

# Navigating Rising Costs: Embracing Home-dining For Ramadan

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Ramadan is universally recognised for its significance in the Islamic calendar, bringing Muslims together in observance of fasting, prayer, and acts of charity. Central to the Ramadan experience is the breaking of the fast, or iftar, where families and friends gather to share meals and strengthen bonds of kinship.

However, recent years have seen a shift in how Malaysians approach iftar, with a growing trend towards eating out at restaurants or purchasing foods from bazaars. While this may offer convenience and variety, it also comes at a cost. Prices have been on the rise, driven by factors such as escalating costs of essential ingredients. Staples such as rice, flour, cooking oil, and vegetables have seen price hikes due to various factors, including inflation, changes in weather patterns affecting agricultural yields, and disruptions in the supply chain.

For example, according to the Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security's latest market data in 2024, the current national average price of Indian red onions is RM7.00 per kg. This is almost double the baseline price of Indian red onions in 2022, which was RM3.90/kg. The situation has led to most traders increasing their prices for Ramadan bazaars this year, leading to backlash from the public as costs of raw ingredients have largely unchanged otherwise.

Furthermore, the implementation of sales and service tax (SST) has led to increased costs for both producers and consumers. This, in turn, resulted in higher prices for goods and services, including food items. This puts a strain on household budgets, especially for those with limited financial resources.

Another factor contributing to food price inflation is the global market dynamics. Malaysia relies on imports for certain food products, and fluctuations in international commodity prices, exchange rates, and geopolitical tensions impacts the cost of imported goods. For instance, changes in the price of crude oil, a key determinant of transportation costs, affects the price of imported food items. In addition to external factors, domestic policies and regulations also influence food prices. Government interventions, such as subsidies and price controls, aim to stabilize prices and ensure food affordability for consumers. However, the effectiveness of these measures may vary, and unintended consequences, such as market distortions and inefficiencies, arise.

The cumulative effect of these factors is felt by consumers, particularly during periods of increased demand, such as Ramadan and Hari Raya. The traditional iftar meal, with its emphasis on family dining togetherness and festive feasting, puts additional strain on household budgets as individuals seek to procure ingredients for elaborate dishes and delicacies. The rising cost of food has implications beyond economic concerns, impacting food security, nutrition, and overall well-being.

Amidst the challenges posed by high food prices, home dining emerges as a viable and sustainable solution. By preparing meals at home, individuals and families can exercise greater control over ingredients, portion sizes, and cooking methods, thereby promoting healthier eating habits. Additionally, dining at home offers significant cost

savings compared to eating out, as homemade meals are generally more economical and can be tailored to suit dietary preferences and budgetary constraints.

To facilitate home dining during Ramadan, several strategies can be adopted like meal planning. Planning meals ahead of time and setting a budget for groceries can prevent impulse purchases and ensure that ingredients are used efficiently. On the other hand, busy working adults may argue that they lack the time and energy to cook elaborate meals at home after a long day of work. For this group, allocating time on weekends for meal prepping and relying on simpler recipes can streamline the cooking process and make home dining more feasible. By dedicating a few hours to preparing meals in advance, individuals can have ready-to-eat options available throughout the week, minimising the need for daily cooking.

While dining out or ordering takeout may be associated with socialising and spending quality time with friends and family, family members or housemates can share cooking responsibilities to turn cooking into a collaborative and enjoyable activity. This alternatively could enhance socialisation and bonding while cooking and sharing meals at home.

Additionally, supporting local restaurants through occasional takeout or delivery can help strike a balance between convenience and cost-effectiveness. By patronising local eateries, individuals can still enjoy restaurant-quality meals while contributing to the local economy. Ultimately, it's about finding a balance that works for everyone's lifestyle and priorities, whether it's cooking at home or dining out occasionally.

The trend towards eating out in Malaysia reflects broader societal shifts in lifestyle and consumption patterns. Factors such as urbanisation, changing demographics, and socioeconomic status all play a role in shaping individuals' food choices. However, amidst these changes, it's crucial to preserve the tradition of home dining during Ramadan as a means of fostering family cohesion, promoting healthier eating habits, and safeguarding financial well-being. By embracing home dining during this holy month, Malaysians can uphold cherished traditions, nurture relationships, and cultivate a deeper appreciation for the blessings of food and community.

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