Ex-president Wei Kim Wee’s fave food in a book

BY JOY FANG

THE late Mr Wei Kim Wee was a simple man with few culinary demands, but he was perceptively when it came to food, said his daughter, Ms Wei Eng Hwa.

He would eat whatever he was served, but he “had very discerning taste buds”, said Ms Wee, 68.

Referring to the dish pong tahu, the classic nyonya tofu and meatball soup which her father liked, Ms Wee said: “He would describe to me how his mother cooked it, such as its texture and so on, so we modified it.”

The recipe for the dish is included in a new cookbook, Cooking For The President: Reflections And Recipes Of Mrs Wei Kim Wee, published by Ms Wee and launched yesterday at the Raffles Hotel.

The 544-page tome was written by Ms Wee, and the photographs inside were taken by her as well. It contains some 250 Peranakan recipes for dishes which her mother cooked for their family, as well as for dignitaries that her late father hosted during his years as Singapore’s president.

Mr Wei died in 2005 at the age of 89 from complications arising from prostate cancer. He was president from 1985 to 1998.

The book—which also includes stories about Ms Wee’s parents and her father’s career— took 21 years to complete, as she has been busy working as a lawyer. Her mother, being the first lady then, was also tied up with official engagements.

Still, Ms Wee, who is the fifth of seven children, persisted on the project because she wanted to fulfil her mother’s dream of documenting all the recipes she learnt from her own grandmother.

“She said if that was not done, it would be a great waste because her grandmother was a genius and an expert Peranakan cuisine cook,” said Ms Wee.

She wrote down the first recipe—that for sambal udang or spicy prawns—for the cookbook in July 1989. Since then, she had tested each recipe several times to make it as perfect as possible, with her mother, now 94, acting as her critic.

XMAS MEAL: Mr Wei Kim Wee (centre) having dinner with his family in 2000. (PHOTO: WEE ENG HWAA)

and consultant. Ms Wee wanted to “capture the essence and true standard of Peranakan cuisine” in the cookbook.

President S R Nathan, who had enjoyed Mrs Wee’s cooking, said at the book launch yesterday: “Today, festive Peranakan dinner has become rare, in fact, a novelty, for Singaporeans. I hope this book...will rekindle interest in Peranakan cooking and its spread.”

Copies of the book autographed by Ms Wee have raised more than 81 million in donations, which will go to five beneficiaries, including Nanyang Technological University’s Wei Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Girl Guides Singapore and the Jamyah Home for the Aged.

Recounting her memories of her father yesterday, Ms Wee said that while he could not cook, he was a caring father who “was very good at fixing Milo, Ovaltine and Horlicks” drinks for the family.

joyfang@spah.com.sg

Cooking For the President: Reflections And Recipes Of Mrs Wei Kim Wee, which has a first print run of 5,000 copies, is available at all major bookstores at $115.50.

HELPDESK 我的字典

Disceming: 敏锐的 mín ruì de
Recipe: 食谱 shí pǔ
Essence: 精髓 jīng suí
Festive: 节庆 jié qìng de