

## Penang Laksa

Written by Administrator II

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### PENANG LAKSA

By HELEN ONG



Penang has many famous dishes to offer, but asam laksa (otherwise known as Penang laksa), is arguably one of the best known of all. Up here though, it's simply called laksa.

The signature thick white rice noodles – of the boiled-from-dried or fresh variety – is served with the distinctive thick sour soup consisting of minced fish and a rempah (ground mixture) of onions, kunyit (turmeric), belacan (fermented prawn paste) and chilli which has been cooked in an assam (tamarind) water and flavoured with serai (lemon grass). A handful of chiam hom (Vietnamese coriander) is thrown in to add extra fragrance.

The bowl of noodles is beautifully and refreshingly contrasted with a colourful garnish of julienned vegetables: cucumber, lettuce, pineapple and onions, then finished off with a large handful of fresh green mint, chopped bunga kantan (pink ginger bud) and red chili. For aficionados, a large spoonful of black goeey hey ko (prawn paste) is de rigueur.

Laksa is truly a fragrant, culinary concoction of all things local, and the fishy smell may (ok, definitely will) require a bit of getting used to. However, rest assured it's one of those tastes that is once tried, never forgotten – you either love it or hate it! But do at least give it a try – you never know; you may like it. People do get hooked on it!

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Like other dishes, you will find local versions throughout the peninsula; in Penang alone we have many: there are Malay versions, Chinese versions, nyonya versions, Balik Pulau versions, Tanjung Bungah, Air Hitam etc.

Because of its acidity, laksa tends to make its first appearance after breakfast, and stays around for the lunch crowd, generally peaking at around tea time when it is at its most popular.

Everyone loves this pork-free dish, so you can find it at practically every corner. Slurp it down standing up in the most basic surroundings, tuck into it in a kopi tiam (coffee shop) for just RM2 or RM3, or order it in the most luxurious, air-conditioned hotel coffee house or upmarket restaurant where a helping can set you back anything from RM20 to RM40.

In Penang, the laksa is ubiquitous – and much loved. Many vendors have become so famous that visitors from all over the country have been known to “tar pau” (pack) their noodles to take back home, some ordering as many as 20-30 packets at a time!

In recent years, many of these stalls have added a “lemak” version to their menu, also known as Thai or Siamese Laksa, but to many, Penang laksa is first and foremost the original asam laksa.

*Helen Ong is a self-confessed foodie who loves to hunt down the best of Penang. She is the author of the book *Great Dining in Penang*. Check out her blog on [www.helenong.com](http://www.helenong.com)*