

**The Ultimate Guide
for Visitors and Expats**

THERE'S

N



**CARROT IN
CARROT
CAKE**

“I would argue that our char kway teow and laksa are better than any pasta dish in the world. I cannot think of any Western salad that can compete with our Chinese rojak. I also think that our roti prata, eaten while hot and fluffy, with chicken curry, beats any pizza I have ever eaten. Fish head curry, chilli crab, black pepper crab are simply heavenly.”

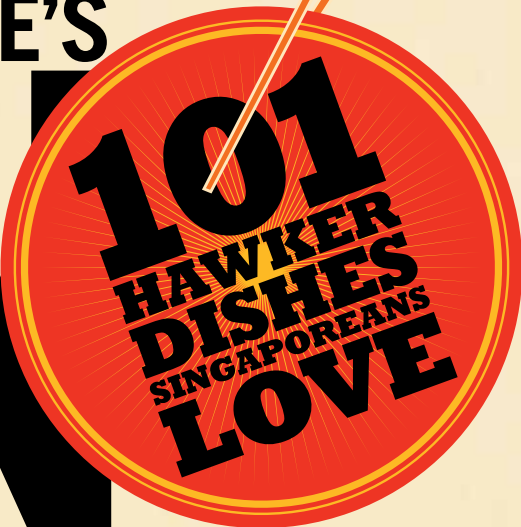
*– from the Foreword
by Prof Tommy Koh
Chairman
National Heritage Board*





THERE'S

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101
HAWKER
DISHES
SINGAPOREANS
LOVE

CARROT IN
CARROT
CAKE

Ruth Wan and Roger Hiew
Main Photography by Dr Leslie Tay

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EPIGRAM BOOKS / SINGAPORE







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FOREWORD BY PROFESSOR TOMMY KOH

It is with great pleasure that I write the foreword to this book. Every foreign diplomat, visitor, expatriate and lover of food should acquire a copy of this book. There are three reasons for my enthusiasm.

First, Singapore is a very young country. We have only existed as an independent country for 45 years. We are, therefore, still in the process of forging a nation. One of the commonalities which unite and bond us as one united people is our love for our unique hawker food or street food.

All Singaporeans, irrespective of race, language, religion, love the same classic dishes. For example, for breakfast, we love to eat kaya toast with soft boiled eggs, nasi lemak and roti prata. For lunch, we love to eat chicken rice, mee siam and nasi biryani. For dinner, it is not unusual for a family to order a combination of dishes of different ethnic backgrounds, for example, satay from a Malay stall, mee goreng from an Indian stall and chilli crab from a Chinese stall, accompanied by sugarcane juice, teh tarik and soya bean milk.

I remember reading a survey of Singaporeans who live and work abroad. They were asked what they missed most about Singapore. All of them replied that they missed their family and the hawker food. I have a good friend who, upon his return, goes to the Adam

Road Hawker Centre to have his favourite nasi lemak. Another good friend heads for another venue for her favourite roti prata. A third friend hungers for laksa and char kway teow. So, my first point is that our hawker food bonds us as Singaporeans and anchors Singaporeans abroad to Singapore.

Second, the open air hawker centres and the air-conditioned food courts of Singapore are places where Singaporeans of all social classes and income groups eat together. Food is a great social leveller in Singapore. Unlike the French, who do not share their food secrets with their friends, Singaporeans love to share their culinary discoveries with their friends and online. As a result, we will find rich and poor Singaporeans queuing up and waiting patiently for their favourite hawker food.

The son of a new foreign ambassador in Singapore called on me recently. It was his first visit to Singapore. He had gone to the Food Republic food court at Wisma Atria for lunch. He told me that he was amazed. He had never seen such a variety of food or such a diverse group of diners. I told him that he had seen one of the miracles of Singapore.

Third, Singapore's hawker food is a culinary achievement which we should celebrate. In some of our hawker food, we find the fusion of different culinary traditions. For example, you will not find fish head curry or mee goreng in India. You will not find Chinese rojak or char kway teow or chilli crab or black pepper crab in China. Malay dishes, such as nasi goreng, tauhu goreng and tauhu telur, are probably the results of the fusion of different culinary traditions. Our hawker food

“Singapore's hawker food is a culinary achievement which we should celebrate.”

is, therefore, an example of the success of Singapore's multi-culturalism. But, just as important, is the fact that some of our hawker dishes are magnificent culinary achievements.

I would argue that our char kway teow and laksa are better than any pasta dish in the world. I cannot think of any Western salad that can compete with our Chinese rojak. I also think that our roti prata, eaten while hot and fluffy, with chicken curry, beats any pizza I have ever eaten. Fish head curry, chilli crab, black pepper crab are simply heavenly.

Because of the importance of our hawker food to Singapore, the National Museum of Singapore has devoted one of its living galleries (see page 10) to it. And in recognition of the importance of documenting Singapore's hawker food heritage, the National Heritage Board has co-funded this book under its Heritage Industry Incentive Programme. Finally, in order to ensure the continuity of this wonderful cuisine and to raise the standard of cooking, I would appeal to the ITE (Institute of Technical Education) to consider opening a cooking school to teach aspiring chefs how to cook our hawker dishes to perfection.

Prof Tommy Koh
Chairman
National Heritage Board



LET'S GET STARTED

“Welcome to the ubiquitous world of the Singapore food court or hawker centre. The young, the old, the well-heeled and slippered – they are all here, eating and drinking like there is no tomorrow.”

You enter and are immediately windsocked by what you see, smell and feel. Before you, a mass of tables and chairs, arranged in some sort of regular pattern, filled by hordes of people slurping and gulping. And, in neat lines, lighted banners invite you to explore an array of cuisines – “PIG ORGANS SOUP” yells out one such banner, while another says, rather mysteriously, “ECONOMY RICE”. You cannot help but notice a few others “LOR MEE”, “ROTI PRATA” and “NASI PADANG”. What does it all mean?

You start walking past the stalls. There are brilliant fires under blackened woks, sudden gushes of steam as lids are lifted, and cavernous pots of curries and soups bubbling away. Your stomach is rumbling with desire and you want to order something to eat and drink. But what to order? And, how to pronounce the names of all these dishes? How to explore this alien world of Singapore street food, also commonly known as hawker food? Suddenly, a sharp feeling of intimidation begins to creep up your back.

Welcome to the ubiquitous world of the Singapore food court or hawker centre. The young, the old, the well-heeled and slippered – they are all here, eating and drinking like there is no tomorrow. While you remain positive and want to jump in and experience the depths of this culinary and sensory fiesta, while you want to “hang with the locals” and satiate your desire for the amazing cornucopia of local dishes that you have heard so much about, including a few that have “fusion” influences or have been given innovative modern twists, you also feel, well, to put it quite simply, lost.

That is when you pull out this book. Heaving a huge sigh of relief, you realise you have a secret weapon that will help you navigate through picking the right dishes, ordering them properly and eating them with local flair. Suddenly, your mood changes: you sense you will emerge triumphant, full of good humour, the prize of delicious local culinary delights in hand.

Yes. This book is meant for you – the foreigner, the expatriate, the tourist. It is for you to whip out when you are feeling helpless and hopeless, standing in front

“This book is not meant to be read from A to Z. It is a rough-and-tumble guide, a don’t-leave-home-without-it accompaniment to Singapore’s food courts and hawker centres.”

of a banner that proclaims in red font, full caps “BUBOR CHA CHA”. It is arranged alphabetically for that very moment when you find yourself smitten by the taste of Laksa and wonder what really goes into making it (and how to pronounce it correctly!) In addition, there is **The Extremely Useful Index** at the back of the book, so that whether something is called Chicken Curry, Kari Ayam, Rendang Ayam or Gulai Ayam (they’re all the same thing!), you’ll be able to use the index to find the right page that explains what it is, before the local standing behind you grumbles under his breath, “Hurry up la!”

This book is not meant to be read from A to Z. It is a rough-and-tumble guide, a don’t-leave-home-without-it accompaniment to Singapore’s food courts and hawker centres. It explains 101 hawker dishes (food, drinks and desserts) – their origins, their ingredients, how they are cooked, how they are to be eaten, and what makes them special. It corrects misconceptions – yes, there’s NO carrot in carrot cake – and it also suggests food pairings – how else would you know that the perfect complement to Chicken Rice is Lime Juice or that Tiger Beer goes really well with Curry Fish Head?

FOOD ON FOOT

Street hawkers have
been feeding our
nation for decades.

I itinerant food hawkers used to ply the streets of Singapore, cooking and feeding their customers in makeshift mobile carts and stalls. As Singapore moved from Third World to First, food hawkers also “upgraded” to permanent locations, known as hawker centres, the most famous of which is Lau Pa Sat. Under one roof, an amazing variety of food from all races and traditions were available to the hungry customer at often dirt-cheap prices. This tradition of hawker centres remains till today, where you can get a rice or noodle dish for \$3.00 – \$5.00 and a drink or dessert for \$1.00 – \$3.00.

Happily, food court business chain giants like Food Junction, Food Republic, Kopitiam and Koufu go to great lengths to ensure that the authenticity of the hawker food they serve is not compromised. Singaporeans who love air-conditioned comfort flock to these new places with their bright lights and fancy designs.

Yet, the true foodie will tell you that the best hawker food is still found in the dimly lit, slightly muddled halls of hawker centres of old. Places like ABC Brickworks Food Centre, Adam Road Food Centre, Fengshan Food Centre, Old Airport Road Food Centre and Chinatown Complex Market, although not air-conditioned, will provide the comforts of truly authentic and amazingly

scrumptious hawker dishes, all of which are explained in loving detail in this book.

Experience Singapore’s Street Food Heritage

For a truly interactive experience, hop over to the National Museum and check out the “Singapore Living Gallery: Food”, one of the permanent exhibitions of the museum. There’s no better way to “live” through the heydays of Singapore’s street life from the 1950s to the 1970s – you will discover how Singapore street food reflects the ethnic diversity, cross-cultural exchanges and cultural innovations of Singapore. There are even mouth-watering documentaries and short films on Singapore street food classics, like Nasi Lemak, Chicken Rice, Bak Kut Teh, and video art about Laksa, Satay and Roti Prata. There’s plenty of food for thought.

National Museum of Singapore
93 Stamford Road, Singapore 178897
www.nationalmuseum.sg

Singapore History Gallery: 10am – 6pm daily
Singapore Living Gallery: 10am – 8pm daily

Access to the Singapore History Gallery and all Living Galleries: adults \$10.00, children (aged between 7 and 18) \$5.00, free admission for senior citizens (aged 60 and above), students and full-time National Servicemen (NSFs). Terms and Conditions apply. The Living Galleries are also free to all between 6pm and 8pm daily.



FOOD A TO Z


Chinese


Malay/Peranakan


Indian

Fill your growling stomach with the delights of these dishes that are suitable for breakfast, lunch, dinner or simply as a snack! The alphabetised and colour-coded items (red for a Chinese dish, green for a Malay or Peranakan dish and pink for an Indian dish) will certainly help to whet your appetite, as you browse through and plan your culinary street food journey!

And remember, if you cannot find the dish in this main section, look for it in **The Extremely Useful Index** at the back of the book. Sometimes, dishes are called by different names, but the index lists all the common names for all the dishes!



BEEF RENDANG

BEEF REHN-DAHNG

Initiate yourself into Malay culinary culture by indulging in this powerfully flavoured delicacy. The dish features beef chunks stewed in coconut milk and a spice paste of galangal, ginger, turmeric and lemon grass. The best Beef Rendang comprises melt-in-your-mouth beef that is clothed in a flavourful thick gravy of spices and coconut milk.

You will almost never find a hawker that sells only Beef Rendang. Instead, Beef Rendang is served at Nasi Padang stalls, which serve all kinds of delicious Malay cuisine. Beef Rendang is the showpiece entree for Nasi Padang.

** You may also like Chicken Curry, Sayur Lodeh and Tauhu Telur.*



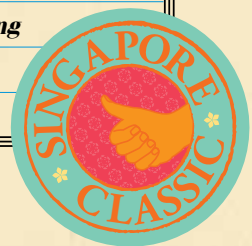
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CARROT CAKE

This is not the sweet carrot-laden dessert of Western origin. In fact, there are no carrots in local Carrot Cake. Instead this savoury dish is made by steaming grated white radish (also known as white carrot in Chinese) and rice flour till a coagulated shape is achieved. The cake is then broken into chunks and stir-fried till slightly charred. Egg, soya sauce, white pepper and chilli sauce are added, with spring onions serving as garnish.

You can order Carrot Cake “white” or “black”. The blackened version is generously doused with a thick dark sweet soya sauce, while the white version contains only a sprinkling of the sauce. Carrot Cake is a popular dish for sharing with friends. It can be eaten for breakfast, as a snack or as part of a dim sum spread.

** You may also like Char Siew Bao, Chee Cheong Fun, Egg Tart and Lo Mai Kai.*





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CHAPATI

CHAH-PAH-THI

It looks like a pan-seared UFO – sans the yeast – and tastes anything but flat. Chapati is an Indian unleavened wholemeal bread. Thinner than a pita, Chapati is served with meat or vegetable curries. It is made of very fine wholemeal flour, ghee (clarified butter) and warm water. When served, it is a pale beige, often with burnt black spots all over.

Chapati can be eaten the local way – with your hands – or with a knife and fork. Why not have some fun and improvise by using Chapati to wrap your favourite choice of meat: roast chicken or beef, rosemary lamb, or tandoori chicken.

** You may also like Murtabak, Roti Prata and Roti John.*



DRINKS AND DESSERTS A TO Z



Chinese



Malay/Peranakan



Indian

You'll be amazed to find such a wide variety of drinks and desserts available at the humble food court and hawker centre. There are drinks to cool you down or to take away that "oily" feeling in your stomach after chowing down on some all-too-artery-clogging fried dish. And there are hot and cold desserts – hot desserts provide that heartwarming feeling on a cold, rainy day while cold desserts perk you up on a hot, humid day.

Remember, if you cannot find the dish in this main section, look for it in **The Extremely Useful Index** at the back of the book. Sometimes, dishes are called by different names, but the index lists all the common names for all the dishes.

**AH BOLING**
AH BOWL-LING

These little ivory-white glutinous rice balls are filled with red bean, green bean, yam, peanut or sesame seed paste, and served in a warm syrupy clear soup. Order Ah Boling when you crave for a warm, sweet comfort dessert. Innovative hawkers have begun to add unique fillings to the rice balls, including durian! The syrupy clear soup is also sometimes replaced with soya bean milk. In any case, Ah Boling is a fairly healthy dessert that won't make you regret the additional calories.

And should you fall in love with these mushy confections, you can buy them at supermarkets in Singapore (at the frozen produce section). They're precooked, and you just have them to reheat the dumplings in the convenience of your home, hotel room or serviced apartment.



BUBOR TERIGU

BOH-BOH TE-REE-GOO

This is the “white version” of its hugely popular cousin: Pulut Hitam. A wholewheat dessert, Bubor Terigu, also known as Pulut Terigu (“terigu” means “wheat” in Indonesian), comprises white wheat beans that are boiled to a porridge consistency, flavoured with pandan leaf and gula melaka (palm sugar). Gula melaka is used instead of white sugar as the former gives this dish a better aroma. Coconut milk is trickled on top to add visual appeal.

The wheat beans, which look like barley, are cooked to just the right crackling softness. If they are undercooked, they will be too hard, and they will have no bite if overcooked. The hawker may ask you if you would like coconut milk, which adds a creamy sweetness. Mix well before eating. This dish is best enjoyed warm, so let it cool a bit before digging in.

** You may also like Pulut Hitam.*

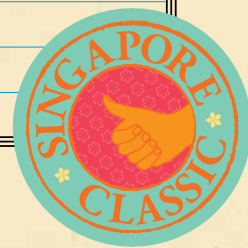


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TEH TARIK

Foamy at the top but robust all round. This concoction is a mixture of black tea, condensed milk, and a good deal of skills without the spills. Literally meaning “pulled tea” in Malay, this hot tea beverage is prepared by the signature process of “pulling” the tea – to the distance of an arm’s length – when pouring back and forth between two vessels. However, the process of “pulling” the tea is not practised in all stalls, simply because not everyone can do it! The greater the distance, the better the perceived taste. This process not only cools the tea, but also blends the condensed or evaporated milk nicely. That’s why you seldom see a spoon served with Teh Tarik, as there’s nothing to stir.

Usually Malay or Indian-Muslim owned, the stall that sells Teh Tarik typically sells food like Roti Prata and Nasi Biryani as well. But some, called “sarabat” (the term is less frequently used in modern Singapore) stalls, are known to sell only drinks.





THE ULTIMATE STREET FOOD TOURS

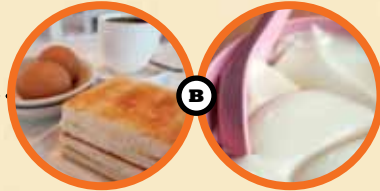
The way to a man's heart is through his stomach. And the way to the heart of Singapore... is through filling your stomach with Singapore's best street food! So follow these scrumptious Ultimate Street Food Tours and eat your way through classic Singapore dishes, discover the culinary genius of several distinct cultures (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Peranakan), and experience the ins and outs of Singapore's delightful local street culture.

The dishes recommended here are commonly found in all air-conditioned food courts, as well as the more "earthy" hawker centres. Let your stomach lead the way. Be adventurous – you'll kick yourself if you miss out!

FOOD TOUR 1 SINGAPORE CLASSICS IN THREE DAYS

DAY
1

START
HERE



B Start your day with the well-loved combination of Kaya Toast and Kopi, a typical breakfast for locals. The silky, warm flavours of Tau Huay complete the meal, leaving you energised for a day of exploration and adventure.



S The classic pick-me-up, Carrot Cake, will shock your senses with its mix of sweet, salty, crispy and chewy.



L A must-try, Chicken Rice is an unforgettable Singapore street food classic.



S Like Carrot Cake, Oyster Omelette is gritty street food at its fried-up aromatic best.



D Why not trot down to Lau Pa Sat Festival Market or East Coast Lagoon Food Village and experience a classic Singapore BBQ Seafood Dinner? Chilli Crab, Black Pepper Crab, Sambal Stingray, Otah... don't forget to savour a few sticks of Satay, which are authentically prepared over smoky charcoal fires in the open air.



D To cool down after all that heat, Ice Kachang and Sugarcane Juice are in order.

- B** Breakfast
- L** Lunch
- D** Dinner
- S** Snack

Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
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DAY 1

DAY 2

DAY 3

Breakfast	Lunch	Dinner
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DAY 4

DAY 5

DAY 6



RECOMMENDED **FOOD COURTS AND HAWKER CENTRES**

“Be adventurous – take a combination of train, bus and taxi and be rewarded with a truly authentic hawker experience in the heartlands of Singapore!”

All major shopping centres in Singapore have food courts, air-conditioned food halls where people have a choice of at least 10 stalls to order various types of hawker food from. Food courts allow locals and tourists alike to enjoy delicious hawker food in air-conditioned sit-down comfort. The major food court chains are Food Junction, Food Republic, Kopitiam and Koufu.

Hawker centres are stand-alone buildings where a variety of hawker food is sold by several stalls. These buildings range from being 30 years old to being newly refurbished. All of them are not air-conditioned, though some have ceiling fans for ventilation. Some locals will


swear by their favourite hawker centre, and insist that the hawker food at these places are more authentic and delicious than the food prepared in the sanitised upmarket environment of air-conditioned food courts. Hawker centres are generally harder to get to, because most of them are not in the city centre or tourist areas. Be adventurous – take a combination of train, bus and taxi and be rewarded with a truly authentic hawker experience in the heartlands of Singapore!


Generally speaking, food courts do not open for breakfast, but hawker centres do. For an authentic local breakfast, head down to a hawker centre in a local neighbourhood, or try out Killiney Kopitiam or Toast Box, two new chains of breakfast outlets which serve authentic local breakfast items in the air-conditioned comfort of shopping centres.


IN THE CITY

Orchard Road/Scotts Road/Somerset Road

313@Somerset – Food Republic

 313 Orchard Road, Level 5


 Monday – Sunday 10am – 10pm

 Nearest MRT Station: Somerset MRT Station


Cathay Cineleisure Orchard – Koufu Food Court


 8 Grange Road, #B1-01


 Monday – Sunday 9am – 9pm

 Nearest MRT Station: Somerset MRT Station


ION Orchard – Food Opera


 2 Orchard Turn, #B4-03/04


 Monday – Sunday 10am – 10pm

 Nearest MRT Station: Orchard MRT Station

National Youth Park – Kopitiam


 121 Somerset Road


 Monday – Sunday 10am – 10pm

 Nearest MRT Station: Somerset MRT Station


Newton Food Centre


 500 Clemenceau Avenue North

 Monday – Sunday 24 hours

 Nearest MRT Station: Newton MRT Station


Plaza Singapura – Kopitiam


 68 Orchard Road, #06-15


 Monday – Sunday 10am – 10pm

 Nearest MRT Station: Dhoby Ghaut MRT Station

Wisma Atria – Food Republic

 435 Orchard Road, 04-00

 Monday – Sunday 10am – 10pm

 Nearest MRT Station: Orchard MRT Station

Glossary

- dry:** when a dish is served dry, it means that the soup is served in a separate bowl from the main dish.
-
- soup:** when a dish is served with soup, it means that the soup is added into the main bowl of ingredients.
-
- century egg:** known as Pidan in Mandarin, this Chinese delicacy is made by preserving duck, chicken or quail eggs in a mixture of clay, ash, salt, lime, and rice hulls for several months. As a result, the yolk turns dark green and smells of ammonia for a taste to remember.
-
- chilli padi:** sometimes called bird chilli, chilli padi is the smallest of all chillies. Bright red in colour, it is also the hottest form of chilli there is.
-
- dim sum:** a type of Chinese meal involving a wide variety of small dishes, similar to Spanish tapas. The dishes are usually steamed or deep-fried, and are eaten for breakfast, lunch or tea.
-
- dry fry:** to fry without oil over low heat.
-
- galangal:** blue ginger.
-
- Hokkien:** a Chinese dialect group originating from Fujian province in China.
-
- rempah:** pounded spice paste.
-
- sambal:** a hot spicy paste made of a mixture of chilli and prawn paste pounded and blended together.
-
- tamarind:** the fruit of this tropical tree is used as a souring agent in many Indian and Malay dishes.
-
- Teochew:** a Chinese dialect group originating from Chaozhou province in China.

The Extremely Useful Index

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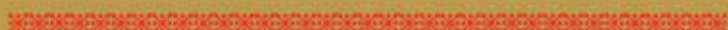
DR LESLIE TAY is a medical practitioner by day. What Leslie does when the sun sets is something all Singaporeans are very familiar with: he eats, he shoots, he posts. See his recommendation of eateries and street food at ieatishootipost.sg. Leslie's book based on his blog posts, *I Eat, I Shoot, I Post: One Man's Search for Hawker Food Paradise* will be published by Epigram at the end of the year.

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Prof Tommy Koh

Chairman

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