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CELEBRATING THE CENTENARY – in recipes

In 1917, French entrepreneur Henri Fauconnier planted the first commercial oil palm crop in Malaysia. Fauconnier couldn't have known it then, but his fledgling efforts have now burgeoned into one of Malaysia's most prolific produce.

Palm oil is Malaysia's fourth-biggest economic resource and provides a livelihood for over one million Malaysians.

To celebrate the centennial anniversary of the Malaysian palm oil industry, the Malaysian Palm Oil Council and The Star Media Group have jointly published *Palm to Plate*, a cookbook featuring a collection of palm oil-inspired recipes contributed by a star-studded

cast of chefs and culinary educators.

The recipes are a combination of new recipes and a best selection from previously published recipes using palm oil and its derivative products.

The participating chefs are Rodolphe Onno, technical director of Le Cordon Bleu Malaysia and the school's pastry chef Patrick Lemesle; Federico Michieletto, former head chef of Marini's group of restaurants; Jean Michel Fraisse, chef-founder of The French Culinary School in Asia; executive chef of The Datai Langkawi Richard Millar, as well as cookbook authors Catherine Lau and Debbie Teoh and TV guest chef Safura Atan.

It's a sign of product confidence when *Star2's* Curious Cook food science columnist Chris Chan, known for digging deep into science to expose food fads and other culinary pseudoscience, is also invited to write an investigative piece.

In the book, Chan says that when he started investigating cooking oils, he discovered several culinary properties about palm oil which places it ahead of many other oils.

"It turns out that it is also healthier to cook with palm oil than many would think." Being the keen foodie that he is, he couldn't help contributing some tips for making a great chicken karaage as well!

Another who counts palm oil an "important discovery" in his journey as a chef is Paris-based French chef David Martin.

"When I lived for several years in South-East Asia, I discovered many things about the region's cooking that I grew to love. One of my most important culinary discoveries was palm oil.

"When I lived in Cambodia, I discovered palm oil and came to realise the incredible benefits it brings to a recipe," he writes in his contribution to the book.

Back in Paris, as a culinary ambassador for palm oil, Martin took to the streets in his Palm Oil Food Truck to spread the good word and dispel fears.

After 100 years, Malaysian palm oil can count many well-known chefs among its advocates, on the basis of its intrinsic goodness, and they pepper the pages of *Palm to Plate*.

The cookbook is divided into various chapters like breakfast foods, healthy eats, fun foods, Malaysian favourites and sweet treats, to capture the various ways palm oil can be incorporated into recipes as diverse as local staples like apam balik, nasi lemak and yong chow fried rice as well as more Western dishes like pan-seared scallops with celeriac puree and potato churros with choron sauce.

There are also some lip-smacking recipes for desserts

like durian crepes and peanut butter crunch brownies.

According to Onno (who also wrote the book's foreword), he didn't hesitate when he was asked to participate and contribute recipes for the project.

"We decided to participate in this book because I see it is a good image for Le Cordon Bleu and we wanted to support a big part of the Malaysian economy. This book is a powerful reminder of what a large role palm oil plays in Malaysia," he says

Ironically, Onno himself only discovered palm oil for the first time when he came to Malaysia a few years ago.

"My first time seeing palm oil was in Malaysia and I thought, 'Wow, it's so red!' But I soon realised it's a good product," he says.

Palm oil today accounts for 35% of the world's vegetable oil market, which says a lot about the oil's global popularity.

Onno's reference to the oil being a "good product" alludes to the many health and nutritional benefits of the product.

The oil's opulent orangey-red colour signals its rich content of natural carotenes (15 times more than carrots and 30 times more than tomatoes). It is also loaded with Vitamin E and is cholesterol-free.

As a cooking aid, palm oil has many great qualities, most notable of which is its high smoke point – 232°C (higher

than sunflower oil and canola oil), which makes it great for deep-frying and pan-frying.

The recipes in the book for breaded wings with devil sauce and fried zucchini flower with ricotta and bottarga offer a glimpse into how palm oil and deep-frying are natural soulmates.

Palm oil also has another great advantage: it is semi-solid at room temperature in temperate regions, which according to Onno, makes it a great replacement for butter.

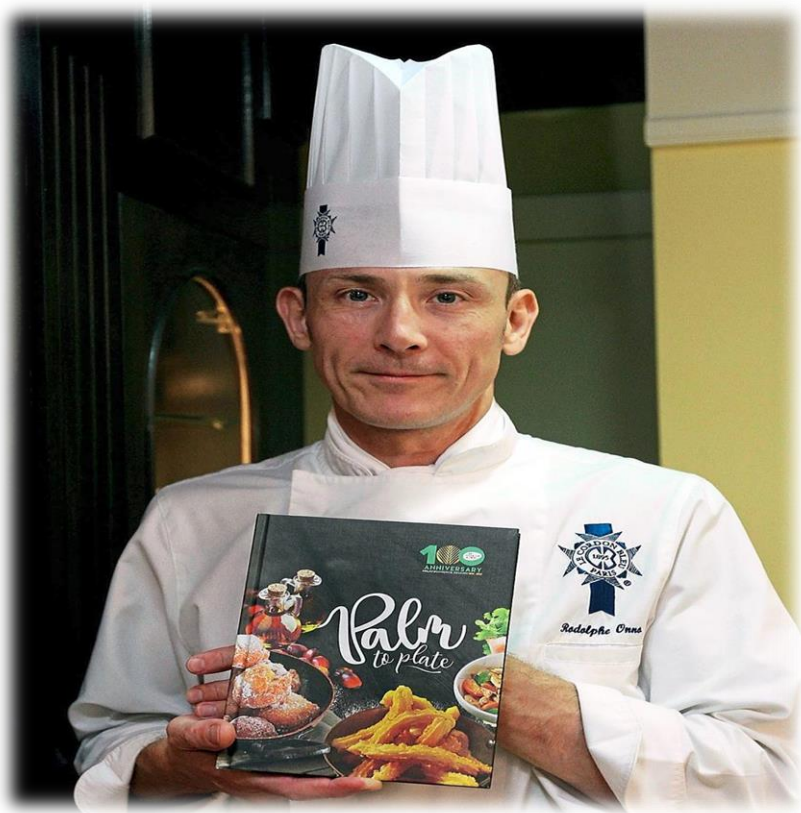
"Even at room temperature, it will be solid. That's why the industry loves to use it because it can be used to replace butter, because of the similarities in texture. It is also cost-efficient because butter is more expensive," he says.

This is also why some of the dessert recipes in the book, like green pea cookies, peanut melts and banana chocolate muffins, have switched out butter with palm oil, given that it is an obvious stand-in.

Onno says he hopes the book will encourage more people to cook with palm oil, especially as it has the backing of so many illustrious food authorities.

"There are pastry chefs and culinary chefs involved in this, so people can see the results of what the chefs have made, and I think it will encourage them to use palm oil in many applications and cooking styles," he says.

Plantation Industries and Commodities Minister Datuk Seri Mah Siew Keong launched launch *Palm to Plate* in Kuala Lumpur on March 7, 2017 in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of Malaysian palm oil.



Rodolphe Onno says that he didn't hesitate to participate in the Palm to Plate cookbook as palm oil is such a large part of the Malaysian culinary fabric and economy.

Photos: The Star/Ricky Lai