

# THE GOODLIFE

## EAT STREET

Notwithstanding the pong of durian (an acquired taste at best), we've always known that Malaysia had great culinary game. Now, it's got a different kind of grounds-up revolution brewing. *GQ* visits Kuala Lumpur to find out what's fresh in the Klang Valley

WRITTEN BY NIDHI GUPTA

**F**rom a distance, it looks like just another innocent tray of mud and green saplings amid a sea of trays of brown soil and infant greens. Except the label on it reads "Project BURN ASSHOLE", emphasis on the last two words. Alleena, the operations manager of A Little Farm on the Hill, laughing in caps lock, announces that she's trying to grow a particularly vicious strain of chilli. Mercifully, it's too young to set our innards on fire. →

The spread at De.Wan  
1958 by Chef Wan

## THE GOODLIFE



Woobar at W Kuala Lumpur; (Left) Fermented pineapple juice and a plate of sautéed pumpkin, chestnut, cinnamon and bay leaf at A Little Farm on the Hill; (Sidebar) Chawanmushi at Flock



Instead, for lunch at this quaint, peaceful farm, we're served a lot of freshly plucked goodness. An alluring mild bitterness spikes the summer afternoon's humid air and our cocktails: In my glass of gin, there's no sugary tonic, but twigs of rosemary and a lime-based homemade concoction. It's also elevating the plate of *bunga kantan* (the torch ginger flower native to Malaysia and Indonesia), while newly harvested kale and basil bring irresistible flavours into our bowls of *nasi ulam*.

We got the sun today, a break from an extended north-east monsoon, as we left for the Janda Baik forest from our base at the shiny new W Kuala Lumpur. The chic hotel opened its doors in Malaysia's capital city barely ten months ago, and is reportedly among a bunch of new luxury offerings – including a Four Seasons and a Banyan Tree – signalling either that KL's back on the radar; or that, for a key layover point for humans and airplanes zinging all over the globe, it was always here, this melting pot of Asia.

From the floor-to-ceiling window in my room on the 14th floor, I can see a forever-improvising city in frantic motion. Down below, cars and pedestrians move like ants on a food-sourcing mission, in a rush, but obediently towing the line. High above, glass buildings crowd out the sky.



### A DAY AT W KUALA LUMPUR

Begin at the gym or the pool or whatever speciality workout the W's got planned for the day (get in on the Barre). After Malay omelettes at Flock, ask for the resident W Insider (check if Meliha's around), who will clue you in on the hottest and hippest everything in KL right now. Book yourself a Malay Urut massage at the Away Spa for when you return: Not only will your polite masseuse knead every pesky node out of your body, she'll revive you with a pot of delicious vanilla bourbon tea. By sundown, find quiet cocktails at the futuristic-looking Woobar, and later let loose at the WET Deck, which hosts the region's most suave DJs every weekend.

Lording above them all are the mighty Petronas Twin Towers, so tall they don't even fit into a phone camera frame. Walking around Jalan Ampang with our necks strained skywards, a fellow traveller comments that this sight kind of reminds her of her home city, Gurugram. It's a bit of a stretch, but you get the sentiment. If you stare too long, skyscraper cities begin to look alike: iconic pieces of architecture glimmering on the skyline like sparkling needles lined up for inspection, cutting up the horizon. It's captivating, aspirational, prestigious – but bland. How do you taste the real flavour of a mega-city?

Between courses, Lisa, the owner of A Little Farm on the Hill, tells us about quitting the urban life – she, an architect, her husband Pete, a musician – to return to the soil, to the basics of good living. On this six-acre patch of land, they grow organic vegetables, fruits, herbs. They smoke meat, make jams. On site, they offer shared farm-to-table brunches, the company of some very friendly doggos, verdant views of Malaysia's gently sloping hills and liberation from mobile phone networks.

They also supply their produce to a few select gourmet stores and restaurants in the city. Which explains the blocks of grassy soil jutting out of the open fridge's shelves at Flock, W's vibrant live kitchen, like some last-ditch effort to preserve the planet's life source in a post-apocalyptic scenario. Executive chef Richard Millar, who left his hometown of Melbourne to work in China, Japan, Fiji, Indonesia and ➔

## THE GOODLIFE

now, here, is passionate about fresh produce, we're told. Just as he is about guiding his patrons through a copious, rather global menu.

One night, Millar walks over to recommend the *chawanmushi*, "a signature dish": In a Japanese egg custard that usually comes with shimeji mushrooms, edamame, crab and chicken, he's boldly added some of that notorious steamed foie gras. As if this wasn't dramatic enough, it arrives sitting in an actual bird's nest. Of course, it instantly becomes an Insta story; a satisfactory number of followers chirp back with drool emojis.

Turns out, Lisa, Pete and their vegetable garden are Millar's discoveries; as are the makers of the superlative artisanal cheese cuts (by the head-scarf-wearing Annisa Iwan and her brand Milky Whey) served at breakfast, as well as the Malaysian single-origin, sustainably made chocolate (by 3D design professor-turned-chocolatier Ong Ning Geng and his brand Concierge) in decadent desserts, like the Pure C-Smoked Noir 64% Lava.

Over at De.Wan 1958, the brand new venture by the uber popular celebrity chef Wan, I can't get enough of the *bubur pulut hitam* – coconut milk and palm sugar syrup poured over a bed of Thai black glutinous rice boiled with corn kernels. The dessert evokes the taste of what we call *kheer* in the North, *payasam* in the South. It arrives after multiple

courses of very Malay fare, dishes curated and adapted from the streets to the royal kitchens: endless sticks of satay, bowls of *sup ayam*, plates of *daging rendang selangor*. It's all deeply familiar and exotic at once, right down to the glass of rose-flavoured milk we're offered to start this meal.

Chef Wan (real name: Dr Redzuan Ismail) is a stocky, witty and very colourful man, often spouting stories bordering on the outrageous. He's a *datuk*, the OG of the Malaysian culinary scene, we're told in awed whispers. Everyone has watched him on TV, growing up. He's the reason Malaysia's become almost synonymous with great food in global parlance. As he says in a YouTube video: "Food is love. Food is peace. Food is everything."

Something the late Anthony Bourdain said on *Parts Unknown* comes to mind: "Do we really want to travel in hermetically sealed popemobiles through the world eating only in Hard Rock Cafés and McDonald's? Or do we want to eat without fear, tearing into the local stew... The sincerely offered gift of a lightly grilled fish head?"

I bite into a tiger prawn that's been slow-cooked in creamy coconut milk, turmeric and pineapple – a recipe called *udang nenas nyonya* that comes from the Peranakans, descendants of early Chinese migrants who settled in Penang and Malacca. "This is the stuff," a Chinese girl sitting next to me on this sharing table exclaims. Yes, indeed; this is fire. 🍲



### GETTING THERE

There are daily flights from Mumbai, Kochi and Delhi to Kuala Lumpur on **Malaysia Airlines** and **Malindo Air**.

### WHILE YOU'RE THERE

In the artsy and hipster neighbourhood of **Bangsar**, visit **Shoes, Shoes, Shoes** to pick up quirky products by Malaysia's most on-trend designers. Find more of this at **Naiise** in the **Zhongshan Building** and stop for a cuppa at **Piu Piu Piu**. If you must visit **Chinatown**, buy your gimcracks from **Central Market** and stop by the tiny **Merchant's Lane** for a taste of KL's own coffee revolution. To savour some of this city's famous nightlife, take your pick between **The Iron Fairies KL**, **Pisco Bar**, **Club Kyō KL** and **Suzie Wong**; and speakeasies like **PS150**, **Omakase + Appreciate**, **The Berlin KL** and **JungleBird**.

### OUT & ABOUT

If all you can manage is a day trip out of town, check out the **Malacca UNESCO heritage site**, a couple hours' drive away. A slice of history from the time that the Straits of Malacca were a key trade route, this is a town gone hipster. Nature and adventure seekers, catch a quick flight to **Pulau Tioman**, a gorgeous island located in the South China Sea: Swim among bioluminescent weed at **Nipah**, go snorkelling at **Coral Island**, learn about **Juara's** turtle project and hike through the island's forests to catch a glimpse of the clarias batu or walking catfish.



A view of the Petronas Twin Towers from the Wet Deck; (Right) A suite at W Kuala Lumpur



IMAGE: W KUALA LUMPUR (SUITE, PETRONAS TWIN TOWERS)