (re)produced in the context of everyday activity (Devasahayam, 2001). Food culture as one of major components of culture exerted significant influence on dining behaviors (Chang, Kivela & Mak, 2010). Food plays a critical role in indicating the differences between cultures and social classes – the concept of differentiating ‘us’ from the ‘others’ (Bourdieu, 1984)

Apart from cultural factors, other social factors such as religious, economics and political factors also affect the way we consume our food. Despite all the initiatives, culture remains a complex subject to understand food choice behavior. Geographical perspective (place-based) also influences food choice and preference. A geographical perspective looks at the level of geographical accessibility in term of the proximity of a predefined area or other determinants. To a certain extent, we acquire a certain taste (or unique taste) through our exposure or repetitive behavior. For example, many Malaysians love food such as ‘budu’ or ‘belacan’ (fermented fish sauce and shrimp paste) which have an awful bad smell on the first encounter. The same goes for ‘durian’ a type of fruit which commonly found in South East Asia. Its odour (can be pungent or good depending on how you perceived it) can be detected from some distance away (it is banned in hotels, most public buildings, airplane, etc). We eat the food of this nature as an ‘acquired taste’ and we ‘acquire’ them through our parents and our surroundings (Chen & Yang, 2014).

Culture (particularly food) is not a static condition, and it responds dynamically to knowledge advancement, social and economic environment and/or ecological changes. As such when they no longer satisfy the demand, it will be modified or replaced by creating a positive environment for innovation. Malay food is typically recognized by its spiciness and as varied as the spices used. The Malays are said to be an easy-going, relaxed and warm people, and such characteristics can be identified in their culinary world. But what is “Malay” food? What are the “benchmarks” foods which are characteristically Malay? Does Malay cuisine affect in the process of modernization. When discussing the current state of Malay foods, the majority of peoples agreed that it is undergoing an identity ‘crisis’. It is believed that being in a multicultural country Malay over the years has adapted other ethnic dishes especially Chinese and Indian to cater the society growing taste buds.

Much has been said about Malay foods, but the criteria for any food to be classified as Malay foods remain obscure. A visit to any Malay restaurants or food stalls in Malaysia one will find all sort of foods. Many of these dishes are hardly Malay even in their name, for example, *tom yam*, *koay teow*, *biryani*, *yong tau foo* and *paceri*. There is no clear definition of Malay foods, and most of the food that has been portrayed as Malay foods is a hybrid version of Malay foods. In essence, Malay foods have lost much of its cultural characteristics. The Malays are now worried about their traditional and culinary heritage being negatively portrayed by the public at large. However, they want their food to be on par with the rest of world cuisine. They are looking for a proper combination of local and global elements.

It is said that Malay cuisine is weak in portraying its distinctive identity. According to Yoshino (2010), one of the reasons why Malay food failed to diffuse globally is due to its home-cooking, and the Malays themselves have not come up with any particular ways of presenting it to consumers as “ethnic cuisine” in a commercial setting. The apparent lacking a clear identity has created many problems to position the Malay food in the market especially the lucrative international market. Foods with ambiguous identities have trouble in maintaining its internal balance and projecting a positive image with vital stakeholders. According to Olmedo (2015), there is relative invisibility of Malay cuisine in the luxury hotel industry in Greater Kuala Lumpur. About this, he states that Malay cuisine is not portrayed by itself in a specific restaurant in Western five stars hotels. He argues there is never any Malay fine dining in Kuala Lumpur. Explicitly, he concluded that Malay cuisine has been relegated to a position of secondary importance and diluted among other Malaysian, Western and “oriental” delicacies on the buffet of the coffee house.

Fast foods operators like McDonald, KFC, Pizza Hut, A&W and even Thai foods were in Malaysia since the 1980s, and the younger generation has grown up with it. For them, burgers, fries, chicken nuggets, and tom yam, does not any longer represent ethnic cuisine and thus the different between what is local and what is foreign is very vague. This phenomenon facilitates the gradual loss of traditional food over time and is strengthen via mass media and popular culture. In this regard, Klein (2007) notes that youth are becoming increasingly “westernized” and care little about the correct methods. It is not wrong to say that the Malays too are more interested in superficial things such as the romantic ambiance of a Western restaurant or the social status associated with it.

There has been no comprehensive research on Malay foods, or their food beliefs and eating habits that have been done. According to Esterik (1992), the few studies conducted within Southeast Asia only centered on traditional food-related beliefs in rural population. In fact, little attention has been given to current changes in dietary patterns among the Malays especially with the current food trends and the overall global homogenization. The Malays, on the other hand, had begun adopting the western way of serving and food as they progressed. In looking for a distinctive identity for Malay

food many young Malay chefs have innovated, reinterpreted, rejuvenated, invented or reinvented, borrowed or exchanged food from other ethnic groups. This, however, has yet to produce the desired outcomes. It seems that this is not something new. For instance if we look at the Malay cuisine historically it can be concluded that the food has been profoundly shaped by centuries of interaction and trades. In a sense, it is true that cuisines are continually hybridizing processes rather than fixed things (Cwiertka, 2006). Having said that, the primary intention of this research is to focus on the innovation processes initiated by the Malay chefs especially which cuisine combinations were achieved and the social meanings that come with it.

2 The root of the Malay food.

If we wish to try to understand the Malay foods or any food production system and the food consumption patterns in which we intend to investigate, then a familiarity with certain historical themes is essential. The aim is, to begin with, or to provide that with a background. However, such background will be very brief as we cannot provide it in any detail since history itself is a vast subject in itself. The main intention is to identify some key ideas which will enhance our comprehension of the foundation of the Malay food ways, a foundation which by their very nature remain unexamined. We need to understand how our history has shaped their food patterns. Possible answers to these questions may be deduced from the old literatures on Malay food ways and by studying ancient Malay manuscripts and from the reports of the British Officers during the colonial days of the late eighteenth centuries.

It is essential to understand the basic characteristics of the Malay foods and their eating practices before we can embark into details of their food beliefs and eating habits. The basic elements that differentiate Malay foods from other national foods are the taste, the cooking technique and the lavish usage of coconut milk. Unfortunately, this is one of the reasons why Malay foods are being avoided. Malay foods have a unique blend of taste with the emphasis is on the balance of between hot, sweet and sour. The source of these taste is mainly derived from local herbs, spices, flowers, leaves, and fruits. A single dish always combines at least three or more of these tastes. Tamarind (dried slices or fruits), limes and vinegar provide its acidic properties, while lemon grass, *pandan*, galangal and turmeric leaves are used for its aromatic characteristics and chilies peppers and spices for its hot properties. Fresh herbs such as *daun kemangi* (local basil), *kunyit* (tumeric), *daun kesom* (polygonum leaves) and *bunga kantan* (ginger torch) are often used. Unlike Indian food Malay dishes are distinguished by the liberal use of coconut milk (*santan*). The combination of these spices, herbs and the coconut milk that gives Malay food its distinctive taste. However, the most important rule in Malay cooking is never pork and alcohol.

Rice forms the main staple of the Malay and this often taken with a variety of dishes. Daily meals are based on white rice while on a special occasion like wedding, *nasi minyak* which is rice cooked in ghee and spices is often served. The variety of dishes provide a

balanced diet in term of a combination of carbohydrate, vitamin, and protein. For example, for lunch or dinner would include rice, gravy, meat or fish dish, vegetables and condiments such as *ulam*, which is usually raw vegetables taken with *sambal belacan* (a hot chili salsa with shrimp paste). Table 1 below described the major food taste in Malay cuisine.

Table 1: The major food taste in Malay food basically derives from these sources:

Taste	Sources
Hotness	Chili, peppercorn
Sour	Vinegar, lime, tamarind and dried tamarind, star fruits, young mango
Sweet	White and brown sugar, honey, palm sugar
Oil	Palm oil, ghee, butter, coconut oil, corn oil
Salty	Soya sauce, oyster sauce, and Thai fish sauce
Thickening agent	Ground fried grated coconut(kerisik)
Spicy	Cummins, fenugreek, turmeric, cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, star anise and poppy seed.
Pungent	Shrimp paste

The most common method of cooking among the Malays are boiling, steaming, grilling and frying. The roasting method is limited to specific cake and desserts only. The preparation techniques include cutting, slicing, grinding, chopping and pounding. Table 2 shows the major cooking techniques and major dishes category in Malaysia.

Table 2: Major cooking techniques

Cooking techniques	Main Dishes
Boiling	Curry, masak lemak,
Stewing	Rendang,sambal tumis
Braising	Korma
Stir fry	Sayur tumis,
Grilling	Ikan panggang, ayam percik, satay
Deep Frying	Fried fish
Steaming	Steam fish
Smoking	Daging salai
Roasting	Ayam golek

Drawing upon the previous precedents, the research highlights the fact that Malay cuisine had distinctively developed its unique gastronomy through adoption,

technologies and the style of dish presentation. Table 3 below described the major food category in Malay cuisine.

Table 3: Major dishes category

Dishes	Category	Description
Sambal	Simmer	A mixture of chilli cooks with prawn paste, and onion. For fresh sambal (sambal belacan) no cooking involved. Sambal can act as a base (mother sauce) for many types of dishes (seafood and Chicken)
Gulai	Simmer	The term is used interchangeably with curry but generally refers to cooking in coconut milk with fresh herbs and spices
Rendang	stew	It is either chicken or beef stew in coconut milk, coconut paste, with chili, lemon grass, galangal and ginger
Nasi	boiling	It is either boiled rice or pilaf rice (rice cook in oil or ghee)
Sup	boiling	In general, Malay only serves clear soup or broth. The function of soup is to compliments the main courses but not as a separate dish.
Masak lemak	simmer	Meaning, cooking in coconut milk
Masak asam	boiling	Meaning, cooking with tamarind juice but without coconut milk.
Kari	simmer	Almost similar to Indian curry however coconut milk is used consistently in the Malay curry
Korma	stew	Almost similar to Indian Korma however with the generous use of coconut milk.

Specifically, there is no category to classify Malay food, unlike Thai food they have low cuisine which refers to ordinary cuisine and high cuisine which refers to the cuisine of the palace. In Thai cuisine the delicate and decorative dishes prepared for the king and royal family are known as *aahaan chaw wang*, whereas *aahaan chaw baan* are those foods that are easily prepared and cooked using local seasonal ingredients (Chulanee Thiantai, 2003). On the other hand, we categorize Malay food according to regional preferences, for example, most of the Kelantanese food have a strong Thai influence, and while Penang's food being influenced by the south Indian cuisine (refer to table 4).

Table 4: Regional Influence

Regional	Influence
Northern (Perlis, Kedah, Penang and northern Perak)	South Indian
Central (South of Perak, Selangor,)	Javanese
Central (Melaka, Negri Sembilan and North of Johor)	Minangkabau
South (Johor)	Javanese
East coast	Thailand

2.1 Theoretical perspectives: Diffusion of innovation

The concept of diffusion innovations which is the planned and spontaneous spread of ideas is the brainchild of Rogers (2003). According to Rogers, diffusion is defined as “the process by which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among members of a social system.” Rogers also postulates that innovation is “an idea, practice or object that is perceived as “new by an individual or another unit of adoption. The discussion of diffusion has reached a wide range of discipline ranging from management, economics, marketing, and sociology. In another word according to Chaudrie and Culkin (2013), “innovation processes term, it describes how new techniques or mode of organization (or can be) introduced progressively into practice, whether some of the sources of technique or mode is research or experience, in-house or out.”

The perspective of demand-pull and supply-push forces that involves the views and opinions of several stakeholders to form will be scrutinized. In another word, supply-push forces emerge from the production of innovative product or process, while demand pull forces occur because of the willingness of potential users to use the innovation.

3 Methodology

The medium to understand the nature of food innovation about Malay food and how it has shaped or been shaped by the pattern of food production and consumption will be the food of the established Malay restaurants, especially in Kuala Lumpur. Three Malays restaurant were used as research sites. These restaurants are more exposed to the contemporary process where a variety of foods which originated outside our society provides greater arrays of cooking style, different cuisine and the spreading of new consumption patterns. The primary purpose of this study was to investigate factors that contribute to innovation practices in the Malay restaurants. The second purpose of this

study was to investigate how these practices can influence the development of Malay food. With this goal in mind, this study was designed to develop a rich description of factors on innovation effort in Malay food development. To support the objectives and direction for this study, the following research questions will be used:

- i. What cuisine combinations were achieved and the social meanings that people made of the result. Which techniques and tastes were adopted, and which were rejected.
- ii. How did the Malay chefs arrive at these choices, were they made entirely by their concern over its vague identity, demands or were there non culinary issues at play, such as considerations of self-pride, social status, and cultural identity?

The research employed in-depth interview and Participant Observation as the principal means of gathering data. This methodology was used to examine the main factors uncovered in the restaurant as well as its potential to influence the Malay food industry. A qualitative methodology was selected for three reasons. First according to Creswell (2007) qualitative research is used to develop theories when partial or inadequate theories exist for certain population or samples. Thus a qualitative methodology can facilitate their discovery which is underrepresented in the literature. Creswell also postulates that qualitative research is used when we want to understand context and setting in which participants in a study address a problem or issue. Merriam (2009) states that qualitative research is suited when an understanding of the problem will result in the improvement of the practices.

To facilitate the research objectives, a qualitative method with case study aspect was employed to collect data. Specifically, a qualitative study with some multiple case study design was employed, and it is considered more compelling and robust than single case (Herriot and Firestones, 1983).

3.1 Data collection

The process involved both primary and secondary resources over a period of six months. Journals, historical text books, government official reports and web sites made up the secondary resources while the primary data emerged from the documentation, archival records, direct observation, physical artifacts, participation observation and in-depth interviews. According to Chaudrie and Caulkin (2013) by using both the secondary and primary data triangulation and a means of verifying and validating the data: thereby reducing bias that can rise from only one source of evidence was reduced. The research sites that have been selected for this study are three Malay restaurants in Kuala Lumpur. For confidentiality, the names of the restaurants have been replaced. These restaurants will be known as Restaurant Seri Hidang, Restaurant Ibu Pertiwi, and Restaurant Kembang Kencana respectively. These restaurants were chosen based on their innovative culinary activities. Three executive chefs and three sous chefs were selected

to be the informants. They were selected based on their roles and influence over decision making process and especially the influence of the decision to innovate.

4 The Findings

4.1 Case1: Restaurant Seri Hidang

Restaurant Seri Hidang which was located in the compound of a large Government-linked plantation company with the capacity of 250 seats. A mixture of Malay and western foods are served here. The restaurant serves their food most of the time buffet style. The idea is to have a mixture of both cuisines. The trick is to capture the Malay middle class group who are very fond of western food but still cannot be separated from the Malay foods. On closer examination, the Malay foods here are heavily influenced by the Thai foods, especially on the appetizers, for example, the *kerabu* (mixed salad). These dishes clearly showed the strong influence of Thai food particularly on the ratio of certain ingredient used in the dishes. In Malay cooking lime juice and bird, chilies are used very lightly compared to the Thais who used it generously. The Malays used grounded coconut paste in their *kerabu* while the Thai did not have that ingredient in their food. The vegetables used in the preparation of these dishes are prepared according to the Thai style of preparation. The Thai styles of cutting the vegetables are more standardized compared to the Malay who still preferred free-style of cutting.

On a similar note, most of the main dishes apart from curry and *masak lemak* (cook with coconut milk) look strikingly Thais. For example, "*siakap tiga rasa*" (which Thai style deep fried sea bass) has all the component of Thai food. The affair is not much different on the dessert counter; glutinous rice with mango, for example, is Thais. The same can said to "*kuih tako*" which mean "*tako Thai*."

The style of food presentation also showed it is moving towards the Thai foods, with it intricately carved fruits and vegetables, on most occasion Thai style plates and cutleries are used. On the other hand, most well-known Malay sweets are labeled as "*nyonya Kueh*" literally means the cakes of the *Nyonyas*. No alcoholic drinks are served in this restaurant.

4.2 Case 2: Restaurant Ibu Pertiwi

The restaurant is set in a colonial building and is very simple but elegant. The main food theme of this restaurant is the fusion of French food and Malay food. Chef of Ibu Pertiwi (the main informant) called this type of cooking as "neo-Malay" cuisine. It is a new concept in Malay culinary world. It is the practice of this restaurant to serve a plate of salmon mousse on top of crisp bread with tofu before their guests making their orders.

The range of appetizers served in this restaurant is not similar to any ordinary Malay appetizers. Dishes like grilled catfish and soft crab masala are served with pomegranate salad and a touch of red caviar. This is new in Malay cuisine. The way the food being

presented is exactly on the fine dining template, where foods are intricately prepared and arranged on a white porcelain plate. This is far from the usual way how Malay food is being served.

Some dishes involved a combination of exotic local fruits with well-known seafood items, for example, a dish of baked scallop is being served with a puree of “kedondong fruit.” This fruit (Jamaican plum) is never served that way in Malay cuisine. The restaurant also offered a dish of *foie gras* with “*ciku*” fruit (sapodilla) and kiwi dressing, an additional curry sauce which will be shaken in a cocktail shaker before being poured onto the dish. *Foie gras* is a foreign ingredient as far as Malay food is concerned.

On overall some dishes have the typical spicy level usually associated with Malay food while other dishes are milder allowing foreign guests who cannot take the spicy ingredients to enjoy the food. The restaurant, however, has only 12 main dishes, and most of these dishes are hardly similar to any ordinary Malay food. For example, grilled rack of lamb is served with mashed breadfruit flavored with local herbs. The dish is accompanied with papaya lime pickles and pink peppercorn gravy. The restaurant also has a comprehensive wine list.

4.3 Case 3: Restaurant Kembang Kencana

This restaurant was located in the vicinity of a five-star hotel in Kuala Lumpur. It is one of Malay restaurant claiming to be a “Malay fine dining” restaurant. The food served here features a creative presentation albeit a fused between Western and Malay flavors. The menu is divided into two sections where the first features traditional Malay dishes while the second section offered dishes that have been given modern fine dining touched. The traditional part offered common Malay food. However, the modern part offered dishes that are different from the normal Malay food fares. Dishes like pan fried *foie gras* and scallop served with avocado and flavored with morel and sweet chili sabayon. This is a combination of Western and Malay flavors where *foie gras* served the western element while a spicy Malay salad compliments it with the Malay element.

According to the Chef of Kembang Kencana, the differences in flavors and styles allowed him to “play and manipulate with” taste and styles. This was evident that such thought and effort are not limited to the blending of Western and Malay elements but also in food presentation. The manipulation of taste and presentation is featured in the dish like cream of red sweet potato served with local basil and black caviar. The only local flavor is from the local basil used in the soup while black caviar is not part of Malay gastronomy. Another invented dish is *singgang* broth (usually light seafood broth) that was served together with stuffed pomfret and Alaskan king crab on *karipoley* (curry leaves) noodles. It has the combination of chili, curry powder and turmeric.

Most of the dishes utilize top quality imported ingredients, for example, lobsters, beef tenderloin, Kobe beef and many imported seafood items. On the same note, some local exotic items like *ikan haruan* (snakehead fish) also being on the menu. The restaurant also has a comprehensive wine list to compliment the foods.

5 Discussion

There are many reasons why these chefs arrived at these choices. One prevalent problem with Malay food is the unclear concept and lack of customer appeal. As a result of these lackluster developments, these young and energetic chefs tried to find ways how these problems can be overcome. According to the Chef of Seri Hidang “Malay food only appear in casual dining of coffee houses in hotels, and its stop at that point, this situation, however, is not helping Malay food to develop into more sophisticated dining and taste.” The problem is further compounded when these coffeehouses have the propensity to offer homogenous offerings of hawkers and ordinary Malay food making it more difficult to identify its distinctive identity.

The need to innovate is echoed by the informant “we want our Malay food attractive to local and Westerners tastes and this way it will help to expand the concept to the rest of the world. To that, he added “Malay food has remained stagnant and has not achieved a very high standard even among the locals, in fact, is considered very ordinary. The decision to adopt a Western style of fine dining and food presentation because we want to say that Malay food is not just about hawker’s food”. The Chef stresses further “this style of cuisine provides space for creativity and presentation. Its ingredients, presentation, and ambience must be exceptional, but at the same time the taste must still be authentic Malay taste.” However, according to the informant, it is necessary to introduce some exotic, premium ingredients on the menu because in that way it can uplift the food to be on par with the well-known Western food. Items like cod fish, caviar, and even *foie gras* have been introduced into the menus. Nonetheless, the taste is still with Malay character. He concedes, “We aim to create dishes with a sense of nostalgic elements and to achieve this we make sure that we have the right combination of spices, herbs, and ingredients.”

Most Malay foods are found at hawker stalls, coffee shop or food kiosks which abound throughout Malaysia. The barriers that prevent it from becoming a fully fledged restaurant food are most probably due to its basically home food in nature. The food is considered too ordinary that it can be easily found in homes. In saying that it is a fact that hawker-style Malay food, on the one hand, is very good and the price is low. This is the best position Malay food has ever achieved. This problem is further compounded when the Malay food itself has been influenced by another ethnic’s food. This situation has led to one prevalent issue that is the concept of most Malay food available is unclear and does not have a good customer appeal. Because of that, Malay food has failed to portray itself distinctively in a specified restaurant, especially in five-star hotels. Malay food activists whether chefs or public at large has yet been able to produce food that has its own unique and distinctive identity. The fact is Malay food has been relegated to a position of secondary importance compared to another ethnic’s food.

The current situation in the Malaysian food service market has created a driving consumer market for high end Malay food; therefore, delving into a new style of food is essential to kick start the process. One possible approach to the problem of appealing

to potential consumers is to add other option to the menus. Restaurant Seri Hidang introduces a combination of Malay and Western food on their menus. In the menu of this establishment, both types of food are served in one buffet spread. The majority of dishes are Malay food while well-known Western dishes like pasta and roasted items filled the rest of the list. This type of menu specifically targeted the middle-class Malays. Another approach is to adopt fine dining food which is based on French nouvelle cuisine to upgrade the Malay foods.

Restaurant Ibu Pertiwi and Kembang Kencana adopted a new style of cooking, flavors, and ingredients, as well as dishes, preparing them in a fine dining context which based on nouvelle cuisine principles and ascribing them with meanings associated with Malay foods identity. This is in contrast with traditional or common daily Malay food identities. The food looks French, but the tastes are still with Malay foods characteristics. The menus of both restaurants are quite similar to differences along the lines of ingredients and presentation styles. Restaurant Kembang kencana focuses on more expensive ingredients like *foie gras*, caviar, and lobsters and also has a more elaborate menu emphasizing fusion cuisine of Malay, Thai, and French. This created exotic flavors especially those gourmet culinary industry ingredients which are known to attract foodies whether local or foreign. Here authenticity is defined from the flavor as the result of the use of local ingredients. Restaurant Ibu Pertiwi in contrast to Restaurant Kembang kencana is more focus on local dishes but with fine dining styles. What is presented as new Malay dishes in both of these restaurants is newly invented dishes. None of these dishes existed outside these restaurants.

6 Conclusion

By using participation observation, it is observed that the phenomenon of culinary innovation in the Malay gastronomic world is due to the poor reputation the food had. Fine dining has been chosen to be the basic principles of their innovation activities. Both the Malay fine dining restaurants in the study, i.e. Restaurant Kembang Kencana and Restaurant Ibu pertiwi are adopting Western culinary techniques in which foreign ingredients are used interchangeably with local ingredients. This invented dishes seemed like Malay dishes being prepared in the style of Western fine dining dishes. The authenticity of such dishes is questionable; it is not wrong to say that such dishes have been “stripped of its Malayness.” It is apparent that the emergence of Malay fine dining restaurants could be a strategy to create a new identity to compete with the more established existence of Thai, Western, Chinese and Japanese food in Malaysia. The way it is prepared, presented and served is derived from the Western fine dining techniques while the Malay elements look very superficial. In simpler words, the western fine dining criterion is being used to define the Malay fine dining. The availability of wine in both restaurant Kembang Kencana and Ibu Pertiwi can be controversial as wine has never been part of the Malays’ culture. The same thing can be said to Restaurant Seri Hidang,

although they are claiming to serve authentic Malay food on closer examination, most of the dishes are either Thai or Western dishes.

As the food looks too foreign (or too French) in comparing with the traditional Malay food, the vital stakeholders will be more confused in identifying the proper Malay food. It might be appropriate to make Malay food looks modern but not the sustainability of that food in the long run. The new identity, however, can be the future of Malay own “haute” cuisine while the ordinary Malay cuisine will remain as the Malay low cuisine.

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