

# Hunting down hearty assam laksa in Penang



Cooking instructor Samuel Tham (above) demonstrating how to warm laksa noodles as you serve the soup. His version of assam laksa (left), with ingredients such as lemongrass, galangal, turmeric, ginger and sardines, may not be on the Bib Gourmand list, but can easily rival the dish served elsewhere in Penang. PHOTOS: DEBORAH L. JACOBS

Malaysia's first Michelin Guide, released in 2023, elevated the dish to celebrity status, but the writer's favourite find is one that is under the radar

Deborah L. Jacobs

PENANG – When Malaysia's first Michelin Guide was released in 2023, it elevated street food to celebrity status. The dish that has received the most love from culinary critics is assam laksa.

The tangy fish-based brew, which combines sweet, sour, spicy and umami flavours, is a Penang speciality. It starts with a hearty broth made with a strong-tasting, oily and affordable fish, usually either mackerel or sardine. Tamarind and prawn paste create layers of flavours.

Garnishes introduce textures: Crunchy cucumber, slivers of red onion and torch ginger flowers flirt with pineapple chunks, as fresh mint and sliced lettuce swoon in the bubbling brew. All this clings to slithery, thick rice noodles.

It is a hearty meal, especially when accompanied by the vegetarian spring rolls that some places sell for dunking into the soup.

Having consumed what might amount to litres of laksa over multiple trips to Malaysia, I am eager to sample the Michelin choices.

The rating system applied to this traditional street food is not stars, but a Bib Gourmand, which the French tyre company behind the world-famous food guide defines as good value for money.

Indeed, assam laksa usually costs between RM6 (S\$1.70) and RM8, depending on the size of the bowl.

During our recent visit to Penang in February, my husband and I try assam laksa from six joints.

These include all three anointed by Michelin. Two appeared in the 2023 guide and retained their bibs in the 2024 edition. The third is new to the list in 2024. It has yet to be published, but designees have already been announced.

Other recommendations come from taxi drivers, the Penang Foodie Group on Facebook and Penangites whom we meet in various contexts.

These are my findings from four notable stalls.

At Wan Dao Tou Assam Laksa, the thick broth with fresh laksa noodles is not tangy enough for my taste.

Situated in a tiny foodcourt, this self-serve stall displays the Michelin Bib – first awarded in 2023 – on its awning. But it skimps on the condiments and is the only place we visit that serves the soup in a paper bowl.

I wonder whether there have been cost reductions since the Michelin inspectors visited.

I have the same reaction at Penang Road Famous Laksa, a once popular stall that gives the impression of being hardened by the notoriety Michelin first be-



Madam Leong Foong Mei and Mr Evans Cheah (both above) of family-owned My Own Cafe. Its laksa (above right), made with mackerel, has plenty of fruity overtones and a pleasant burn.

stowed on it in 2023.

Its laksa, made with sardines, tastes like pineapple juice. Maybe the artful plating, perfectly mirroring the poster outside, appealed to the inspectors. Still, it is a narrow, dark and cramped place that does not make me want to linger. It would have been okay if the laksa is outstanding, but it is not.

Vendors like to say their laksa recipe is an old family formula, but the new addition to the 2024 Michelin laksa line-up does not pretend that is the case.

The family trio that started My Own Cafe in 2013 developed the recipe from scratch and have adapted it based on customer feedback, says co-founder Evans Cheah.

When we arrive just as the restaurant is opening, his mother Leong Foong Mei is sitting at a wooden table chopping torch ginger flowers.

It is like stepping into someone's kitchen – in this case, an old clan house that the family rents near the clan jetties in the historic city of George Town.

The small restaurant, with painted tile floors and whirling ceiling fans, evokes the heritage of old Penang. One wall includes a mural by popular street artist Louis Gan, featuring the family patriarch, Mr Cheah Teong Hin.

The laksa, made with mackerel, has plenty of fruity overtones and a pleasant burn.

The owners learnt about the accolade when a friend texted them, "congrats". They have no idea when the inspector might have visited.

By then, conversations about what makes the perfect laksa have begun to sound a bit like Goldilocks: not too thick, not too thin, not too sweet, not too sour.

In Penang, where it sometimes seems like everyone is a self-appointed food critic, gossip swirls around the savoury soup.

Without doubt, Penang's most famous stall is Pasar Air Itam

Laksa, started in 1955 outside the wet market in Air Itam – now one of the most densely populated areas on the island.

Dana Ng pays homage to it in her whimsical pop-art mural on a wall outside DeView Hotel, around the corner from the market. Completed in 2021, it has a crying fish and a screaming chilli tangled in the noodles.

The business that inspired the mural is now colloquially known as "Anthony Bourdain Laksa" – the late American chef and author visited there in a 2012 episode for his travel show No Reservations (2005 to 2012) and rhapsodised about the soup.

But in recent years, as the older generation retired, there was no heir apparent prepared to take over.

Right now, a sign at the empty space indicates that it is "temporarily closed until further notice".

Ms Jacqueline Wong, a wedding planner who grew up eating that laksa, says its broth is unparalleled, with "an intensely fishy taste, like drain water" – this being a positive attribute.

Its thickness and funk, she assumes, comes from blending all parts of the fish together. And, unlike other renditions, it has no pineapple. For this reason, some connoisseurs say it lacks soul.

One such detractor is Ms Wong's husband Samuel Tham, a former chef who now conducts cooking lessons. He so strenuously objects to that laksa's strong smell that he has declined his wife's request to replicate it.

The version we prepare in his class incorporates fresh ingredients such as lemongrass, galangal, turmeric and ginger, which we buy together during an early-morning visit to the Air Itam wet market. For the fish, we use sardines, carefully cleaning them and removing the meat from the bones, under his watchful eye.

The final product rivals any that we have eaten at street stalls and



Wan Dao Tou Assam Laksa (above left) prominently displays its Michelin Bib on a banner. It serves the laksa soup in a paper bowl (right).

## WHERE TO GO

### WAN DAO TOU ASSAM LAKSA

WHERE 1 Jalan Gottlieb, George Town; open: 11am to 5.15pm, closed on Mondays

### MY OWN CAFE

WHERE 2 Lebuhr Cannon, George Town; open: 10am to 4pm, closed on Wednesdays

### PENANG ROAD FAMOUS LAKSA

WHERE 5-7 Lebuhr Keng Kwee, George Town; open: 9am to 5.30pm, closed on Wednesdays

### KIM LAKSA BALIK PULAU

WHERE 67 Main Road, Balik Pulau; open: 9.30am to 5pm, closed on Mondays and Tuesdays

Mr Tham's artful garnish arrangement surely would have impressed the Michelin inspectors.

Our private lesson, where we make three dishes, lasts about five hours, including pickup at our hotel and a market visit to buy ingredients. It costs RM660. Go to [cookingwithchefsamuel.com](http://cookingwithchefsamuel.com)

One advantage of preparing the soup yourself is that there are no mysteries about what goes into the pot.

Ms Wong postulates that the barely discernible black and white dots in the soup she finds so "heavenly" are bits of fish eyes and bones. A taxi driver warns us about stands that cut costs by adding fish powder – an ingredient in animal feed.

Still, it is much easier to order assam laksa at a well-chosen stall than to make it yourself.

Towards the end of our two weeks in Penang, we return to the laksa stand that remains our gold standard: Kim Laksa. It is not in George Town, where most tourists focus their activities, but in Balik Pulau, a township about a 45-minute taxi ride away, in southwest Penang.

My mouth puckers in anticipation as I watch the vendor fill our order the traditional way: ladling the hot soup over the noodles and garnish, then pouring out the liquid, and repeating the process until everything is warm.

The laksa is as we remember it – the perfect balance of fishy, tangy and spicy notes. We leave with our bellies full and our lips burning slightly from the chilli.

In Michelin parlance, it is worth the journey. Part of me hopes the anonymous inspectors never make the trip.

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