

Stick to tradition, please

Candlenut has some inspired dishes, but its best Peranakan offering is the babi pongteh

Restaurant Review

Wong Ah Yoke
 Food Critic



It is not surprising that Candlenut chef-owner Malcolm Lee is becoming a poster boy for rising Singapore chefs. After all, he ticks all the right boxes: Young and photogenic, he is also dedicated to updating Peranakan cuisine.

A business management graduate from Singapore Management University, the 29-year-old is also an alumnus of local culinary school At-Sunrice Global-Chef Academy. But unlike many of his peers, who have gone on to work in Western kitchens, he decided to focus on the cuisine of his Peranakan mother.

He opened Candlenut Kitchen in a small shophouse in Neil Road in 2010, but closed it last year. Now he is back with Candlenut in bigger premises at Dorsett Residences in New Bridge Road, which opened on July 1.

I visited the Neil Road eatery when it first opened and was unimpressed with the limp versions of Peranakan dishes I ate. They lacked the full, rounded flavours that characterise the cuisine, a hybrid of Chinese and Malay cooking.

The food at the new eatery, where I have dined twice, leaves a better impression, but I am not convinced that Lee is the future of Peranakan cooking. I left both times with mixed feelings. There are some dishes that he does well and others that I will not order again.

The babi pongteh (\$14) is one dish done very well. Chunks of pork belly are simmered to perfect tenderness with soft, moist meat and fat that melts in the mouth. The gravy is thick, with flavours of fermented soya bean paste, soya sauce and spices. I ordered the dish on both visits and it was perfect each time.

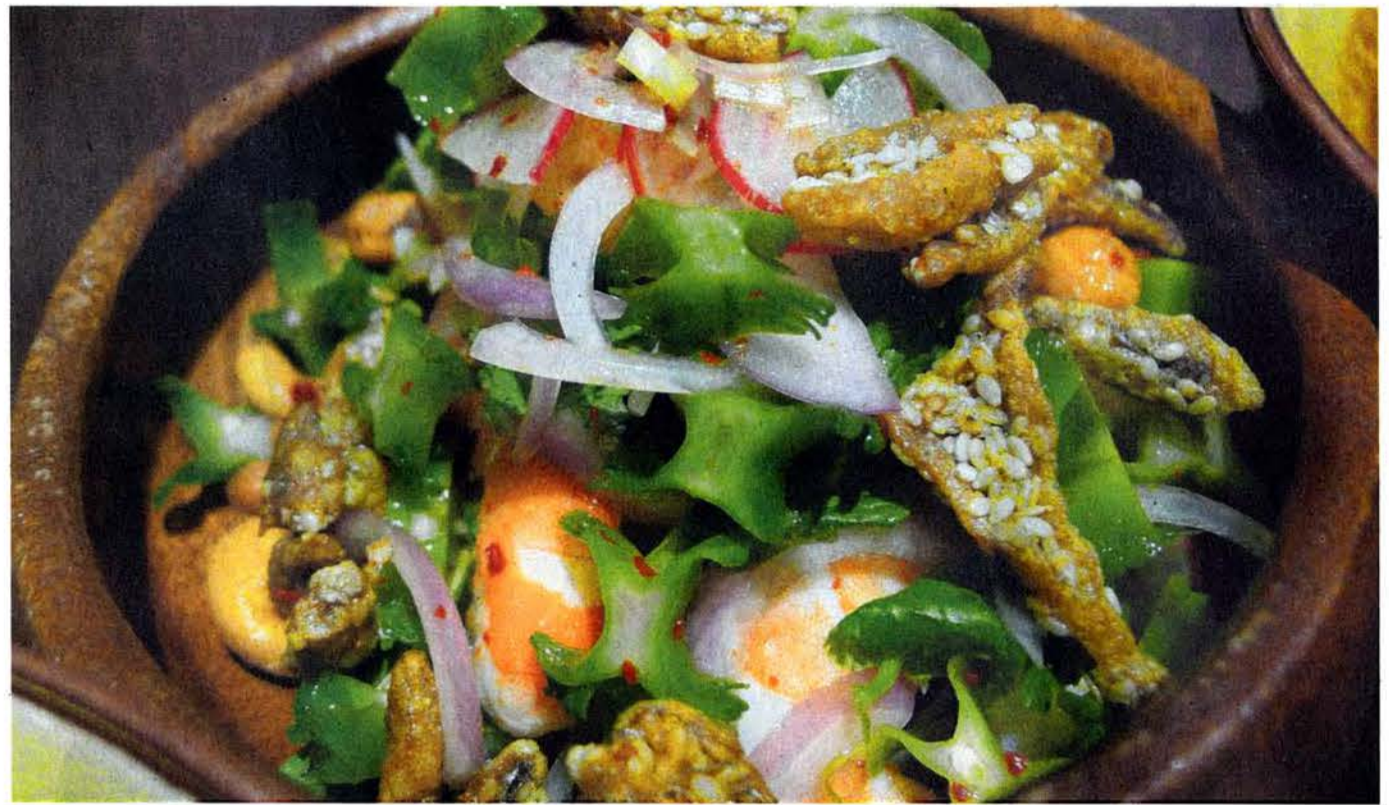
On the other end of the pendulum is the ayam buah keluak (\$16), which is done all wrong.

The traditional recipe calls for the pieces of chicken to be simmered in a rich, spicy gravy thickened with buah keluak, a nut with an inky, strong-tasting kernel that gives the dish its characteristic flavour.

Lee's recipe is, however, distinctly different. The dish tastes as if the gravy and chicken are cooked separately, then stirred together briefly before being served. So while the chicken meat is nicely smooth and firm, it has no taste of buah keluak. The gravy, which feels watered down, gets no flavour from the chicken either.

The Nonyas had a reason for their time-consuming method of cooking the dish. Simmered together over a low fire, meat and gravy form a close relationship that binds them together. Here, they hardly have time to get acquainted.

Buah keluak is also cooked with beef short rib (\$24) here in a similar short-cut method. But in this case, the meat seems to have been cooked longer in the gravy,



which is not only thicker, but also tastier.

Lee's new ideas are not all without merit though. An original dish, sambal goreng mushrooms (\$14), is rather inspired.

The sambal, which is authentically fiery, is traditionally used to fry vegetables such as ladies' fingers – also available here at \$10 – but goes very well with the assorted mushrooms too. The pieces of enoki and oyster mushrooms soak up the spicy flavours. They also retain a nice crunch despite being well-cooked and are better than the slightly undercooked ladies' fingers.

My reaction to the other dishes ranges from indifference to mild interest. The Mum's curry (\$14) is obviously cooked the same way as the ayam buah keluak, and the bright yellow curry itself tastes predominantly of turmeric and coconut milk.

The winged bean salad (\$12) is too tart and feels one-dimensional, while the sambal sotong (\$14) has so little character that I can't make out any dominant flavour.

The chap chye (\$12) and ngoh hiang (\$8) are decent but I've had better. The same can be said of the chendol cream (\$7), a dessert comprising a layer of coconut custard topped with gula melaka and chendol jelly.

So I'm not nuts over Candlenut. One might feel obliged to encourage a young man who is passionate about his culinary heritage and trying to update it with modern techniques. But the reality is, sometimes the old ways are better.

✉ ahyoke@sph.com.sg

SundayLife! paid for its meals at the eateries reviewed here.



Winged bean salad (above) and babi pongteh (left) from Candlenut.

ST PHOTOS: WONG AH YOKE

CANDLENUT

331 New Bridge Road, 01-03
 Dorsett Residences,
 tel: 8121-4107

Open: Noon to 2.30pm (Mondays to Fridays), 6 to 10pm (Mondays to Saturdays).

Closed on Sundays and public holidays

Food: ★★☆☆

Service: ★★☆☆

Ambience: ★★☆☆

Price: Budget from \$40 a person

