Cooking healthy

Here are tips to ensure you're making delicious and healthy meals at home.

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IN the bustling streets of Kuala Lumpur and vibrant neighbourhoods across Malaysia, the enticing aromas of nasi lemak, char kway teow and roti canai are never far away.

For many Malaysian families, the convenience of eating out at food courts or the ease of a few taps on a food delivery app has become the default for daily meals.

While our local food scene is world-class, this shift away from the home kitchen comes at a hidden cost.

Most commercially-prepared meals are designed for speed and palate appeal, often at the expense of nutritional integrity.

They frequently lack essential fibre from vegetables, wholegrains and legumes, while being heavily laden with "the big three": salt, oil and sugar.

Over time, these imbalanced eating patterns can lead to significant health consequences, including hypertension (high blood pressure), obesity and diabetes, affecting not just adults, but the younger generation as well.

The solution isn't to give up our favourite flavours though, but to reclaim them instead.

Cooking at home is the ultimate act of self-care.

It provides total control over what goes into your body, allowing you to manage portions, handpick fresh ingredients and choose cooking methods that preserve nutrients, rather than destroying them.

Adding flavour without salt

The journey to a healthier lifestyle doesn't start at the gym; it starts in your pantry.

By shifting the focus to home-prepared meals, you transform your kitchen into a laboratory for health.

When you cook at home, you are the gatekeeper.

You can prioritise lean proteins like skinless chicken, fish and tofu over fatty cuts of meat.

You can ensure that half your plate is filled with vibrant, fibre-rich vegetables – something that is often difficult to achieve when ordering takeaway.

This control allows you to build a balanced plate that fuels your body, rather than just filling it.

One of the biggest hurdles people face when switching to home-cooking is the fear that "healthy" means "bland".

This is a common misconception.

The secret to delicious, low-sodium (salt) cooking lies in layering flavours using nature's own enhancers.

Instead of reaching for the salt shaker or heavy seasoning powders, look to local herbs and spices:

> **Aromatics**

Use liberal amounts of onions, garlic, ginger and shallots.

Sautéing these slowly releases a natural sweetness and depth.

> **Heat and zest**

Fresh chillies, lemongrass and galangal provide a sensory punch that makes you forget the salt is missing.

A squeeze of lime or calamansi at the end of cooking can "brighten" a dish, mimicking the tongue's reaction to salt.

> **The umami factor**

Umami is the "fifth taste", a savoury richness that provides satisfaction.

You can achieve high-impact flavour by using:

- Mushrooms (dried shiitake are particularly potent)
- Tomatoes or a small amount of concentrated tomato paste
- Fermented soy products like tempeh and miso
- Small amounts of toasted anchovies (ikan bilis) or seaweed
- Pure umami seasoning (i.e. pure monosodium glutamate, or MSG, which is made from sugar cane or tapioca through a fermentation process).

It's important to note that while traditional fermented favourites like budu, cincalok or belacan are incredible umami bombs, they are also exceptionally high in sodium.

The trick is to use them as a "whisper" rather than a "shout" – use just enough to provide depth without sending your salt intake skyrocketing.

Cooking it healthy

How you cook is just as important as what you cook.

Deep-frying – a staple in many commercial kitchens – adds excessive calories and can create harmful compounds when oil is reused multiple times.

At home, you can opt for techniques that lock in flavour and moisture without the grease, such as:

> **Steaming and poaching**

These are the gold standards for retaining vitamins.

Steaming fish with ginger and scallions is a classic example of a dish that is high in protein and low in fat.

> **Grilling and roasting**

These methods allow fats to drip away while caramelising the natural sugars in meats and vegetables, providing a smoky depth of flavour.

> **Quick stir-frying**

By using a non-stick pan or a well-seasoned wok, you can "flash-cook" vegetables and proteins with just a teaspoon of heart-healthy oil, keeping the veggies crunchy and nutrient-dense.

Making an effort to cook at home is about more than just making healthier meals; it can also be a good way of modelling healthy behaviours for your children. — Filepic

Even when using packaged ingredients, you can make a massive difference by reading the label.

Many brands now offer lower-sodium soy and oyster sauces.

When using these, try diluting them with a little water or broth, or simply use half the amount the recipe calls for.

Another lesser-sodium option is pure umami seasoning (e.g. MSG), which can be used as an alternative to replace a portion of salt.

This reduces sodium content while maintaining the deliciousness of the food.

Your taste buds are remarkably adaptive; if you reduce salt gradually, you will eventually find that commercial foods taste unpleasantly salty.

A long-term investment

Redefining your relationship with homecooking is a journey that pays dividends for a lifetime:

> **Financial savings**

While the initial grocery bill might seem significant, the cost per meal of homecooking is almost always lower than eating out, especially when considering the long-term medical costs avoided by maintaining a healthy diet.

Bulk-buying staples like brown rice, lentils and seasonal local greens is a budget-friendly way to feed a family.

> **Family connection and education**

Cooking at home is a powerful way to model healthy behaviour for children.

When kids see parents peeling garlic or washing bok choy, they learn that food is something to be prepared with care, not just consumed from a plastic container.

It turns mealtime into a shared experience of creation and connection.

Family mealtime is a unique opportunity to inculcate healthy eating among its members.

Reclaiming the kitchen is not about achieving culinary perfection or spending hours over a hot stove every night.

It is about the simple, intentional act of choosing what fuels your family.

By leaning into the rich array of local spices, embracing naturally-flavourful ingredients and opting for gentle cooking methods, you can create meals that are as delicious as any restaurant dish, but far kinder to your heart.

Start small – perhaps three nights a week – and watch as your kitchen once again becomes the healthiest, happiest room in your home.

Associate Prof Dr Satvinder Kaur Nachatar Singh is the Nutrition Society of Malaysia (NSM) assistant honorary secretary. This article is contributed by Nutrition Month Malaysia (NMM) 2026, an annual community nutrition education initiative jointly organised by NSM, Malaysian Dietitians' Association and Malaysian Society of Body Composition. NMM will be holding its Food-Fit-Fun Fair in Sunway Velocity Mall Cheras, Kuala Lumpur, on June 4-7. The information provided is for educational and communication purposes only, and should not be considered as medical advice. *The Star* does not give any warranty on accuracy, completeness, functionality, usefulness or other assurances as to the content appearing in this article. *The Star* disclaims all responsibility for any losses, damage to property or personal injury suffered directly or indirectly from reliance on such information.