

Back In Time: A 1960s Malaysian Coffeeshop



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Illustration by Hwans Lim

My mother was born in Kajang, a small town mostly known today for its succulent satays. But it hadn't always been that way. Kajang once had something else to offer its dwellers — Malays, Indians and Chinese alike — a place to eat, drink and be merry. This is the kopitiam story my mother would tell, at every opportunity she has.

In Kajang in the 1960s, Kok Wah National Theatre was the core around which the town revolved. Very often, families would take the kids out for a matinee show on a Sunday afternoon and after, there was only one place to go: Mui Suan.

My grandmother, my *Ah Po* built a coffeeshop from her savings during the Japanese occupation. Having migrated to then Malaya from Hainan Island, she worked hard, selling ais kacang and cendol out of a wooden pushcart. No one knew why she was never given a difficult time by the Japanese, as many at the time were. Perhaps food

was seen as sacred and those who peddled it were spared. Or maybe the Japanese simply enjoyed her homemade cendol too much. A few year after the occupation ended, Ah Po had saved enough money to buy two adjacent shophouses. One for *Ta Leh* (meaning 'Uncle' in Hainanese), and one for *Papa*. That's how Mui Suan began in 1954, in the corner lot shophouses of Kajang Bazaar.



Remnants of what used to adorn Mui Suan in the 1960s

Set between the local theatre and high traffic Foh Hup bus station, every day was a good business day at Mui Suan. Ta Leh helmed the coffee and toast station, straining coffee through stocking-like bags with water boiling over a charcoal fire. Ah Po scooped short, thick tails of freshly made cendol into a bowl of shaved ice. Papa and Mummy manned their nasi lemak stall out front, serving porcelain plates of the national breakfast to regular customers-turned-friends — my classmate's father, the friendly Indian aunty who lives across the road, Papa's drinking buddies. Kajang folks patronised Mui Suan profusely, and not just for their breakfast fix.



Mui Suan is a one man show today, run by Ta Leh's son, Yee Fu.

We were the only kopitiam that had a jukebox set and in those days, 10 cents got you a buzz-worthy P. Ramlee tune or a soothing Teresa Teng track. We bobbed our heads to whatever was played by whoever had the cents to spend. Then there was Mummy's

nasi lemak with the array of wonderful dishes like curry chicken and sambal kerang — this brought business from so many Kajang residents. Her recipe was so beloved that every morning, my teachers at school would scramble to buy the nasi lemak packets I brought with me, the rice still warm beneath the banana leaf and newspaper wrapping. That was how I earned my first pocket money.

But Sundays... Sundays were the best because that's when I got to be at Mui Suan all day. I got to sit there watching uncles pour their morning coffee onto the flat ceramic saucer only to slurp it up at one hurried go. My favourite was the Malay uncle who did it with extra caution so he wouldn't drench his beard with hot coffee. I also watched Ta Leh at work, toasting fluffy white bread — the Hainanese kind; no crusts — over the same charcoal fire that boiled water. He'd slab a thick cut of butter on one side and on the other, smooth, homemade kaya. And every time someone ordered an ais kacang, the sound of the metal ice shaver that whirred its way through the big block of ice echoed the shop. From the outside, the distant call of "*Chen lut zai, chen lut zai!*" (meaning 'cendol boy' in Cantonese) would be a telltale sign of another customer arriving at Mui Suan.



Regular customers-turned-friends who grew older alongside Mui Suan



Empty seats were a sign of the day's end

In the day, the chitter-chatter of friends and neighbours gathered would rise to a crescendo, coupled with the blaring music emanating from the jukebox. But as the sun began to set, the crowd too, would start to thin. Chairs would noisily scrape the floor as friends and regulars rose in succession, reluctantly saying their goodbyes as they headed home for dinner. When the room was quiet except for the creak of ceiling fans, that's when Ta Leh would get up to take the burning charcoal off its heat, Ah Po and Mummy would begin rinsing coffee cups and greasy plates in hot water, and Papa would methodically slide in the floor-to-ceiling wooden planks that they used as a makeshift front door.

Everybody worked swiftly and silently, closing shop as quickly as they could, knowing that at 5am tomorrow, the doors would open again.

Kajang Bazaar was demolished in 1993 and Mui Suan has since moved to Pasar Besar Kajang on Jalan Jelok to a much smaller establishment. It's a lot less glamorous than it used to be, but it still serves the oldest of friends.

If you too, grew up on local favourites like these, relive the good old days with [Burpple's Guide to Best Malaysian Eats in Damansara Utama, Selangor.](#)

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