



FESTIVE *inspirations*

Abiding by festive traditions is important, but there is always room for something new at the buffet table.

During Chinese New Year, how about serving an authentic *lo hon jai* (Buddha's Delight) with its full ingredient mix and symbolic meanings? Make it a Christmas to remember by serving Swedish buffet delicacies. Turn *Iftar* into fresh gastronomic experiences with the hottest ideas from Middle Eastern Ramadan buffets. Become a millennial wedding expert on everything from cake to catering.

Lo Hon Jai:

Blessings for Chinese New Year

Auspicious meanings lie at the heart of Chinese food. During Chinese New Year, symbolic foods are even more important.

Take *Lo Hon Jai* (罗汉斋), or Buddha's Delight, a vegetarian dish eaten on the first day of Chinese New Year. Each of its 8 to 18 ingredients embodies an auspicious meaning. To name

just a few: ginkgo nuts beckon good fortune; bean curd sticks stand for wealth; and water chestnuts represent unity. To enjoy *lo hon jai* is to usher in prosperity for the new year.

Steeped in blessings, *Lo Hon Jai* is a fantastic addition to the festive menu. Chefs can adopt traditional recipes, though the dish lends

itself easily to creative adaptations too. Add to it luxurious ingredients such as abalone and scallops, and the dish becomes a 'treasure pot' signifying abundance. How's that for more crowd-pleasing symbolism?

Core Ingredients of *Lo Hon Jai* and Their Auspicious Meanings

- Arrowheads: benevolence
- Bean curd sticks: wealth
- Black fungus: longevity
- Black moss: wealth
- Carrots: good fortune
- Fried bean curd: family prosperity
- Ginkgo nuts: good fortune
- Glass noodles: longevity
- Golden lily buds: wealth
- Lotus seeds: family prosperity
- Lotus roots: abundance
- Snow peas: unity
- Water chestnuts: unity



A modern interpretation of *Lo Hon Jai*, Buddha's Delight

Almost every food served during Chinese New Year carries a message of prosperity. This updated version of *Lo Hon Jai* is filled to the brim with blessings of wealth, peace, and abundance. Eight pieces each of eight types of ingredients are used, symbolising great fortune for everyone at the table. Abalones, dressed in a golden *Lo Hon Jai* sauce, complete this 'treasure pot'.



Have a Swedish Christmas

In Sweden, Christmas festivities begin as early as 13 December, when Swedes commemorate Lucia, the patron saint of light, with candle-lit processions. As Christmas Day draws nearer, they love to browse Christmas markets in search of trinkets and treats while sipping hot *glogg* (mulled wine) amid the winter ambience.

On Christmas Eve, Swedes traditionally enjoy a *julbord* (pronounced 'yuleboard') at home. It is a buffet of dishes so lavish that a Swedish family could take up to a whole month to prepare. Most Swedes will go for more than one *julbord* during the festive season, and many restaurants will serve it from late November onwards.

Here in Southeast Asia, more guests are arranging Christmas get-togethers at hotels. Why not tweak your menu with a selection of *julbord* dishes and surprise them with some Scandinavian Christmas magic?

At the Swedish Christmas Table

A traditional Swedish *julbord* consists of five 'plates', from appetisers to cold and hot dishes to desserts.

- **First plate:** assorted pickled herring, such as *senapsill* in a creamy mustard sauce, *matjtes* in a preserving liquid
- **Second plate:** fish, such as smoked eel, preserved cod, crayfish salad, all manner of salmon—cured, poached, raw, smoked and more
- **Third plate:** cold meat dishes, like *julskinka* (Christmas ham), chicken liver pâté, smoked lamb, *kroppkaka* (potato dumplings filled with pork or bacon)
- **Fourth plate:** hot dishes, such as *kottbullar* meatballs, Jansson's Temptation (potato casserole spiked with anchovies), *julgryta* (beef stew with cinnamon and figs)
- **Fifth plate:** desserts, such as cinnamon-dusted rice pudding, chocolate fondant, pear tart with star anise

Smörgåstårta, Swedish Sandwich Cake

Sweden, the country that spawned the world's favourite furniture store, IKEA, is also home to *Smörgåstårta*, a salad of scallops and prawns wrapped with thin cucumber slices into a square sandwich cake, a must-have for Christmas. This version is garnished with salmon roe, caviar, and beetroot juice.

Iftar With a Twist

Come Ramadan, Muslims worldwide break fast with *iftar* meals. Hoteliers have introduced novel flavours and creative takes to satisfy the appetites of Muslims seeking *iftar* experiences with fresh twists.

At the New Orleans-themed Cravin' Cajun at Novotel Dubai Al Barsha, for example, guests broke fast with American fare like mac and cheese, chicken and waffles, and key lime pie.

St Regis in Abu Dhabi served an Asian-Latin Ramadan feast at its Caribbean-inspired Asia de Cuba restaurant. Dishes

included empanadas filled with lamb picadillo in Korean *bulgogi* sauce and chicken dim sum with avocado wasabi cream.

Closer to home, Feast Restaurant at Sheraton Bandung offered an iftar buffet that harked back to the good ol' *kampung* (village) days. The concept dialed up the nostalgia using time-honoured Indonesian dishes and rustic décor, and guests were kept entertained with old-school board games and live music performances.

Over at Jakarta Restaurant at The Dharmawangsa Jakarta,

the chefs looked to Indonesia's coastal regions for inspiration. The result was a *pesisir*-style spread with favourites from Manado, Bali and Padang.

Iftar presents many opportunities for hoteliers to think out of the box and present inventive Ramadan concepts and fresh ideas for the buffet menu. Adding these new twists will help you to stand out from the competition.



Moroccan-Style Chicken Stew

Inspired by a Moroccan household dish, this stew is made with free-range chicken broth and organic tomato puree. Black, red and white quinoa is added as a wheat-free option. Garnish with olives and serve alongside gluten-free couscous for a warm, hearty *iftar* meal.

Millennial Weddings

Traditional weddings in the region often follow a pattern. The families usually decide the guest list. Attendee numbers run into the hundreds, or more. Chinese couples may opt for traditional tea ceremonies and eight-course dinner banquets.

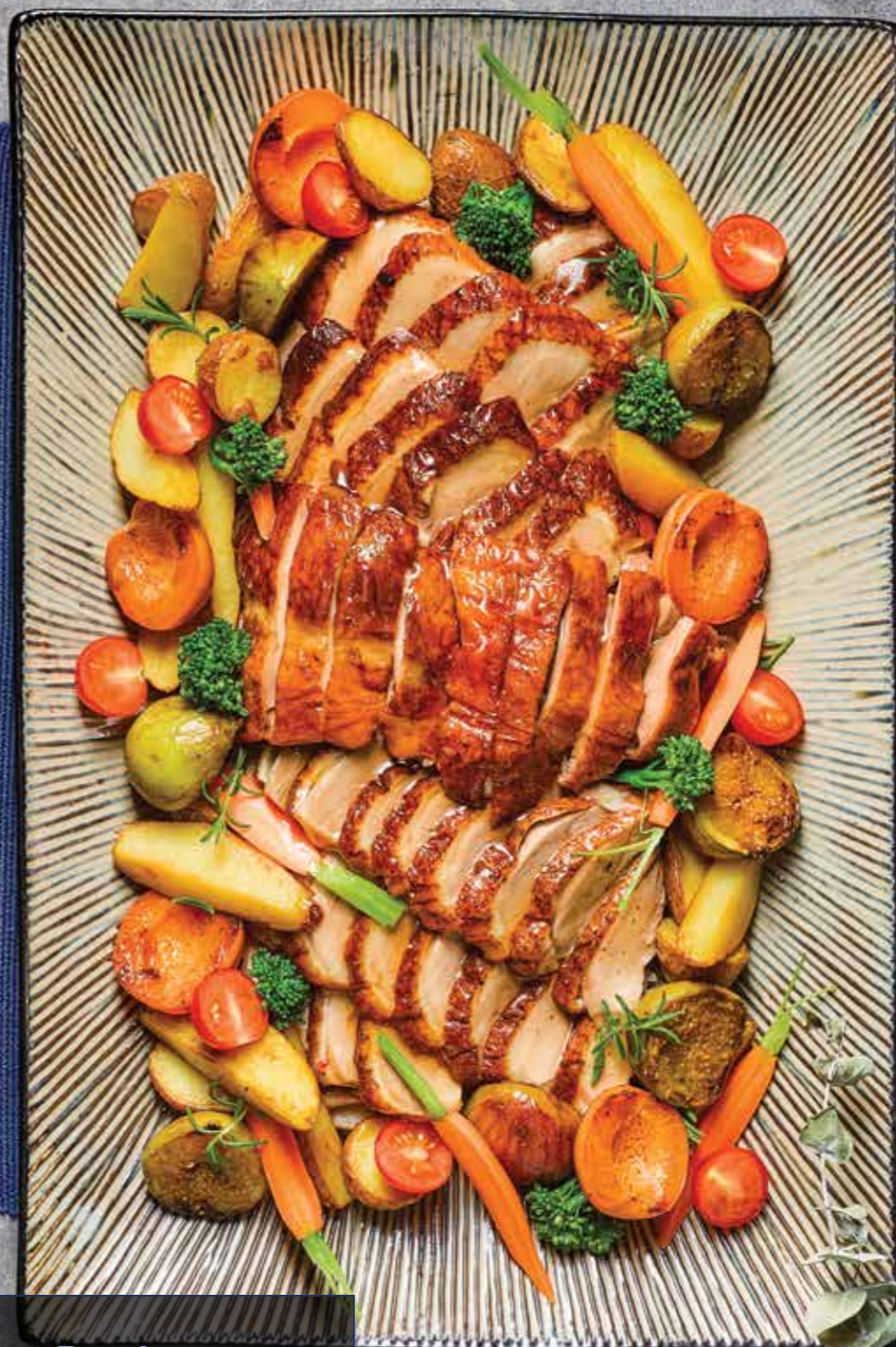
But gone are the days when couples are beholden to every nuptial custom. Millennials prefer to stamp their individuality on their big day and have the spending power to personalise their celebrations.

Just how different are millennial weddings? Social media plays a big part: savvy couples create their own wedding hashtags for guests to share happy moments with the rest of the party. Some couples forego dinner banquets for buffet lunches. Seating arrangements? Too stuffy. Casual dress code? Why not?

More importantly, millennial couples want to work with chefs on custom menus. Their aim? To wow guests by showcasing personal favourite foods. They

crave one-of-a-kind dining experiences: creative wedding cakes (macarons or cake pops, anyone?), dessert buffets with doughnuts and cupcakes, open drinks bars, and even entire banquets with organic, sustainable, or vegan dishes.

The possibilities will keep on evolving. To hoteliers and chefs, this means staying ahead of wedding trends, keeping an open mind and continuing to reinvent and personalise offerings.



Roast Duck Party Plate

Weddings are occasions where the young and old come together to celebrate the newlyweds. This crowd favourite – Chinese roast duck – is coated with luscious plum sauce, sweetening the special day. It is also decked out with Western staple ingredients like figs, apricots, as well as potatoes, which are baked, steamed, and deep-fried.

