



BITE - SIZE BALLS



A cooking class at Hotel Tugu.
Opposite: Lining up the local
ingredients at Bali Asli.

*Tour Bali through its
cooking schools and, as
Samantha Brown
discovers, you'll uncover a
lot about the island and
its favorite dishes.
Photographed by
Johannes P. Christo*

hear the man in the tree before I see him. He's perched so high that the foliage initially hides him. He uses a stick to whack the fruits that will be used to brew *tuak*, a slightly fizzy sweet wine popular with Balinese farmers.

As far as missions go, so far this one is successful. I'm determined to explore Bali one cooking school at a time, and I'm far away from any kitchen, getting sun-kissed and, occasionally, startled by a lowing cow. With my guide Ketut and another student, I'm rambling through the surrounds of Bali Asli, a restaurant and school set up by British chef Penelope Williams outside Amlapura on the east coast.

Though we started our walk on the asphalt road outside the school, in a few minutes we're encircled in farmland. We roam through a field of cassava trees, past

gleaming caged fighting cocks, until the view opens to the ocean. Lombok sits in the distance. Sarong-clad women wash in the canals of the Balinese *subak* system, which irrigates the emerald paddies crisscrossing toward the horizon. It's a small, no, make that bite-size, slice of Bali.

Then it's off to the kitchen. Our class takes place in full view of soaring Gunung Agung, Bali's highest and most revered volcano, and begins with a crash course in all the key ingredients of Balinese cooking. As with many other Asian cuisines, it's about getting four flavors—sweet, salty, sour and hot—just so.

One of the spices I'm most intrigued with is *kencur*, or lesser galangal, a gnarled turmeric-like root. Bite down on a slice and it leaves your tongue gently anaesthetized, almost like chili without the heat. The "Balinese truffle," or *pangi*, is also new to me. It's the nut of a fruit, which when broken open reveals a deep brown flesh reminiscent of fine dark chocolate. Williams says she's added flecks to a chocolate pudding with success.

The key to Balinese dishes is nearly always a version of a *bumbu*, or spice paste. It's a dish I'll repeat at all the schools, one that contains a combination of at least some of the following: chilies, garlic, Asian shallots, candlenuts, nutmeg, ginger, turmeric, *kencur*, torch ginger, tamarind, palm sugar, shrimp paste, lemongrass and *salam* leaves.

In this class we use a *bumbu* that includes coriander seeds, common in Balinese cuisine, mixed with minced chicken to form satay on lemongrass skewers. Our *pesan be pasih*, a spiced fish fillet steamed in banana leaf, plus a tofu version, uses the key *bumbu*, as does our *urap paku kacang merah*, a fern-tip salad that is heavy on coconut and red beans.

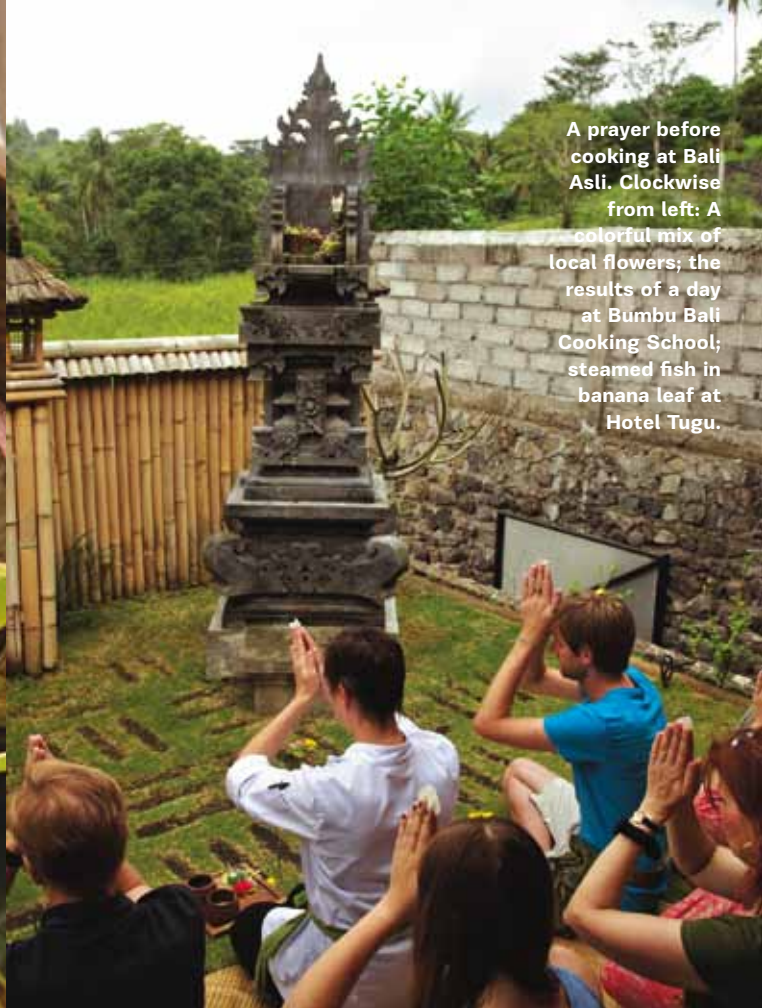
After those delicious dishes, it's off to class number two. Hotel Tugu in Canggu on Bali's west coast offers classes in a replica of an old-style Indonesian *warung*, or streetside restaurant. Before we start cooking though, we're up at 7 a.m., heading to Pasar Badung in the island's capital Denpasar. A stream of black pickup trucks belch fumes, engines idling, as they offload produce from the island's cooler northern hills.

The more we walk, the more we buy. A porter balances our groceries in a basket on her head as we wend our way past benches curving under the weight of produce: limes; mangoes; fresh coconut oil; torch ginger; cauliflower; cabbage; eggs from ducks, geese and chickens; banana stems and leaves; papayas; bananas; soursop; avocados; turmeric—one type for cooking, another to make *jamu*, or traditional medicine—broccoli; coconut oil; and chilies.

Ayu from the hotel and I buy ingredients for the five dishes I've selected out of the 10 on the hotel menu. There's no lecture—it would be foolish to stop to chat amid this mayhem—but Ayu answers all my queries. On our menu: *lodeh tewel tahu tempeh*, a Javanese soup of young jackfruit with *tempeh* and tofu; another version of *pesan be pasih*; *lawar kacang panjang*, or long bean and chicken salad; the banana-stem soup known as *jukut ares*; and *ayam pelalah*, or Balinese shredded chicken.

Back at the hotel, Ayu stays in the kitchen to help chef Ibu (a term of respect meaning "mother") Soelastris and I prepare our feast. Nothing is pre-chopped or ready, so the two of us become kitchen hands, chopping, bruising, slicing, crushing, grating and sniffing ingredients laid out for us in neat banana-leaf pockets. And I can, therefore, announce the real time it takes to produce five authentic Indonesian dishes, right from the start: an hour and 40 minutes, which is not that much longer than it takes me to produce a slightly complex meal in my own Western kitchen.

Ibu Soelastris, from Malang in East Java, speaks Bahasa Indonesian and Javanese, but barely a smattering of English. It's not a problem though, because in her humming kitchen, where two woks and a steamer hiss or sigh without pause, words don't matter too much. This is a demonstration I feel privileged to be able to participate in; it's not a technical account of ingredients or a lecture in the subtle differences between a Balinese and Javanese curry (though the answer, I've learned elsewhere, involves cardamom and cumin). And forget recipes—though I'll be given a booklet at the end—as Ibu Soelastris tosses and tastes without consulting anything at all. When we run out of banana leaves, she dashes to the adjacent garden for more.



A prayer before cooking at Bali Asli. Clockwise from left: A colorful mix of local flowers; the results of a day at Bumbu Bali Cooking School; steamed fish in banana leaf at Hotel Tugu.



Garden ingredients are also on the menu at classes developed by Australian Janet de Neeffe in the hill town of Ubud in central Bali. Today Balinese chef Inengah Oleg Sudira plucks the stamens from three ruby-red hibiscus flowers and pops them into a glass. He pours in boiling water, stirring as the water turns a purple-black. With a squeeze of lime, the magician watches our reaction as the liquid lightens dramatically to lollipop pink. A little white sugar and we have ourselves sweet hibiscus tea.

It's a reviving drink after a morning spent at Ubud's traditional market in the heart of the tourist quarter. It's easy to see the market building as a palimpsest; during the early hours, it's filled with Balinese buying ingredients for their daily cooking, then later in the day it's crammed with tourists snaring souvenir fare while trudging the grime-slicked aisles.

Sudira explains along the way the nuts and bolts of Balinese food. Black and white pepper come from the same plant, but the white is soaked and dried in the sun twice. Nutmeg is a natural hallucinogen—have a little in milk with ginger to sleep well. The “saffron” you see everywhere in Bali is “cheap saffron,” likely safflower seeds. We talk fruits, vegetables, rice, tofu, even quotidian knives and coconut graters.

Back at school, we have breakfast then start cooking our dishes for the day: chicken curry, anchovy *sambal*, wok-fried eggplant, tofu fritters, bean coconut salad and *sago* pudding. We take turns grinding, chopping, frying and tasting in an open-air pavilion at one of de Neeffe's guesthouses. “It's like aromatherapy,” Sudira sighs, standing over the wok as steam dances away from a *bumbu* frying there.

Little details again surprise. Did you know the direction you cut purple Asian shallots in Balinese cooking depends on whether they're going into a *sambal* or are being fried as a garnish? We wash down our feast with a glass of *tuak*.

It's almost a two-hour drive from Ubud down south to Jimbaran Bay, once home to a fishing village and now fringed by some of Bali's top resorts and seafood restaurants. Classes held by Swiss chef Heinz von Holzen begin at the market behind the beach at 6:30 a.m. Though top-flight hotels line the same road as the market, duck just a few meters down a side street and this large market shows you the real Bali alive and well, he says.

While von Holzen takes us through a riveting explanation of chicken hypnosis—really—spices and



Chef Heinz von Holzen leads a market tour. Opposite: An array of ingredients for Balinese spice paste.

fruits, a *kul kul*, or traditional Balinese village drum, sounds, a high-pitched *rat-tat-tat*. The men of the village forget about work and immediately head to a community meeting, he explains.

Our next stop is Jimbaran's seaside fish market. The beach here is gorgeous in the filtered morning light; red, yellow and blue Balinese *jukung* bob offshore, a scene that most who visit the island yearn to see.

At the same time von Holzen, who has been bringing travelers to the markets since 1997, despairs of dwindling catches. A few years ago massive hauls were being pulled in daily, but now most fish are trucked in from Java under questionable conditions. The boats that bring in the fish now are often merely acting as nothing more than taxis from other craft that are fishing to Bali's east.

Back at the school, set in guesthouse grounds in Tanjung Bena adjacent to Bali's luxury enclave of Nusa Dua, we have a quick tour of the on-site pig pen where von Holzen is raising his own very happy pigs.

The chef is an acolyte of Harold McGee and Heston Blumenthal, meaning our recipes tell us how much garlic to use right down to the nearest gram, and definitely not by the clove. Nevertheless, get a few of the key recipes—yes, the *bumbu*—truly correct,

and we can then let our imaginations at home go a bit more wild and crazy, he says. The dishes we make here—with the assistance of Ida Bagus Wisnawa, von Holzen's assistant, and an entire behind-the-scenes kitchen—are simply too numerous to list. It's a jam-packed, high-energy, exhausting day.

At one point von Holzen becomes distracted. "It's our latest problem," he says. "We have a pig that's too big for the oven." He's clearly amused at this development. "Ah, I love it." He means all of it, this, Bali. And after four days in some of Bali's best kitchens, I have to say I share his feelings. †

Cooking in Bali

Bali Asli Jln. Raya Gelumpang, Gelumpang village Amlapura; 62-828/9703-0098; baliasli.com.au; classes Rp800,000.

Hotel Tugu Jln. Pantai Batu Bolong, Canggu Beach; 62-361/4721-701; tuguhotels.com/bali; classes with market visit Rp1,040,000.

Casa Luna Bali Cooking School Honeymoon

Guesthouse; Jln. Bisma, Ubud; 62-361/973-282; casalunabali.com/cooking-school; classes Rp300,000.

Bumbu Bali Cooking School Jln. Pratama, Tanjung Bena; 62-361/771-256; ballfoods.com; classes with market tour Rp1,035,000.