Belacan tale

Despite its pungent aroma, sambal belacan is hard to resist, as two members of a research team discover.

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Howard ironic that the much-loved sambal belacan, a zesty sauce of mashed fermented shrimp blocks pounded with fresh chilies, shallots and asam jawa or some lime juice, should also emit such an awful pong. But despite its distinctive smell, local foodies are united in their willingness to put up with the aroma in favour of the pleasures of the palate.

Agreeing wholeheartedly with them are Dr Sharin Karim, 36, and his colleague, Dr Norizan Adzahah, 31, members of a research team of four studying consumer perception towards what they term as Malaysia’s “mother sauce”.

“Many people have a love-hate thing with sambal belacan,” said Sharin. “While many grimace at the stink, everyone agrees that the versatility of sambal belacan is limitless. It can be eaten fresh as a dip with raw vegetables, used as a base for frying rice or cooking vegetable dishes; and added to desiccated coconut, it makes a delicious kerabu dressing.”

The team from the Faculty of Food Science and Technology in Universiti Putra Malaysia, Serdang, without a doubt, has many conundrums to share since the sambal belacan research project began in August last year. The team’s first job, revealed Sharin, was to sniff out producers of the fermented shrimp paste, the basic ingredient of the appetising sauce.

“When it began as a cottage industry, belacan used to have the characteristics of their areas of production. The ones from Melaka came in the shape of burger patties, while the Penang variety was sold either in block or powdered form.”

“In any case, small shrimp or ‘geragai’ is the main ingredient in its making. The yield is about 1kg of geragai for 10 patties,” said Sharin.

The origins of belacan, according to the lecturer, may date back to a few hundred years. Sharin said fishermen from the coastal areas used this as a method of preserving a valuable protein source when refrigeration was still unheard of.

According to Norizan, making belacan can be a viable home project too. It was, she said, a simple matter of mixing the shrimp with plenty of salt and praying for sunny days. The process of sunning and pounding the geragai is repeated several times while the fermentation process takes place.

Of course, the quality of the belacan depends on how meticulous the maker has been in monitoring the process and in the content of the shrimp. As with anything in this age of mass production, Sharin revealed some employed unscrupulous methods of production that could tarnish the belacan’s rich reek.

Some manufacturers resort to adding rice and sweet potato to give the belacan bulk. The more unscrupulous may even add nitrate (which is carcinogenic) to give the end product a smell like belacan.

Some academicians explain the reason behind the odourous character of the belacan. The fermentation process, which breaks down proteins into amino acids, releases thousands of volatile compounds and hence the smell which contributes to a unique odour,” explained Norizan.

But interestingly, the reason behind the detailed study of sambal belacan has more to do with cultural pride. If the West can be proud of their wines, cheeses and smoked salmon, we should do the same with our own fermented seafood product, they insisted.

Sadly, there is still a dearth of information with regards to the hallowed belacan, unlike cheese for example, which has a rich vault of history and tradition in its culinary archives. “Our aim is to preserve the reputation of belacan as our heritage, a sort of ‘last food’ from older times,” enthused Norizan.

It cannot be denied, say these academicians that belacan is a unifying factor as it has found favour with all the different races in Malaysia.

“It has become so inherent in local culture and lifestyle that even the Nyonya and Babas have coined the term ‘belacan sleeves’ in reference to a certain cut in their attire where the cuffs are done in certain way so that the diner will not accidentally dip them in the gravy while eating,” pointed out Sharin.

But while these well-intentioned researchers aim to place the belacan on a pedestal of elegance, time ingrained habits may take a while to change.

“While the culinary reputation of the belacan remains uncontested, it has picked up some negative social associations, perhaps due to its smell,” said Sharin.

“You hear people making remarks like ‘You smell like belacan’.”

Even I am guilty of the negative inference at times when I have chartered my students by saying that their assignments have a ‘belacan-like quality to them’, shrugged Karim.

Of course, there is hope that time will help reverse the negative connotations.

Still, the researchers assure us that it is nothing that anyone should worry about, except for the unresolved problems of splatter- ing chilli juice which has inadvertently made many eyes smart.

So, hand over the mortar and pestle, because we are all going to continue making our sambal belacan. Just don’t forget to wear goggles, okay.