

Penang Assam Laksa Recipe (Nyonya Recipe)

Ingredients:

600 g fresh coarse rice vermicelli

600 g chubb mackerel (kembung)

Spice paste (A):

5 shallots, peeled

2 stalks lemon grass (serai), sliced finely (use only the bottom tender inner part)

Thumb-sized piece fresh young turmeric (kunyit)

7 dried chilies, soaked in warm water for 15 minutes

3 fresh red chilies (omit this if you want a less hot gravy)

5 cm piece shrimp paste (belachan)

Spice paste (B):

2 pieces tamarind (assam keping)

1 ginger flower bud (bunga kantan), chopped very finely

5 - 6 stalks polygonum (daun kesum)

5 rice bowls water

1 teaspoon sugar

1 cucumber

1 bundle mint leaves (daun pudina)

2 big red onions, cut into rings for garnishing

3 fresh red chilies, sliced finely at a slant

1 small pineapple

Black prawn paste (heh koh) - this is a thick black paste which has to be diluted before use. Its odour and taste are pungent to the uninitiated. A delicacy of sorts, its use is actually limited to a few specialities like Penang Assam Laksa and Rojak. However, it can be used as a dip for chilies, cucumbers and mangoes. Without heh koh, the dishes mentioned above lose their hallmark.

Method:

Skin and slice cucumber. Discard core and shred. Scoop a few tablespoons of prawn paste into a bowl. Dissolve in a little warm water. Skin pineapple and cut off eyes, wash and shred. Prepare ground ingredients (A). Stir fresh coarse rice vermicelli in hot water for a few minutes after separating and rinsing under cold water. Remove and drain. Into a pot, add 3 rice bowls of water. Add fish. Boil until cooked. Remove fish. Discard bones. (Alternatively, steam fish and flake). Add another 2 rice bowls of water to pot. Put in ground ingredients (A). Boil until gravy is fragrant. Add ingredients (B), fish flesh, sugar and salt to taste. Check to ensure that shrimp paste dissolves. Boil gravy for 10 - 15 minutes at low heat, adding more water if necessary. To serve, put coarse vermicelli into a bowl. Garnish with pineapple, cucumber, chilies, mint leaves and onions. Add gravy. Add prawn paste according to personal taste.

Note: An excellent substitute for chubb mackerel is wolf herring (parang). It gives a sweeter, tastier gravy. A can of sardines is also a good substitute if fresh fish is not readily available.