

## **A Gastronomic Journey Through South-east Asia**

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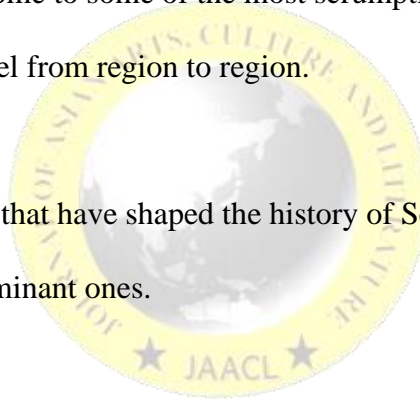
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### **Abstract**

If you ever want to delve into the culture, traditions, and practices of a particular nation, all you have to do is partake in their cuisine.

The cuisine of a nation is characterized by the use of distinctive ingredients and techniques that go into the preparation of the dishes that make up their culinary palate. South-East Asia is culturally diverse and home to some of the most scrumptious cuisine on earth. The flavors change as you travel from region to region.

So, which are the cuisines that have shaped the history of South-East Asian cuisine? Let's take a look at some predominant ones.



### **Keywords**

Cuisine, culture, rice, dishes, Asia

### **Introduction**

#### **SRI LANKAN CUISINE**

Sri Lankan cuisine has been shaped by many historical, cultural, and other factors.

This cuisine is known for its use of herbs, spices, fish, vegetables, rice, and fruits. The cuisine also centers on many varieties of rice and coconut, which are integral to it. Seafood also plays a significant role, be it fresh or preserved fish.

As a country that was a hub in the historic oceanic Silk Road, contact with foreign traders brought new food items and cultural influences to the island nation, in addition to the local traditions of the country's ethnic groups. All of these factors have helped to shape Sri Lankan cuisine. Similarities can be seen to the cuisines of other South Asian neighboring regions, particularly to the state of Kerala in Southern India.

Sri Lankan cuisine is characterized by unique spice blends with heavy use of cinnamon and black pepper, as well as by the use of ingredients such as maldive fish, goraka , pandan leaf, lemongrass, and jaggery made from the kithul palm syrup. Many varieties of red rice are consumed and some are considered heirloom rice in the country. Tea is an important beverage throughout the country, and Sri Lanka is known for producing some of the world's finest tea.

A typical Sri Lankan meal consists of boiled or steamed rice served with a curry of fish or chicken with other curries made with vegetables, lentils, or fruits. In fact, rice and curry is also the national dish of Sri Lanka.



**Image 1: A typical Sri Lankan meal**

Dishes are accompanied by pickled fruits or vegetables, and chutneys. Coconut sambol is widely consumed. It is a paste of ground coconut mixed with chili peppers, dried Maldivian fish, and lime juice. Sri Lankan curries feature sizable chunks of fresh protein swimming in bright, fragrantly-spiced broths. Along the coasts, families enjoy fish, shrimp, or crab curries. In the high hills of central Sri Lanka, pork is used for curries while Chicken, beef, goat, and lamb curries are found island-wide.

Typical Sri Lankan meals are colorful and visually appealing. The family gathers together and eats in individual plates with their hand. The spoons are used for serving the accompanying food from the communal bowls kept on the table.

### **CHINESE CUISINE**

Chinese cuisine holds significant importance in Asian Culture as even though originating from China, it has been heavily influenced by Chinese Diaspora living overseas. Today, Chinese food is the most popular take-out food in western countries. Staples like rice, soy sauce, noodles, and tofu have influenced many other Asian cuisines.

Chinese cuisine evolved gradually over the centuries as new food sources and techniques were introduced, discovered, or invented. The Han and Ming dynasties were instrumental in developing Chinese cooking by the adoption of both cooking implements and cooking methods. The Ming also saw the adoption of new plants from the New World, such as maize, peanuts, and tobacco.

Chinese cuisine can be divided into four major traditional styles:

Chuan cuisine – Chuan cuisine is famous for its bold, spicy-hot flavors that are derived from dry spices such as crushed peppercorns (black, red, and white) and dried, crushed chili. This Cuisine excels in quick-frying, stir-frying, dry-braising, and dry-stewing methods of cooking. The main ingredient is the Sichuan Province's natively grown pepper called the huajiao which is dried and crushed to make a dry spice powder.



**Image 2: Huajiao pepper**

Lu cuisine - Lu cuisine, emphasizes fresh ingredients and the use of salt as a flavoring agent. This cuisine is derived from the traditional cooking methods of Shandong, a coastal province in East China. Seafood is the most notable ingredient of Lu cuisine and scallops, prawns, clams, sea cucumbers, and squid, etc are used. Besides seafood, a variety of other ingredients like corn, peanuts, grains, and vegetables are also used. Some famous snacks include stir-fried clam, Chinese fried dumplings, etc.



**Image 3: Sea food platter**

Yue cuisine -Yue Cuisine originates from Guangdong Province in South China. It features carefully chosen seasonings and employs the techniques of stir-frying, frying, stewing and braising for cooking food. Special attention is paid to the temperature of cooking. Emphasis is laid on the color, fragrance, taste, and forms of the food prepared. Some examples of this cuisine include - Piglet Barbequed over the open oven, Beef with Oyster Sauce, Snake Soup, Braised Shrimps, etc.



**Image 4: Snake soup**

Huaiyang cuisine - Huaiyang cuisine originates from and popular Yangzhou and Huai'an province in China. This cuisine uses fishery products as the main ingredient. The cooking technique focuses on imparting a light, mild, and sweet flavor and preserving the original taste of ingredients. The preferred cooking techniques are stewing, simmering, braising, steaming, and frying. Braised Shredded Chicken with Ham and Dried Tofu, Minced Crab Meat and Pork Balls, etc, are some examples of this style of cooking.



**Image 5: Seafood platter**

Apart from the above four traditional styles of cooking, modern cooking styles, catering to more refined food palates have also mushroomed up. They include cuisines of – Anhui, Cantonese, Fujian, Hunan, Jiangsu, Shandong, Sichuan, and Zhejiang.

A typical Chinese meal consists of two general components: a) carbohydrate source or starch - typically rice, noodles, or mantou (steamed buns), and, b) an accompanying dish of vegetables, fish, meat, or other items. Rice is a critical part of Chinese cuisine. However, in many parts of China, particularly North China, wheat-based products including noodles and steamed buns predominate, in contrast to South China where rice is dominant. Soup is usually served at the end of a meal to satiate one's appetite.

Chopsticks are the primary eating utensil in Chinese culture for solid foods, while soups and other liquids are enjoyed with a wide, flat-bottomed spoon (traditionally made of ceramic). In a Chinese meal, each individual diner is given their own bowl of rice while the accompanying dishes are served in communal plates (or bowls) which are shared by everyone sitting at the table. Each diner picks food out of the communal plates on a bite-by-bite basis with their chopsticks. The food selected is often eaten together with a mouthful of rice.



**Image 6: Chinese meal**

Chinese meals do not typically end with a dessert. Instead, sweet foods are often introduced during the course of the meal with no firm distinction made. Cold beverages are believed to be harmful to the digestion of hot food, so items like ice-cold water or soft drinks are traditionally not served at meal-time. Besides soup, if any other beverages are served, they would most likely be hot tea or hot water. Tea is believed to help in the digestion of greasy foods.

## **INDONESIAN CUISINE**

Indonesian cuisine is a collection of various regional culinary traditions that form the archipelagic nation of Indonesia. Indonesia is composed of nearly 6,000 populated islands and this leads to a variety of flavor profiles. The nation is home to more than 300 ethnic groups and each has lent their preference to the development of national cuisine.

Indonesian cuisine mostly includes rice, noodle, and soup dishes. However, it does vary greatly due to geographic influences. For example, the Sumatran cuisine has Middle-Eastern and Indian influences, featuring curried meat and vegetables such as gulai and curry, while the Javanese cuisine is mostly indigenous, with some hint of Chinese influence. The cuisines of Eastern Indonesia are similar to Polynesian and Melanesian cuisine.

The reason for this is that Indonesia's indigenous techniques and ingredients were heavily influenced by India, the Middle East, China, and also by Europe. Indonesia was an important stop on the ancient trade routes. Spanish and Portuguese traders brought 'New World' produce even before the Dutch colonized most of the archipelago. The Indonesian islands, The Moluccas (Maluku), which are famed as "the Spice Islands", also contributed to the introduction of native spices, such as cloves and nutmeg, to Indonesian and global cuisine.

Indonesian cuisine often demonstrates complex flavors. The dishes are hot and spicy and yet are derived from the basic combination of tastes such as sweet, salty, sour, and bitter. The bumbu spices mixture is indulgently used to flavor food and the sambal, the Indonesian hot and spicy chili sauce with shrimp paste is a staple condiment at all Indonesian tables. The Indonesians employ seven main cooking methods - frying, grilling, roasting, dry roasting, sautéing, boiling , and steaming.

In 2018, The Indonesian Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy chose five dishes that best represented the cuisine and cultural heritage of Indonesia.

Soto - A traditional soup mainly composed of broth, meat, and vegetables.





**Image 7: Soto ayam/chicken soup**

Rendang A spicy meat dish (mostly using beef) originating from the Minangkabau region in West Sumatra, Indonesia.



**Image 8: Beef rendang**

Satay - A dish of seasoned, skewered and grilled meat served with a sauce. Although, native to Indonesia, it is popular in Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Brunei.



**Image 9: Chicken Satay**

Nasi goreng - Nasi goreng means "fried rice" in both the Indonesian and Malay languages. It is a rice dish with pieces of meat and vegetables added to flavour it.



**Image 10: Egg and seafood Nasi Goring**

Gado-gado - An Indonesian salad of slightly boiled, blanched or steamed vegetables with hard-boiled eggs, boiled potatoes, fried tofu, tempeh and lontong (rice wrapped in a banana leaf) served with a peanut sauce dressing.



**Image 11: Gado-gado Platter**

Today, some popular Indonesian dishes have become an inherent part of the cuisine of its neighbours like Malaysia and Singapore.

An Indonesian traditional meal usually consists of steamed rice as a staple with vegetables and soup. Meat or fish are given as side dishes. In a typical family meal, the family members

gather around the table laid with plates of steamed rice and bowls holding several other dishes. Personal plates are used for eating and usually the oldest family member or the husband has the right to initiate the meal.



**Image 12: Indonesian traditional foods**

## **THAI CUISINE**

Thai cooking emphasizes on lightly prepared dishes that have strong aromatic components and a spicy edge.

According to the Thai monk Venerable Buddhadasa Bhikku's writing - 'India's Benevolence to Thailand', Thai cuisine was influenced by Indian cuisine. He wrote that Thai people learned how to use spices in their food in various ways from Indians.

Today, many dishes that are now popular in Thailand were originally Chinese dishes. They were introduced to Thailand by the Hokkien people starting in the 15th century, and by the Teochew people who started settling in larger numbers from the late-18th century onward. The cooking was enhanced by adapting spices from other cuisines such as that of

India and Persia. Example, kaeng kari -yellow curry, and kaeng matsaman -massaman curry.

Regional variations in Thai cuisine find their roots in the borders that Thailand shares with other nations. Northern Thai cuisine shares dishes with Shan State in Burma, northern Laos, and also with Yunnan Province in China, whereas the cuisine of Isan (north-eastern Thailand) is similar to that of southern Laos, and is also influenced by Khmer from Cambodia to its south, and by Vietnamese cuisine to its east. Southern Thailand, with many dishes that contain liberal amounts of coconut milk and fresh turmeric, has that in common with Indian, Malaysian, and Indonesian cuisine.

Traditional Thai cuisine can be broadly classified into four categories:

Tom (boiled dishes) – This basically consists of flavourful soups and broths. As the name implies, the word ‘Tom’ means boiled and the suffix ‘Yum’ or ‘Kha’ etc refers to the main ingredient used for making the soup.



**Image 13: Coconut soup**

Yam (spicy salads) – Yam is the Thai salads that have four main methods of preparation - - yam, tam, lap and phla.



**Image 14: Yam Thale – Thai Seafood salad**

Tam (pounded foods) – this category of cuisine contains foods in which pounded ingredients and spices etc have been added. So, ingredients like garlic, fish sauce, palm sugar, tomatoes, peanuts, sun dried shrimp, carrots, green beans, tamarind juice, and lime juice Using a wooden or clay mortar and a wood pestle, they mash and mix the ingredients to unlock the flavours and smells.



**Image 15: Tam Lao- Green Papaya salad**

Gaeng (curries) – This category of food consists of deep-fried, stir-fried, and steamed dishes that have mainly been influenced by Chinese cooking techniques.



**Image 16: Gaeng Ped – Thai red curry**

In modern times a more accurate way to describe Thai cuisine would be to consider the five regional influences while classifying it.

Bangkok cuisine – It is the cuisine of the Bangkok metropolitan area, with Teochew and Portuguese influences.

Central Thai: cuisine of the flat and wet central rice-growing plains, site of the former Thai kingdoms of Sukhothai and Ayutthaya, Coconut milk is one of the major ingredients used in Central Thai cuisine.

Isan or northeastern Thai: cuisine of the more arid Khorat Plateau, similar in culture to Laos and also influenced by Khmer cuisine.

Northern Thai: cuisine of the cooler valleys and forested mountains of the Thai highlands, once ruled by the former Lanna Kingdom and home of Lannaese, the majority of northern Thailand.

Southern Thai: cuisine of the Kra Isthmus which is bordered on two sides by tropical seas, with its many islands and including the ethnic Malay, former Sultanate of Pattani in the deep-south. Hainanese and Cantonese influence can also be seen on this food.

In addition to these regional cuisines, there is also Thai royal cuisine which can trace its history back to the cosmopolitan palace cuisine of the Ayutthaya kingdom (1351–1767 CE). Its refinement, cooking techniques, presentation, and use of ingredients were of great influence to the cuisine of the central Thai plains.

A typical Thai meal consists of rice with many complementary dishes. The dishes are all served at the same time, including the soups. Traditionally Thai food is eaten with the hand while seated on floor mats.



**Image 17: Typical Thai meal**

Traditionally, a meal would have at least five elements: a dip or relish for raw or cooked vegetables. Khrueng chim, considered a building block of Thai food by Chef McDang, may come in the form of a spicy chili sauce or relish called nam phrik (made of raw or

cooked chilies and other ingredients, which are then mashed together), or a type of dip enriched with coconut milk called *lon*. The other elements would include a clear soup (perhaps a spicy tom yam or a mellow tom chuet), a curry or stew (essentially any dish identified with the *kaeng* prefix), a deep-fried dish and a stir fried dish of meat, fish, seafood, or vegetables.

## **MALAYSIAN CUISINE**

Malaysian cuisine consists of cooking traditions and practices that reflect the multi-ethnic makeup of the population of Malaysia.

The vast majority of Malaysia's population can broadly be divided into three major ethnic groups: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. The remainder consists of the indigenous peoples. As a result of historical migrations, colonization by foreign powers, and its geographical position, Malaysia's culinary style in the present day is primarily a melange of traditions from its Malay, Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, and ethnic Bornean citizens. Thai, Portuguese, Dutch, Arabian, and British have also contributed to the development of Malaysia's cuisine. The resultant symphony of flavors has made Malaysian cuisine highly complex and diverse which uses many condiments and spices.

Peninsular Malaysia shares a common history with Singapore, so it is common to find versions of the same dish across both sides of the border such as laksa and chicken rice. Malaysia also shares culinary ties with Indonesia, and both nations often share certain dishes, such as satay, rendang and sambal.



In the 15th century, the region now known as Malaysia became an important passageway for maritime trade. Passing through Malaysia were Arab traders who brought spices from the Middle-East, and Portuguese, Dutch, and English colonizers and traders who introduced food staples such as peanuts, pineapples, avocado, tomato, squash, and pumpkin. Later, under the British rule, the colonizers brought many Chinese and Indian laborers who contributed to the diversity in tastes in Malaysian cuisine.

Chilli peppers are indispensable to Malaysian kitchens. As a general rule, two types of chilli cultivars are the most commonly available: the bird's eye chili (cili padi), which although small in size are extremely pungent and very hot; and longer varieties, which tend to be much milder.



**Image 18: Birds eye chilli**

Belacan is essential to Malaysian cooking. It is a type of shrimp paste which is pressed into a block and sun-dried. It contributes a mellow flavor to cooked dishes. Belacan is also crumbled into a ground spice paste called rempah.

The coconut is another quintessential feature of Malaysian cuisine, and virtually all parts of the plant are used for culinary purposes. Gula melaka is unrefined palm sugar produced from the sap of the coconut flower. It is the most traditional sweetener in Malaysian cooking and

imbues a rich caramel-like flavor with a hint of coconut. Soy sauce of different varieties is another important ingredient. Lemongrass too is widely used. The pandan (screw pine) leaf is also favored. A subtle aroma is released when the leaves are bruised by tying one or two long leaves into a knot. It is used for cooking curries, rice, and desserts.

Tofu products, specifically fried tofu, are widely used as cooking ingredients and as side accompaniments. Fried tofu products are found as a versatile component ingredient for dishes like stir-fried noodles, rojak (fruit and vegetable salad), noodle soups, and stews. Dried seafood products contribute a savory depth of flavor to some Malaysian dishes. Small dried anchovies, known as ikan bilis, are very popular. It acquires a very crispy texture when deep-fried, and is served as an accompaniment or prepared as a sambal relish. Ikan bilis is also boiled to make fish stock; in fact, instant ikan bilis stock granules are a popular seasoning in modern kitchens. Dried shrimp and salted dried fish are also used in various ways. Other essential seasoning and garnishes include tamarind. Candlenuts are normally ground to thicken sauces.

A typical Malaysian meal consists of plain steamed white rice served with side dishes of meat or vegetables or gravy. A warm broth or soup may also be served.



**Image 19: A Malaysian meal**

A popular dish based on rice in Malaysia is nasi lemak, rice steamed with coconut milk and pandan leaves to give it a rich fragrance. Of Malay origin, nasi lemak is very popular and frequently referred to as the national dish. It is customarily served with fried anchovies, peanuts, sliced cucumber, hard-boiled eggs, and sambal.

## **JAPANESE CUISINE**

Japanese cuisine encompasses the regional and traditional foods of Japan, which have developed through centuries of political and socio-economic changes.

The traditional cuisine of Japan, washoku is based on rice with miso soup and other dishes. Seasonal ingredients are used in the preparation. Side dishes often consist of fish, pickled vegetables, and vegetables cooked in broth. Seafood is common, often grilled, but also served raw as sashimi or in sushi. Seafood and vegetables are also deep-fried in a light batter, as tempura. Apart from rice, staples include noodles, such as soba and udon. Japan also has many simmered dishes such as fish products in broth called oden, or beef in sukiyaki and nikujaga.

Rice is a staple in Japanese cuisine. In modern times wheat and soybean have also become staples.

During the Kofun period, Buddhism became the official religion of the country. Therefore, eating meat and fish was prohibited. In 675 AD, Emperor Tenmu prohibited the eating of horses, dogs, monkeys, and chickens. In the 8th and 9th centuries, many emperors continued to prohibit killing many types of animals. The number of regulated meats increased significantly, leading to the banning of all mammals except whale, which were categorized

as fish. During this period, chopsticks were introduced to Japan. Initially, they were only used by the nobility. The general population used their hands, as utensils were quite expensive.

It was during this period that due to the lack of meat products Japanese people minimized their spice utilization, opting instead for mildly spiced dishes. Spices were also rare to find. In the absence of meat, fish was served as the main protein. And, fish has influenced many iconic Japanese dishes today. In the 9th century, grilled fish and sliced raw fish were widely popular. In traditional Japanese cuisine, oil and fat are usually avoided within the cooking process.

Since fish was the main source of protein so preserving fish became paramount. Sushi originated as a means of preserving fish by fermenting it in boiled rice.



**Image 20: Sushi platter**

Sushi became a popular snack food and main entrée, combining fish with rice. During the Edo period (mid-15th century), sushi without fermentation was introduced and it was still being consumed without fermentation till the end of 18th century when the hand-rolled and nigiri-type sushi was invented.

In 1854, Japan started to gain new trade deals with Western countries when a new Japanese ruling order took over (known as the Meiji Restoration). Emperor Meiji, the new ruler, staged a New Years' feast designed to embrace the Western world and countries in 1872. The feast contained food that had a lot of European emphases. For the first time in a thousand years, people were allowed to consume meat in public. After this New Years' feast, the general population from Japan started to consume meat again.

In a typical Japanese meal, rice is served in its own small bowl (chawan), and each main course item is placed on its own small plate (sara) or bowl (hachi) for each individual portion. Japanese style traditionally abhors different-flavored dishes touching each other on a single plate, so different dishes are given their own individual plates as mentioned.



**Image 21: A typical Japanese meal**

Japanese cuisine is based on combining staple food, which is steamed white rice or gohan, with one or more okazu or main dishes and side dishes. This may be accompanied by a clear or miso soup and tsukemono (pickles).

As is evident, all of the South-East Asian cuisines are partial to using ginger, garlic, chilies, rice, meats, etc in its cooking. As elucidated above, the techniques used are also similar – deep-frying, stir-frying, steaming, etc.

But, what is noteworthy is the fact that even though the ingredients remain the same, a mere change in the quantity, style of use, and cooking method adopted changes the flavor profile of the food. This is what leads to different regions of South East Asia having their own distinctive cuisines. And, this is also what makes South East Asian food a true gastronomic delight favored by many connoisseurs globally.

### **Acknowledgment**

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