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Restaurant review: Peninsula has tradition, ambition

A new Malaysian outpost serves up the real thing: skillfully prepared native dishes in a stylish contemporary setting.

Jeremy Iggers, Star Tribune

Exploring a new cuisine is a bit like visiting a country for the first time -- there is much to learn and, if you have guides who know the territory, you'll get more out of the experience. **Peninsula**, the new Malaysian restaurant on Eat Street (a.k.a. Nicollet Avenue), isn't really the first Malaysian restaurant in the Twin Cities, but it's certainly the most ambitious, with the most extensive menu, and a level of ambience and amenities that other local Malaysian restaurants can't match. My own guides to this cuisine were three natives of Malaysia, who joined me on one visit.

My companions started out skeptical. In Malaysia, they told me, the quality of food at restaurants and street stalls is very high. Fresh fruits and vegetables and spices are available year-round, and competition is so tough that second-rate eateries don't last long. So Malaysian restaurants away from the homeland can be disappointing -- the cooks aren't always as skillful, and the flavors aren't as fresh.

Surveying the menu, they picked out the different ingredients of Malaysia's multicultural cuisine. Only 7 percent of Malaysia's population is of Indian ancestry, but many Malaysians, regardless of their background, start their day with *roti canai*, an Indian flatbread served with a mild but savory brown potato and chicken curry.

About a quarter of Malaysians are of Chinese ancestry, a heritage represented on the menu by numerous dishes such as beef *chow fun*, Hainanese chicken, and pork with preserved egg porridge. Thailand borders Malaysia, so it's no surprise to find some Thai dishes on the menu as well, such as a Thai green curry, Thai eggroll and a Malaysian version of *tom yum*, a popular Thai hot and sour soup.

But the majority of dishes on the menu are traditional Malaysian preparations. What distinguishes many of these dishes is the complexity of the flavors -- a palette of spices that includes cinnamon, ginger, cardamom, kaffir lime leaves, hot peppers, lemongrass, fermented shrimp paste, chili paste and cloves.

The food can be spicy: About half of the dishes on the menu are printed in red, as a warning. But I didn't encounter anything nearly as hot as some of the fiery Thai and Sri Lankan preparations I've sampled locally.

There is no symbol on the menu to warn diners about smelly dishes, but

perhaps there should be. On another visit, the waiter tried to warn us away from the *penang rojak*, a salad of cucumber, jicama, mango and pineapple, drizzled with a dark sweet sauce made with *belacan*, a fermented shrimp paste. He told us that he personally couldn't stand the smell of it, and that he had been told to discourage Westerners from ordering it. (It turns out that this attitude is not uncommon: The Wikipedia entry for *belacan* notes, "To Westerners -- and even Asians -- unfamiliar or unappreciative with shrimp paste the smell can be extremely repulsive.") But the dish wasn't quite as pungent as advertised, and I found it rather refreshing.

My favorites among the traditional Malaysian dishes included the beef *rendang* (slow-cooked chunks of beef, lemongrass, chili paste, coconut milk, cinnamon, cloves and red curry) and the *panggang ikan* (a fresh fish --we chose flounder -- covered in a paste of aromatic seasonings, deep-fried and then wrapped in a banana leaf). It takes a lot of work to extract all the succulent morsels of meat from the Malaysian-style (Dungeness) crab, but the complex blend of spices makes it well worth the effort.

Other recommended dishes include the *achar* (a salad of pickled cabbage, carrots, green beans and cucumber in a lively peanut sauce), the satay tofu (big crisp wedges of deep-fried bean curd filled with bean sprouts and topped with a similar, savory peanut sauce), and the *asam laksa*, a sour and spicy broth with very fat noodles.

Nothing we had was bad, but I probably wouldn't order the *belacan* eggplant again -- too much fried eggplant, not enough flavor -- or the *popia*, a very bland spring roll stuffed with jicama, egg and bean sprouts. And none of us cared much for the Malaysian Buddhist delight -- a stir-fry of fried tofu and mixed vegetables.

There is a lot more on the menu that I would like to try, ranging from the red curry beef stew hot-pot, the mango shrimp and the *kambing rendang* (lamb simmered in coconut milk, chiles, ginger, cinnamon and cloves).

Servers are young, friendly and inexperienced. A limited selection of inexpensive but decent wines from familiar producers is available by the bottle or glass, along with a short list of domestic and imported beers.

At the end of our dinner, all three of my Malaysian companions gave the Peninsula a strong endorsement: They said the food was as good as at the restaurants back home.

By the way, there are several other local restaurants that serve Malaysian cuisine. I haven't dined recently at **Rasa Salang** (2480 Winnetka Av. N., Golden Valley) or at **Singapore Chinese Cuisine** (1715 Beam Av., Maplewood). But I had a delightful dinner recently at **Singapore** (5554 34th Av. S., Minneapolis), the world's only Malaysian-Ethiopian restaurant. And I have also enjoyed the Malaysian fare I have sampled at **K-Wok** (1813 Riverside Av., Minneapolis), which has a short list of Malaysian dishes hidden away on the back of its mostly Chinese and Vietnamese menu.

Peninsula ***

Location: 2608 Nicollet Av. S., Minneapolis, 612-871-8282.

Hours: Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 10:30 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to midnight.

Atmosphere: Contemporary Asian with open kitchen and natural woods.

Sound level: Moderate.

Recommended dishes: Spicy Malaysian crab, fish in banana leaf, beef rendang, sambal sotong (sautéed squid).

Price range: \$5.95 to \$16.95; seafood specials sometimes higher.

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