



# Zingiberales in Traditional Malay Cooking

By Norasiah Jamil, Contributor

The Malay Archipelago is a huge area with over 20,000 islands which covers the countries between Indochina (Southeast Asia) and Australia. In addition to Malaysia, other countries are Indone-



Malaysia, with Thailand to the north and Indonesia to the south and west.

sia, the Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, East Timor, and Papua New Guinea. Plants of the Zingiberales order, like bananas and gingers, have long been planted as ornamental plants in the backyard and also used in the traditional cooking.

The three main edible Zingiberales are the commonly known edible ginger (*Zingiber officinale* or *halia* in Malay), turmeric (*Curcuma domestica* or *kunyit*), and cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum* or *buah pelaga*). In addition to these, over

20 other gingers are used as vegetables, spices, or medicines, from the genera *Alpinia*, *Amomum*, *Elettariopsis*, *Etlingera*, *Hedychium*, and *Kaempferia*.

Banana leaves are commonly used, as are the aromatic leaves of turmeric, to wrap grilled fish to prevent too much heat being applied to the fish and burning it. Banana leaves are also used in making traditional Malay cakes called *lepat*. *Lepat* comes from the word *lipat*, meaning “to fold”. *Lepat* are made of a mixture of crushed banana, rice flour, thick coconut milk, and sugar, which is wrapped with banana leaves and both ends are folded to prevent leakage of the mixture. Then these will be steamed for one hour and served hot or cold.



The author (in the black shirt) with friends collecting plants in a Selangor rainforest.

## Inside this issue:

Zingiberales in Traditional Malay Cooking	1
President's Corner	4

## Dates to Remember

- HSPR Meeting, 10:00 am, Sunday, March 9, 2008. Farm of Annette and Héctor Méndez-Caratini, Barranquitas, PR.
- Heliconia Society International Conference, June 22-27, 2008, Iquitos, Peru.

## Zingiberales in Traditional Malay Cooking (continued)



**Kunyit or turmeric (*Curcuma domestica*) inflorescence**

Torch ginger (*Etlingera elatior*), known as *bunga kantan* in Malay, has an aromatic edible flower that is much used in Malay cooking. The bud is harvested when it is still tightly closed, and they are stored in water on the counter, just like

cut flowers. They last 1-2 weeks, and can

even be frozen until needed. Only about 6 inches of the tip is used, and is typically sliced thinly for cooking. The flower can be sliced thinly and added to fried rice or cut into halves or quarters and added to the gravy of dishes known as *asam pedas*. *Asam* means “sour”, and refers to sour fruits, especially tamarind, that are used to give foods a sour taste. *Asam pedas* is a spicy and sour fish and vegetable stew.

In northern Malaysia, close to the Thailand border, a special delicacy called *gulai batang pisang*, or banana stem curry, is prepared for wedding feasts. Banana stem curry is common in villages, but is almost unknown in restaurants or urban areas. This practice began during the Japanese occupation when people were hiding in the jungle and had to survive on jungle foods. The banana which is used, called *pokok pisang hutan*, is a wild, seedy banana that is not used for its fruit because it is very seedy. This wild banana is chosen because most of other banana stems are bitter. It is also not planted, but self seeds and grows readily in cleared garden patches and other disturbed areas.

The outer layers of the pseudostem of the banana plant have to be peeled away until the soft, white



**Kunyit or turmeric (*Curcuma domestica*) rhizomes in the market**

inner core is reached. It is important to use only



**Buah pelaga or cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*)**

young pseudostems that have a tender core. The stems are cut into 5 cm (2 inch) pieces and are cooked until tender. If meat is added, it is boiled until half done before the banana stems are added.

**Norasiah is an electrical engineer and plant enthusiast in Kuantan, Pahang, Malaysia, with a passion for heliconias, Plumerias and tropical fruits. She owns a tropical plant nursery and has an Ebay Store called ExoticMatahari. She can be contacted at: [exoticmatahari@yahoo.com](mailto:exoticmatahari@yahoo.com)**

## Zingiberales in Traditional Malay Cooking (continued)



*Bunga kantan* or torch ginger (*Etlingera elatior*) flower

### Gulai Batang Pisang (Banana Stem Curry)

1 lb. young  
banana in-  
ner stems  
(cut into 2"  
pieces)  
2 lb. meat,  
cut into  
small  
pieces  
(optional)  
2 cups co-  
conut milk  
10 pieces  
curry leaf  
2 cinna-  
mon sticks

2 star anise  
2 tsp. tamarind paste  
cooking oil  
salt, sugar to taste  
MSG (optional)  
2 tbsp. curry powder  
2 cups water  
2 tablespoon chili paste  
4 red onions (finely ground)  
6 garlic cloves (finely ground)  
1 inch of ginger (finely ground)

Heat oil in a pan. Add the ground onions, garlic and ginger with curry leaf, cinnamon sticks, and star anise. Mix curry powder, water and chili paste together and then add it to the pan. Cook thoroughly, then add coconut milk and meat. When meat is half cooked, add the banana stems and boil until tender. Add tamarind paste, salt, sugar and MSG (optional). Wait for a minute then serve.

(From <http://rainazra.blogspot.com>)

### Nasi Kerabu (Herbed Rice Salad)

This is a very good dish for a potluck or picnic, and contains four different gingers: edible ginger, torch ginger, galangal, and turmeric.

1 cup fresh grated coconut  
1/2 cup dried fish (ikan bilis)  
3 cups cooked rice  
1 stalk of lemongrass, very thinly sliced  
1 torch ginger bud, very thinly sliced (optional)  
1 shallots, very thinly sliced  
1 inch ginger, very thinly sliced  
1/2 inch galangal, very thinly sliced  
1/2 inch fresh turmeric, very thinly sliced, or 1 tsp. ground  
1 bunch of celery leaves  
1 bunch of cilantro  
1 bunch of mint  
1 bunch of watercress  
10 kaffir lime leaves  
4 Tbsp. vegetable oil, plus 2 Tbsp. more for frying  
salt and black pepper to taste

Heat a large pan over very low heat. Add the coconut and toast it, stirring constantly, for 20 minutes. It will turn golden brown and dry out. Let cool, and then grind it to the texture of fine bread-crumbs in a food processor or with a mortar and pestle.

Heat 2 Tbsp. of oil in the wok, and add the dried fish. Fry, stirring often, until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Let cool, and then cut into small pieces.

Pick the leaves from the stems of the herbs. Roll up the leaves into little bunches, with the lime leaves on the outside. Chop very finely, creating very thin julienned herb strips.

In a large bowl, combine all the ingredients. Toss with the vegetable oil, add salt and pepper to taste, and serve.

(From [http://indolaysia.typepad.com/some\\_southeast\\_asian\\_junk/recipes/](http://indolaysia.typepad.com/some_southeast_asian_junk/recipes/))

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# HSPR

*Promoting Zingiberales in  
Puerto Rico since 1996.*

*The Heliconia Society of Puerto Rico, Inc. was founded in 1996. The objectives of the society are to stimulate and promote the enjoyment and understanding of Heliconia and related plants of the order Zingiberales through education, research and communication, and to interact with the Heliconia Society International and other institutions which share similar interests, purposes or objectives.*

## President's Corner

We would like to thank Patricia and Franklin López for hosting our December HSPR meeting at their lovely home in Aibonito. We all had a great time and appreciate their hospitality. The typical Puerto Rican Christmas food (lechón asado, pasteles, arroz con gandules, tembleque, arroz con dulce, etc) that they served was delicious.

Unfortunately, due to a power outage caused by the rain, the interesting lecture on "Differentiating strictas from bihais" by our HSPR member, Arnaldo Astacio, could not be held. Arnaldo has graciously accepted to reschedule it for our upcoming March meeting.

During the past meeting the membership elected me as President of our society. I deeply appreciate the trust they have deposited on my shoulders and I'll try to do my best along with your help. I solicit a round of applause for our past President, Dr. Raymond Jerome, who has done a superb job.

Spring is here, so let us celebrate. Our next meeting will be held at my farm, located high in the Cordillera Central (800 meters above sea level), between Aibonito and Barranquitas (Barrio Pulguillas, Carr 723, km 7.4 interior). It will be an excellent opportunity to observe a great variety of inflorescences of heliconias, costuses, calatheas, gingers and tropical fruits. Parking is VERY lim-

ited on the narrow road, so car-pooling will be greatly appreciated. The farm is like a tropical jungle, where everything grows wild; so don't forget to bring adequate shoes, or boots for walking. Please be careful, the trails are muddy and slippery.

As always, we're asking our members to bring refreshments, snacks and covered dishes to share in our "pot-luck" lunch. Remember to bring plants and rhizomes for the RAFFLE, for sale or for our customary "Show and Tell" sessions. It is very exciting to win. Our society needs the money generated from the raffle to subsist. Please contribute!

Saludos a tod@s,

Héctor Méndez-Caratini  
President, HSPR



**What's cooking? Read about Banana Stem Curry and other Malay dishes in this issue!**