

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

## Journal of Ethnic Foods

journal homepage: <http://journalofethnicfoods.net>

## Review Article

## Rendang: The treasure of Minangkabau

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 19 July 2017

Received in revised form

11 October 2017

Accepted 11 October 2017

Available online 19 October 2017

## Keywords:

Cuisine

Culture

History

Minangkabau

Rendang

## ABSTRACT

*Rendang* is a traditional food originating from West Sumatra and prepared by Minangkabau people. *Rendang* is commonly made with beef (especially tenderloin) with special sauce containing a high amount of coconut milk. In the past, Minangkabau people prepared *rendang* in such a way that it has long shelf life and could be stored during long journeys. The long shelf life of *rendang* is thought to be contributed by the spices used during the cooking process. Nowadays, *rendang* is known worldwide, but its history and cultural significance are given less attention. In this article, the history and philosophy of *rendang* as the treasure of Minang people is discussed. To date, it is believed that *rendang* originated from India because of its similarity to Indian curry. The long cooking process of *rendang* has its own philosophy about patience, wisdom, and sincerity. Proper choice of beef, spice mix, control of heat, cooking duration, and stirring technique affect the taste of *rendang*. Traditionally, *rendang* is served during special occasions and to special people.

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## 1. Introduction

Indonesia is an archipelago that stretches from Sabang to Merauke and covers around 5,193,250 million km<sup>2</sup> area. Indonesia has ethnic and cultural diversity in traditional habits, foods, traditional clothes, art, etc. Padang, the capital of West Sumatra, still holds quite prominent traditions. Food items made with basic ingredients such as coconut milk, beef, or buffalo meat are quite typical and common in this area (Fig. 1).

In a survey conducted by Cable News Network in 2011 and 2017 [1], *rendang* was voted as the most delicious food in the world based on readers' choice. *Rendang* is a traditional dish of West Sumatra with generous amounts of different kinds of spices and ingredients including meat and coconut milk. Usually, the Minang people like to eat beef dishes. Rini et al [2] reported that *rendang Minang* is cooked for 6 to 7 hours at a temperature of 80–95°C. Spices and herbs that are used to make *Minangkabau rendang* are garlic, onion, red chilies, turmeric, ginger, pepper, lemongrass, galangal, star anise, kaffir lime leaves, bay leaves, turmeric leaves, and asam kandis (*Garcinia xanthochymus*). The

origin of *Rendang* could be traced back to the Indian merchants, who brought their food to Indonesia which was adapted by Minang people as *gulai*. Minang people cooked this *gulai* further to prepare *kalio*. The cooking process was then continued until it thickened and became *rendang*.

*Minangkabau rendang* is characterized by dry texture and strong fragrant aroma due to the slow and long cooking process, which results in dark brownish appearance. *Rendang* came to West Sumatra in the early second millennium. According to Yoshino [3], in the 1900s, immigrants from Indonesia, especially the Minang people, who took a long journey to Malaysia, introduced *rendang* there; therefore, nowadays *rendang* is quite popular in Malaysia.

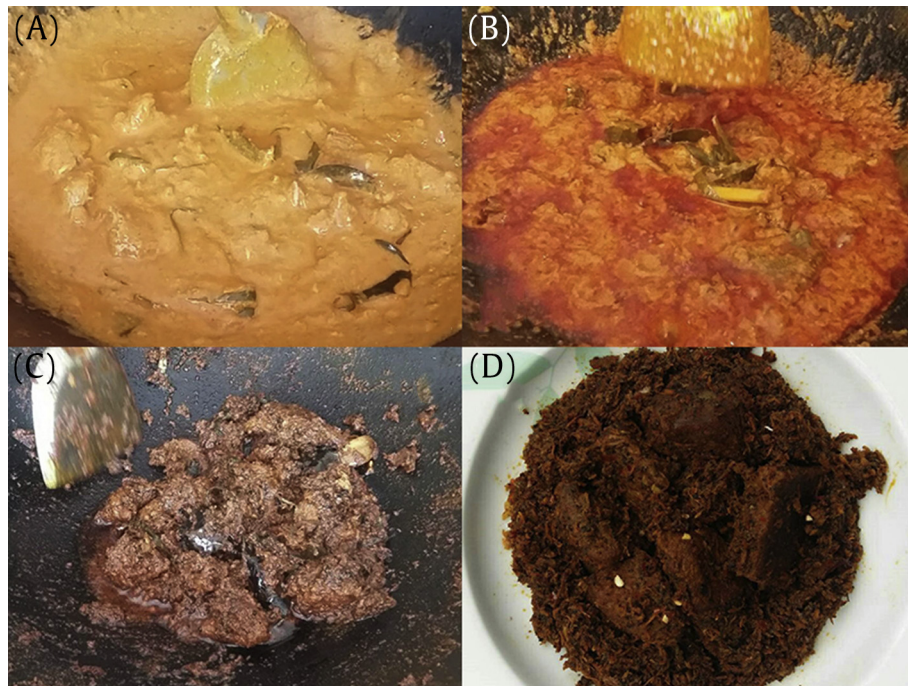
The word *rendang* originated from the word *merandang* or *randang*, which means “slowly” as it takes a long time to complete the cooking process. Philosophically, *rendang* is a treasured and honored food. Comparing it with everyday dishes, Andam [4] argued that *Minangkabau rendang* has the highest hierarchy among the others and is commonly referred to as *kepalo samba* (head of the dishes) in traditional and important events. Originally, the main ingredient of *Minangkabau rendang* was beef because of its abundance in West Sumatra. However, people could nowadays find *rendang* with different kinds of meat, including chicken.

## 2. Food and culture

Kittler and Kathryn [5] explained that food culture, or more commonly known as foodways, is a food habit that refers to the way

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**Fig. 1.** The process of making *rendang*. (A) The first stage of the *rendang* is very similar to curry with lots of liquid. (B) *Rendang* is becoming drier with reduced liquid (*kalio*). (C) The liquid is almost gone. (D) The final *rendang* which is dry, and no liquid is observed.

humans utilize food, from how it is selected, obtained, and distributed to who prepares, serves, and eats it. These processes are unique to humankind. Kittler and Kathryn [5] added that the essential esthetic of the food portray native cultural identity. They [5] also explained that when people move from one area to another with different culture and norms, acculturation happens.

### 3. The history of *rendang*

According to the history, *rendang* is a food made with beef simmered in spices and coconut milk. There are Dutch archives about Minangkabau that state regular contacts between India and West Sumatra in the early second millennium. Winarno and Agustinah [6] reported that a combination of meat and spices prepared in North India known as curry is believed to be the precursor of *rendang*. They [6] added that Indians came to West Sumatra to trade and brought their own culture. Hypothetically, it can be stated that it has a relation to *rendang*.

*Massaman curry* from India is almost the same as *gulai*, and its sauce contains coconut milk. It is recooked into *kalio* in which sauce is more condensed, brownish, and oily because of splitting by heat. The Minang people cook it again until the color becomes darker, and the meat absorbs the sauce. Sutomo [7] reported that *rendang* was found in West Sumatra in the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

Rahman [8] narrated about William Marsden's observation of the difference in processing characteristics between Sumatran curry and Indian curry in 1771–1779.

Almost all side dishes that are popular in Europe are cooked using the curry cooking technique (derived from India). Among Malay, curry is also known as *gulai* and is prepared using any kind of main ingredient but generally made with meat or chicken with different kinds of nuts, vegetables, and fruits. Certain spices, which are mixed and milled, are added to it. In Europe, this is known as curry powder. This powder contains chili, turmeric, lemongrass, cardamom, garlic, and coconut milk. This composition is different from Madras and Bengal curries that use more spices. Somewhat

surprisingly, pepper, which is produced as a major commodity in Sumatra, has never been used in their food. They consider that pepper makes blood hot, in contrast to chili.

Rahman [8] also stated that in Luso–Asian cuisine which spread in Malacca in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the dried meat cooking technique that could prolong the food's shelf life was in practice and was prepared by the Minangkabau people. Ingredients for preparing Indian curry and *Minangkabau rendang* are similar. Onion, coriander, cumin, and ginger are some ingredients influenced from India. Rahman [8] also stated that the history of foods in Indonesia is centered on spice discovery and its trading. In West Sumatra, people planted the spices and crops around their house. Andam [4] reported that coconut trees are found along the streets and in the natives' houses in West Sumatra. It is not too difficult for them to find coconut.

Winarno and Agustinah [6] reported that turmeric had been planted more than 2000 years ago in India, China, and the Middle East. It was believed that turmeric was a spice used by Persians and was related to the worship of Sun God. It is also reported that nowadays, turmeric is grown all over the tropical area in the world. Meanwhile, Seow and Choon [9] argued that coconut milk is always correlated with Southeast Asian food. In West Sumatra, coconut trees grow well on the land, including in the mountainous area. Andam [4] also reported that coconut trees that grow in the beach area produce sweeter fruits than those from any other area.

Winarno and Agustinah [6] reported that 9000 years ago, chili was cultivated in Mexico Valley, North America. The Mexicans kept the chili a secret until Christopher Columbus introduced it to Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. At that time, chili was the most important common spice in Europe. The Portuguese brought chili to East India, Asia, and Africa. Winarno and Agustinah [6] also reported that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, chili was brought to America by Europeans. Rahman [8] reported that West Sumatran people were not as eager to buy pepper as Europeans and Americans, which shows that chili was more popular than pepper in that area. Ginger was cultivated 3000 years ago. Ginger consumption was greater

than the use of salt in Asia. Spain expanded ginger trading to Jamaica and the land of Europe.

Winarno and Agustinah [6] reported that pepper originated from the tropical forests in India. They [6] added that countries that produce pepper are India, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brazil, with its trade reaching a quarter of the world's total spice trade. It is believed that pepper can give strong aroma to meat-based dishes because it has warm sensation. Pepper also contributes as a taste balancer because of its spicy characteristic. Rahman [8] added that during spice trading, spicy food was venerated as the main ingredient of Indian curry, while India influenced spicy food consumption around the globe. Mansoer et al [10] also reported in 1970 that pepper has had the most importance in culture, economy, and politics of Minangkabau since 500 BC. It is also stated that pepper trading brought prosperity to some villages in West Sumatra.

Winarno and Agustinah [6] reported that onion and garlic are spices originating from Asia. They [6] argued that when onion is used for cooking, it does not reduce the level of taste. Garlic as a part of the genus *Allium* has a strong flavor when it is sliced. They [6] added that chopped and crushed garlic gives more flavor.

The spread of *rendang* in West Sumatra originated from three areas, named *Luhak nan Tigo*, which roughly means “the three mountains”: *Luhak Agam*, *Luhak Payakumbuh* or *Limo puluh* (50 cities), and *Luhak Tanah Data*. After that, *rendang* spread along the coast where the comers lived. There are various kinds of *rendang*, and the variety depends on ingredient stocks and environment conditions in the specific areas in West Sumatra. Some examples of such variety are *rendang lokan* (seashell *rendang*) from Painan or Pariaman; *rendang belut* (eel *rendang*) from Batusangkar; *rendang itik* (duck *rendang*) and *rendang jariah* (jengkol *rendang*) from Bukittinggi; *rendang pensi* (scallop *rendang*) from the Maninjau Lake area; and *rendang daun kayu* (leaves *rendang*), *rendang telur* (egg *rendang*), *rendang ayam* (chicken *rendang*), *rendang sapuluik hitam* (black glutinous rice *rendang*), *rendang tumbuak* (round-shaped beef *rendang*), and *bareh rendang* (white glutinous rice *rendang*) from Payakumbuh. The Minang people in Batusangkar and Lintau add green coriander, which contributes a special flavor. Specifically, the Minang people in Batusangkar add star fruit leaves to give a sour flavor to *rendang belut*. The similarity between them is the cooking technique.

As it happened, Minangkabau people like traveling. Therefore, in the area with high-level mobility, *rendang* became famous. Asnan, a historian, believed that the spread of *rendang* to other Malay regions was primarily caused by travelers from Minangkabau who traveled from one place to another. Those places are Riau, Jambi, and Malaysia. Anderson [11] said that Minangkabau people traveled until Batubara and brought *rendang* as a reserve during their long journey. Rahman [8] stated that the habit of long journeys and advanced mass media development also contributed to the spread of Minang food outside Minangkabau.

Rahman [8] reported that a newspaper, called Soenting Melajoe, which was circulated outside Minangkabau, contributed to the popularity of Minang foods. This newspaper was started in 1912 by Datuk Soetan Melajoe with “*Soerat Chabar Perempoean di Alam Minangkabau*” (female newspaper of Minangkabau) as a motto. The newspaper published about Minang women's activities and some recipes. The newspaper subscribers were from Bandung, Medan, Bengkulu, Gorontalo, Pisang Island, and Tanjung Karang. Europeans who lived in Palembang, Batavia, and Kupang even ask for *Minangkabau rendang* beside the remittance. Rahman [8] also added that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Soenting Melajoe* published the recipe of *Minangkabau rendang*.

Rahman [8] stated that Zainoe'ddin-moro, a writer of a woman school's recipe book (*meisjes-vervolgscholen*), wrote the recipe in

the Melayu style, especially for Minang foods. In this book, one of the most favorite recipes is *Minangkabau rendang* because he wanted the readers from other countries to be able to cook *Minangkabau rendang*. This recipe was previously rarely found in the Hindi recipe book. Zainoe'ddin-moro also explained that before World War II began in 1940, it was reported that *Minangkabau rendang* was so precious. In the late 1930s, the development of Minang foods showed a good progress. After the World War II had started, West Sumatra was in short supply of meat that the production of *rendang* was weakened.

#### 4. The philosophy of *rendang*

The Minang people believe that *rendang* has three philosophical meanings: patience, wisdom, and persistence. Cooking *rendang* requires patience, persistence in stirring, and wisdom in setting the fire. Wisdom is needed in choosing the ingredients such as meat, chili, and other spices that are required to achieve the desired taste. Many aspects, such as patience and experience, are needed to achieve perfection. Ingredients for preparing *rendang* depend on the availability. Originally, beef and buffalo meat were used, but now one could see more diverse kinds of *rendang*.

*Rendang* is a verb, derived from *merandang* (making *rendang*). Words such as “stir-fry” or “sauté” can be used for many kinds of ingredients, for example, sautéed kale, sautéed bean sprouts, etc. Similarly, *rendang* is actually a verb that means eliminating or drying the water by stirring. According to Sutomo [7], “*randang*” means “slowly”; it is based on the *rendang* cooking process that takes a long time.

According to the Minangkabau people, Andam [4] reported that *rendang* is a pride and also an honored food. *Rendang* must be prepared at the *datuk* coronation ceremonies, engagements, marriages, and other important traditional events.

An event that presents 1 kg beef *rendang* placed in a special plate at the end of the row among other dishes (namely *kepalo samba*) conveys several meanings. One of the purposes is to show or reflect that the host or stakeholders can present this special dish. After the event is held, *rendang* is consumed by the host. Small pieces of *rendang* that are placed with other dishes are consumed by the guests. In some events, a wooden model is used as a symbol of meat. It is covered by spices and oil; this is done because the guests do not eat that special *rendang*. Nowadays, treating *rendang* as *kepalo samba* has faded due to modernization.

#### 5. The traditional style for consumption of *rendang*

According to Asnan, a professor of history, there is no specific way to eat *rendang* in the Minangkabau culture. In the old times, *rendang*, a traditionally preserved food, was used as reserve or supplies for travelers on their long journey and was only wrapped by a sheet of paper and eaten using hands. But during important events, *rendang* is served with other dishes such as *gulai*, *sayur rebung* (stem bamboo soup), fried fish, *sayur nangka* (young jackfruit vegetable), etc.

#### 6. Traditional equipment and the rumah gadang

Traditional tools used to make *rendang* are *kacik* used as coconut milk squeezer, *batu lodo* (a stone with a size of winnow and shaped like a spindle) used traditionally to grind chili, and *kancan* (a large frying pan) made of thick metal to cook *rendang*. Andam [4] added that at the bottom of the *kancan*, there is traditional stove with four holes for the firewood. Furthermore, Andam [4] stated that *rendang* should not be cooked at a high temperature. Despite the heat from cooking, the eyes of the cook do not get





**Fig. 2.** The *Rumah Gadang*. A traditional house of Minang people in West Sumatra. It has a typical high roof with several protrusions. Such a design also indicates smoke accumulation in the ceiling, thus protecting the eyes of the cook. Traditionally, Minang people cook *rendang* in this house.

irritated because of the unique shape of *Rumah Gadang* (the traditional house of West Sumatra), which is designed with a high roof to lead away smoke and prevent it from being accumulated and centered (see Fig. 2).

#### Author contributions

All authors have contributed to the paper and have never submitted the manuscript, in whole or in part, to other journals.

#### Conflicts of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

#### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all contributors who have shared the knowledge and references about *Minangkabau rendang*: Madam Reno Andam Suri as the author of the *Rendang Traveler: Menyingkap Bertuahnya Rendang Minang* and *The Story of Rendang*; Minang culinary consultant, Prof. Dr. Phil. Gusti Asnan, Professor of History at Andalas University, Padang, West Sumatra, Indonesia; Prof. Dr. Nur Indrawaty Lipoeto, MSc, Ph.D., SpGK, Professor of Nutritional Sciences at Andalas University, Padang, West Sumatra, Indonesia. They would also like to thank Dr.

Albert Kuhon, food culture lecturer at Surya University, Tangerang, Banten, Indonesia and Efendi Oulan Gustav Hakim Nata Buana, S.TP, M.Eng, who edited this manuscript.

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