

Quintessentially Malaysian

Uncovering the history behind the unusual names of our favourite festive delicacies.

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HARI Raya Aidilfitri is here, so it's time for some ant nest biscuits, rattan fruits and crunchy snails.

Or how about some chicken scratch and cat's tongue cookies?

No, these are not apocalyptic pandemic-inspired Aidilfitri delicacies, but rather traditional goodies and festive favourites that often grace Hari Raya spreads – kuih sarang semut (ant nest biscuits) buah rotan (rattan fruits), kuih siput (crunchy snail snacks), cakar ayam (chicken scratch) and biskut lidah kucing (cat's tongue cookies).

As many have learnt from foraging the Ramadan e-bazaars this past month – unlike at the physical stalls, we can't just point at the goodies that catch our eye online without knowing their names – most of our local sweet treats and snacks come with interesting, if not unusual, monikers.

For the most part, our Raya delicacies are not as colourfully named as the more traditional kuih muih – with many carrying self-explanatory tags like the crowd favourite tat nanas (pineapple tart) or biskut Nestum (Nestum biscuit). Others are physical descriptions of the kuih, like kuih kapit (closed biscuit) or batang buruk (ugly stick) or biskut dam (checkerboard cookie). (See next page.)

But while there is not much documentation of the origins of Malay kuih, Shahrin Karim, a professor of Malaysian food heritage and culture at Universiti Putra Malaysia, says that with a little digging, there is a trove of information to be found.



London Almond

This modern kuih with an "international name" is a staple during Hari Raya.

Popularised some 20 to 30 years ago, the sweet crunchy confectionery is made with a whole roasted almond encased in a cookie mixture which is then dipped in chocolate and topped with more chopped almonds.

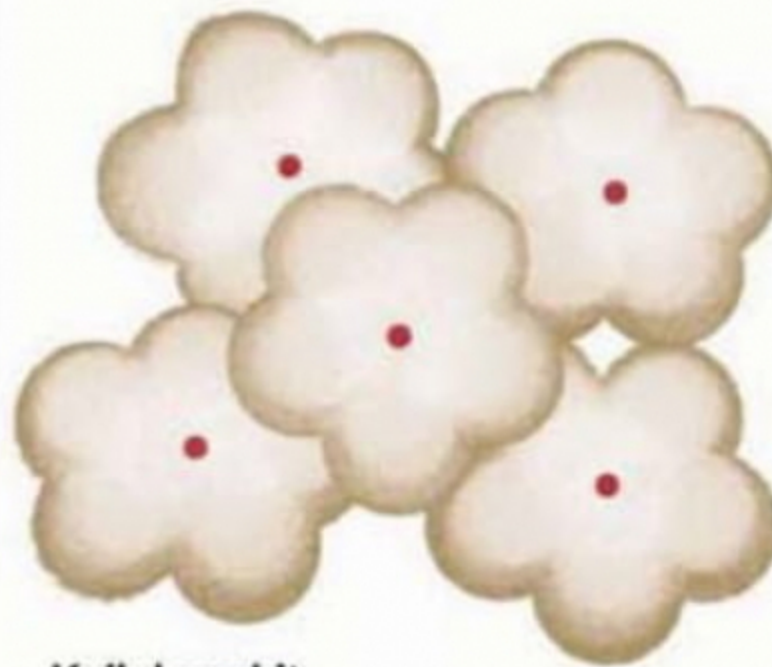
"It is called London because it is unlike other Malaysian kuih. The ingredients are more expensive, 'atas' (posh), and resemble something Western," Prof Shahrin says, while pointing out that Malaysia's history with Britain may also be a factor that led to the name.



Biskut makmur

Prosperity biscuit

This biscuit's history traces back to Arab roots. The name makmur (prosperity) may have been a misnomer from the Maamoul date cookies which are popular in the Middle East and were brought to Malaysia, says Prof Shahrin. However, the Malaysian version is a little different – instead of using dates and figs as fillings, biskuit makmur uses nuts, which are easier to find in this part of the world.



Kuih bangkit

Rising kuih

This tapioca flour-based kuih is a difficult one to make due to its exacting cooking techniques. Shahrin explains that the kuih is called as such because it expands and rises during the baking process to become brittle and can easily melt in the mouth. Kuih bangkit turns hard when baked incorrectly.



Kuih ros / Kuih goyang

Rose kuih / Shaken kuih

This crunchy snack is also known as kuih loyang, probably after the brass flower-shaped mould that is used. Goyang refers to the technique of making the kuih, where the batter-covered mould would be shaken gently in hot oil to get the batter to drop into the oil.



Bahulu

Bahulu is the South-East Asian version of a mini sponge cake or madeleines. Back in the day, it was made for special occasions like Hari Raya and Chinese New Year but due to its immense popularity, the bahulu can now be found throughout the year. According to one story, the name is a shortened version of "buah tangan dara hulu", or a gift from a young lady from upriver, which implies that the bahulu was commonly eaten in communities that lived alongside a river.



Biskut teratai layu di tasik madu

Wilted lotus on a honey lake biscuit

While we would like to imagine that the origin of this kuih was sparked by a kuih-maker delicately preparing dishes by the edge of a lotus-filled lake bathed in the evanescent light of a golden sunset ... this lyrical name was most likely inspired by the kuih's floral shape and a song of the same title by popular singer Fauziah Latiff in her 1993 album *Epilog Memori Gelita*.



Pulut tai-tai

Ladies Who Lunch glutinous rice

This Melaka kuih traces its origins back to the baba/nonyas and the Tengker Malay community who live in the state, says Prof Shahrin. The main component is pressed glutinous rice with blue colouring from the blue butterfly pea flower. "The nonya version is served with sweet kaya (sweet coconut jam) while the Malays in Tengker serve the dish, also known as pulut tetal, during Hari Raya with asam pedas or fresh prawns in coconut-pineapple gulai (curry)," he adds. It is likely that the pulut tai-tai received its name due to its popularity among the ladies who lunch set.

Check out the recipes at kuali.com.