

That's Wild Season 2

Spice of Life | Plants in Local Cuisine

[00:00:00] **Jana:** It's a very important message. People don't realise it. They really don't realise their beef steak also comes from plants. And I always love to remind them, you know, no grass, no cow, no cow, no beef steak. It's simple math.

[00:00:14] [Jingle]

[00:00:20] **Elliott:** Hello and welcome to *That's Wild*, a podcast series brought to you by the National Parks Board. I'm Elliott, and I'll be a host for this series where we'll be talking to special guests from the nature community about topics surrounding biodiversity conservation in our City in Nature. Today's episode's all about plants.

They're one of the most essential parts of human life. Even though most of us may not fully realise this, and beyond nourishing our bodies, plants are also deeply intertwined with our cultural roots and heritage, and they make up a huge part of what we eat each day.

[00:00:48] **Elliott:** So today we have Jana and Malcolm here to talk to us about the wonderful world of plants and how we use them in our, you know, cuisines and our daily lives. So guys, would you please introduce yourselves?

[00:00:59] **Jana:** Hello everyone. I'm Jana. I work as an herbarium keeper and principal researcher at Singapore Botanic Gardens. And the plant group which is the love of my life are gingers. So, I have spent my life researching gingers.

[00:01:13] **Malcolm:** So, hi everyone. I'm Malcolm and I am the chef and co-owner of two restaurants, Candlenut and Pangium. We have Candlenut. We kind of focus on family Peranakan stories and dishes, and Pangium is where we kind of take that further while exploring regional, heritage, culture, as well as recipes and lost ingredients.

[00:01:37] **Elliott:** So, I thought we'd just open up with a very casual and open question. So, what do you guys like about plants? What got you into plants or what got you into using plants in food?

[00:01:47] **Jana:** What got me in the plants, I was born loving plants. So, my parents say, you know, at three years old I was already plucking plants. Here and there. And, for me, like the very clear memories when I was about 10 years old. And we would go for a school trip to the glass houses in Prague, which is the capital city of the country I come from. And there we went into the tropical glass houses. I was completely smitten by gingers at that point. So yeah, that's where my passion for gingers started.

[00:02:14] **Elliott:** Naturally, right, when you deal with food, you're using plants, but what deepened your interest in using different types of plants for your dishes?

[00:02:21] **Malcolm:** Yeah. My very earliest memory of plants is really from my mom. It's not because I love plants in the first place, but I see her, you know, she spent all her free time planting plants, going to the nursery, repotting plants, shifting things all over the house. And sometimes we struggle to find our, in a way, find our door to go inside the house, right?

Because it's just filled through to the corridor. And sometimes she plants those edible plants, like chillies or lime. And that's where I got a bit more interested. It's like, "Oh, we can actually eat this?". And then from there, of course, plants being used in all sorts of Peranakan cuisine, you know, and that kind of start that fascination, you know, like how can just shallots, garlic, chillies and lemongrass, when you grind them together – it looks like just plants, right – but then somehow the smell and the aroma that just permeates the kitchen to the room, to the corridor. And that was alluring. So that's how I kind of really got more and more interested in them.

[00:03:22] **Elliott:** And I think you guys mentioned gingers and you mentioned aromatics. Maybe we could highlight a few of these plants that are very special to you guys and that you guys study or use a lot in your daily lives? What are some examples of these really important plant species to our cuisine, to heritage, to research?

[00:03:39] **Malcolm:** Well, for me, right? A kind of story is, you know, we always travel and there is something we always miss, you know, when we go to different places, especially to western countries, and that is chillies.

[00:03:50] We need that kind of heat and spice. And then that's where I realised that we grew up with so much of it. But it's so integral into our, not just in, in our palette, but kind of that spice... invigorates us, you know? I think sometimes we're a little bit kind of crazy that way, right?

[00:04:06] Our weather is so hot and so humid, and we still want to add more heat to our bodies, but I think that's really something, I feel, is really indispensable. You know, when we mix *sambals* or curries, even just adding sliced *chilli padi* to noodles and rice, we just love it.

[00:04:22] **Jana:** Well, I think for me, when it comes to food, if you ask me what my favourite ginger is, it has to be a torch ginger. That is really like a secret ingredient of Peranakan cooking. That flavour, it's just amazing. It is very hard to describe, but it's quite amazing.

[00:04:40] There is a little bit of ginger, there is a little bit of lemongrass. Then there is something, what nothing else has, just the torch ginger. So, I really love any dishes with that. But of course, when it comes to my professional life studying gingers. So, the two genera I study the most, it's the genus *Curcuma*, which is the genus where turmeric comes from.

[00:04:58] And the genus *Zingiber*, that's where our common *halia* ginger comes from. So those are very special genera for me. They are very large, they are taxonomically very complex. So we always like, discovering still new species to science. And for the ginger we have discovered a new ginger species from Singapore.

[00:05:18] **Elliott:** Right. Before we go into all these new discoveries, could we describe the torch ginger a bit more? Like what dishes are they used in and what the ginger itself kind of looks like? I guess it looks like a torch, right, cause it's called torch ginger.

[00:05:30] **Jana:** Yes. The inflorescence, it's like a torch, but actually by the time it reaches the stage of the torch, by then it's already inedible.

[00:05:38] **Elliott:** Oh, okay.

Jana: So the torch ginger, you have to harvest when it's really young, it actually looks like a spear. You can see them on the local markets. They are kind of like, spindle-shaped, flower buds, in pink colour. And they are usually used fresh. So you shave them into very, very thin slices and then you add them as a garnish.

[00:05:59] So for me, I'm totally addicted to Chinese *rojak*. So, I mean like, if there is no torch ginger, don't even bother. If you come to a rojak stall and there is not enough of torch ginger, locally known as *kantan*, don't buy.

[00:06:13] Some cultures, they also use the leaves. And what people do not know, the fruits of torch gingers are very nice to eat. So, many local people in Peninsular Malaysia, in Borneo, you know, and other parts of Southeast Asia, they actually harvest the fruits, and they eat the seeds.

[00:06:31] Now the seeds are spicy, but they are embedded in the juices, sweet and sour, what we call botanically an aril. So, it's something like when you have a passionfruit, you have the seed inside. And that seed, it's in the juicy sweet sac.

[00:06:44] **Elliott:** Oh yeah. Yeah.

[00:06:45] **Jana:** So, the torch ginger has a similar thing. Okay. It's just that it's not yellow but white, but it's still sweet and juicy.

[00:06:51] **Elliott:** Right.

[00:06:52] **Malcolm:** Yeah. So I'm already learning something new today. Right? Yeah. I'm learning and it's something that I really look forward to because we really do use quite a lot of this, you know, the torch ginger, flower, even really the *rojak*, right?

[00:07:04] Like, Jana mentioned, you know, you just have to have it in that Chinese *rojak* until people call it a *rojak* flower sometimes, right? Yeah. That's how important it is. Really many, many uses for even our kind of cuisine, uh, like shaving it finely to garnish, on salads like, you know, *kerabus*, and we even use it to infuse into like *assam pedas*.

[00:07:24] So that gives you a very nice, citrusy aromatic, flavour profile. like yesterday we tried a kind of a *gado gado* salad. Yeah. And then we have to, we mix a lot inside?

[00:07:34] **Malcolm:** It matches so well with that kind of peanut sauce, you know? Right. Yeah. I was like telling my chef it seems like too much, but somehow it just balances the whole thing, because it can be quite rich.

[00:07:44] But yeah, it's amazing. So, we really use a lot of this and, it's really true that when you get the fresh one, it's totally different from the sad looking one. The moment you, you slice it, you can see already, you know, it makes a lot of difference. And when we garnish or put inside a *nasi ulam*, that kind of herb rice salad, wow. I tell you, it's really, really one of the best things you will have, you know? Yeah.

[00:08:09] **Jana:** Now I will let go of one of my, alcohol secrets here. You can actually slice the torch ginger, and you can macerate it in vodka or in any other neutral tasting alcohol. And you can get a pretty decent flavour for your drinks.

Elliott: I have to try that.

[00:08:25] **Jana:** And then you can use those drinks in some kinds of cocktails. you can get that little flavour. Or if you want the child-friendly version, you can also actually boil, or kind of make, a drink like a syrup flavoured with torch ginger. There are so many uses.

[00:08:40] **Malcolm:** Yeah. Speaking of which, this also you can use for dessert kind of components. You know, like infusion. Yeah. You can make a very light kind of sorbet with it.

But one we did before, now I remember, so we slice it very thinly and we candied it, and you serve it on top of...you can do like *sugee* cakes and stuff like that.

[00:08:59] Oh, it's amazing, because that kind of flavour that comes through with the butteriness of the cake is nice.

[00:09:04] **Elliott:** Let's talk about all the other types of gingers that you guys use, you know, in Peranakan cuisine, maybe in any other cuisine, right? I mean, we have the torch ginger, but what are some other gingers that we use? It's not just, you know, your *halia*, right? What do we even call it? Common ginger?

[00:09:17] **Jana:** Yeah, common ginger. Common ginger would be *halia*. I mean obviously, what is very important one is *galangal*, also known as *greater galangal*, and that one it's a really fairly large rhizome, which is pinkish in flower and locally it is sold as "blue ginger".

There is nothing really blue. I understand that came from some misunderstanding of being, it called "southern ginger", which is supposed to be "nan ginger", but that, it actually can also mean a "blue ginger". But it's really a key ingredient for *rendang*, and many other like meaty rich curries.

[00:09:53] So that one, it's very important. And then of course, turmeric. You cannot imagine Asian cuisine without turmeric. And it's not only Peranakan cuisine, but Indian cuisine, Malay cuisine. I mean like, life in Asia cannot happen without turmeric. Many people don't know that turmeric is a ginger. And then the last one, very common one, it's cardamom.

[00:10:13] And in cardamom we use seeds. Right? Again, plenty of people do not know that cardamom is a ginger.

Elliott: I didn't know that.

Jana: Yeah. But they are locally many, many more. If you go to Tekka Market, Sand Ginger, Then the ginger which is called "Chinese Keys", which especially Thais, they use it for *Tom Kha Kai* and for some other dishes. There are very many gingers in the market.

[00:10:34] **Elliott:** And I guess, in your cooking Chef Malcolm. Yes. Yeah. Other gingers do you use?

[00:10:38] **Malcolm:** Yes. I mean we, everything that Jana mentioned, we really use quite a lot of it. You know, actually when we kind of interview a new cook or chef to join in. We'll say get ready because your knives will be very dull, you'll be kind of slicing a lot of,

galangal, turmeric and all these kinds of, gingers and this all, you know, like *rendangs* and all that. They do add a very distinctive note and a complexity to the dish. It really depends and you cannot overuse it also. It can even be bitter or unbalanced. And, even talking about, like sand ginger and stuff, this is something new we also kind of discovered, you know, we were trying to research and pinpoint the flavour. It's only this kind of ginger can give you that very distinct flavour profile, and that makes like, what we do now, a peanut sauce, it transformed it to another level of flavour. And so, over the years we really, we've kind of used a lot, but we are still learning even more deeply about the types of ginger and how can we use them even more extensively.

[00:11:39] **Elliott**: Could we talk a bit more about the sand ginger? So that's something that I'm not too familiar with, but I've heard it's been used in *gado gado*. Is that correct, or is it used for other kinds of dishes?

[00:11:48] **Malcolm**: Yeah, so this was interesting because we are kind of doing a research on this *gado gado* sauce, right?

[00:11:53] **Elliott**: Yeah.

Malcolm: So, me and my chefs, we were looking at it and we were all trying to say, "You know what is this flavour profile?" We're trying to recreate this. And we were looking at recipes and asking around. And then we went around everywhere, trying to taste different herbs and spices, but we just can't unlock this, right?

[00:12:09] So, you know, my R&D chef, he went to Geylang Serai Market, right? And he literally went to each store to ask the aunties, right, what is this thing that gives it the flavour? And then she recommended, she said, "You have to use this sand ginger". And it was like, you know, all of us like, unlocked, why didn't we know about this?

[00:12:26] Why did we miss it out? And um, so now actually it's going on our menu next week, you know? So that's how much we love it. Cool.

[00:12:32] **Elliott**: What's the taste profile like for the sand ginger? Is it hard to, I know it's hard to explain for these gingers, but how does that differ from, I mean, either torch ginger or your common ginger?

[00:12:40] **Malcolm**: Wow. Tough question.

[00:12:44] **Jana**: It is a tough question because, I will throw in a scientific fact, and that is that each of the ginger species have their flavour compounded by, on average, 4,000

aromatic compounds. Just digest that. And we have about 1,500 species of gingers. And every of those species have that composition constructed differently.

[00:13:06] So, we are talking about very complex things here, right? But I mean to rescue Malcolm a little bit, I mean, from the point of a botanist, I use smell a lot when I try to differentiate the gingers in the field. I would say like torch ginger, you can still feel a bit more of a fruitiness.

[00:13:24] While, I would say the sand ginger is more spicy and earthy. You don't have that much of that fruity lightness. It gives you that kind of like a grounding, warm, warm spicy feel.

[00:13:38] **Malcolm:** Do think maybe almost a slight medicinal component?

[00:13:43] **Jana:** Yes, there is a herbal component. Yeah.

[00:13:45] **Malcolm:** Yeah. So it's not your usual spicy kind of ginger. It's just very deep. slightly herbal. Yeah. Herbal is the word, kind of flavour profile and that is very different from the rest.

[00:13:56] **Jana:** I mean, gingers are masters of disguise because you know, you can have your ginger flavour, but there are species, which if I would give a blind test to Malcolm, I'm sure he would say, "Oh, this is lemongrass, hundred percent."

[00:14:09] And it's a ginger. And then I also have a ginger, which we described not too long ago from Vietnam as a new species which smells and tastes exactly like cinnamon, like hundred-percent cinnamon. And you know, when the analysis is done, you know, that cinnamon compound will be there. So that's how versatile gingers are.

[00:14:30] There are also some gingers, which actually smell pretty bad. If you crush them, they smell like bed bugs, right? And that smell may not be pleasant for humans, but actually when you dilute it enough, then again it may become pleasant. So, it's a whole, whole scent and aromatic compound world, which is quite amazing for this plant group.

[00:14:52] **Elliott:** Right. And you mentioned four, was it 4,000 aromatic compounds?

[00:14:55] **Jana:** Compounds in each. Of course, there are always two or three or five, which are the major ones. And then there are plenty of those which are there in a little bit amount.

But it all works as a complex. And I think that's where also the way you prepare these things matters a lot because these compounds, they do engage in chemical reactions. And I'm sure Malcolm can tell you that throwing a ginger into the blender and submitting it to heat as opposed to knife cutting and processing it the traditional way, it can completely tweak your flavour.

[00:15:28] **Malcolm:** It's true. I mean, it comes down to the, even the ginger itself, the fibres, right. And because the way you kind of cut them, it releases different kinds of flavour profile, even textures also, and all this, it may seem very minute, but every little bit contributes to the final product, right, of the dish. And we've tried many ways, you know? When we want a certain result and, you know, in restaurants sometimes, you are tight for time, right? And cutting requires a lot of patience and a lot of time. But we just cannot take the shortcut. We just cannot blend it. We've just got to cut it in a certain way to get that result.

[00:16:04] **Elliott:** I mean, you guys are talking about a lot of different types of gingers and a lot of different types of taste profiles. How hard is it to identify the right ginger to use in your dishes? Is that something that requires a lot of training, a lot of experience? For our wet markets, there's a lot of different local names. So, do local names kind of help with that or do they actually make things a bit more confusing?

[00:16:27] **Jana:** Okay. From the botanical point of view, the common names can be very confusing because a single common name, it's often applied to 3, 4, 5, but sometimes even 10 different species. So, a good example of that is turmeric.

When you go to local markets, any rhizome which is decently bright yellow, orange inside and smells somewhat like a turmeric is basically labelled as such. But from a botanical point of view, if you take these rhizomes and you grow them in pots, you know, two years later you will get maybe 10 different flowers or 5 different flowers.

So that's sometimes like why people say, oh, turmeric from this region, it's like more spicy and less spicy. But actually, sometimes, people are actually using different species.

[00:17:16] **Elliott:** Wow.

[00:17:17] **Jana:** So that's how taxonomy is important to Malcolm's work.

[00:17:19] **Malcolm:** Yes. Along the years we do realise, you know, you start out learning from... even homes, right? It's just turmeric, right? And as we kind of go into restaurants and we get different... suppliers or we go to the markets and you're buying the turmeric, it doesn't give you the same result. And you realise, yeah, the region does play a part. The species does play a part.

[00:17:40] Everything, every detail matters, right? I think this is the new kind of learning curve for us as chefs also to go deeper into what we know. For many we call this old school. Even Peranakans, right, they actually recognise by that kind of flavour profile.

[00:17:56] It's about palate training over the years sometimes. Right. They may not know, exactly the region, the names of it. But I think that's where, that sensing of like, "Hmm, this is not the right one. I have to find this kind of flavour profile.". Sometimes it takes years, uh, to kind of catch that, but that's why it makes it so special.

[00:18:12] **Jana:** Even in the field sometimes, you know, I'm in the locality and the gingers are not flowering, and many of them look very, very similar in leaf. The leaves are same looking. When they flower, they look different, but flowers are not there. So I always crush the leaves. If they smell different, they are different. Trust your nose. Yeah. Not very scientific, you know, because in the field you can't really quantify it, but whenever the two plants smell different, you can bet your socks on that!

[00:18:41] **Elliott:** Is that how you guys might have identified the new species that you guys discovered in Singapore, or did that just look different when you saw the flower?

[00:18:47] **Jana:** Oh, that just looked different because Singapore, it's quite small. We knew exactly which kind of species were described from Singapore before. So when my colleague brought the first leaf into the herbarium, I was like, "I have never seen this from Singapore.". There are some species in Peninsular Malaysia, which look very, very similar. So, we had to make sure it's not just a species which was already known from Peninsular Malaysia which have turned up in Singapore because that wouldn't be such a big deal. That happens far more frequently. But we did make sure that the species in Singapore, it's different, distinctly different from all others. And we described it as Singapore ginger.

[00:19:27] **Elliott:** It's only found here.

[00:19:28] **Jana:** Which is only found here.

[00:19:29] **Elliott:** Right.

[00:19:30] **Jana:** So, until now it has not been found 10 years later, there is no record of it from Indonesia, Peninsular Malaysia. And you know, that means the species, it's endemic to Singapore and we have the responsibility to conserve it and protect it, because if we don't, that species will be gone.

[00:19:48] And we have very few individuals, like 13 individuals in the wild. But of course, we have propagated a lot already behind the scenes.

[00:19:55] **Elliott:** Okay. Good to know. Going back to the question on the topic of ingredients. I know we're talking about a lot of different regional variations and all having a bit of a different taste profile.

Has globalisation changed how hard it is to procure certain ingredients or how cuisine has evolved over the years? Have we started using certain ingredients that we didn't use in the past? And is it harder to find these more specific kind of gingers?

[00:20:18] **Malcolm:** From personal experience, I have run the restaurant, you know, for 15 years and you do see differences from before to now in terms of what kind of quality of ingredients or how is it changing, and then that makes sense because sometimes when my mom tells me that, ingredients are not the same as before, right?

Yeah. You can say even things like, chillies. You just have to buy what is available. Yeah. Rather than what you have before, because it can come from anywhere now. It's about availability rather than, specifically what do you really want or remember it to be. Because that's what you, you kind of have access to.

[00:20:57] And with, like you mentioned, globalisation is one, commercialisation is another where you have to make your products consistent in terms of look, size, quality. And sometimes this consistency takes away a lot of the uniqueness of ingredients. And we do see that happening now.

[00:21:17] As long people want that it will continue to happen. And we have to go and source very carefully with maybe small farmers, people who are genuinely interested to, you know, grow these sorts of plants. And they're quite rare. Let's put it this way. Yeah. In Singapore.

[00:21:32] **Elliott:** So even in the wet markets, sometimes it's hard to find the gingers that you need for your dishes?

[00:21:38] **Malcolm:** Yeah. Sometimes it's hard. I mean, it's more of whether they can get it in, because they may not be the ones kind of growing them also, and you kind of need to build relationships sometimes, right?

[00:21:48] Because if they come in, in small quantities, then you kind of make sure that they remember you and want to keep them for you.

[00:21:53] **Jana:** Yeah, I think the variety, even on the local market, it's slowly shrinking because it's just more convenient for people to get their shopping done only in the supermarket.

[00:22:03] Yeah. Right? But in the supermarket, when you go to the banana section, you know, mostly you see just the *Cavendish* bananas. And, if you go to the wet market, you can see five, up to 10 different varieties, local varieties of bananas. And you get different tastes, the different colours, different sizes, you know, really a wonderful variety.

[00:22:23] But if people stop patronising the wet markets, we will lose all these heirloom and heritage varieties forever and ever. So, the loss of these varieties is one thing, but second thing, it's running the risk that if we all rely on a single type of banana, like *Cavendish*, you know, virus may come and wipe them out.

[00:22:43] This happened in the 1950s where the world already lost one of the favourite banana varieties at that time, and *Cavendish* came in and took that place. But you know, it can happen again, with *Cavendish*. And if we do not have all these local varieties, you know, then we have no backup to fall on. The same goes for conservation of the wild species because if we do not conserve the wild species, then something happens to our favourite globalised crop.

[00:23:11] We have nothing in our hands to rescue it with. If we still have the crop wild relatives, if we still have the other heirloom varieties, you know, we can still do more crossing. We can, uh, breed more resistant varieties and things like that. So it's very important. So, people please do go to wet markets because if you go to the wet markets and you support the farmers, they will still bring you all these wonderful different varieties.

[00:23:37] Make it a point, consume different kinds of bananas, different kinds of gingers. Because if you buy, people will bring it in.

[00:23:44] **Malcolm:** That is true. You know, it's not just supermarkets. Because now it's so convenient to order online, right?

[00:23:49] And that's where people start to not just go to the supermarket, you start to stay at home and then nobody is at the wet markets.

[00:23:55] Over time, yes, that's where, you know, store owners say, "Yeah, we will stop bringing this in. We'll stop growing this because yeah, there's no demand for it.". And at the same time, commercialisation is selling loads of maybe *Cavendish* bananas.

[00:24:07] It's true, you know, you go there, it's endless, rows and rows. On the culinary side, you know, it's such a waste to lose great tasting, local style banana cakes because if you use the *Cavendish*, you just can't get the same flavour. It's, it's just different and it's, you've lost not just the ingredient, but a part of our heritage as well.

[00:24:26] **Elliott:** Yeah. I guess to preserve our heritage, right? It's very important to know and distinguish different types of plants that we use, and that's one reason why we need to conserve them. But any other reasons? This I'm directing more towards Jana. Any other reasons why it's important to identify, study and conserve all the plants that we have around us?

[00:24:42] **Jana:** Well, the identification comes in a very simple thing. If you cannot identify a plant and give it a name so that we all refer to the potato as a potato and a tomato as a tomato, then we cannot really speak. We need a common language. That's where the science comes in, and the common names are not cutting it because one common name, many different plants.

[00:25:03] That's where the Latin names, the Esperanto of science, come in. And also, how do we actually apply the plant names? That's very important. So, who are the people who decide what is the plant's name? Those are the botanists. But who is the police behind who is safeguarding how the plant name is applied.

[00:25:23] And the answer to that, it's herbarium, right? Herbaria around the world, they store the correctly named plant samples. And those plant samples, which have been named by scientists. So those are kind of like a benchmark for how the plant name has to be applied. And so, when somebody finds a plant without a name, they go to the herbarium.

[00:25:43] They go to the botanist, and they ask, "Hey, what is this plant?". And we do compare them with these correctly named samples, and we arrive to the conclusion what that plant is. And now you may think, "How does that actually relate to my daily life?". And the answer to that is that many plants look really quite similar, yet one can be deadly and one can be edible.

[00:26:03] And trust me, you want to know and be very sure which one is which. Mm-hmm. So that's where the botany comes in. And preserving all those plant collections in the herbarium is a matter of life and death. So, I always tell people, you know, your life depends on herbarium and people like, what is herbarium?

[00:26:23] How can my life depend on something I don't even know about?

Nature Nuggets (Recommendations segment)

[00:26:30] **Elliott:** Welcome to *Nature Nuggets*! In the spirit of our podcast title, *That's Wild*, we wanted to ask our guests to recommend something wild that they've come across or enjoyed, and that you can check out yourself too.

[00:26:40] **Elliott:** So, Jana, what recommendation do you have for audiences?

[00:26:43] **Jana:** I would definitely recommend everyone to visit the Ginger Garden in the Singapore Botanic Gardens.

[00:26:48] It's a place where you can see over 550 species and varieties of gingers, and many people don't even know that bananas are related to gingers. They belong to the ginger order, *heliconias*, and very many other interesting plants.

Malcolm: For me, I'll go the gastronomic route, right?

[00:27:06] And that's where, if you have a chance to, to try somewhere in a restaurant or somebody's house, do try *Nasi Ulam*. I think this is really one of the really rare, kind of dish because it just takes so much time to make it. I mean, in theory it's not difficult.

[00:27:24] It's all the different fresh herbs that you can find. And they will have to test your knife skills. So, you know, the dish, we have many kinds of commentary. It can be known as the Queen of Peranakan rice sellers. It symbolises the epitome of *Nyonya* kind of, knife skills and their attention to detail.

[00:27:43] And so this is something you should try because you can put many kinds of ingredients inside, different kinds of gingers even we do like with turmeric. Any herbs you can find, *laksa* leaves, lemon basil, lime leaves, you name it, you just put it in, and you just have this really amazing flavour profile of the region. So where you are from, they get the herbs from the region. That's what you're tasting.

[00:28:08] **Jana:** It sounds like an herbarium on the plate, and I'm definitely going to try it.

[00:28:13] **Elliott:** Some things you can't get from a book or film, so please go out there and experience these things for yourselves. For now, we're gonna jump back into the main segment of our podcast.

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[00:28:25] **Elliott:** So, if you guys have seen our promo video, *Jana* went to Geylang Serai Market to look at the wide variety of gingers they have there. We have some of them here today with us.

[00:28:35] So Malcolm, you're holding onto a tiny ginger. It looks a lot tinier than the *galangal* at least.

[00:28:40] **Malcolm:** Ya it looks quite small. On just first glance, people might just think, "Hey, it might be a turmeric right?". When you look closer, when you kind of break it apart, you definitely can see it has a yellow, kind of light-yellow interior, not your usual orange. And the smell,

[00:28:55] it's earthy, somewhat. For me, it's just got this medicinal-ish kind of smell, which I think is really, really nice. You can't really pinpoint your finger on it, but it goes well with, you know, for us we do a spice paste with peanut to make a sauce out of it.

[00:29:10] And this one just transforms it. It's kind of that secret ingredient if you will say right, that makes all the difference, and this is the sand ginger.

[00:29:18] **Elliott:** Apart from the gingers, we also have, well these are also technically gingers also, right? Bananas.

[00:29:24] **Jana:** Yes. We have different kind of bananas, which you usually do not get in your supermarkets. We have got red bananas, which are originally from South India. The texture. It's very different from *Cavendish* Bananas. They are more slimy, kind of thing, but it gives it like really nice feel.

[00:29:42] They are very sweet and really quite different. And the next kind of bananas we have is, *Pisang Nipah*. And those you can recognise fairly easily because it's that kind of banana. If you cut them across, they are not round, they are really rectangular.

[00:29:57] So I feel, especially coming from, European country where all you get are like *Cavendish* bananas. And then I came to Asia, and it was like, oh my God, this one tastes a little bit like apricot. And this one taste a little bit like apple. And this one tastes a little bit like with lemon, kind of, that tangy kind of thing.

[00:30:15] I was completely smitten by bananas. And I don't buy *Cavendish* bananas anymore.

[00:30:20] **Elliott:** For these bananas, right, are there any particular uses for them? I mean, you mentioned that you know, you can just eat them like that, right? These are fruits.

[00:30:27] **Jana:** Yeah, these ones are really like, table dessert bananas. Yeah. Which we eat as a fruit. But of course, there are many bananas which are used as staples. They are very starchy. So they are, plantains. Yeah. Plantains are kind of bananas also. And so, some of them are harvested while they are still green and people just peel them and boil them.

[00:30:48] And basically, they're used like potatoes. Or like, tapioca kind of thing. Right? Then there are some of the plantains, which are, being fried. So, you get kind of like a *pisang goreng*, but for our *pisang goreng*, we usually use *Pisang Raja*, the sweet one. The South Indian long plantains, which are inside slightly on the orange kind of colour.

[00:31:11] when they fry them, they're also sweet. Right.

[00:31:53] **Elliott:** And we can get those here?

[00:31:13] **Jana:** We can get those here, but uh, they are far less frequent than the red ones or then the *Pisang Nipah* or *Pisang Mas* or all the other kind of things.

[00:31:23] Again, Tekka market is a good choice. Geylang Serai and occasionally other markets.

[00:31:29] **Elliott:** Okay. I'll look out for it.

[00:31:30] **Elliott:** I wanted to actually explore the local names a bit more because I don't really, I'm not very familiar with plants, but, um, right now I'm working on a project at the wet markets with fish, so cataloguing the different local names for fish.

[00:31:42] And what I've realised is that the local names for fish can be quite specific also, more specific than, let's say, the English names at the supermarket. So, I was wondering whether, they might not be as accurate as the scientific names, but do local names also, you know, make distinctions between different species, more so than I guess the commercial names.

[00:31:59] **Jana:** Common names can be sometimes very generic, but sometimes they can be more specific than scientific names.

Elliott: Right.

Jana: And there have been examples, where the local people can actually tell you. Uh, when the botanist visits these two, we have two different names for them. And then the researchers will do all their studies with the molecular methods and, you know, six months later they will actually verify that the locals were right. Right?

[00:33:03] **Elliott:** Hmm

[00:32:24] **Jana:** So, it goes both ways and especially, Orang Aslis.

[00:32:24] **Elliott:** Yeah.

[00:32:27] **Jana:** You know, listen to Orang Aslis when you are in the jungle, they really know their stuff. But I think, again, like the wet markets, common name like a turmeric or very, uh, widely used plants? By default, I am always very careful about those names because as people travelled around the world, sometimes they brought their turmeric with them, the true turmeric, but sometimes they didn't and they found growing in that new place where they moved in something similar also with orange rhizome. And hey, you know, it still smells and taste a little bit like turmeric. And they will still call it a turmeric. They would not invent a new name for it.

[00:33:06] **Elliott:** Right.

[00:33:08] **Jana:** Right. So that's how we end up with these most common essential things like turmeric, you know, being applied to 10 different plant species, depending where you are, if you are in Indonesia, if you are in Vietnam or if you are in India.

[00:33:22] **Elliott:** So interesting. And we were talking about, you know, conserving these plants, right? And I guess today we're talking a lot about gingers, besides, going to the wet market and I guess using a wallet to kind of give that demand for a variety of gingers to be there. What are some other ways that we can conserve this wide variety of plant species around us?

[00:33:38] **Jana:** I mean, being from the Botanic Gardens, of course, we focus a lot on the wild plant species. Not so much about conserving edible varieties, but really the, what we call the crop wild relatives. Yeah. These are plants which are related to the plants we use. And, yeah, so we do it by many different ways.

[00:33:55] We have species recovery programme, you know, so the plants, which we feel are at risk of extinction, either regionally or even just for Singapore, we would try and rescue them by various methods. Mostly we would have them propagated. We, of course, always prefer the methods which preserve the genetic variation in plants, but sometimes all you have got left, it's one single plant, and that's where a tissue culturing will come in.

[00:34:21] So that we at least make plenty of material before we can even think further. So, we do conserve in that way. But you know, people don't realise that you can do any action

for conservation only when you have baseline data in, and I go back to the naming plants, you need to know what the plant is called and where it is distributed.

[00:34:43] **Elliott:** Yeah.

Jana: And when does it flower and fruit so that you can go and harvest seeds. And where do you get all that information from? From the herbarium specimens. Right? Because the herbarium specimens would have the records of specimens collected over the period of 200 years, let's say. and over the very wide geographical area.

[00:35:03] It gives you a larger picture, if you don't know what you have and where you have it, you cannot conserve it. So, I always say herbarium and plant taxonomy, you know, it's kind of like giving an alphabet to everyone else. The name is key to the knowledge.

[00:35:19] Of course we also do really practical on the ground conservation by slowly exchanging the ornamental species in our plantings all over Singapore, and we exchange them for the native species. So, we are making our ecosystems, our greenery, more resilient.

[00:35:35] That's what will make our City in Nature happen.

[00:35:38] **Elliott:** Right. And Malcolm, how do you think this kind of translates into the kitchen? Like how can chefs better use, I guess, taxonomy and scientific research to help them in the kitchen?

[00:35:41] **Malcolm:** I think in the kitchen, right, we are very focused on just doing and preparing. And I heard this analogy someone gave to me before, we are like cavemen, right? We are just stuck in this kitchen, and we just get very happy over fire and just cook. And I think sometimes when in the midst of like, just preparing food and just, slicing, chopping, grinding up all these gingers and vegetables and plants, we tend to forget that there is a bigger picture, like what Jana mentioned, right?

[00:36:19] And I think this is a very good reminder, in fact recently for us, getting deeper into understanding, turmeric is not just turmeric. You know, there's many kinds, many regions, many usages. And I think this gives chefs, or at least our chefs now a clearer idea.

[00:36:36] You know, food is really much more than just being a caveman, and in the bigger picture also, you want to share, or for us it's like, oh, you want to, you preserve heritage, per se, right? But the idea of it is still education. Without education, nothing can happen. It's just, you just gonna do, do, do.

[00:36:54] But you need to educate. And that's where, whether it is in combining wisdom of old *Nyonyas* and their palette, and you have to trust them when they see, they taste, they know, whether it is like a combination of professional cooking where we kind of put it in terms of very structured way of producing food, and to experts on the taxonomy of it.

[00:37:13] Everything comes together. And then you have this whole big picture.

[00:37:16] **Elliott:** And I realise I didn't ask this before, but I think it's a very important question. What do you think sets Peranakan cuisine apart from the rest? What makes it special and is it tied to the use of different types of plants? And also following that, what are the commonly used plants, aside from gingers that we've already discussed, that are used in Peranakan cuisine?

[00:37:34] **Malcolm:** So, what makes the Peranakan is unique is also about the history of kind of where Peranakans came from, right? Especially this region where we are along the straits of Malacca, Indonesia and because on the trading routes and different people come to all these parts to do trading, and I was saying like, it's not like today where you can kind of fly in for a business meeting and get out that night, right?

[00:37:56] You kind of take a ship here after a long journey and you have to do your business here for a while. And that's where people start to, especially Peranakans, they intermarry and that's where they bring along their cultures, their ingredients, their stories. And for Peranakans, we specifically, at least for my kind of heritage is a Chinese Peranakan, right?

[00:38:16] And so, regionally you cook a lot of this curries using a lot of these local spices. But then the Chinese are like, "Oh, we miss our soy sauce, we miss our pork, we miss our Chinese mushrooms. We miss our soybean paste.", and this starts to blend together slowly, right? And this becomes what we call, of course the Peranakan culture, but at the same time like we call the *Tok Panjang*, right? It's interesting cause you have kind of Malaysian, Indonesian style dishes and then you have Chinese braised dishes or stir fried dishes.

[00:38:47] And "what is going on?". Peranakans kind of embrace the idea of diversity, innovation, creativity.

[00:38:54] And then that translates to really the ingredients that we use. So even you can have Chinese-style curries already, right? And they infuse a *rempah* into their curries. And through the years I start to understand. Yeah. And shallots, garlic, chillies, different types of ginger, lemongrass, all these with herbs like, lime leaves, torch ginger flower, it just creates this new combination of flavours that are very unique to the Peranakan culture.

[00:39:21] **Elliott:** And your two restaurants are named Candlenut and Pangium. Yes. These are also plant species. Yes. And they're quite important to Peranakan cuisine as well, right?

[00:39:28] **Malcolm:** Yes, yes, yes. Yeah. So, I mean, for us, me and my mom, we were the ones who kind of started Candlenut right?

[00:39:36] It was two of us in the kitchen. That's why I really say that the old kind of Nyonya flavour profiles is so important because they keep you grounded, right? And my mom, you know, never really run a restaurant before. I always say it's a question of whether we were brave or we were stupid, right? When we decided to start the restaurant.

[00:39:42] Yeah. And then it's like, okay, what name shall we do it? Shall we call it? You know, Nyonya Kitchen or something? So I said, let's call it an ingredient because we use so much of local ingredients. Right. And it's like, yeah, but kind of lemongrass is very overused. And of course you have other restaurant names named after different herbs. And it's like, we are quite unknown, right?

[00:40:14] So what unknown ingredients are there? And we realised candlenut was one of that, kind of, nobody really understands. Is it candlenut? What is it? It's like a candle. Is it a nut? Is it a seed? And so, we said, "Let's use this as our name. And plus, it sounds quite cool, you know?"

[00:40:29] And we started with Candlenut, and through the years, this is where kind of the idea of people don't understand, even the local names of it, right? So many times, people come to Candlenut and they introduce their guests, "Oh, this is Candlenut, this is the *Buah Keluak* restaurant.". Yeah. And, and it is like, but we can't really correct the guests right? And say, no, you're wrong. It's not *Buah Keluak*, it's *Buah Keras*, right? Or, in Indonesia they call it *Kemiri*. But that kind of stuck in my head and say, yeah, that's how the local ingredients are kind of lost really, in terms of the knowledge of them.

[00:41:01] And when we were starting the second restaurant, me and my wife, we were thinking few names and stuff. I was like saying, hmm, we are doing a sister restaurant, right? So, this is the best time, you know, to clear the air up already. So, if candlenut, the local name is called *Buah Keras*. Then the new restaurant should be named *Buah Keluak*.

[00:41:19] Right? And the English name of it, then it became Pangium. And that's really when people come to the new restaurant and they're like, "Oh, we never knew." And that's great because that's the whole idea of the restaurant, the whole idea of why we wanted to study, our chefs, our team wanted to join us to discover whether it is from the story, heritage and now the ingredients, right? Learning just wow.

[00:41:41] And, we are just happy that we are on this journey. Like I was telling many people and our guests, we have so much ingredients, so much story and dishes we can— or I would say I will never be able to explore everything in my lifetime. It is a start of the work, and it needs to be continued by the generations after.

[00:42:01] **Elliott:** I think that's a nice little wrap up to everything. You know, really highlighting the importance of taxonomy in cuisine and the intersection of both, you know, why they're important and how that can help preserve different species, but also why identification, you know, scientific naming as well as the local names right, are very important to unlocking certain taste profiles in our food.

[00:42:22] So thank you Jana and Malcolm for joining us today. I hope you guys had fun talking about all the interesting, you know, questions and ideas that we've had on this podcast.

[00:42:32] **Elliott:** Thank you for listening to this episode of *That's Wild*. If you would like to hear more, please tune in for more episodes on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and YouTube. And if you like our content, don't forget to show your support by hitting the follow button and giving us a five-star rating. Bye everyone!

Jana: Bye!

Malcolm: Bye!