

An Insider Guide to the Balinese Food Scene with Tjok Maya Kerthyasa

Indonesian-Australian chef and co-author of recently published cookbook Paon, Tjok Maya Kerthyasa takes us on a spice-packed adventure through Bali's kitchens, sharing her favourite hotels, bars and go-to brunch spots along the way.

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Words by Lucy Kehoe and Georgina Groom

Bali is home to a beguiling blend of cultures. Beyond the free-spirited surfers, clean-living nomads and style-conscious students, visitors will discover a tropical paradise rich in ancient traditions, many of which are centred around the gift of food. Intrigued to find out more about a cuisine that both honours its heritage and offers a feast for the senses, we spoke to Balinese-born chef Tjok Maya Kerthysasa. Her new cookbook, Paon, co-written with chef I Wayan Kresna Yasa, who was born on the Balinese island of Nusa Penida, is out now.

Having made it her mission to explore Bali's kitchens and culinary history, there's not much Maya doesn't know about the local scene. Here, she shares her favourite way to spend a Sunday, the essential souvenirs to grab for foodie friends and her go-to restaurant for a low-key lunch.

Discover Bali's kitchen culture with cookbook author Tjok Maya Kerthysasa



Tjok Maya Kerthysasa, left, and a rural spot in Tabanan. | Photo credit: Martin Westlake

When is the best time to visit Bali?

September. It's not too hot, not too wet and not too crowded.

How should we get around?

If you're looking to travel to different parts of the island, I recommend going by car with a knowledgeable driver. I'm a big believer in forming relationships with people who can guide you through their unique experience of a place.

I also love exploring the quieter parts of the island on foot, preferably in the morning or late afternoon, when it's not too hot. Bali has a soothingly slow pace of life, and walking allows you to take all of it in consciously.

How would you characterise the region?

The different regions of Bali have strikingly different energies. The mountainous areas of Batukaru and Kintamani are lush, wild and steeped in mystery. The cultural centres are dynamic, historical and buzzing with inspiring people. The eastern coastline is gentler. Down south, it's a melting pot of cultures, cuisines and architecture. The island is multi-layered, energetically potent and endlessly surprising.

Where should we base ourselves?

Go to the countryside. I have a soft spot for the food of inland Tabanan. The area is super-earthly, being surrounded by rice fields, rivers and jungle. The beauty of Bali is that nothing is too far for day trips, so you can be based almost anywhere and easily visit the different regions.



Agricultural land in Kintamani, left, and a market trader. | Photo credit: Jon Chica / Shutterstock.com

Any hotels you love?

Tandjung Sari, in Sanur, is my favourite. It's been around since the 60s and hasn't changed much. Each room is a standalone bungalow, with the kind of classic Balinese interiors you don't often see in new hotels. Each is hugged by lush gardens peppered with antique sculptures and shrines. It's set on a quiet strip of beach. When the weather permits, you get striking views of the great volcano Mount Agung towering over the water. On Sunday evenings, a local dance troupe uses the hotel's courtyard as a practice space - it's a really special immersion.

Where should we grab brunch?

Go to a traditional morning market to buy *jaja*, or Balinese cakes, for breakfast. Or *bubur*, which is our answer to congee. Try the traditional Payangan morning market, Pasar Umum Payangan, where the farmers' produce is always fresh and interesting. The action starts early (around 3am). Most market-goers are up and at it before sunrise in Bali, so try to get there as early as possible for the cream of the crop.

Credit cards won't get you very far at the markets - remember to bring cash. Post-market, head to Old Friends Coffee in Nyuh Kuning village for a caffeine hit.

What about a low-key lunch?

I love Murni's Warung. It was the first restaurant of its kind in Ubud - my parents have been going there since the late-70s. Ibu Murni, its owner, is known across Bali and beyond for her contributions to traditional food, arts and crafts. Order her *nasi campur*, a dish of rice with spiced, slow-cooked chicken (known locally as *betutu*), tofu and tempeh in peanut sauce, and *sambal matah*, made with finely sliced shallots, garlic, chillies and house-made coconut oil.



A bungalow suite, left, and the pool at Tandjung Sari hotel.

Any dinner recommendations?

Room 4 Dessert is my go-to for special occasions. I love the way Will Goldfarb and his team explore the traditional, medicinal, and artisanally produced ingredients of Bali through each season.

If you're based in south Bali, head to Wayan and his wife Mary's new restaurant, Home, in Pererenan. Their dinner menu is deeply inspired by the flavours of Wayan's ancestral home, Nusa Penida. There's a strong emphasis on seafood (sourced fresh each morning from the Jimbaran Fish Market), and interesting explorations of heirloom starches such as corn, sorghum and cassava - ingredients that don't often appear on restaurant menus and speak to Bali's diverse culinary history.

Any chefs in the region we should be keeping an eye on?

I love what Wayan is doing at Home because it's giving more and more people access to the ingredients, flavours and techniques of Nusa Penida. Another chef doing great work to preserve and promote the flavours of his region is Jero Mangku Dalem Suci Gede Yudiawan, up in Les, north Bali. He's a powerful advocate for real Balinese cooking, supporting local producers and staying true to one's roots.

It's sunset, and we're meeting you for drinks. What's the address?

Right now, I'm loving Sunset Park, the rooftop bar at Seminyak beach club Potato Head. There's a vastness about the space that makes it unique in Bali, and there's often some form of art, music or cultural offering that makes the experience extra-special. You'll find me drinking a tebu cooler - pressed sugar-cane juice with guava kombucha and rum.



Chef Wayan in the kitchen, left, and a dish on the menu at HOME. | Photo credit: Livia Kurniadi

Where should we go to enjoy some fresh air?

I always head for the mountains when I'm looking for cool air and nature. [Batukaru Coffee Estate](#) is my favourite place to stay. It gives you access to sparkling natural pools of ice-cold water straight from the mountains, hectares of jungle laden with edible treasures, and the incredibly beautiful rice fields of Jatiluwih, just below the property itself. It's the kind of place that encourages you to walk, meditate, breathe and assimilate with the rhythm of nature.

Tell us about a place only locals know....

I travel up the east coast often and I love stopping at Merta Sari for lunch. This warung, or local eatery, specialises in a spread of rice with two kinds of tuna satay, spiced fish cakes, sautéed water spinach, roasted peanuts and fish soup. People come here in droves, particularly when there's a ceremony at Goa Lawah, aka Bat Cave Temple, around the corner. For a true Indonesian experience, grab one of the low lesehan tables, at which you sit cross-legged on the small pavilion.

Best way to spend a Sunday?

Sunday is particularly special in Bali because it's when locals and visitors alike enjoy themselves outdoors - by the ocean (particularly at sunset) or in the mountains. I'd recommend heading to Sanur beach. I like to rent a bicycle, ride along the coastal track in the late afternoon, dodging vendors selling char-grilled corn and fairy floss, then take a dip in the ocean as the day fades away. There's a light, happy, buzzy energy in the air and the joy is infectious.



Evening drinks at Seminyak Potato Head's beach bar, Sunset Park.

Some must-visit boutiques, shops or food stores?

You can stock up on excellent coconut oil, palm-sugar syrup and natural sea salt at Dapur Bali Mula, in Les. I also love Ubud's [Tanah Pottery](#), for locally crafted ceramics, and the [John Hardy](#) boutique and gallery at Seminyak, which sells a beautiful, thoughtfully curated selection of textiles, basketry and jewellery.

A book to read while we're there?

Bali: Sekala and Niskala by Fred B Eiseman, which offers beautiful explanations of Bali's rituals, arts and spiritual roots, and will help you understand the energy of the island as a whole. You can purchase it at [Ganesha Bookshop](#) in Ubud, a must-visit for anyone interested in old and new literature about the cultures of Bali and wider Indonesia.

Something to bring back as a souvenir for our foodie friends?

Blacksmithing is one of Bali's most precious traditions, and I personally love cooking with locally crafted knives. [Sounds Familiar Knives](#) creates custom blades using a combination of traditional Balinese and Japanese knife-making techniques. You can order them via Instagram and they'll soon be opening a shop in Seminyak. For something a little more lightweight, go for east Bali sea salt or a jar of artisanal palm sugar from Room 4 Dessert.

The Lowdown

Paon: Real Balinese Cooking by Tjok Maya Kerthyasa and I Wayan Kresna Yasa is published by Hardie Grant Books (£26) and is available to purchase at [bookshop.org](#).

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