

# Cooking up a storm

Sharpen your knives and tie up your aprons as Helen Dalley introduces six cooking courses from around the region

**F**ood is one of the best ways to get a sense of a new destination and travellers are often keen to reproduce the dishes they've tasted on the road. But attempts to replicate those exquisite *xiao long bao* sampled in Shanghai, or that delicately spiced bowl of *laksa* in Kuala Lumpur, don't always go to plan.

A cooking school provides the opportunity to master the techniques and recipes needed to re-create the genuine article and transport those flavours home.

## MALAYSIAN MASTERPIECES

From spicy *rendang* stews and satay sticks to Chinese-inspired dishes like *bak kut teh* (pork rib soup), Malaysia is home to a host of popular dishes, many of which can be re-created within the classrooms of At 19 Culinary Studio in Kuala Lumpur.

Masterchef judge John Torode, who is renowned for his Asian cooking skills, recently visited the studio to cook *nasi lemak* for the first episode of his "Malaysian Adventure" cooking series.

"We were so excited to know that John was coming to our kitchen to cook with local celebrity chef Sherson Lian," revealed owner Hellen Fong. "He has a good knowledge of the spices and ingredients used in Malaysian

cooking like *belacan* (shrimp paste) and pandan leaf."

The studio's approach to Malaysian cooking is to keep it simple: "We have to consider modern lifestyles and palates by utilising food processors and pressure cookers to save time, and replacing ingredients such as eel with fish as in the Assam Laksa recipe taken from our *Lost Recipes of Malaysia* cookbook," says Fong.

Most customers are keen to learn dishes that they can't find easily at restaurants. "They also like to learn to cook dishes of other races – the Chinese want to learn Malay dishes while Indians are keen to master Chinese dishes, for example. Clients want to learn dishes they can re-create easily at home for their family and friends," she adds.

Past attendees noted that they enjoyed the classes as the groups were kept small so everyone got the attention of the instructor. "We are located in a bungalow, so people feel relaxed here – it's like cooking in someone's home," says Fong.

New classes from the studio include folk art painting on cupcakes and cookies using edible paint, while for the Instagram generation, there's a food styling and photography class entitled "Plate to Pixel".

[at19culinary.com](http://at19culinary.com)

## ITALIAN GOURMET

Sydney is home to many great Italian restaurants including Lucio's for Northern Italian specialities like black handkerchief pasta and Pilu at Freshwater for a Sardinian take on suckling pig. It's also the home of Italian "providore" Salt Meats Cheese, which started off as a food emporium and now operates six restaurants and a cooking school at its latest Alexandria outlet, where participants can master pizza, pasta and mozzarella in two-hour classes. "Cooking class participants can buy items like pasta machines, dough scrapers and other equipment to take home and practise their new cooking skills," says Amanda Merlo, who handles events for the brand.

Merlo says the pasta and ravioli classes are particularly popular, and the recently introduced pizza masterclasses have been booking out fast. What clients find the most rewarding about the course is that they're learning a life skill. "Many are excited to go home and practise making fresh pasta for their families, show off their freshly stretched mozzarella or bake their pizza dough," says Merlo.

As for those who are nervous about signing up and have little to no experience in the kitchen, Merlo reassures would-be attendees that all its classes are suitable for

**Opposite page:**  
Making pasta at  
Salt Meat Cheese in  
Sydney



beginners. "They're designed to guide participants step by step, so there's nothing to be afraid of, and you'll be surprised how proud you are with the finished product. Italian cuisine does not need to be complicated – using simple, fresh, quality ingredients can make for an easy, tasty meal," she adds.

[saltmeatscheese.com.au](http://saltmeatscheese.com.au)

## CANTONESE CLASSICS

From baskets of steaming dim sum to Cantonese favourites like sweet-and-sour pork, Hong Kong is a city that takes its food seriously. Wannabe chefs can get to grips with the techniques at The Chinese Culinary Institute, a professional outfit that trains young chefs and also offers a Fun Kitchen programme. The four-hour immersion course sees novices learn two dishes from one of three categories: wok-cooking fare such as deep-fried boneless chicken with lemon sauce, southern dim sum with Guangdong classics like shrimp and pork dumplings or northern dim sum dishes include pan-fried minced-beef cakes.

In addition to mastering two dishes, participants can sample a Chinese set lunch prepared by students and witness a live demonstration of *la mian* (hand-pulled noodles), an option that's particularly popular with non-Chinese participants.

The cooking classes teach participants about Chinese culture by explaining how dim sum differs from region to region. "We distinguish between northern and southern dim sum to reveal different characteristics in cooking method and taste. This is the same for the other dishes, which specify which province they are from so participants can gain a greater understanding of the cooking from different regions in China," says Christina Choy, head of marketing services.

Attendees get the opportunity to learn some basic Chinese

cooking skills, from how to use a wok properly to making dumpling skin from rice flour. "By the end of the course, they should come away with a basic knowledge of Chinese cooking and the techniques associated with it in addition to the recipes learnt," she adds.

[cci.edu.hk](http://cci.edu.hk)

## JAPANESE JOURNEY

Based in Tokyo, near the largest wholesale fish and seafood market in the world, classes at Tsukiji Cooking start with a tour of the historic area where more than 2,000 tons of marine produce are handled daily and tunas have sold for record-breaking prices: a 180kg bluefin fetched US\$37,500 here in 2013.

During the tour of Tsukiji, participants shop for ingredients for the three dishes they will be preparing, cooking and eating – all within a 3.5-hour timeslot. (Those with less time can go straight to the kitchen for a two-hour lesson). Guide Misao Sugibayashi says participants are keen to master Japanese classics like miso soup, tempura and udon noodles.

"Clients enjoy making udon from scratch, and making up bento boxes according to their own preferences, which are fun classes," she says.

Tsukiji Cooking additionally offers clients the chance to learn home-cooked Japanese favourites like hearty broths and teriyaki, a cooking technique where foods are grilled with a glaze of soy, *mirin* (rice wine) and sugar. "Japanese home style cuisine is getting more popular than ever and participants want to know about basic Japanese ingredients and seasoning," says Sugibayashi.

The school also offers the opportunity to observe a Michelin-starred chef in action at a renowned Ginza restaurant. Limited to 11 people, this two-hour session is



popular with foodies, who can sample four different items from the restaurant menu after witnessing the dishes being prepared on the counter.

Recently launched cooking courses include an option to make popular Japanese dessert *matcha-kuzu nagashi*, a chilled sweet made with green tea, alongside curry rice and miso soup. A Premium Sake & Local Appetizer class is another recent addition.

[tsukiji-cooking.com](http://tsukiji-cooking.com)

## SHANGHAI EATS

One of the few cooking studios in Shanghai to offer lessons in English, Chinese Cooking Workshop offers six public courses, including classes dedicated to *la mian* and another

**Clockwise from top left:** Tsukiji Cooking; Chinese Cooking Workshop, Shanghai; At 19 Culinary Studio, Kuala Lumpur; and making noodles and dumplings at Hong Kong's Chinese Culinary Institute



that teaches students how to shop with confidence at the wet market. Lessons last for two hours, while those opting for the wet market tour will need three hours to hand.

By taking students to the wet market and sharing his own cooking experiences, head chef Mike Huang hopes to provide an insight into Shanghainese food, which is famous for dishes including sweet-and-sour spare ribs and drunken chicken. "Participants can enjoy a fun, hands-on cooking experience," he says.

In addition to its six public courses, the cooking school offers several private courses, including "Dim sum", where participants make two different dishes, and "Wok", where three dishes are

introduced. "Most of our participants want to learn how to cook items like xiao long bao, green onion pancakes, spring rolls, fish-shaped dumplings and sesame balls," says Huang, who adds that the workshop's Wok course and Dim Sum class are its most popular offerings at the moment.

While Huang admits many participants may initially struggle to chop food using a cleaver or flip a wok with ease, by the end of the session he says students will have absorbed the basics of Chinese cooking and be ready to cook their dishes at home.

Participants who prefer to take a more hands-off approach, meanwhile, can rent out the kitchen and ask the chef to cook for a group.

"People can tell us what they want to eat and our chefs will cook in front of them so they can have a very personalised dining experience," says Huang.

[chinesecookingworkshop.com](http://chinesecookingworkshop.com)

## TASTE OF THAILAND

One of Thailand's most esteemed culinary brands, Blue Elephant, operates restaurants around the world and also produces a range of curry pastes, herbs and spices. Located opposite the Surasak Skytrain station in Bangkok, the Blue Elephant Cooking School is renowned for its beautifully presented dishes and is helmed by founding partner and director chef Nooror Somany Steppe, who is often on hand to supervise lessons at the 113-year-old mansion.

Participants usually want to master Thai classics like *tom yam* soup, green curry and *phad Thai*, says the chef: "We teach them about Thai ingredients and herbs, how they can be used and what can be substituted if they can't buy those ingredients."

One popular class is the half-day Morning Course that includes a visit to Bangrak market to shop for ingredients like Thai sweet basil, kaffir lime leaves and bird's-eye chillies. "The market tour enables students to see and learn about fresh ingredients and herbs used in Thai cooking, and many will buy ingredients to take back home and cook with, such as palm sugar." During class, participants cook four different dishes. "We explain that the main key to cooking successfully is to know your ingredients," says Somany Steppe.

One of the workshops offered is a fruit and vegetable carving class, a skill once taught to the women in the royal palace to bring drama to the dinner table. "While it is largely attended by professional chefs," Somany Steppe says, "I would recommend this class to anyone who wants to relax the mind, as it's very therapeutic."

[blueelephantcookingschool.com](http://blueelephantcookingschool.com) ■