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Take a Peek Inside Tracy Goh's Malaysian Pantry at Damansara

by Omar Mamoon — SEPTEMBER 15, 2023 9:09AM



Tracy Goh PHOTO: ARON PRIETT

born in Damansara Utama, Malaysia, **Tracy Goh** moved to San Francisco in 2012 to explore opportunities in digital marketing. She quickly ditched corporate life after her first year and followed her passion for food: “I was always thinking about food, and I always wanted to feed people, so I made the switch,” she says.

Goh started cooking foods she grew up eating at pop-ups throughout the city—at her apartment, restaurants, and private venues—basically anywhere with a kitchen. She did family-style, communal dining



(<https://mtgad.com/www/delivery/cl.php?bannerid=15095&zoneid=6&source=sourcevar&sig=6cfdc45bc17ad73cd795ca823e9ce86f789b1e7d663a97c4d744b7a279ba584c&oadest=http%3A%2F%2Fplateonline.com%2Fadvertisement%2F33747%2F34937%3FHardLead%3DFalse%26CompanyId%3D731%26url%3Dhttps%253A%252F%252Fplateonline.com%252Fregister%252Fuser-register.php%253Fdestination%253Dnode%253Fsrc%253Dctwebad>).

beautiful, vibrant dishes with layers of flavor and flair.

B where she'd serve massive, messy crab feasts and big brothy bowls of laksa.

In 2018, Goh joined **La Cocina**, a business incubator in San Francisco's Mission District that helps low-income, primarily immigrant women of color start their food businesses. She formalized her business, continued with pop-ups, and in October of 2022, opened her very first brick-and-mortar restaurant off of Church St. in Noe Valley, a place to call her own and a nod to her roots: **Damansara**. Goh's goal is to educate and put Malaysian food on the mainstream map. "Most people don't really think about it because there aren't many Malaysian restaurants around," says Goh. "I want the cuisine to be something people want to explore."

At Damansara, Goh achieves her goal through cooking with high-quality local produce combined with imported ingredients from Malaysia and beyond. Goh told us about five essential Malaysian ingredients she uses to create



Candlenuts, lemongrass, and beef rendang PHOTO: ARON PRUIETT

(<https://plateonline.com/recipes/beef-rendang-0>)

Candlenuts

Known as kukui nut in Hawaii, the candlenut has a very high fat content. They're slightly larger than macadamia nuts in size, and they should not be eaten raw, as the nuts are mildly toxic when uncooked. Instead, Goh blends them with water in a Vitamix to create a paste, which she uses as a rich thickener for stews such as her rendang ([recipe \(https://plateonline.com/recipes/beef-rendang-0\)](https://plateonline.com/recipes/beef-rendang-0)). "The flavor is pretty mild—it's like a nutty, unsalted butter flavor with the same amount of fat," says Goh. Goh imports most of her candlenuts from Indonesia but also sources some from Hawaii.

How to use it: To thicken curries, stews, or sauces when you don't want to use dairy or coconut milk but want a rich, buttery, nutty flavor

Torch Ginger Buds

Goh sources the bright pink torch ginger flower, also known as wild ginger, from a farm in Malaysia. She uses the buds, which she finely chops into slivers, for a salad garnish. "It has a citrus aroma without the sour flavor, and it's a little gingery without the heat," says Goh. Torch ginger buds complement acidic dishes, and the gingery flavor removes a bit of the fishiness and funkiness from fermented dishes. "It balances the strong fishy smell," says Goh, who also makes a spice paste with the chopped buds—along with shallots, galangal, turmeric, and lemongrass—used to brighten up her assam laksa.

How to use it: As a garnish on herby green salads, soups, or seafood



Torch ginger buds PHOTO: ARON PRUIETT

Belacan

A pungent paste of fermented dried shrimp, belacan comes in a compressed block that looks like a brown bar of soap and contains just two ingredients: shrimp and salt. Goh imports hers from Malaysia—she slices it thin and roasts it at 350°F for 20 minutes to remove moisture. This step also adds a smoky flavor and makes the product more shelf-stable. It then gets ground with an electric spice grinder into a coarse powder and incorporated into virtually every dish on the menu. “It’s like a super-concentrated fish sauce,” says Goh. “It gives the umami base for lots of recipes.”

How to use it: Like salt in seafood dishes or sauces



Kaya coconut jam made from pandan leaves PHOTO: ARON PRIUETT

(<https://plateonline.com/recipes/kaya>)

Pandan Leaf

Goh gets aromatic pandan leaves from farms in the Bay Area, and she uses them in both sweet and savory dishes. Mostly, Goh uses pandan leaves with rice: she bunches up a bunch of leaves, ties them together, and cooks them with rice to add a wonderful aroma. “It smells sweet with a hint of grassiness,” says Goh. The leaves can be juiced and added to desserts to impart that unmistakably bright green color. Goh also adds the juice from the leaves to make kaya coconut jam ([recipe \(https://plateonline.com/recipes/kaya\)](https://plateonline.com/recipes/kaya)) to spread on toast, plain crackers, or sticky rice for a quick snack.

How to use it: In bitters or syrups for cocktails

Tamarind

Tamarind fruit is commonly used in cuisines throughout the world. Goh gets the fruit pods whole and semi-dry, which she reconstitutes with water, blends, and runs through a fine-mesh strainer. Since it’s rich in pectin, the resulting liquid is viscous and syrupy. Goh adds the sour liquid concentrate to many dishes, including the assam laksa, chile crab sauce, and sambal. “The acid balances the seasoning and flavors,” says Goh.

How to use it: As a citrus juice substitute in recipes that call for lemon or lime

Omar Mamoon is a San Francisco-based food and drink writer.

COMMENTS