

Asian Dessert Houses

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Whether you’re mad for matcha or crazy for Q balls, you definitely have many choices for Asian desserts available in Jakarta! Read about the Asian dessert craze that is sweeping over the city.

When I hear the word ‘dessert’, the images that usually pop up in my mind are of ice cream, cakes, and the likes. Yet whenever I find myself venturing to the food haven that is Pantai Indah Kapuk, I always see lines of people in front of popular Taiwanese dessert vendor Hong Tang, waiting for their bowl of grass jelly. It would definitely be narrow-minded then to only associate desserts with those only from the West, when Hong Tang serves about 400 customers per day. Even Shirokuma, a café that specializes in Japanese desserts, gets 250 to 300 customers daily, an impressive feat considering the café barely opened two months ago. “Asian desserts are really *happening* in the world right now,” Khoirul Rozikin, Hong Tang’s marketing rep, said. “This has helped Hong Tang’s popularity rise in Jakarta since we opened in 2012.”

What is it about Asian desserts that have made them so popular with Jakartans? “I think the popularity of Asian dessert houses in Jakarta proves that people are demanding for flavors that are closer to home,” Michelle Widjaja, proud founder of Shirokuma, said. “Even though I am a classically trained as a pastry chef at a French institution, I feel that Asian flavors are easier on the Indonesian palate and prefer the subtle sweetness of Japanese flavors.”

Widjaja is certainly spot on. Although I grew up with a more generally Western dessert palate – thanks to my Dutch-influenced mother – I must admit I have encountered cakes and ice creams that are far too rich for my taste. Thus, during a family summer vacation to Japan, I was most happy to find the combination of both Eastern and Western desserts – the *matcha* (Japanese for green tea) soft serve. Its bittersweet green tea taste makes the scoop of ice cream during a hot summer day much more tasty than just the boring vanilla, yet not so overpowering like a Chocolate Chocolate Chip cone would be.

Widjaja’s brainchild of Shirokuma too, was inspired from a trip to Japan. “I decided to open Shirokuma because my friends and I have been searching for Japanese dessert cafes in Jakarta where we could enjoy sweets that we tried while we were travelling,” she said. “Jakarta has many flourishing Asian dessert houses, and Shirokuma aims to provide something different by serving desserts that are yummy and easy on the pocket.”

Shirokuma is certainly unique from other Asian dessert houses in Jakarta, serving mostly Japanese specialties. According to Widjaja, so far the Shiratama Parfait has been the customer favorite, “a parfait with layers of *matcha* jelly, chunky red beans (anko), cornflakes, mocha and shiratama balls topped with soft cream.” When asked about Shirokuma’s source of *matcha*, Widjaja asserts that Shirokuma aims to provide the best green tea

taste. "We love that our customers appreciate the quality of our authentic Japanese *matcha*, so we really go through great lengths to ensure that our *matcha* is top-notch quality," Widjaja said. "Our latest batch of *matcha* powder was air-flown straight from Kyoto, Japan through our supplier. We buy *matcha* powder that not only looks vibrant green, but also has a nice smooth flavor."

But for more adventurous Shirokuma customers, Widjaja recommends their deep fried oreos. "This slightly more sinful but satisfying dessert is served with your choice of soft cream as well," she said. One might have duly noted that deep fried oreos would not be considered as an Asian specialty. This is because Widjaja aims to always be innovative as well. "We continue to experiment with new modernized flavors at Shirokuma that can bring the best of both worlds together in an awesome dessert," she said.

Yet of course, the existence of Shirokuma would not even be possible without the big Taiwanese dessert giant, Hong Tang, previously known as Sweet Poetry, that begun this Asian dessert craze in the first place. Since opening at Pantai Indah Kapuk in 2012, Hong Tang has opened six more outlets around Jakarta, and also instigated other Asian dessert vendors such as Sumoboo, Honey Bean, and many others to open around the city. The key to Hong Tang's success? Why, it's no secret of course – it's Grass Jelly 28!

Let me explain. Hong Tang's menu consists of different series of Taiwanese desserts, divided into different categories. For instance, a popular category is the Q Balls Series. According to Hong Tang's website, their Q Balls "are made from a combination of fresh sweet potato and hearty taro." If you would like to sample these Q Balls, then you just need to select something from the Q Balls Series! As Widjaja have said before, the popularity of Asian dessert houses is largely due to its similar palate to Indonesian cuisine. Thus, it is no surprise that Hong Tang mainly uses ingredients that are familiar to Indonesians' tongues, such as beans, grass jelly, taro, sweet potato, etc.

All the choices in each of the different series are numbered, which brings us back to Grass Jelly 28. Considerably the most popular choice in Hong Tang, #28 in the Grass Jelly series consists of grass jelly, Q balls, sweet potatoes, tapioca pearls and taro balls, and comes with a scoop of *matcha* ice cream. It is the perfect combination of chewy, sweet, and tasty. The serving is definitely generous – I could not finish one bowl by myself, so I would recommend you getting one to share.

But of course, the popularity of Grass Jelly 28 is also hugely due to social media. If you have not seen any of your friends post an appetizing photo of this 'It' dessert – Hong Tang's signature red bowl with the vibrant green *matcha* ice cream on top of the grass jelly – you must have been hiding under a rock! Rozikin is definitely thankful for Jakartans' love of social media. "Our customers' love of posting pictures of our dessert on instagram has certainly helped Hong Tang to become more popular," he said.

Now that we have more than just your regular selection of cupcakes and tarts in Jakarta, I know my dessert adventures in the city will be just that much sweeter. As Bill Waterson once said, “I’m not a vegetarian – I’m a dessertarian!” Now who’s with me?