

Eat Gourmet at Street Stalls in Southeast Asia's Foodie Capital

By Kirsten Raccuia

In a place like Penang, food is everything. That's why this little island off the coast of Malaysia is so often touted as a top foodie destination by big-name publications and news outlets. But, unlike many top foodie spots, it's not because of expensive Michelin-starred restaurants or celebrity chefs.

In Penang, eating is all about cheap local food stalls, many of which are actually pushed into place by a bicycle or a scooter. There are about 85,000 of them—on an island of about 700,000 people. That's roughly one food cart for every eight people. In comparison, my hometown of Chicago has only about 18,000 restaurants for 2.7-million people. And, unlike in Chicago, I can get a top-class meal in Penang for less than \$2.

My husband Mark and I didn't move here for the food. We came for the warm weather, ocean views, low costs, and the adventure. But the astounding range of tasty offerings has been a big plus. Just going down the street, I can sample 20 to 60 types of local food. And that's not counting Korean, Thai, Western, Japanese...

There's only one way to decipher this foodie island: Taste as much as you can. I started at the hawker stalls, where even the most expensive dish is less than \$5. With more than 30 different stalls to choose from, these can be a bit daunting. The key is to take your time and do the rounds, look at the posted menu or pictures, and see what's cooking. See what the locals are eating, and if it looks good, ask them what it is and where they got it. (In Penang this is the highest compliment.) Tell the cook what you'd like and where you'll be sitting. He will come find you when the food is ready, which is usually pretty quickly. Don't pay until you get the food and don't fill up on the first round.

Once I found out what I liked most, I hunted down restaurants or carts that specialize in that kind of food. These recipes have been passed down through generations. For instance, the Jalan Siam *char koay teow* cart makes over 500 plates of the same dish every day. They have it down to the last shrimp; it's a science.

Here are my own favorites:

First is *char koay teow*. This scrumptious Chinese rice-noodle dish is to Penang what pad thai is to Thailand: almost like a food group. It's a silky rice noodle, cooked

with soy sauce, chili, shrimp, chives, egg, and bean sprouts, plus my favorite addition of thinly-sliced Chinese dried sausage. It's all wok-fried in about two minutes to absolute perfection. Most traditional places cook over a charcoal flame. Nowadays, most people cook with propane, but when cooking is over charcoal the taste is always different, almost richer.

One of the best places to get it is a stand on the corner of Jalan Siam and Jalan Anson in George Town. There is no official name, so everyone just calls it "Jalan Siam *char koay teow*." It's open every day except Sunday, starts cooking as close to 3 p.m. as possible, and shuts when it runs out of noodles. The cook literally rides his bike-kitchen to the spot where he cooks.

Although the line may look small, that's deceiving, so be sure to get there early. When Mark and I first ate there, only four people were in front of us. I couldn't understand why we had to wait 45 minutes to get a plate of food that takes less than three minutes to make. Turns out, you can go across the street to the Hock Ban Hin Café and have a beer while you wait in comfort for your \$1.50 plate of noodles. Just pop by the street cart first, tell him how many orders you want, and let him know you'll be in the café waiting. It may not be the fastest delivery, but these banana leaf-covered plates of glossy noodles are certainly worth the wait.

If you're not up to waiting, the lesser-known but just as delightful Ah Soon Char Koay Teow, in the Tanjung Bungah neighborhood, is the place for you. About a 20-minute drive on the coast road north of George Town, it's a great place to stop for lunch on the way to the beaches of Batu Ferringhi. Ah Soon and his wife have been cooking there for almost 30 years and their kids are on hand to carry on the family business. They serve only two dishes, *koay teow th'ng* and *char koay teow*. It's part restaurant and part food stall: They cook outside the restaurant on a cart, but you order and eat inside. They even make their own Chinese dried sausage. For a dish of *char koay teow* here, you'll pay \$1.40.



"In Penang, eating is all about the food stalls."



The author contemplates a dish in the Red Garden night market, Penang Island, Malaysia.

of curry they first brought weren't enough, you can continue your curry spree for about \$3.50.

Down the street from Veloo Villas is Sri Anandan Bahwan. It actually has four locations and all have banana leaf, so pick one and pop in.

The third type of local food that you commonly find here is *nasi kandar*. It's an Indian-Muslim dish that traces its origins to 1930s Penang. "Nasi" means rice and "kandar" is the bamboo pole the baskets of delights were balanced on. Indians would carry this *kandar* on their shoulders from home to home, selling food to the locals.

My favorite spot is Line Clear, at 177 Jalan Penang. It's open 24 hours, is in an alley, and hasn't changed since it opened in 1930. The guys who run it wear sunglasses at midnight, blow whistles to keep the line moving, and just generally love to interact with people. You stand in line, but it moves quickly—and you get to watch them cook massive batches of curries and more, in banged-up metal vats big enough for an adult to climb into.

Everything is buffet style, so you just point. They spoon curry on your plate, one type overlapping the next until you can't tell one food from the next. Then they ask if you want gravy, which means at least four different curry sauces over everything. The locals call it *banjir*, which literally translates to "flood." I have no idea how they charge you, because each topping has a different price. Truthfully, I'm still learning what some of the dishes are. I point, they scoop, I eat. And every bit is delicious. Usually I can eat there for around \$6, but I never finish my plate.

To discover your own favorite spots: If you see a line of locals, stop and get in it. Even if you don't know what the house specialty is, by the time you get your food, you'll not only have a history of the cart, you'll also have some new friends who will positively tell you the one and only *best* place for *char koay teow* in Penang. ■

Next it's time for Indian food, specifically banana-leaf curry, which hails from southern India. With this dish you get a huge helping of rice and then about five different curries, ranging from pumpkin to okra and everything in between, all served on a huge banana leaf instead of a plate.

There are two great places for banana-leaf curry, both in George Town's Little-India section. Veloo Villas, at 22 Lebu Penang Street, has been around since 1959. A cab driver recommended it and he didn't steer me wrong. This place makes some serious curry. And they keep bringing you more to try, so if the five mountains

WHAT TO DO IN PENANG (APART FROM EAT)

For a small island, Penang really has it all: beaches and jungles, temples and mosques, architecture and history. It's full of surprises, and getting lost is the best way to find them. But if you don't feel like wandering, here are my top two things to do.

Nature. On the island's northwest tip is the Penang National Park. The biodiversity is very rich, even though it is the world's smallest national park, at just over 6,178 acres of jungle and wetlands. Hiking trails, a canopy walk, a meromictic lake (that is, the lake's layers of water don't mix), eight beaches, and over 1,000 species of flora and fauna are here to

enjoy. My favorite activity is a barbeque on Monkey Beach. Hike in and bring your own picnic to Monkey Beach, or go in style with Captain Heng. For \$25 a person, Captain Heng can pick you up on his boat at an arranged meeting point. He packs a huge feast with non-alcoholic drinks, and we always bring beer and wine. Just hop on board and disembark at the beach, where troops of local macaques wait to steal your satay. Captain Heng takes care of everything, so you can relax on your quiet, tropical beach and be pampered. To reach Captain Heng, call him at 012 499 5979.

The Arts: Walk over to George Town's

Cititel Hotel (66 Jalan Penang) and you'll see a line of colorful trishaws. These are three-wheeled bicycles with an enclosed or covered bench that fits two people. Each trishaw is lovingly decorated by its owner with everything from lights and bling to flowers and horns. For about \$10 per hour, your driver will pedal you to any sights you request. I love all the *al fresco* art. There are 3D-murals painted by Lithuanian artist Ernest Zacharevic, welded iron-work art that blends humor with the story of Penang's history, and countless other little spots that your trishaw pilot can bike you to. It's a great way to slow down and see George Town.