

# Tutumbakon

## – an indigenous speciality



Sabah is full of culinary surprises, but unfortunately even in its capital, Kota Kinabalu, it is sometimes difficult to find the 'real Sabah' on a plate. Local indigenous cuisine is wholesome and healthy, and generally the recipes are simple: most meals are boiled in water, the so-called 'sup terjun'. Fish or meat, a few vegetables from the garden or the jungle, and some salt and chillies together with 'asam' - something sour - and you'd be surprised how tasty deer, or catfish can taste so simply and quickly prepared! Maybe these recipes were considered too simple to have made it to the capital? When one is lucky enough to be invited to a local home, expect some really good food, be it with the coastal Bajau, the more rural Kadazan and Dusun or the jungle dwelling Murut. Of course, some specialities are more for the acquired taste, such as the various 'bosou' and 'nonsom', which are pickled vegetables and meats, rather strong in taste. Other items on the menu may be delicious, but name and appearance offend most so-called civilised people, such as the 'tutumbakon'... a huge worm living in the sand of Sabah's beaches...!

On the tamu (weekly market) in Donggongan last Friday I noticed a quickly growing crowd around an elderly man squatting on the ground with two buckets. Curious to see what he was offering, I squeezed my way through and found that he was doing abrupt business, scooping out handfuls of sand into moving plastic bags in front of him. At a closer look I found that each bag was containing a dozen or so twisting tutumbakon - or, in English: huge, wriggling, ugly worms. The man, busily chatting in Kadazan with his customers was selling them at RM 2.00 a bag. I overheard a younger man amongst the crowd asking whether this was meant as bait for fishing. I thought that the mere size of the worms must frighten away any smaller fish and was curious to hear the answer. I quickly got it from one of the customers, a stout Kadazan lady laughing at the ignorance of the younger generation: "Ansakon ku montok dongadau - I am going to cook that for lunch", she was chuckling ahead as she paid six Ringgits for three bags, plus a few extra worms. I amused myself watching the faces in the crowd, some of them with disbelief, some of them hungry with anticipation of what obviously must be a delicacy, and other showing sheer disgust.

Ever curious to taste whatever traditional dish I can get, I bought a bag. Just one. It seemed such an unlikely dish, making me wonder who was the first person to try those winding things. But used to rarer specialities such as butod (protein rich, sweet sago grubs), and hindung (a fresh-water eel of rather slimy appearance but exhilarating taste), I brought the worms home. The reaction of my friends was impressive. Most of them young, they jumped and ran away not when they saw them, but when a colleague of mine confirmed that one could eat them! He, of good old Kadazan school, was pleased at my purchases. Loathing 'modern' vegetables, he largely prefers cooking traditional specialities that grow, run, fly, crawl and - in the case of the worms - wriggle their way in and through the jungle.

He quickly set to work, and here is how to prepare worms: clean the tutumbakon under water. Without the sand, they look like metallic hoses, becoming rigid at touch. Weird. Then you have to take them at both ends, and break them in the middle. Empty their blood - yes, these worms have red blood - into a bowl, and throw away their intestines full of sand. The tubes, for such they are, will continue to move, a strange sensation. With a stick turn them inside out. Now they look like miniature stocking. You can eat them raw, and my friend proved it. He also affirmed that they were good for cleansing the blood if eaten raw. With certain hesitation, but overcome by curiosity I took a little bit. Never having had such earth living creatures, I did not know what to expect, taste-wise. Well, not to hold you any longer in suspense: it tasted very nice, a bit of iron, with a hint of squid, and some sand under my teeth. Seafood-ish, I'd say, very pleasant, just a bit tough. One really has to chew hard on them.

At this stage, you can macerate the worms in lime, with ginger and onions, very much like the famous hinava: fresh fish pickle. You can also cook them in a soup. The recipe is simple, not to say simplistic: in a pan fry some onions and a bit of garlic. There is no need to use a lot of oil. Then add water, the blood, and the worms in one go, and bring to boil. An interesting phenomenon takes place: the soup turns whitish, as if santan (coconut milk) had been added.

The delightful smell of the soup brought those back who ran away in prospect of a weird lunch. I must admit, worms in one's plate does look a bit strange, but then only think of tripe and other offal, which I consider much less of a speciality (considering where it comes from and what function it takes in the body...), and even less presentable. Or think of prawns, snails and other seafood, which some people perceive as weird and won't eat. Tutumbakon tastes of seafood, and in a way they are. They live in the sand of beaches along the coast. Without mentioning that they are worms, one probably would say squid, only that they are quite rubbery, and, yes, the sand you inevitably grind when chewing the speciality might be a bit strange...



"Sabah is full of culinary surprises, but this is definitely only a recipe for the daring ..."

## WHERE TO STAY

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Best Western Kinabalu Daya Hotel  
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