



OPINION

Viewpoint: KF Seetoh

Support Food Hawkers to Preserve Local Food Culture



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Originating on the streets, Singapore’s colourful hawker food culture has become an iconic part of the city-state’s way of life. Noted hawker food champion **KF Seetoh** celebrates its origins and argues that more than be done to support Singapore’s hawkers and keep this unique culinary tradition alive.

Food is more than a mere passion in Singapore. What Singaporeans fondly term Hawker Food is where our history—its many places, faces and tastes—converges. It is part of our identity, and a key part of our culinary DNA. To this day, the best way to get an idea of the flavours that colour the city is to visit some of the 30,000 or so food hawker stalls islandwide.

The story is a familiar one: migrants came to this growing city over a century ago, and many sold food on the streets to earn a living. They fed the comfort food needs of their fellow migrants with a variety of affordable fare prepared based on traditional recipes they brought with them from their home countries across Asia.

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When these street vendors were relocated to purpose-built hawker centres in the 1960s for sanitation and safety reasons, it had the unintentional effect of preserving these heritage flavours and culinary traditions. Over the years, Singapore’s hawker food culture has evolved and flourished, becoming a national institution in itself.

Today, there are 114 public hawker centres in Singapore—each built like a shed roughly the size of a football field and housing about 50–180 individual food stalls. Hawker stalls are also to be found in private coffee shops, food courts, canteens and standalone shops. What they offer is a spread of authentic culinary delights at affordable prices, available all across one of the most expensive cities in the world. Over 5 million hawker meals are served each day, in this city with a population of under 6 million.

Diverse flavours of the world can be found in our public hawker centres. The menu ranges from Japanese ramen, tandoori meats and

vegetarian fare to Thai moo yang, English pub grub, Mexican tacos, Vietnamese pho...the list goes on. In their midst is a clutch of iconic local favourites, born of the ingenuity and desperation of hawkers who fought to survive in the early days. Localised dishes such as rojak, roti john, char kway teow, bak chor mee, Katong laksa and sup tulang have become part of our unique culinary vocabulary. Any food that settles into a hawker centre and is favoured by the masses becomes a part of Singapore’s gastronomic landscape.

Take Hainanese chicken rice, a top Singaporean favourite that has evolved beyond its predecessors, with local tweaks such as a spicy, fragrant chili sauce not found in the original recipe. In each platter of chicken rice, you can discern not just a deep love for food, but a dynamic ecology. Each platter is a portal into a whole world of culture, which yields opportunities in food entrepreneurship, tourism, education, jobs, trade, service provision—not to mention many happy tummies.

Many of the 17 million visitors Singapore hosts each year would happily queue for an iconic Singaporean dish, because the whole experience of waiting and eating alongside locals is a culinary souvenir memory they can bring home. They get a sense of the taste to get a sense of the place.

Hawker centres show culinary democracy in action. From well-heeled professionals to proud blue collared workers, the young and old, retirees, graduates and school dropouts, all races and creeds, families, single parents, the retrenched, even celebrities—everyone is equal here. A marketing director waiting to order 50 packs of nasi lemak for his office team will queue patiently in line behind a mother buying one pack for her child’s lunch. And at S\$3 a packet, there’s little reason to complain.

The feeding culture of eating together at a hawker centre is one of the most effective ways to promote bonding and a sense of national identity in Singapore. This is why the government, ordinary citizens, the private sector and hawkers themselves all have vested interests in keeping this culinary culture going.

It is a happy tango: citizens are kept well fed and happy, at modest prices. Some families depend on hawker food as the most affordable comfort food they can get. At the same time, the business world can leverage Singapore’s culinary fame to market related services and products to visitors and the world at large. And the hawkers themselves can make a living while keeping important traditions alive.

Hence, the current bid to enshrine Singapore’s hawker culture as Intangible Cultural Heritage by UNESCO is promising. If it succeeds, it would help shine a spotlight on our diverse hawker community as a whole, not just individual stars like the famed Michelin awards.

But continuity and sustainability remain challenges in Singapore. There are no clear pathways into the hawker business. Many find it daunting to enter the trade, in a city where rents and operating costs are high.

Introducing more layers of management does not help. Instead, we must keep operating costs down so hawkers can run their own businesses viably, and pass savings on to customers who can then continue to enjoy good, affordable meals. Perhaps basic ingredients such as salt, sugar, oil and common sauces could be bought in bulk to lower costs. We must find ways to encourage and train entrepreneurial new players to take up the trade.

Then we must let them do what they do best: figure out how to give us great hawker food. 