Cooking up help for poor women

Student initiative helps them earn extra money

By Jeremy Lim

THEY trick to fluffy fragrant nasi lemak, she says, lies in pandan leaves and ginger.

And with that, Madam Rosni Sadi, artfully embeds the two ingredients in the pot of rice filled with coconut milk. She urges the four students in her cooking class - organised by Gourmet Guru Academy - to do the same.

"Practice makes perfect," says the cooking instructor. "Don't be surprised if it doesn't turn out good the first time."

Madam Rosni, 47, would know about practice. She has been making improvements to her nasi lemak recipe for more than two decades, after learning it from her mother and grandmother. She appears like an old hand at her job but actually started teaching just nine years ago.

"In the beginning, I was a bit nervous, as my English was not good," says the mother of three children, aged between 14 and 23. But she has steadily built up her confidence, and earns $1000 taking on classes of up to 10 students once a month.

"She's quite a good teacher because she gets everyone involved," says sales manager Samantha Sesh, 39, who paid $20 for the nasi lemak class. "We learned to tell when the dish is ready by stirring and watching the colour of the ingredients change."

Madam Rosni is one of seven women recruited to be cooking instructors at Gourmet Guru, which was started last year by 14 students from Nanyang Technological University's Sife (Students in Free Enterprise) club. The social enterprise initiative sets out to help poor women, who are talented cooks, to share their skills and earn some pocket money.

The project helped the NTU Sife team win this year's Nanyang Award for Teamwork yesterday, for bringing success and honour to the university. Launched in 2005, the annual awards recognise outstanding achievements of faculty, staff and students in areas like research, innovation and humanitarian work.

One of Gourmet Guru's founders, Ms Diana Yusoff, 23, was inspired by her Pakistani-born aunt, who was working part-time in a library for $500 a month.

"She couldn't work full-time because she had to care for her one-year-old son," says Ms Diana. "But she could make fantastic biryanis and chapatis (traditional rice and bread)."

Her aunt readily agreed when asked if she wanted to make extra money teaching others how to cook. But the academy also has a broader mission.

"We could just teach people to cook pasta and still make money, but that won't help to preserve our culture," says NTU's Sife club president Stanley Chim, 24. "We want to teach traditional cooking that has been passed down through the years."

For Ms Rostrill Bawri, 40, traditional dishes like asam pedas and lemak chilli padi with pineapple have been a family lifeline for generations. After her grandfather died, her grandmother supported seven children by selling Malay food from her home kitchen. Ms Rostrill's mother continued the tradition, teaching cooking at community clubs.

Now it's her turn. On top of her full-time work as a canteen vendor, Ms Rostrill teaches at Gourmet Guru's classes, held at several venues including the Singapore Sports School and a centre run by Muslim women's organisation PPS, once or twice a week.

"When I turned 12, my mum called me to help out in the kitchen," says Madam Manzilah. "She started me on easy tasks, like throwing onions into the soup."

"But the real skill she taught me was tasting the food and knowing what to add."

The public can sign up for classes at gourmetguruacademy.com, and buy its cookbooks at Times and Popular bookstores or order them online.

Mixing business with lots of heart

THERE are many programmes encouraging students to get into business but one global organisation has a feel-good twist all of its own.

Sife (Students in Free Enterprise) not only encourages students to start their own businesses, locally or overseas, but requires them to pass on skills to a needy community group.

Sife - whose motto is to give students "a head for business and a heart for the world" - started in the United States 35 years ago and came here in 2003. It's a non-profit group that adheres to tried and tested business concepts while providing a framework to guide worthwhile projects and take them further.

This means the club can help the environment and assist the community to earn income at the same time, says Sife volunteer Daniel Tan.

Mr Tan, 26, who works at venture capital firm G-kobe Partners, is the sort of businessman Sife wants its students to learn from.

Participants in Sife projects are exposed to business concepts through meetings with mentors and industry partners. Students must ensure their project has measurable results, such as an increase in income or a new revenue stream for a poor community.

There is more to Sife than making money. It also requires students to weigh economic, social and environmental factors when starting a project.

This was what led a group of students from the Singapore Management University to launch BuRIP Cafe at Punggol Community Club last year.

The cafe is staffed by "disadvantaged" people and allows someone like Ms Salamah Hassan, 49, who is deaf and mute, a chance to pursue her culinary passion and become a cook.

The Sife approach is used in universities and polytechnics here and often linked with overseas learning projects or entrepreneurship clubs. And Sife projects here have bagged numerous local and international awards.

In 2010, Singapore Polytechnic's Sife initiatives, which involved helping a South Indian farming community improve its farming methods, helped it win the President's Award for the Environment.

For Sife Singapore chief executive Mamie Cheong, 54, the best part of Sife is its concrete impact on people: "It's very real. Sometimes they fail, and they learn."