

It's got to be Habhal's for flavour and taste

By Ben Tan

SOYA sauce, kicap, tau you. Whatever name you call it, it is without doubt one of the most popular food components in Malaysian cuisine.

The humble black liquid is actually a complex fermented product made from soya beans.

The Chinese and Japanese have used soya sauce for thousands of years as a flavouring condiment and also as a dipping sauce for their food.

In Malaysia, it is also used for similar purposes. However, families here typically use a brand their respective families have used over the years. This is usually a tried and trusted method.

One of the more established brands here is the well-known Habhal's Kicap Cap Kipas Udang soy sauce.

Habhal is a premium soya sauce maker. It is part of Zara Foodstuff Industries Sdn Bhd and is considered household name in many Malay homes and food outlets.

The Johor-based company makes its famed red (for sweet) and green (for salty) soya sauces from premium-grade Canadian beans, brewing them according to strict quality methods.

Like most basic soya sauce recipes, Habhal's soya sauces include a reasonable amount of wheat, caramelised sugar or just caramel colouring and salt. Habhal only specialises in the salty and sweet dark varieties.

Zara Foodstuff Industries quality assurance manager Mohd Nazri Ismail said making soya sauce was not an easy process as it is a fermented product.

"It is made of soya beans, roasted wheat, and an inoculated mold. After the inoculation, the soya sauce sits for three days until the culture develops.

"After that, the liquid mash, as it is now called, is put into fermentation tanks for several months.

"Before bottling, the liquid is filtered by pressing the solids out," he explained during a recent visit to their factory in Jalan Langkasuka in the Larkin Industrial Area in Johor.

The entire operation, done with great care, is overseen by Nazri who underwent specialised training in food science and technology.



The management team behind the production, marketing and distribution of Habhal's and Zara Foodstuff Industries products.



A technician making sure the production line runs smoothly.



Workers stacking the batches of bottled Habhal's Kicap Cap Kipas Udang for distribution to various retailers and vendors nationwide.

Habhal's soya sauce products are made from genetically modified organism (GMO)-free Canadian soya beans, wheat, water, salt, and sugar.

After grinding the soya beans, the mixture sits for two or three days and is then inoculated with carefully selected mold. Here is where colour, flavour, and aroma really begin to develop.

It is then allowed to ferment with added brine; that is where the salt comes in. The mixture then sits in large fibreglass tanks with sugar, for several months.

When the fermentation is complete and the colour appropriate, the workers press out the solids and filter out the raw soya sauce.

After this, the workers pasteurise the soya sauce to destroy any pathogenic bacteria. It is then packaged in the bottling production line after their laboratory does all the necessary tests.

ZFI Marketing Sdn Bhd senior sales and marketing manager Hasnah Abdul Rahman, who represents the marketing and distribution arm, said the company's soya sauces have a massive following in Malaysia. They command about 70 per cent of the market for sweet and salty variants, which are commonly used in Malay dishes.

"Our soya sauces still maintain their traditional taste as they are specially prepared using time-honoured recipes," she said.

Last year, ZFI Marketing Sdn Bhd recorded RM60 million in sales from its various products, making it one of the major players in the Malaysian-owned fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) market.

Habhal's soya sauces are also exported to Singapore and Brunei.

In the United Kingdom and Australia, the sauces can be found in niche shops specialising in Asian cuisine.