

***Tukang Lewat:* Food on the Go, Indonesian style**

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It's midnight and your stomach's growling. You're hungry and there's not a bite to eat in the house. You're too lazy to go out and drive to a *warung* (food stall) to eat. Suddenly, you hear a familiar *tok-tok-tok* sound in the distance, like the sound of someone hitting a piece of hollow wood with a stick. Your heart

and stomach joyfully leap in relief as you instinctively salivate to the familiar sound: the *tukang lewat* has come to save you from your hunger pang!

During my visits to Indonesia, I discovered that no matter what time of the day you spend at home, you could never go hungry as long as tukang lewats come around and you have a few thousand rupiahs to spare in your pocket. It is very common for Indonesians to buy ready-to-eat meals from their local *tukang lewat*.

The *tukang lewat* (which literally translates to "workman by-passing" or "tukang lalu" in Bahasa Malaysia) is usually a man who pushes a 2-wheel *gerobak* or cart around the neighborhood and sells food of his specialty. The *gerobak* is usually equipped with cooking utensils such as a simple stove and *kuali* (wok), and a myriad supply of raw ingredients needed for the *tukang lewat*'s cooking. The *tukang lewat* can be selling *bakso* (in which case he is referred to as the *tukang bakso*) - a local meatball soup dish; or if you're in the mood for fried rice, the *tukang nasgor* (*nasi goreng*) will cook a plate of delicious fried rice for you on the spot. Or, if you really would just like to have *sate* (skewered meat), just hang around home and wait for the *tukang sate* to come around, mouth-watering aroma of freshly barbequed *sate kambing* wafting from his *gerobak* and all.

Depending on the neighborhood you're in, each *tukang lewat* will establish his own distinguished call. It only takes a trained ear to know that the long wooden-sounding *tok-tok-tok* is the sign of a *tukang bakso* coming, or the melodic *ting-ting-ting* tapping of a spoon on a ceramic bowl signals that a *tukang gado-*

gado is in the vicinity. Once you've figured out your favorite *tukang lewat*'s special call, you would run out of the house armed with money when you heard it, and stop him to order a bite to eat. This was one exercise which I quickly learned to master when I was in Indonesia!

Savoring *tukang lewat* food is a favorite pastime shared by many Indonesians, young and old, rich and poor. Even in the most posh areas of Jakarta, one can find *tukang lewats* making their rounds, in hopes of enticing customers to purchase their food.

Food purchased from a *tukang lewat* is commonly known as *makanan jajan*; the word *jajan* meaning 'spend' implies a price that is affordable by even school children. It is not a wonder why most Indonesian children often come home from school with no appetite to eat home cooked meals, as most kids like eating tasty *jajan* food after school hours.

Riga, a Jakartan friend of mine, made an interesting observation of the many years she's had *tukang lewat* food. She says:

"Curiously, the cheaper the price is, the better the food will taste! I've had many different kinds of bakwan, only to conclude that the less I pay for it, the tastier it will be! Believe it or not, even the smell of the kerosene used on the tukang lewat's stove can influence how good the food will turn out!"

Malaysia does not have *tukang lewat* such as the ones I've encountered in Indonesia, which is a shame really, considering how much Malaysians love to eat at odd hours. We have to make do with our regular outings to the *mamak* stalls where local favorites such as *roti canai* and *tauhu bakar* often become our choices for tummy-fillers, not forgetting our *teh tarik* to wash it all down.

But one thing for sure, I can't wait to have my next round of cheap *bakwan Malang* (only Rp.3000 and absolutely scrumptious) from my favorite *tukang lewat* in South Jakarta. So cheap and satisfyingly yummy too! (fairy@mahdzan.com)



Credits:

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