

Worth the Shot

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It is undeniable that one's image is everything in Jakarta. It's no surprise then that the simple, photo-sharing app Instagram is currently the city's favorite social media application – you get to prove how amazing you are as a person just by a single picture! The easiest would be to show how pretty you are with the #selfie. If you are a bit braver, you then showcase how fashionable you are with the #ootd. But of course if you fail to deliver on both, there is always the reliable #foodgasm and #foodporn to show off the delicious and beautiful meal you just had, making you a savvy foodie, which is debatably cooler than being that girl who posts only on #selfiesunday.

Putting the culture of Instagram aside, the rise of the photo-sharing application has certainly placed a higher importance on a meal's aesthetics. They say don't judge a book by its cover, but let's be real – would you rather like a photo of plain scrambled eggs or beautifully prepared eggs benedict? Obviously, the benny would be the more obvious choice. Studies show that perspective has always mattered in terms of taste. As a sense, taste is a mixture of experiences – one that does not only consist of not just how the food taste on your taste buds, but also how the food looks, feels and smells. For instance, there was a study on the effect of food appearance done on the Discovery Science channel's *To See or Not To See* on culinary arts students. These students had to identify a bunch of sodas that were dyed from their original colors. Due to the color difference, many of them identified the wrong soda.

Food presentation is undeniably an important factor in the culinary experience, but how important has it come to be in the Jakarta's culinary scene? In a city where image is everything, I have found that many restaurant connoisseurs focus simply on bettering the image rather than the actual substance itself. There has been quite a

number of new restaurants popping up in the city over the past few years, ones I applaud for its tasteful interior design and great food presentation. One can even find a handful of food stylists – those that prepare a meal to look especially appetizing in a photograph – around Jakarta. Tricks of the trade, for instance, include adding aspirin powder to champagne to create extra fizz, or adding lipstick on strawberries to bring out its color.

It goes without saying that esthetics of a meal are definitely important. But with that being said, how often have you been impressed by a dish's presentation, only to be disappointed by the next second by its mediocre taste? When was the last time you had a genuinely delicious and flavorful meal? Or in the day and age of Instagram, have we settled with being content with a meal when we have gotten an amazing photo from it (and more often than not, an equally pretentious caption that includes either *foie gras*, *duck confit* and/or *caviar*)?

Do not take me wrong; as an obsessive food photographer myself, I have experienced firsthand the joys of capturing a cute box of elaborately decorated cupcakes, or a beautiful plate of shiny aglio olio. But I too, have experienced firsthand the disappointing feeling when I discovered the pasta is too oily that its flavor is downright bland, similar to the feeling of biting into a dry cupcake with icing that is too sweet for anyone's good. Jakarta chefs and restaurant owners, it is time to raise your standards for the perfect meal – one that is not only beautiful, but also equally delicious.

There is a particular scene in Disney's *Ratatouille* that embodies what I mean by a great meal. Sometime in the beginning of the movie, movie viewers witness Remy the rat's love of food for the first time. Remy balances a strawberry and a hunk of cheese in his hands. As he takes a bite into each of the condiment, he closes his

eyes and his entire background goes black. Colorful fireworks appear behind him, simulating the experience his taste buds are going through. “Mmm yeah, each flavor was totally unique, but combined one flavor with one another, something new was created,” he mumbles as he bites into his *fromage*. Remy’s experience shows us the essence of a great meal – one that will still taste amazing even when you close your eyes.

Perhaps it is time for a new line of restaurants in Jakarta. For quite some time now, metropolitan cities all over the world have been offering the option of dining in the dark. In the recent time-traveling movie “About Time”, British actor’s Domhnall Gleeson’s character meets his future wife, the beautiful Rachel McAdams, on a blind date, literally. Customers would not only dine with someone they had not met previously, but also in the dark. This culinary experience obviously depends on the restaurant’s reliability – they could offer you poisonous food and you would not even know it – but it is an experience that emphasizes the taste of the meal, while also providing a setting for great company that does not involve looking at Instagram every five minutes. Time for a dining-in-the-dark restaurant, Jakarta?

In the end, Remy said it best, “If you are what you eat, then I only want to eat the good stuff.” Let us not waste more time on settling on mediocre meals, and only take the time to enjoy a high-quality meal, one that is pleasing to not only the eyes, but the taste buds as well.