

Let Them Eat Cake

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Twenty years ago, every warung kopi (local coffee shop) offered a selection of fresh, tasty little cakes and sweets called jajan, and almost every woman and girl knew how to make them. Now even in the villages the warungs seldom offer more than tasteless mass-produced snacks, with nary a dusting of fresh coconut in sight. Bali's unique sweets may be in danger of extinction. Even the classic bubur injin, a rich pudding of black rice with a splash of coconut cream, is rarely to be seen on restaurant menus these days.

Long-time Ubud resident Janet Molloy was already a trained chef when she moved to Bali. Hanging out in the warungs in 1990, she took a professional interest in the colourful sweets that were offered with her glass of morning coffee. She applied herself seriously to the research and learned to identify sumping, bantal and klepon. Ewel, a tarry pudding, and bubur ijin were made from black sticky rice. Dadar was a small pancake and kue mangkok were the cupcakes with split tops used in offerings...

"It's sad to see the rich diversity of regional jajan disappearing," Janet says. "These would have traditionally been a source of income for village women. It's especially sad that they're being replaced with factory made, nutrient-depleted buns of dubious vintage sold in cellophane bags. My grandchildren may never taste real jajan."

Jajan is a Balinese word. A limited selection of these cakes can still be found today in markets and supermarkets, but they are seldom seen at roadside warungs or even the baskets of wandering snack vendors any more. Some of the ingredients, like black sticky rice, have become rare and costly. Few young women can be bothered making jajan these days. Each type takes about two hours to make, they are sold very cheaply and most must be consumed within a day.

Before baking powder was available, Balinese women used fermented cassava for leavening. They still use the traditional pandan and suci leaves to colour and flavour the green cakes and, when steamed in a banana leaf, a pale green colour is imparted. Red palm sugar lends a caramel hue. Generally speaking, jajan are a healthy snack. If you steer clear of the pink ones (which sometimes use textile dyes), the ingredients are natural and local.

"Jajan is the ultimate Slow Food," says Yvonne Day, founder of the Kue patisserie and restaurant in Ubud. Yvonne lived for many years in Jakarta with an Indonesian family and has steeped herself deeply in the lore of traditional cuisine. She is an authority on jajan. "I could still probably make about 15 different kinds of jajan without looking at a recipe," she tells me. "I made them often with my Sumatran mother-in-law to be eaten by the family. We used all the traditional molds."

In fact, jajan under other names is a Southeast Asian phenomena, with very similar items to be found in the morning markets in Malaysia, Thailand and Laos. Yvonne made this discovery on a recent trip, eating her way around the region. "I spent a lot of time in the local markets sampling things," she says. "In the Thai markets I could see most of the same cakes with slight variations, also in Malaysia and Laos. They used the same ingredients but in a different format."

Yvonne believes that jajan flags migration patterns around Asia, a sort of culinary conversation that followed the Mekong through Laos, Thailand and Malaysia, crossed to Sumatra and then to Java, followed population movements from Sumatra to Kalimantan and then into the eastern part of Indonesia. "It would be interesting to get a map and track different varieties of jajan down from Sumatra to Java, Kalimantan, Bali and then Sulawesi and see them peter out at Flores. If we went way back, I think we'd find that Bali's jajan came from Malacca Straits and that all its jajan traditions began somewhere else."

Where ever the migrants ended up, the women adapted their traditional recipes to use locally available ingredients. Depending on what part of Indonesia she was in, Ibu might use flour made from mung beans, white rice, sticky rice, sago, taro or cassava. Many jajan incorporate red palm sugar, beans, coconut and bananas. As one travels east through Indonesia, the variety of jajan decreases because fewer ingredients are available. There's a heavier reliance there on bananas, sweet potatoes, coconut and palm sugar.

Some jajan show influence from other cultures, mainly China and Holland. The Dutch influence comes through in the marriages of heavy Dutch puddings with Indonesian ingredients. The Dutch replaced cow's milk with coconut milk in their own traditional recipes, so these sweets are also dairy free and suitable for vegans and people on gluten free diets. Dutch-influenced jajan may use wheat flour and some actually have gouda cheese in them. Some jajan, like the ondeh ondeh sold on streets of Denpasar and on the Bypass, are fried with mung/black bean paste inside and coated with sesame seeds, showing their Chinese influence.

Now that the price of white and red palm sugar are nearly the same, there is a temptation to use white sugar in the traditional sweets. But this changes the flavor, as white sugar is sweeter and lacks the rich caramel undertones of palm sugar.

"These cakes use few ingredients and are so healthy that they give the farmers enough energy to work long mornings in the field. Traditionally, jajan is a breakfast food and midmorning snack, with the fried, steamed and saucy ones served in late afternoon. Any time of the day is jajan time, except at night," Yvonne observes. "Although making jajan is a dying art in Bali it still happens in villages in Java because people don't have the options they have here."

Jajan are typically fried, steamed or boiled. Some are fermented, using the same yeast that is used for making brem. Tape, a fermented jajan that is sold in wet or dry forms, is an essential ingredient of the classic Indonesian sweet Es Campur. Agar agar, derived from seaweed, is used in wet snacks which are traditionally served at Balinese weddings.

Yvonne has a full collection of the metal, clay and wooden presses and molds used to make the various jajan shapes. The wooden molds resemble butter molds and show Dutch influence. Some jajan are extruded through presses with round holes like the string hoppers of Sri Lanka.

Wayan Manis, my housekeeper, knows how to cook all of the jajan. In fact, her first income-generating activity was making jajan with her mother when she was eight years old, to be peddled to her school mates during breaks to earn money to buy rice for the family. I asked her why so few jajan were available now -- didn't the Balinese want to eat them anymore? The disappearance of jajan is in fact tied to Ubud's (and Bali's) new prosperity. "People want to eat them but woman don't want to make them!" Wayan told me. "Jajan are a lot of work and sell cheaply. Woman are too busy now, the compounds have money coming from other sources. Jajan makes so little money that the women can't be bothered."

The Balinese do miss jajan, though. A few women have set themselves up as suppliers for events and parties and do a roaring trade. One of these is Ibu Luh Parmi's Roses Café in Rose Street Gang Ratna No. 3 Denpasar, which caters to a rapidly growing clientele of Balinese who come for a cup of coffee and her fresh jajan. Ibu Luh caters traditional Balinese cuisine for ceremonies and other events, but has found that the demand for jajan is increasing strongly. She and her staff prepare the sweets using traditional utensils like clay and metal molds. In one private school in Denpasar, Balinese parents take turns bringing jajan to school once a week for the children, where it is highly popular. In Sanur market, you can find Javanese, Sumatran and Balinese jajan.

"Jajan is a dying art in Bali, no question about it," Yvonne points out. So start exploring some of the local delicacies before they disappear for good. Traditional morning markets always have a few women selling jajan. Ask for...

- Gambir/Ewel (Bali chocolates – ground black rice and palm sugar wrapped in bamboo leaves and tied up like tiny gifts)
- Klepon (dainty green balls rolled in freshly grated coconut that deliver a delicious explosion of liquid palm sugar when bitten)
- Jajan Abuk (grated layered coconut pancake)
- Kue sago (soft cakes of sago flour served with red palm sugar syrup and grated coconut)
- Kue Dadar (green pancakes of tapioca flour with grated coconut and palm sugar syrup inside)
- Giling-giling ('worms' made from rice or wheat flour)
- Singkang pisang (a slice of banana in a circle of green singkang cake served with coconut)
- Kulak pisang (bananas cooked in red palm sugar and tapioca flour)

- Kue Injin (black rice pudding)
- Kue Lompag (singakang, red palm sugar and coconut)
- Pisang Salae (fried bananas)
- Waluh (steamed dumplings of rice flour, pumpkin and grated coconut)
- Mangkok (steamed cupcakes with split tops)

Ibu Kat's book of stories *Bali Daze - Freefall off the Tourist Trail* is available from:

1. *Ganesha Books in Ubud and Seminyak*
2. *www.balidazethebook.com* downloadable as a PDF file
3. *Amazon* downloadable for Kindle