

Before Penelope Williams accepted the role of executive chef at the Alila Manggis Resort in Bali in 2007, her understanding of Indonesian cuisine was that of any other average tourist – minimal. “I knew what fried rice was – my mum used to cook me a dodgy version of nasi goreng with pineapple and frozen peas!”

She quickly learnt. “I threw myself headlong into it – so many new ingredients and techniques, and amazingly patient teachers.”

But what really struck Williams, 40, was that resorts served either Western food or very bad examples of Indonesian food. Authentic Balinese food, easily accessible from street vendors, was often too spicy for Western tastes and there was the risk of poor hygiene.

Williams, who had worked at the Savoy in London before spending five years at Danks Street Depot in Sydney’s Waterloo, felt there had to be another way. After three years of learning from the locals, she opened her own Balinese restaurant and cooking school in the north-eastern village of Gelumpang, naming it Bali Asli.

“In the Balinese language, *asli* means real, true and authentic,” says Williams, who works closely with her Balinese staff of 20 and teaches the cooking classes. “I fell in love with the local ingredients, the regional produce and people who farmed, fished and foraged for it – and I felt inspired to share that.”

Designed to replicate a traditional, regional Balinese culinary experience, the restaurant overlooks Mount Agung, Bali’s tallest and most sacred volcano. It’s an idyllic view for the diners, who can enjoy the chef’s daily selection – anything from fish satay grilled over the fire pit to an Indonesian risotto – while they sip a pineapple, mint and papaya concoction fresh from the organic garden.

But for the more intrepid, there is the Life in the Village cooking class – an adventure comparable to something from National Geographic Channel.

The classes, which average about four students but can have as many as 10, begin with a journey into local areas and may include anything from learning how to plough with a cow, plant rice or fish from a *jukung* (canoe). Those fortunate enough may bathe in the cool springs of Tauka village before they head back to the kitchen to cook what they’ve gathered over an open fire. On weekends, there’s even the option of yoga and a massage, but the emphasis remains on the fresh food, with many of the ingredients grown in the restaurant’s garden.

“My mantra is, ‘If you can’t see it from Bali Asli, it’s not on the menu,’” says Williams. “Everything was created to celebrate the flavours of Bali and its beautiful culture.” ●

With reporting by Lynn Malone.

For more information, go to bali.asli.com.au.



An expat chef has created a slice of foodie heaven in a tropical paradise.
By **Natalie Reilly.**

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Clockwise from main: The spectacular view from Bali Asli; making Balinese palm wine; Penelope Williams in the Bali Asli kitchen; a bowl of tipat sentok; the view from the dining room; fresh coffee beans, ready to be ground; a cooking class in action; jukung outriggers at sunrise; the catch of the day being grilled over a fire pit.



Photography by Yaeko Masuda; courtesy of Bali Asli