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MALAYSIAN TODDY, TUAK AND TAPAI KEEP TRADITION ALIVE

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Coconut flower buds are tapped for their sap before they bloom, and the liquid collects overnight in a container on the tree. Early every morning, agile climbers collect the sap, and it ferments on its own throughout the day. Photo by Michelle Yip.

It is a truth universally accepted that a country with an abundance of rice and coconut would naturally have rice wine and coconut wine. Japan has sake, South Korea has makgeolli, India has toddy which is a coconut sap wine. Similarly, Malaysia's minority communities have been home-brewing toddy, tuak and tapai (various forms of fermented starch) for generations. Yet the country is hardly known as a producer or consumer of alcohol.

The omission of local alcohol from official tourism canon is intriguing and likely due to religious beliefs, racism and colonial baggage. Rice wine is a spiritual and cultural offering for many indigenous communities in East Malaysia, who may choose to steer away from it when they convert from animism to Islam or Christianity. In addition, the country's Muslim-majority citizens and policy makers tolerate but are not keen to promote alcohol. To underline this point, alcohol is subjected to hefty "sin tax" in Malaysia, along with tobacco and gambling.

There is also the British colonial legacy that stereotypes as "uncouth" the minority groups who consume this moonshine. As a result, centuries of local alcohol know-how are at risk unless there is a resurgence in interest.

In Banting, a sleepy seaside town 60 kilometers from the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, a coconut plantation dubbed Chelliah Toppu is known as *the* place to get toddy. Coconut flower buds are tapped for their sap before they bloom, and the liquid collects overnight in a container on the tree. Early every morning, agile climbers collect the sap, and it ferments on its own throughout the day, with different flavor profiles at different stages. Freshly collected toddy is sweet and often preferred by younger folks. By noon it is sour, turning thick and very sour by evening. This is usually the taste profile of choice for the older generation.

Mrs. Nava (who declined to give her full name) is a Malaysian-Indian lady who runs the place with her family, after inheriting the business from her parents-in-law.

"Those days were very difficult. The workers had to climb tree by tree to collect the sap," Mrs. Nava says. These days they have devised a system to move between trees without going back on the ground, making the toddy collection much quicker. "Like Superman," she laughs.

The coconut trees are replanted once the sap diminishes, and each tree can be productive for 30-40 years. Interestingly, none of these trees ever bear fruit as it has traded production of coconuts with sap.

Pre-Covid, Chelliah Toppu would receive 1,000 guests or more on a weekend, from a cross section of Malaysians as well as Nigerian expats (there are similar drinks in Nigeria made from the sap of palm trees). These groups of friends and families come by to enjoy their toddy and eat homemade Indian dishes prepared by Mrs. Nava while being surrounded by the plantation. According to Mrs. Nava, these days visitors linger for longer than they did during her in-law's time.

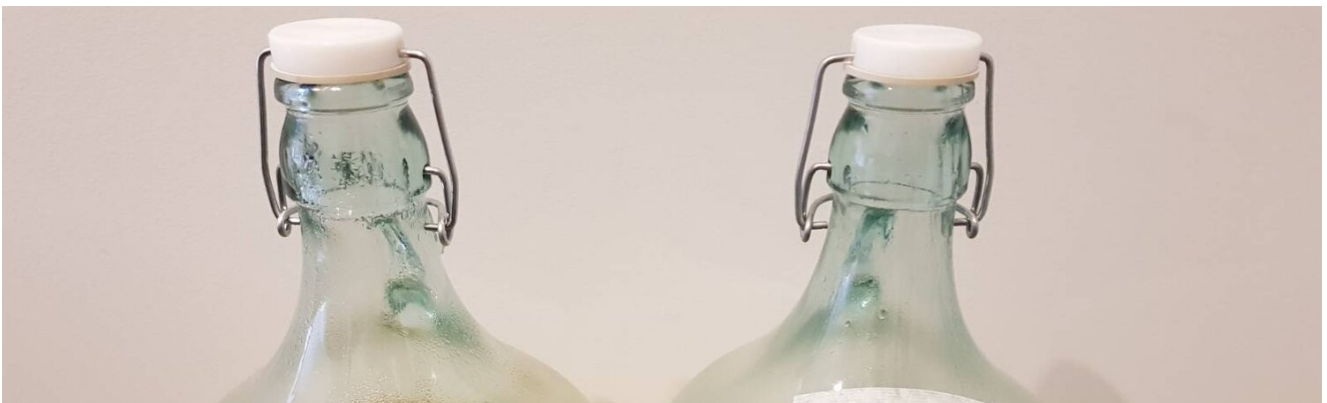
"They bring small children, let them touch the trees, let them touch the ground." It's a full-on sensory experience especially for young families, who are discovering more ways to enjoy nature. It also helps that toddy is pure fermented sap without additives.

Despite this idyllic backdrop and the natural production of toddy, it is still mired in racist tropes. This started when the British colonists brought Indian migrants from Tamil Nadu and Kerala to work in Malaysian rubber estates in the late 19th century. The Indian community, in turn, brought over their knowledge of coconut sap and fermentation to Malaysia and drank toddy as a social activity.

Over time, the community was subject to exploitation and became indentured laborers. Many lived with generational poverty and limited infrastructure. Since they drank toddy, this led to the stereotype of the poor, brutish, toddy-drinking Indians.

When modern-day Malaysian-Indians seek social mobility, they still must overcome this stigma. Sometimes that means proudly declaring they've never touched a drop of toddy in their life. My own family members would not drink toddy, even if new research declares it a health drink filled with probiotics. On the other hand, Mrs. Nava's toddy business has meant that her family earned enough money to send children for further education, so it is all relative.

When I visited Chelliah Topu and drank toddy for the first time a decade ago, it tasted illicit before it tasted sweet. Years later, I am still ambivalent about it, although I love sweet and slightly fizzy drinks. I have accepted this is a byproduct of social conditioning and not reflective of Mrs. Nava's fermentation skills or the organic coconuts.





For Gideon Gadalon, lihing is a drink that connects him with his late father who taught him the process. Photo by Gideon Gadalon.

The situation is different in the state of Sabah in East Malaysia which is more than 1,600 kilometers from Kuala Lumpur and over the South China Sea. Here, there is some reprieve from the country's administrative center and its conservative take on alcohol, partly because the indigenous leaders insisted on more ownership on local issues when it joined the Malaysian federation.

Tapai and lihing (fermented glutinous rice) is still an integral part of communal gatherings and festivals; it's used as offering to the spirits during harvest festivals. Unlike wine, where the grape varieties are deliberately cultivated for taste profile, tapai is usually the alcoholic byproduct of the village's main produce. In Sabah, this could range from rice and tapioca to pineapple and banana.

Harold Reagan Eswar (Egn, as he's known) is a fourth-generation tapai brewer in Sabah. He and his mother, Christa Mayon Ungkas made a concerted effort to keep the tradition alive through workshops and education programs when Ungkas realized that the practice was dying as the elders passed away and others converted to Islam or Christianity.

The process starts with cooking the rice, letting it cool and then mixing it with pounded ragi, which is a dry-starter culture. This dry mixture is then placed into a clay jar to start fermenting. Within a few days, the alcoholic liquid will start to form at the bottom of the jar. Based on this technique, the process to make rice wine is more similar to beer than wine.

Egn has a very meticulous process to make tapai, akin to a science experiment.

"We use rice from the previous harvest, which means it's a year old," he says. "It tastes better. New rice is too soft. We also use a clay jar, because clay is cooling."

This is an important consideration in a tropical country. He is not a fan of using plastic jars as the alcoholic content will erode the plastic, which in turn will seep into the drink and change its taste.

Nor is he keen on glass jars, which may surprise people who brew their own beer at home.

“A glass jar will expose the insides of the fermenting rice to sunlight, which is not good for the yeast,” he explains. “Besides, big-sized glass jars are hard to come by.”

There are also other cultural do’s and don’ts to making tapai that Eng abides by.

“We cannot eat or touch lime or other sour tasting (acidic) fruits for a week before we pack the rice into the clay jars.” He also believes that the tapai responds to the makers’ emotions. “How you feel, what you say when you make tapai will become its characteristics. So, if you repeat or chant the mantra, ‘bittersweet,’ the tapai will be bittersweet.” This happens to be the ideal taste profile for tapai.

Gideon Gadalon, another Sabah native, has been trying to perfect his lihing in Melbourne, Australia. For him, lihing is a drink that connects him with his late father who taught him the process (similar to tapai) five years ago. Gadalon has been trying to merge that knowledge with more modern equipment.

“My dad used to say that when we make lihing, we have to use ginger to sanitize any surface that the glutinous rice touches. I was quite skeptical since ginger is not a sanitizer,” he says, laughingly. “He also told me the boiled rice has to be cool to touch before we add the yeast or starter. If it’s too hot, it will kill the yeast. But what does that mean, cool to touch? Eventually, I worked out it should be about 28 degrees and I now measure it with a thermometer.”

Gadalon has leveraged Melbourne’s craft beer scene to make his lihing. “I put the cooled down rice and pounded yeast in an airtight plastic brewing bucket with a screw top and o-ring. I also use a filter in the bucket, almost like a cheese cloth, to separate the rice from the liquid. That way the final product is clear and not cloudy.”

Despite these innovations, Gadalon admits that his lihing does not taste like his dad’s version, which he puts down to differences in temperature and climate.

“My dad’s version always had that smooth, velvety taste, almost like plum wine. That’s the taste I am still trying to chase.”

Mrs. Nava, Eng and Gadalon have made a concerted effort to learn and continue making alcohol for their own reasons. This is not always easy, as there is a history of alcohol control in pre-independence Malaysia. The British colonists were very insistent on monitoring what they considered excessive drinking among their Malaysian subjects. This is not surprising, given the global temperance sentiment at that time, such as Prohibition in the United States. But as colonizers, they needed to ensure their subjects drank enough to pay alcohol tax, yet not enough that they failed to show up to work the next day.

In peninsular Malaysia in the early 1900s, both British and Malayan officials tried to clamp down on toddy sales, including picket campaigns and a medical report stating that the country's health issues were to be blamed on "the unsanitary ways of Tamil coolies."

In Sabah, the British imposed the native liquor tax in 1913 to discourage excessive drinking among the Murut community. Rather than taxing the finished alcohol product, they taxed the raw materials used to make tapai, such as cassava, rice and coconut. What they failed to account for is the social significance of tapai and how essential it is in ceremonial events, from births to deaths. This infringement on the Murut way of life was one of the reasons for their rebellion two years later.

It is tempting to think of this as yet another interesting footnote in history featuring alcohol and conflict, similar to the rum rebellion in Australia. But as we now know, these rebellions are often more a fight for control over commerce, identity, lifestyles and community, rather than the alcohol itself.

All is not lost. There is a new generation of toddy, tapai and tuak makers who have started commercializing their products with savvy marketing on social media. Toddy, in particular, is difficult to commercialize as the taste profile changes as it ferments.

Despite this, Andrew Eddison of Bellamy Toddy Shop in Kuala Lumpur is still charging ahead. As their shop is in the city center, they decided to be inventive to attract and retain a more urban crowd. This means that in addition to fresh regular toddy, they offer toddy cocktails, with flavors such as strawberry, rose, pink guava, and mint.

Another example is full-time tuak brewer Maynard Langet who started the brand Bad Cat Borneo in the state of Sarawak, East Malaysia. He is now a full-time tuak brewer as a way to keep the cultural practice alive, but also because he believes there is demand and interest for unique alcoholic products.

"Tuak is like pasta, it's so varied and everyone will have their own recipe. You can either drink it neat, like vodka, or it can be used to make cocktails with pineapple or elderflower syrup," he explains.

Despite this growing demand, the process to obtain alcohol distribution or export license in Malaysia remains opaque. Distilling alcohol definitely requires a license but nobody can say for sure if brewers need a license for fermenting starch. It is a source of amusement and frustration for Langet.

"The state tourism body promotes tuak overseas, almost like a prop for cultural exoticism. Yet I cannot get a license to export the product."

Langet remains unfazed. “What I want to do is raise awareness of tuak, to the point it cannot be ignored” he stressed, thus perfectly encapsulating the future of all Malaysian moonshine.

Alia Ali

Alia Ali is a writer based in Langkawi, Malaysia. She recently cofounded a website called [Periuk](#), focusing on Malaysian home cooking and food stories.



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