

# KYO PANG

*Kopitiam*

NEW YORK CITY

by Liz Grossman

In Malaysia, the kopitiam, or a mash-up of “kopi,” or coffee in Malay, and “tiam,” or shop in Hokkien, is more than just a café where high-octane, hand-pulled coffee and simple dishes like fish ball soup and kaya butter toast are served all day. It’s also a place passed down through generations. “Every family in Malaysia has their own kopitiam,” says Kyo Pang. “It probably started with your grandfather, who brought your dad, and then your dad brought you, and the owner probably knows everything about your family. You unconsciously developed a relationship with this old man.” To Pang, who was born in Penang, that man was her grandfather. He owned a kopitiam that her father eventually took over and turned into a family-style restaurant that expanded to four locations. Pang, who is third-generation Baba Nyonya (an ethnic group of descendants from Chinese migrants who settled in Malaysia, also known as Peranakans), remembers watching her dad prep food in the kitchen while her mom managed the front of the house. “My mother was very strict, and our relationship is a little bit different. She definitely has a high standard,” says Pang. “You’d be afraid you were going to do something

wrong or she’d disapprove of you. She was like the queen who looks at you and you know you’re guilty. But there was a lot of respect and love because in the Nyonya family, the women have higher status over the men.” The pressure only strengthened her culinary skills and their relationship. “I realized the only way I understood my mother’s love for me was through cooking. The most peaceful moment I can remember is standing next to her, preparing stuff.”

But despite her family’s legacy of running restaurants, they didn’t want her to follow in their footsteps. “They’d say it was a very tough life, they wanted me in a white-collar job,” Pang says. In 2008, she left Malaysia and moved to L.A., and then on to New York for a work/travel program. “In Malaysia, people think if you’re able to send your kids to New York City, it shows you’ve made it,” says Pang, who found deeper meaning behind the move. “I came to study, but another reason was because it was illegal to be gay in Malaysia. I also came here for asylum,” she says. “I had been doing everything I could for my mother to be a great daughter. I was never rebellious, never touched a cigarette, weed, or other drugs. The only thing I did was coffee. I felt like I had always lived my life for other people.”



Milo French Toast, \$9, Kyo Pang, Kopitiam, New York City. RECIPE, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com).





KYO  
PANG

**What is the next cooking challenge or technique you want to try?**

My fiancée is from Sichuan, China. She moved here for me, and my biggest challenge so far has been to cook something for her that reminds her of home. Sichuan is a food paradise of China, and they have a lot of sauces and spices I don't know. My cuisine is Nyonya food and we were known as the first fusion food of Southeast Asia. I want to try and marry Malaysian-Nyonya techniques and traditional Sichuan preparation, and see if I can come up with something amazing.

ALVIN KEAN WONG

That included the restaurant and club owners she worked for as a promoter in her first stateside job. “It was lucrative, but very stressful, because the clubs were male-dominated and I was probably the only Asian female who worked there,” Pang recalls. Already feeling disconnected from her family, she knew it was time to leave her promoter job when she almost lost her dad due to depression. “He had become a very famous chef in Penang but was having a midlife crisis,” she says. “I’d call him and we’d be silent for a bit, and then I’d ask, ‘Are you still cooking?’ When we’d talk about food, he’d be happy again. I felt it was time to do something for him.” In 2015, she opened the original Kopitiam in a 210-square-foot café on Canal Street with four stools and a counter. She crafted a simple, small menu of the homey and soulful Nyonya delicacies she grew up

eating. “People thought I was crazy, including my mother,” says Pang. “She didn’t understand why I wanted to be a coffee shop owner after studying so hard.” But Pang found happiness, and herself, in the simplicity of a shoebox-sized corner, where regulars flocked for made-to-order black and white Malaysian coffees thickened with ghee or condensed milk, thick-cut French toast coated in dark Milo powder and drizzled with condensed milk (\$9, recipe, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)), toast slathered in sweet pandan kaya jam and paired with silky, salty, half-boiled eggs (a nod to the sweet-salty yin and yang food and life philosophy of Baba Nyonya), and nasi lemak, a soul-satisfying classic dish of coconut rice, crispy fried anchovies, peanuts, spicy sambal, cucumbers, and hard-boiled eggs (\$9, recipe, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)). “In Malaysia, we don’t have

breakfast, lunch, and dinner. We snack all day,” Pang notes. Last summer, she moved the café to a 35-seat location on the Lower East Side. She also took on a partner and scored a James Beard semifinalist nod for the Best Chef: New York award. More room also meant adding dishes like Hainanese chicken rice and Hakka-style pan mee flour noodles made from scratch, and having space to display and store more Malaysian imports, like butterfly pea flowers her mother sun-dries and ships to her for sticky rice. Pang’s remained humble about the restaurant’s success with her mother, but suspects she keeps tabs on her via social media stalking.

“My parents haven’t been here yet, but they’ll call once in a while and ask what I need or if there’s something they could ship me,” says Pang. “Now, they are proud. Now, they are happy.”