

ELEANOR FORD

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Ayam taliwang

Serves 4

1.5 kg (3 lb 5 oz) chicken
3 tablespoons oil
10 garlic cloves, peeled
5 large red chillies, halved and seeded
2 dried red chillies
2 red bird's eye chillies, stems removed
2 cm (¾ inch) kencur (optional)
6 candlenuts or 10 blanched almonds
1 teaspoon shrimp paste
3 lime leaves
3 salam leaves (optional)
2 tablespoons oyster sauce
2 tablespoons soy sauce
2 tablespoons coconut milk
juice of a lime, plus extra to serve

Two worlds are divided by the ribbon of water that separates Bali and Lombok. A pair of perfect volcanic cones, their peaks shrouded in cloud, stand like giant sentinels guarding the narrow Lombok Strait between the two islands. To the west lie the Asian lands of elephants, tigers and orangutans, to the east the Australasian lands of marsupials, cockatoos and komodo dragons. On the short boat ride across you pass over the Wallace Line that demarcates these two ecosystems. When English naturalist Alfred Wallace made this journey in the nineteenth century he was struck by the complete change in flora and fauna, sparking revolutionary work on evolution. For all the natural splendour of Lombok, it is ayam taliwang that captivated me most. It is not only its name that is irresistible, this is truly everything you could hope for in grilled chicken. The skin is burnished and glazed, contrasting with succulent meat inside. There is a fiery smack of charred chilli and deeply smoky savouriness from the garlic. Putu, a chef in Lombok for forty years, shared his mother's recipe with me, which I have adapted to cook in the oven at home.

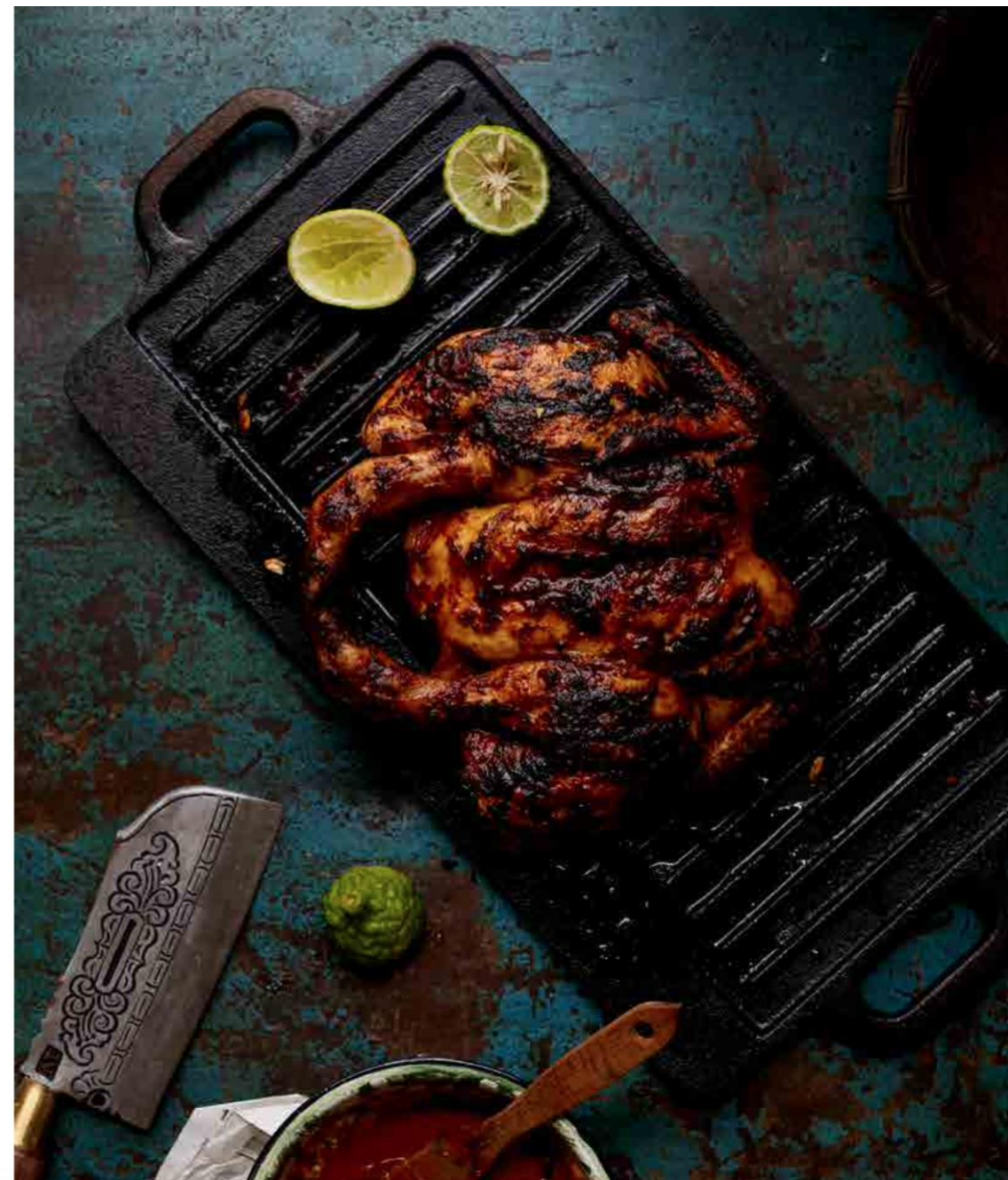
Lay the chicken on a large board, breast side down. Use kitchen scissors to remove the backbone by cutting down either side of it. Flip the bird and press firmly on the breast to flatten. Season and rub with a little oil. Set aside to come to room temperature whilst you make the sauce.

Heat half the oil in a frying pan and add the garlic, chillies, kencur, candlenuts and shrimp paste. The garlic cloves go in whole, the dried and bird's eye chillies have their seeds in. Cook until the garlic is slightly browned and everything is aromatic. Leaving the oil behind in the pan, transfer to a blender and add a pinch of salt and 250 ml (1 cup) water. Blitz until smooth.

Return to the pan with the residual oil and add the lime and salam leaves. Cook on a medium heat, stirring, to thicken. Once it has lost its rawness, turn down the heat, add the oyster and soy sauces and coconut milk. Simmer for a few minutes, then turn off the heat. Scrape three quarters into a bowl, stir in the juice; season. To the pan, add the rest of the oil to make a marinade.

Preheat the oven to 200°C (400°F). Heat an ovenproof griddle or large pan (cast iron is ideal) and when sizzling hot lay in the chicken, breast side down. Use a spatula to press the skin into the pan, letting it turn golden, blister and crisp – about 4 minutes. Paint the underside of the chicken with the red oily marinade, then flip and paint the rest on top. Transfer to the oven to cook.

Check after 35 minutes. When cooked through the juices will be clear and if you have a meat thermometer it should reach 74°C (165°F). Leave the chicken to rest for 15 minutes before serving with the sauce and an extra spritz of lime.



GARLIC CLOVE CURRY

Sudu lunu hodi ~~~~~ Sri Lanka

Serves 4 or more as a side

A real treat for garlic fiends. Poaching in a spiced coconut gravy mellows and sweetens the cloves and they take on the floral muskiness of curry leaves and brown sugar notes of fenugreek.

Get ready for obscene quantities of garlic, around five heads, depending on size. If you are lucky, you can find peeled frozen garlic in some Asian or health food shops. Otherwise, here is a tip to make the peeling less laborious: Break apart the heads with the heel of your hand and drop them all into a large pan for which you have a lid (or use two large metal bowls, lip to lip). Cover and shake vigorously until the cloves have freed themselves from their papery jackets. It is not infallible, working better with some garlic than others, but enormously satisfying when it does.

250g (9oz) garlic cloves (about 5 heads)
1 large onion
2 tablespoons neutral oil
10 fresh curry leaves
¾ teaspoon fine sea salt
2 tomatoes, chopped
2 green chillies, slit lengthways
2 teaspoons curry powder
½ teaspoon fenugreek seeds
½ teaspoon ground turmeric
½ teaspoon Kashmiri chilli powder
200ml (generous ¾ cup) coconut milk
12cm (4½ inch) pandan leaf (optional)

Peel or defrost the garlic cloves (see introduction). Trim the onion, halve lengthways then slice lengthways again into wide petals.

Heat the oil in a saucepan over a medium-high heat. Add the onion, curry leaves and salt and fry until the onion softens, then starts to turn golden and sticky. Add the garlic cloves and cook for a few minutes, to sear the outsides. Add the tomato, chillies and spices and cook for about 5 minutes so the tomato breaks down into a sauce.

Pour in the coconut milk with the pandan and bring to a simmer. Cook on a low heat for around 30 minutes, being careful not to stir too much as the garlic softens. You may need to add a little water towards the end. Taste a clove – it should be very soft, sweet and any harsh rawness cooked out. The timing will depend on the age and size of your garlic cloves, so taste is the best judge. Start checking at about 25 minutes and be ready to cook for 45 minutes, if needed.

This is a dish that works well being made in advance. Serve warm rather than piping hot.

EAT WITH

Rice or roti and other vegetarian dishes, such as dal

Consider also a Mint sambal: Grind together in a food processor 30g (⅓ cup) grated coconut, leaves from a small bunch of mint, ½ red onion, 1 garlic clove, 3 green chillies with or without their seeds, and a pinch of salt. Add a squeeze of lime juice and a little water to loosen the blades.



Recipes from:

