

The Indonesian Kitchen

Sri Owen

Gus Filgate, Photographer

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Not yet an Asian Tiger in the mold of Thai or Vietnamese cooking, Indonesia is rich with indigenous, is-land-food sensibilities complemented by Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, British, and Spanish influences. Over the past 500 years, European spice traders looked to the islands of Bali, Java, Sumatra, and hundreds of others as their honey pot to prosperity. Fortunes were made, pirates did their mischief, many lives were lost, and in the end, Indonesia deserves credit for contributing to a fascinating clash of culinary conventions between Europe and the East.

Do you think ingredients like coconut, chilies, citrus, mangoes, peanut sauces, and any number of marinades and curries were well received in the dank kitchens of fifteenth-century London, Amsterdam, and Lisbon? “No coconut ice cream for me, mum. May I have another serving of boiled tripe, please?”

This latest book from Sri Owen, one of the “grandes dames” of England’s culinary awakening along with Elizabeth David, Jane Grigson, and Claudia Roden, may just earn the attention needed to lift Indonesian cooking into warm stove-light of universal acceptance. She has collected 120 recipes including dishes from her grandmother’s kitchen through to the street food of her college years, and onward. Of great interest is her embrace of regional Indonesian cooking including, for example, Javenese *sambel* (curry-type sauces), *rendang* (beef or buffalo preserved in spiced coconut milk) from west Sumatra, *ikan pesmol* (Jakarta-style fried fish), and a traditional Bali recipe of slow-cooked duck named *bebek betutu*.

Born in Sumatra, Owen has lived in London since 1964, although travel, especially in Italy, is an indispensable part of her life. She writes, “An Indonesian food lover who has chosen permanent exile: is that how I think of myself? Perhaps I have become a bit of a missionary. My mission is to show my readers the real goodness of Indonesian food—and my dream is to convince my countrymen and women of its excellence and make them proud of it.” Her many cookbooks include *The Home Book of Indonesian Cookery* (1976), *The Rice Book*, *New Wave Asian*, and *Indonesian Regional Food and Cookery*.

MATT SUTHERLAND (February 13, 2009)

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