

## ikan pekasam

Hasanah Mohd Ghazali  
Muhammad Shahrin Abdul Karim

Fish is a wonderful bioresource, so versatile when it comes to transforming it into food. Fish can be eaten raw or cooked. Many cooking styles can be applied to fish. When thinly sliced, fresh raw salmon becomes sashimi, served with a variety of garnishes and sauces. Raw fish can be dried, dried and salted, pickled or fermented. Fermentation is an ancient art of preserving food. In Malaysia, when fish is fermented, two forms can be obtained: ikan pekasam and budu (fish sauce). The Malays, especially in the northern states of Malaysia, practise the making of 'ikan pekasam' by fermenting freshwater fish such tilapia (*Oreochromis mossambicus*), lampam jawa (*Puntius gonionotus*) and sepat (*Trichogaster trichopterus*), with ground roasted uncooked rice and salt for a minimum of two weeks. Natural microflora in

the mixture, typically lactic acid bacteria, acts on starch in the rice and converts it into lactic acid, a natural preservative. This changes the flavour, aroma and texture of the fish. Budu or fish sauce, on the other hand, is produced by fermenting small marine fish with salt until completion. Ikan pekasam is traditionally fried or roasted before eating it hot with freshly cooked rice and vegetable. An enterprising cook would garnish fried ikan pekasam with lightly fried slices of chilies and onion, and then drizzled with lemon/lime juice. People find the aroma of ikan pekasam being fried either able to whet their appetite or off-putting! Nowadays, one may come across ikan pekasam in 'gulai lemak kuning' and as 'sambal ikan pekasam'. One may also go a step further and smoke ikan pekasam to bring out unheard of flavours to connoisseurs.

