

Balinese Food: The Traditional Cuisine and Food Culture of Bali

Vivienne Kruger

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By way of introduction to Vivienne Kruger's *Balinese Food*, bear in mind that eight degrees south of the equator, this modest-sized, lava rich, emerald green island rests among the 17,508 remote, culturally distinct constellation of Indonesian islands. It is home to three million mortals who believe they are protected by an unfathomable number of Bali-Hindu goddesses and gods that inhabit the island's sacred mountain peaks.

The Balinese are unlike almost any other island people in that they are suspicious, even distrustful, of the sea, believing mischievous spirits and negative powers dwell there—the underworld, as it were. Yes, they eat seafood, they just mostly let other Indonesians do the fetching.

Fittingly, Kruger's masterful use of language; dogged, on the ground conversations with thousands of Balinese cooks and farmers; and disarming humanity leads to a culinary-minded compendium unlike almost any other. Bali, you got the scribe you deserved.

What makes Kruger's work even more impressive is the fact that almost nothing about Balinese food history has been written down over the years. She writes: "Like so many other traditions in Bali, cooking techniques and eating habits are passed down verbally by elders to their children and grandchildren who help in the kitchen. However, Indonesia has an old orally transmitted food culture because the pleasure of storytelling is entwined with the pleasure and effort of cooking and eating."

Balinese Food is framed around twenty-one topics, including the all-important sacred ceremonial cuisine, traditional village foods, the cult of rice, Balinese pig, Balinese duck, and specialized cooking techniques like saté, banana leaf wrappers, and the use of bumbu, a sacred, powerful dry spice paste mixture. In the chapter "Seafood in Bali," Kruger lists a popular, fragrant accompaniment called sambal matah—chopped shallots, red chilies, coconut oil, and kaffir lime juice—that is always served raw and fresh, in this case, alongside a simple recipe for grilled tuna.

An outstanding achievement in the realm of island cooking and Indonesian history, *Balinese Food* showcases the Balinese people in the most flattering of ways.

MATT SUTHERLAND (Summer 2014)

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