



Couplan at the 2016 Food and Society Conference — SAMUEL ONG/The Star.



The simple meal Couplan enjoyed with the orang asli he met in Tapah.



The leaf of the lemba plant. (Right) The amazing lemba fruit. — Photos: FRANCOIS COUPLAN



Ulam Kampung is a must-have to begin the feast.



There's only goodness in nasi ulam (pictured below) and nasi kerabu with its plethora of herbs like this Nasi Kerabu Ulam Setaman, to which you can easily add wild herbs that you forage yourself.



The little Sabahan who took Couplan into the forest to show him its edible secrets.

By SUZANNE LAZAROO
star2@thestar.com.my

A SECRET to surviving the brash harshness of modern living lies in the jungles and forests, says renowned French ethnobotanist Francois Couplan.

It is to be found in the plethora of wild, edible plants available to us, the relationships and knowledge we can build with these native plants and the traditional food ways we can reclaim.

Speaking at Malaysia's first Food and Society Conference held in Hotel Bangi Putrajaya in late November, Couplan delivered his message of deliverance via flora in a keynote address titled Edible Plants and the Concept of Soft Survival in the Modern Urban Lifestyle.

We need to soften the jagged edges of the urban lifestyle, he said, and we can do so by going into the forests.

This concept of "soft survival" is the idea he has pioneered in Europe – it is a profound experience of harmonious existence with nature.

A vocation found in the forest

Complete with fedora and a familiar-looking jacket, Couplan, 66, is Indiana Jones come to life.

But his Lost Ark is no ancient relic – it is the living, breathing verdant heart of the world's plants.

A pioneer in the world of the wild plants of Europe, Couplan has studied the plants of five continents.

He is the author of over 80 books, which have been translated into German, Spanish, Dutch and Japanese.

He has been teaching about the uses of plants since 1975, and his titles unfurl in a scroll of learning: Doctor of Sciences (National Museum of Natural History in Paris), Doctor of Science in Britain, a graduate of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes in Paris, Knight of the Order of Agricultural Merit in France.

His classrooms and his research labs often have tree trunks for walls and a feathery canopy of leaves overhead – Couplan has spent long periods living with nature, teaching students about the relationship between plants and people, and learning from the indigenous peoples of various cultures and geographic locations – from the Native Americans of the United States to Malaysia's own orang asli.

Couplan set up a school in Lyon, France, the Collège Pratique d'Ethnobotanique, which has an in-depth three-year curriculum on plant-people relationships, and teaches survival courses with an emphasis on foraging.

In his work with edible plants, he has collaborated with notable chefs in Europe, the United States and Japan – but more on that later.

Time to get wild

We can survive the concrete jungle with the help of the actual jungle, says French ethnobotanist Francois Couplan.

Why wild is better

If you listen to Couplan's fascinating treatises, in any competition between wild and cultivated plants, it is wildness that seems to win out.

"Wild plants are better than health supplements. They are more efficient at delivering nutrition because their nutritional elements are balanced and natural, with complete proteins," he said.

"They are rich in antioxidants, have medicinal properties and are both better-tasting and cheaper. Plus, they are part of tradition, and are living beings, so it is possible to form a relationship with them.

"It's a lot easier for me to form a relationship with a plant than with a vitamin pill!"

And in the health stakes particularly, modern society really needs to rethink its attitudes to consumption, to which so many health problems can be traced.

"Malnutrition, with a lack of essential vitamins and minerals, diabetes, obesity – the list is long," said Couplan. Wild plants need to be appreciated and consumed, he says, but they need to remain wild.

"In our need to control the world, we try to control nature and how it yields food," he said. "Once you try to cultivate plants, they are changed. You must remember that agriculture is only about 10,000 years old.

"But importantly, this attempt to exert control constructs power and places it in the hands of a few, resulting in poverty, oppression, war," he said. "The first seed that was planted in the ground was the seed of a nuclear bomb."

Eating wild plants can destabilise this power structure, putting the power back within the hands of the people.

"This is about a revalorisation of tradition, which includes looking to the indigenous locals, to the orang asli, to teach us. The knowledge of wild plants is fast disappearing, because it is usually found among the older people."

Education is very important in foraging. It must be underscored by a solid backbone of knowledge – lest one actually poison oneself.

Couplan also advocates going into nature and returning to our gatherer origins because eating wild plants is about building relationships with nature itself, recognising our stewardship – rather than ownership – of the earth.

"We need to have a relationship with something that is not under our control," he

said. "And to that end, we must allow wild plants to be wild, and accept the gifts nature gives us."

Urban living may be rife with modern trappings, but sometimes they are just that – traps that shape our own edges into sharp things like themselves.

"Living in a modern city is all about hard survival, and I hope that knowing and eating wild plants can soften that, by enhancing physical and mental health, by giving us more autonomy over what we eat. By helping us build a better relationship with nature, so that we are less frightened by it."

Into the woods

Couplan has been obsessed by plants all his life, but even more so by the relationship between the human and plant kingdoms. And there is no one with a closer relationship to plants than the indigenous peoples of an area, including here in Malaysia.

"Whenever and wherever I travel, I observe how people relate to plants," he said. When he came to Selangor for the conference, he spent a couple of weeks doing just that.

"First, I went to a supermarket in Bangsar and observed some vegetables, nicely packed in plastic, fresh and organic," he said. All were cultivated, and of various origins – none were native.

"It was the local plants I wanted," he said. So Couplan went to a local restaurant in Bangi. To his delight, he stumbled upon ulam, such as tenggek burung (Euodia ridleyi).

"I went to a restaurant in Bangi and I discovered ulam, tenggek burung in particular. So I wanted to find out more about ulam ... and I found myself in an orang asli village in Tapah," said Couplan.

There, the villagers live in a small settlement snugly flanking the forest. They took him in among the dense foliage every day, and taught Couplan about plants like serai kayu (Syzygium polyanthum) and putat (Barringtonia racemosa).

"When we got back to the village, we ate these leaves. Paku pakis and lembe (Curculigo latifolia), which is juicy and sweet and aromatic, and which makes water taste sweeter after you eat it," he said. It was a journey of discovery that picked up where Couplan left off on a previous trip to Sabah two years ago. That time around, he stayed with friends from the Dusun tribe.

"Their young daughter, she was about 12 at the time, also took me into the forest and showed me so many plants with huge nutritional value," he said.

His conclusions? Malaysian forests are full of treasure, if only we knew how to appreciate it, look for it and co-exist with it. But unfortunately, this isn't (yet?) the case.

When he emerged from the jungles, Couplan again paid a visit to a local restaurant, this time near Tapah. "We ate carrots with cabbage and cauliflower! Again, not native. And this is not confined to Malaysia – I have seen the hill tribes of Vietnam cutting down forests in order to cultivate coffee trees, to get money to buy phones and carrots!"

"So the question is, why aren't wild plants eaten any more? Why is even ulam often rejected?"

Eating symbols

There are many possible reasons that wild plants could have fallen into disfavour, said Couplan.

"Could it be because they taste bad, it takes too much time to get them, because there is a concern they might be poisonous?" he said.

But no, because steered gently by knowledge, they can be both delicious and nutritious, as well as easily accessible. So perhaps the clues lie beyond the obvious, in sociological and historical studies and in the human psyche, which relies so heavily on internalised symbols.

"Could it be that wild plants are considered famine food, or the food of the poor, that they are not socially acceptable?" he asked. This is an attitude rooted in medieval Europe – and subsequently transmitted to the rest of the world via colonialism – with its clear delineations of class.

"One way to segment the upper and lower classes was by what they ate. The upper classes consumed refined food and sugar, plants which were introduced to the area rather than native, and transformed by man [cultivated].

They ate birds, because they could fly and were therefore considered closer to God!" said Couplan.

In contrast, the lower classes ate coarse food with no refined sugar, and foraged for local plants straight from nature. "And they ate pigs, which wallowed in the mud and were therefore considered 'low' animals," said Couplan.

Put so baldly, it sounds somewhat ludicrous – but it is easy to draw parallels between these old attitudes and contemporary ones, to see how they have evolved insidiously over the years.

We don't even have to look as far as the forests to see it – there are already class distinctions drawn between open-air and supermarkets – even if there is a worldwide resurgence of interest in a more natural way of eating, with "foraging" becoming a trendy rather than vilified by-word in the culinary world.

"We eat symbols, in an unconscious process," said Couplan. You are what you eat, and so people often seek to eat power, or the symbols of power.

Humans can be such a stubborn, contrary bunch. "Cultivated plants are comparatively more expensive, and harder to grow, so they are often seen as more valuable," said Couplan. This idea spread across the world via colonialism, and so cultivated vegetables became one of the hallmarks of a modern diet, perceived as progressive.

People have used this consumption-based class segmentation to establish lines of power throughout the ages – with a few exceptions though, as can be seen in the wild greens – such as black nightshade, thistles, purslane and avronies, a kind of wild

asparagus – that have always formed a significant part of the Cretan diet in Greece, and the enduring tradition of eating mountain vegetables in Japan.

Reversing roles

Today, wild plants are also wildly trendy on the progressive global table, proving that Couplan's hoped-for "revalorisation" is indeed occurring.

Beyond Couplan's own pioneering work, we have intrepid kitchen adventurers like Noma's Rene Redzepi, the king of foraging on his native Danish shores.

Couplan himself has worked with chefs like the French Marc Veyrat from the Haute-Savoie region, whose first two restaurants earned three Michelin stars each; he is iconic on the European culinary scene, well-known for his use of mountain plants and herbs.

Veyrat grew up in the French Alps, where the wild plants nodded in the wind and pointed a way towards a cuisine that he describes as "a paradox, both rooted in the earth yet poetic".

Right here at home, there is chef Darren Teoh from Dewakan, who has always fiercely held to the belief that the story of Malaysia, our story, is echoed from tree to vine to shrub in our lush jungles – and whose own menu tells foraging tales to any diner who will listen.

But we as urban Malaysians need to be excited not only by the thistles and brambles of faraway icy climates, but by the citrusy, fragrance of the tenggek burung and the taste-modifying powers of the lembe. We need to go into the woods.

