



Malaysian Chicken Satay

Satay Ayam

Fanning the glowing fire as he flipped skewers of golden-hued meat, increasing their alluring char, Lajis grudgingly revealed a secret to me: for special customers he adds ground-roasted peanuts to the marinade. At his hawker stalls in Kuala Lumpur, his cooks grill and serve mountains of this bamboo-borne snack, and pile them onto tables for guests to help themselves. At the end of the snack, customers simply count the number of skewers and pay accordingly: not too long ago they were ten cents a stick (peanut sauce, cucumbers and red onions included).

Here are a few more insider tips from the hawkers: Firstly, make a lemongrass basting brush. The woody tops of lemongrass stalks fray into fibrous bristles when pounded with the handle of a knife, creating a brush. Use this to apply juices and marinade to the meat as it grills. Soaking the skewers may not completely prevent them from burning on the grill but it sure slows them down. To really prevent burning, arrange the skewers so that their exposed ends hang off the edge of the grill. Make sure to push the coals to the edges of grill (pg. 111).

When Malaysians eat satay, they use their spent skewers to spear crisp cucumbers and onions and dip them in peanut sauce. They nosh, alternating between the spicy charred meat and the refreshing vegetables.

Makes 30 skewers

- 2 stalks Lemongrass, trimmed and sliced very thin, about 1/16 inch (.1 cm.)
- 4 cloves Garlic, roughly chopped
- 1 Tbsp. Finely grated galangal
- 1/2 cup Granulated sugar
- 2 tsp. Kosher salt
- 2 tsp. Ground turmeric
- 2 Tbsp. Ground, peanuts, roasted in dry pan (pg. 109) or ground fried peanuts
- 2 lb. (914 grams) Chicken thighs, boneless, fat on, skin-off, cut in 1/2 to 3/4-inch (1.3 to 2 cm.) squares
- 30 each Bamboo skewers, about 10 inches (25.4 cm.) long, soaked in warm water 1 hour
- 2 medium Cucumber, Kirby variety preferred, bite size pieces, about 1 inch
- 1/2 small Red onion, small bite size pieces, about 1/2 inch (1.3 cm.)
- 1 recipe Compressed rice cakes (*ketupat*), (optional) (pg. 312)
- 1 recipe Malaysian peanut sauce (*sos kacang*), (pg. 313)

1. Make the marinade: In a blender, puree lemongrass, garlic, galangal, and as much water as is necessary to facilitate blending, until it becomes a smooth marinade. Transfer to a bowl; add sugar, salt, turmeric, and peanuts. Pour marinade over chicken. Massage thoroughly (you may wish to use gloves or tongs, since the marinade will stain your fingers). Marinate covered in the refrigerator for 24 hours.

2. Skewer the satay: Pierce the marinated chicken onto skewers, aiming for the center of meat so that it lays flat on skewers. Arrange three to five pieces onto each skewer, leaving space at the blunt end of the skewer for handling.

3. Make the accompaniments: Wash cucumbers, trim off ends. Cut 1/2-inch chunks on varying angles to create odd bite-size wedges. Trim off the ends of the onions, cut into 1/2-inch (1.3 cm.) dice. Arrange on plate with compressed rice cakes.

4. Grill the satays: Grill over glowing coals or in a grill pan, turning often, until they are cooked through and the marinade has caramelized.

5. Serve with peanut sauce, compressed rice cakes, cucumbers and red onions.



Intense fire chars the outer edges of the satay creating an unparalleled flavor.

How and Why

1. Marinate overnight for the maximum flavor penetration and tenderness. The sugar and salt tenderize the meat and hold in the moisture when grilling it (a quick curing process).

2. Aim for the center of meat so that it lays flat on the skewer. This way more surface area is exposed, promoting even cooking.



Pressed Rice Cakes

Ketupat

Jn Singapore and Malaysia, artisan cooks weave the palm fronds into small pouches for this dish. The pouch is with raw rice, pulled closed, and then boiled until the rice expands and compresses inside to form a tight cake. The cakes are cooled, cut into bite-size pieces, and eaten with satays and other flavorful dishes. I've created a more practical method for preparing the rice cakes, using standard baking pans. This is very authentic, albeit non-traditional. Many Malaysian cooks now prepare it this same way!

Makes 25 pieces

1 cup Long grain rice, such as jasmine
1½ cups Water

1. Prepare the pans: Lightly grease an 8-inch × 8-inch × 2-inch baking pan (20 cm. × 20 cm. × 5 cm.) Line with plastic wrap, allowing a 4-inch (10 cm.) overhang on all sides. Have ready a second pan that stacks neatly into the lined baking pan (this will be used to weight down the rice).

2. Cook and mold the rice: Cook rice in covered pot or rice cooker using standard absorption method (pg. 106). After resting for 10 minutes, when cooking is complete, remove from heat and stir rice for 10 seconds slightly mashing some of the grains so they stick together after pressing.

3. Transfer rice into the prepared pan; spread into an even layer. Fold the overhanging plastic wrap over the rice, and then cover with an additional sheet. Top the rice with another pan, so that its surface is completely pressed by the bottom of the inserted pan. Weight the top pan down with a 4-pound weight (½ gallon of water (1.9 L.) or even a selection of canned goods). Set aside at room temperature for 1 hour, until rice is firmly set.

4. Unmold, cut and serve: Remove weight, remove top sheet of plastic and grip overhang of plastic wrap from bottom layer, pull up to remove rice from pan. Transfer to cutting board, remove all plastic wrap, and use a wet knife to cut into ¾-inch (2 cm.) cubes. Arrange on a platter with cucumbers, red onions, and peanut sauce for dipping. When serving with satay, it's traditional to spear the rice and vegetables with aid of the spent satay skewers.

How and Why

1. Spraying or wiping pan with oil first helps the plastic wrap adhere. The oil acts like an adhesive making the plastic stick, I find I use this same technique for lining pans with parchment paper or plastic wrap.

2. Giving the rice a brief stir after cooking ensures that the cakes hold together. The slightly mashed grains act as a sort of glue.



Spicy Peanut Sauce

Sos Kacang

This is one of the first authentic Malaysian sauces I learned, It was back in the late 1980s and my then-Malaysian-food-guru, Mr. Lajis, had come to my mother-in-laws house to show me some of the secrets that made his six street food stands in Kuala Lumpur such booming successes. This sauce can be served after it's simmered only an hour, but full flavor is achieved only after a slow cook of several hours. Add small splashes of water as it simmers to maintain a medium-thick consistency. The flavorful oil that the spice paste was fried in will eventually rise to the surface, resist your temptation to skim this off. The oil is very flavorful and is not discarded.

Makes 3 cups

- 1/2 cup (1/2 oz. / 14 g.) Dried red hot chilies, stems and seeds removed
- 1 tsp. Dried shrimp
- 1/2 cup Vegetable oil
- 2 medium Shallots, roughly chopped
- 2 stalks Lemongrass, trimmed and sliced very thin, about 1/16 inch (.1 cm.)
- 2 tsp. Finely grated galangal
- 2 cloves Garlic, roughly chopped
- 1 1/2 cups Peanuts, roasted in dry pan (pg. 109) or deep-fried, ground finely
- 3 cups Water
- 3/4 cup Granulated sugar
- 2 tsp. Kosher salt

1. Cover chilies and shrimp with 1 cup room temperature water; soak 30 minutes. Drain well.
2. Make a semi-smooth spice paste (*rempah*) (pg. 105) by pureeing the oil, shallots, garlic, lemongrass, galangal, drained dried shrimp, and chilies in a blender.
3. Heat a 2-quart saucepan over medium heat. Add pureed rempah; cook on medium heat until mixture is fragrant and oil begins to separate out from it, about 5 to 10 minutes.
4. Add water and peanuts; stir well. Bring back to a boil, lower heat, and simmer 1 hour, stirring often. Add sugar and salt. Continue to simmer until "raw" flavor has dissipated, up to 2 hours, adding water as needed to compensate for evaporation.

How and Why

Oil will rise to the top of this sauce. Do not discard this oil. The oil is packed with flavor and it is traditional to have some oil floating on top.



Notice the difference in appearance between the pan-roasted nuts (top) and the deep-fried nuts (left). Look at page 109 for more details on strategies for maximizing flavor.