

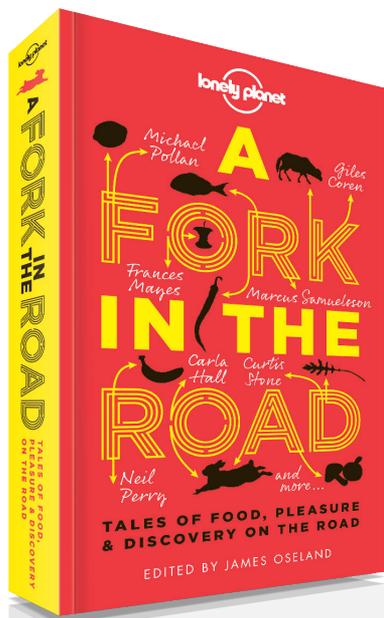


Penang: The best of Asia on a plate.

Q & A

Dining and Dashing

James Oseland tells Diana Hubbell about his new book, an anthology of food and travel yarns, along with a few tidbits about his own history of eating and exploring in Southeast Asia.



As a food editor, judge on *Top Chef Masters*, and author of the James Beard-winning Southeast Asian cookbook *Cradle of Flavor*, James Oseland knows a thing or two about the intersection of food and travel. His latest project is *A Fork in the Road: Tales of Food, Pleasure & Discovery*, a compilation of culinary adventures by chefs, food writers and restaurant critics from around the world.

How did you choose which writers to include in the book?

It was a complete joy choosing a global banquet of folks to contribute, like Frances Mayes from the U.S.; Sandi Tan, a Singaporean-born author; and Giles Coren, a London-based TV host and newspaper restaurant critic. I knew all 34 of them would provide amazing, funny and moving stories.

You first traveled to Southeast Asia when you were 19. What was your first impression and why do you keep coming back?

My impression as an American who had barely traveled was, ‘Wow, Indonesia is a seriously hot, loud, insane place... when can I go back to California?’ But the place grew on me. Actually, more—it helped transform me into the globally minded person I am today. And in the process it became my beloved second home. I never feel I’m fully me until I’m in Indonesia.

What’s your top foodie destination?

Easy answer: As amazing as the food is in Asia, for me Penang, Malaysia, wins

out. The island boasts what is probably the Earth’s most diverse cuisine, from incredible Malaysian-Chinese *char kuey teow* to Indian-style super-spicy *nasi kandar* curry offerings. Penang is like the best of Asia on a plate.

What is the most memorable meal you’ve had in Southeast Asia?

The one meal that always comes to mind is a *selamatan* (a sort of celebratory potluck) I participated in Jakarta many years ago. Laid out in front of me was a seemingly endless array of pan-Indonesian dishes, including *rendang* (Sumatran dry beef curry), *urap* (a Javanese salad with a market’s worth of lemon basil), *gulai ayam* (chicken curry spiced with cinnamon and lemongrass), and *opor* (tender, young jackfruit and coconut stew). After that meal, I knew I’d found my new food home.

Aside from guidebooks—and magazines, of course—how do you find the best places to eat?

My finely tuned “foodar,” of course. Which, when you boil it down, is a rather prosaic and unscientific process of elimination: I tend to look for the places that seem the most crowded and the least tricked up. I have a special allergy towards establishments that are supposed to be “the” place to eat... but I always adore discovering the sort of out-of-the-way gems that usually only have very small menus offering a few local specialties, prepared to perfection. +