Walking the wok on heritage and authenticity



■ Julie Lin is a Malaysian-Scottish chef, broadcaster and cookery teacher

Chef Julie Lin's debut cookbook redefines fusion, blending her Malaysian-Scottish background with bold ideas on the politics of food in modern kitchens, writes Ailsa Sheldon

IF you thought that 'fusion food' was a trend left behind in the 1990s then think again. Fusion is back, it's better, and it has a powerful new advocate in Julie Lin, the chef and restaurateur turned author and presenter. Julie Lin first gained prominence for her Malaysian-Scottish cuisine in Glasgow, opening restaurants Julie's Kopitiam and GaGa. This summer her first cookbook Sama Sama: Comfort food from my Malaysian-Scottish kitchen was published and it's been storming up the best-seller lists.

"Fusion is a symbol of strength, and it's a symbol of how people have migrated over here and created a cuisine that's powerful and gives them a means of survival," says Julie, "food is political, and it's always connected to the movement of people. I think fusion got a bad name in the 80s, and 90s, which I want to try and reclaim, because fusion really explains the cuisine of Malaysia, where it's so diverse and it's made up of different cultures."

Fusion has a firm place in Scotland too. Sama Sama reads as part cookbook, part manifesto for how to bring cultures together in the kitchen.

"We have a very narrow view of authenticity," says Julie, "In my restaurants I would often have people who weren't Malaysian saying to me, 'that's not authentic Malaysian food'. I don't really understand what that means, because authentic Malaysian food would be going to Malaysia and eating food of Malaysian tradition.

"I want us to broaden our ideas of authenticity. I actually find it very authentic to use Scottish herbs, or samphire in a stir fry rather than bean sprouts when they're local and in season. I find that more authentic to the movement of people and how you enjoy food in different countries and climates.

"A phrase that I often hear is, 'Chinese takeaway food is not real Chinese food'. I don't think you can say that, because it would make the journeys of so many people that have emigrated from China to open Chinese takeaways and restaurants almost invalid. That's part of immigration, where you get a hybrid cuisine of what people know how to cook and what works here. I think Chinese takeaways really epitomise that. It might be different from regional cuisine in China, but there's definitely validity to that, and strength."

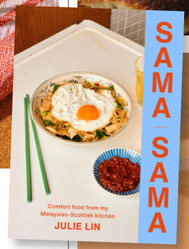
Sama Sama is a deeply personal book, interwoven with Julie's experiences of growing up mixed-race in Glasgow, starting a restaurant at a young age, and of her mum's immigration from Malaysia to Scotland to work as a NHS nurse. Every story adds a deeper understanding of ingredients, recipes and approaches to cooking.



■ Chinese sausage Bucatini soup is a favourite in Julie's kitchen



■ The 'chippy potato fritter morning roll soup for one' will be familiar to Scottish palates



■ Julie Lin's new book if perfect for discovering the secrets of one great Malaysian cuisines

Chapters include 'Authentically in Between', exploration of the duality of Julie's cooking, and 'Learning for the Motherland' which are family recipes. Sama Sama aims to instill kitchen confidence, and encourage cooks to season 'Agak-Agak': until a dish is just right for your palate, or as Julie's cousin, quoted in the book says, "season the dish until the ghost of our ancestors tells you to stop." There's a chapter of solo meals: 'Cook when Nobody's Watching," and plenty of reminders that it's always worth making something delicious just for you.

Sama Sama has had a rapturous response with new fans including Nigella Lawson, whose work hugely inspired Julie as a young chef. It's also giving a voice to many people with dual heritage who have been reaching out to Julie, finding recognition in her pages: "I was speaking to a girl who's Norwegian – Indonesian," says Julie.

"She said now I want to try and cook a Norwegian stew with Indonesian flavours. I think that's amazing. It's really nice to hear of people doing the same thing and embracing that world of fusion." Crucially, Julie's family in both countries are also delighted with the book. "My family have been so lovely," she says, "I got to show my Malaysian family the book when I was there for Lunar New Year. My family are a very supportive, loving bunch anyway, and the book felt like a vessel to explain how it's been being Scottish-Malaysian, a bit like a manual of how my brain works."

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Having stepped away from restaurants Julie is currently in demand for pop-up food events, and on television, appearing on Channel 4's Sunday Brunch, presenting a food documentary for BBC's 'Discovering the World's Table' and becoming a frequent guest on BBC's Saturday Kitchen.

"I still have restaurants in my bones," she says, "but when you work in food, people expect you to work in restaurants. I want to see if there are other avenues to look into, maybe making products, and definitely book two. Finding a brilliant food community has been really important to me. So that's what this next year is going to be about, which is very exciting." ■

● ***Sama Sama by Julie Lin (Ebury Press, £28) Photography by Liz Seabrook***