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# Belacan tale

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

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**H**OW ironic that the much-loved *sambal belacan*, a zesty sauce of roasted fermented shrimp blocks pounded with fresh chillies, 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 put up with the aroma in favour of the pleasures of the palate.

Agreeing wholeheartedly with them are Dr Sharim Karim, 36, and his colleague, Dr Norizan Adzahan, 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 Sharim. "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 University Putra Malaysia, Serdang, undoubtedly, has many conundrums to share since the *sambal belacan* research project began in August last year.

The team's first job, revealed Sharim, 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 'geragau' is the main ingredient in its making. The yield is about 1kg of geragau for 10 patties," said Sharim.

The origins of *belacan*, according to the lecturer, may date back to a few hundred years. Sharim 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 geragau 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, Sharim revealed some employed unsavoury 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 pinkish tint," said Sharim.

And herein, these academicians explain lie the reason behind the odiferous 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 'fast food' from olden 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



**Cultural pride:** Dr Norizan Adzahan and Dr Sharim Karim are studying the public's perception towards *sambal belacan*. In the background is *belacan* in its various forms.

gravy while eating," pointed out Sharim.

But while these well-intentioned researchers may 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.

"You hear people making remarks like 'You smell like *belacan*'.

"Even I am guilty of the negative inference at times when I have chastised 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 splattering 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.