



THE BEST OF US Myrna Pohan and Selly Wilson

Feast of Flavours

Myrna Pohan and Selly Wilson enjoy Betawi's rich colonial culinary roots at Tugu Kunstkring Paleis's heritage building with **Edith Emeralda**

JUST BEFORE DUSK ENDED ONE balmy day, two chic ladies dressed in black alighted in front of a white concrete edifice with two domed towers in New Indies style circa 1914: the Tugu Kunstkring Paleis. Through an airy lounge strewn with colonial-style furniture, Myrna Pohan and Selly Wilson paused a moment upon entering the Diponegoro Room. The main dining hall is named after a 9m by 4m painting, *The Fall of Java*, painted in 18 months by the owner of Tugu Group, Anhar Setjadibrata.

Capturing one of the pivotal moments in Javanese history when Prince Diponegoro was

captured by General de Kock under the guise of peace talks, Anhar is also in the frame as the painter who recorded the event. Antiques of the Yogyakarta and Surakarta sultanates from Anhar's private collection further transport diners to Java in the 19th century.

Up the grand staircase and to the right, the two best friends arrived in the era of Soekarno, Indonesia's first president. After a short pause to admire Anhar's collected artifacts in relation to the room's namesake, they moved on to the Hercules Room for a special Rijstaffel Betawi dinner. Harking back to the colonial plantations, *rijstaffel*—meaning the rice table—is a way to showcase Indonesia's rich cuisine and culture. The feast is sometimes

PHOTOGRAPHY: IRWAN KURNIA AND HERI B HERYANTO



accompanied by traditional dancers and is always served by at least two waiters; in its heyday, there would be one waiter to each dish. Now quite rare in its full glory, Tugu Kunstkring Paleis is one of few still doing the whole procession with 12, 16, or 24 menus.

Twelve white tureens carried in a woven rattan basket that hung from a *pikulan*, or a long pole hauled between two waiters, arrived while Myrna and Selly enjoyed their drinks. Paired with *nasi uduk*, the ladies excitedly discussed about which mains to be tasted first between the *opor*-style duck in coconut milk: ox tongue stew in sweet soy sauce *semur* a la Betawi, or the minced beef *sate lembut* Betawi. "Try the duck," Selly said, "It melts in your mouth and easily falls off the bone." Myrna, who sat across from her, gladly savoured her second sate lembut, a rare gem on Betawi menus.

Between dips in green chili sauce, snaps of shrimp crackers and *melinjo* chips, and crunches of turmeric-based pickles, Selly and Myrna exchanged news about their lives, which are oft-intertwined due to their friend circles and the Common Cause Charity.

HISTORY AND HERITAGE

Clockwise from left: the Gallery Dining Room; the Diponegoro Room; Sayur Gambas Udang



BACK IN TIME Clockwise from above left: The Rijstafel Betawi set; bitterballen for appetiser; 12 different dishes in the Betawi Rijstafel

Harking back to the colonial plantation, ‘rijstafel’ is a way to showcase Indonesia’s rich cuisine and culture.

“We grow closer due to our active roles in the charity,” Selly said, “Besides that, early this year I just launched a line of contact lenses,” Selly said. She further explained that from a yearly bazaar the group gathers donations to help fund special-needs children who require treatments and operations.

As for Myrna, she’s also a film director at buttonijo production house, an independent movie maker, funder and distributor focusing on fiction, documentaries, and anything in between. “One of my ongoing projects is a documentary on the Javanese native religion, *kejawen*,” Myrna said. “This movie will be one that’s quite deeply personal to me as the more I searched into it, the more I looked into who I am.”

Rounding off their journey through Betawi cuisine were tempeh cooked with chilies and preserved soya bean paste; *karedok* Betawi, a raw salad of cucumbers, bean sprouts, cabbage, long beans, and more in peanut-

based dressing; stir-fried *sayur gambas*—or luffa vegetable—with prawns and mushrooms; and a dish of fried, air-dried shrimps that immediately piqued Selly and Myrna’s interest in trying to recreate one at home.

Selendang mayang, another rare treasure among Jakarta’s traditional menus, closed off their warm dinner with a refreshing mix of coconut milk, brown palm sugar, crushed ice, and chewy rice flour pudding naturally coloured green with pandanus leaf extract. Myrna and Selly slowly savoured the sweet-and-savoury dessert before realising that it was time to leave for a movie premiere that they were both invited to. ❶

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RARE GEM



OLD-TIME FAVOURITE

Now only available in Tugu Kunstkring Paleis and a few other places, *Es Selendang Mayang* is a treasured Betawi dessert with its unique textures and flavours.