

Chicken Rice in Taiping

Half the fun of travelling to faraway places and intermixing with different cultures is to be found in the simple - but most essential – daily task of eating and drinking. We think all the answers are at home ... until we go abroad. Often, as well as new foods that unlock new taste buds, it's the setting around those foods that provides extra divergence from our norms.

My breakfast at the Peace Hotel in Taiping consisted of chicken rice and milk tea ... roast chicken that is. Customers had the choice of roast chicken, or white chicken. My selection arrived in four white dishes, each emblazoned with suitably sized dragons: plain white rice, the roast chicken with cucumber and green leaf garnish, a bowl of a soup-like brown gravy and a smaller dish containing what appeared to be a rather fiery looking chili sauce. The tea was served in a clear Pyrex tumbler, with matching saucer, and was the customary carnation milk with tea variety, to be stir-mixed with a Chinese spoon, also sporting a dragon design on its stem.

I'm not sure this would have been my first breakfast choice – the chicken that is, roast or otherwise - but the other possibilities were fried rice, which I didn't fancy at 10 o'clock in the morning, or Kentucky Fried Chicken, across the road. It had always amazed me that KFC could operate successfully in a country like Malaysia, where gastronomic delights abound on every corner. But each to his own I guess, as long as that *each* did not include me.

The atmosphere in the café was lively, to say the least. Two tables, of elderly, middle-aged men were particularly noisy. They conversed at their tables, and between tables in extremely loud and rasping voices. In the West, one would have thought there was a terrible argument going on: a matter of life or death. But here, in Taiping, this was just a friendly discussion between neighbours.

A group of six young ladies entered the café, dressed in western-style blue jeans, with different coloured T-shirts, though the predominant colours were white and pink. Each of these girls were quite small and pale-skinned; I thought they appeared Japanese in stature and style. They ordered chicken rice – the white variety – and it came within minutes, (making me wonder if they had pre-ordered, because my roast dish had taken much longer) delivered on a large, white, oval plate and placed in the middle of the table for them all to share. They drank soft drinks with ice and talked animatedly and at high pitch for the short time they were there, which I guessed was less than 30 minutes.

Unfortunately, I had chosen a small table at the epicenter of a three-tabled triangle and with the crusty selection of Malaysian men hurling comments - or perhaps insults (who knows?) - at and between their tables on one side and the six petite but voluble girls screaming at each other with voices that could shatter my pyrex tea tumbler on the other, I resigned myself to thinking about the ups and downs of a traveller's life, whilst surreptitiously dividing my pink serviette into two and forming little mini ice-cream cones to act as ear plugs.
