



Chicken Rice in Taiping

Half the fun of travelling to faraway places and intermixing with different cultures is to be found in the simple - but most essential – daily task of eating and drinking. We think all the answers are at home ... until we go abroad. Often, as well as new foods that unlock new taste buds, it's the setting around those foods that provides extra divergence from our norms.

My breakfast at the Peace Hotel in Taiping consisted of chicken rice and milk tea ... white chicken that is. Customers had the choice of roast chicken, or white chicken. My selection arrived in four white dishes, each emblazoned with suitably sized dragons: plain white rice, the chicken with cucumber and green leaf



garnish, a bowl of a soup-like brown gravy and a smaller dish containing what appeared to be a rather fiery looking sauce. The tea was served in a clear *Pyrex* tumbler, with matching saucer, and was the customary *Carnation* milk with tea variety, to be stir-mixed with a Chinese spoon, also sporting a dragon design on its stem.



I'm not sure this would have been my first choice – chicken that is, roast or otherwise - but the other possibilities were fried rice, which I didn't fancy at 10 o'clock in the morning, or *Kentucky Fried Chicken*, across the road. It amazed me that *KFC* could operate successfully in a country like Malaysia, where gastronomic delights abound on every corner. But each to his own I guess, as long as that *each* did not include me.

The atmosphere in the café was lively, to say the least. Two tables of elderly, middle-aged men were particularly noisy. They conversed at their metal-edged laminated tables, and between tables, in extremely loud, rasping voices. In the West, one would have thought there was a terrible argument brewing: a matter of life or death. But here in Taiping, this was just a friendly discussion between neighbours.

A group of six young ladies entered the café, dressed in western-style blue jeans, with different coloured T-shirts, though predominantly white and pink. Each of these girls were quite small and pale-skinned; to me they appeared Japanese in stature and style. They ordered chicken rice – the white variety – and it came within minutes, (making me wonder if they had pre-ordered, as my similar meal had taken an eternity). This was delivered on a large, white, oval plate, and placed in the middle of the table for them to share. They drank soft drinks with ice and talked animatedly and at high pitch for the short time they were there, which I guessed was less than thirty minutes.

Unfortunately, I had chosen a small table at the epicenter of a three-tabled triangle. Thus, with the crusty selection of Malaysian men hurling comments - or perhaps insults (who knows?) - at and between their tables on one side, and the six petite but voluble girls screaming at each other, with voices that could shatter my glass tumbler on the other, I resigned myself to thinking about the ups and downs of a traveller's life. Surreptitiously I also busied myself with dividing my pink serviette into two and forming little mini icecream cones, to act as ear plugs.

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