

AUTHOR OF THE AWARD-WINNING FOOD BLOG IEATISHOOTIPOST.SG

DR. LESLIE TAY

# THE END OF CHAR KWAY TEOU AND OTHER HAWKER MYSTERIES



DOES "TARIKING"  
THE TEA  
MAKE IT BETTER?



HOW CAN YOU TELL  
IF YOUR ROTI PRATA  
IS GOING TO BE GOOD?



WHY SHOULD  
POIAH  
BE EATEN WHOLE?



**THE END OF CHAR KWAY TEOW**  
**AND OTHER HAWKER MYSTERIES**



ieat · ishoot · ipost

# THE END OF CHAR KWAY TEOW

AND OTHER HAWKER MYSTERIES

**DR. LESLIE TAY**

WINNER OF ASIA PACIFIC'S BEST FOOD BLOG



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TO MY COLLEGE SWEETHEART,  
WIFE AND  
BEST FRIEND LISA.



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## FOREWORD

# AN AMAZING LABOUR OF LOVE

I landed at Paya Lebar Airport from freezing Berlin in February 1978. As the door swung open, I hit a wall – 32°C and what appeared to be 100 percent humidity. I had finally arrived in Asia.

After clearing customs and immigration, I was off in a cab, which of course was not air-conditioned. A swift 15-minute ride later, there I was, entering a five-star hotel along Orchard Road. Peering outside, I saw the city, busy and bustling, and the locals munching away.

The next day, I was welcomed by a gleaming executive chef, who exclaimed, “Very busy, go up and eat first then we speak later.” So, off I went to Hin’s Heavenly Cookhouse. Of course, food was pre-ordered and arrived swiftly. It was an exotic feast – clear soup with quail eggs, jumbo prawns with the shells on, fried rice and of all nightmares, there was no fork and knife. I looked at a pair of chopsticks and a Chinese spoon. Observing all the diners around me, I tried to figure out how to eat with them. As I struggled, the diner next to me quietly moved out of shooting range.

A week later, I took a trip up north where I was introduced to chicken feet (“Can one really eat this?”) and Chinese fondue, or steamboat as I later found out. And what is that prickly expensive fruit? Didn’t anyone bother to close the lavatory? Nasi what? Lemak or alamak? And the sambal, wow. I fell in love, and till today that love story has never ended. In fact, it has flourished.

Fast forward, 32 years later. My prosperous frame is the best testimony of having fallen hopelessly in love with that ever present mistress of foods – “hawker food”. Available in all shapes and sizes and at all costs, from 50 cents to \$50, (yes, this version actually exists) and at all locations, from swanky Orchard Road to sweaty Sembawang Shipyard.

The search never stopped. Then recently, I took notice of Dr. Leslie Tay,

who runs this blog on local food. Upon a chance meeting, I realised he was a genuine doctor, philanthropist, family man and a foodie who spends his free time researching local dishes. Leslie has done this for years and his collection of locations, dishes and their descriptions is an amazing labour of love.

Singapore is all about hawker food. It has always been a part of our DNA. But the age of mass production has arrived. This means shortcuts like ready-made pastes which make the food taste almost identical. It is a sad new world order but it is the reality. Yet, if we don’t share and preserve one of the most famous traditions, born out of need and developed into a true craft, then what will happen in the future?

Therefore, I am a wholehearted supporter of Professor Tommy Koh, who recently tabled the idea of a culinary school for hawkers. Yes, this must be done, especially in this fast moving world before one of the great culinary heritages of the world is lost.

Keep the Singapore chicken rice alive as it is the equivalent of a national monument, a dish comparable to the national anthem. Have you ever met anyone that didn’t enjoy this succulent dish? As far as I’m concerned, whether it’s \$5 (my portion size) of chicken rice or a \$150 *poularde de bresse* with truffles, as long as the food is perfectly prepared, both have an equal standing. With one small exception – the former I can and am enjoying rather regularly.

This book makes an important contribution to Singapore’s food heritage, not least for being a guide to the best of the best hawker stalls.

Bon appétit, or as we say here, selamat makan!

**Peter A Knipp**

Publisher, *Cuisine & Wine Asia* magazine and organiser, World Gourmet Summit



## INTRODUCTION

**I am a doctor and yes, I love food.** For some reason, a lot of people think that doctors are people who only eat healthy food. OK, I do watch my diet, but when I see a plate of Hokkien mee with its glistening noodles and slightly charred bee hoon that has been infused with rich prawn stock, I succumb to its lure just like any other mortal. After all, I was a foodie before I became a doctor. So, if you prick me, will I not bleed? If you tickle me, will I not laugh? And if you give me a plate of Hokkien mee, will I not eat?

This is a book that I never planned to write. What I wrote over the last four years was a blog, an online diary of a few hundred of the best hawker stalls across our island where I went to eat, shoot photographs and post my thoughts online. Hence the blog's name: ieat, ishoot, ipost. Along the way, I spoke to hundreds of hawkers and recorded the oral histories of our hawker dishes. I asked them questions like why chwee kueh (water cake) is called chwee kueh, which part of the pig makes the best char siew (barbecued meat), and whether tarikng (pulling) the tea makes it taste better. Their answers fascinated me and I recorded them down in the blog. What

you have here, is all the interesting bits collected over four years, distilled into a book. Each chapter will deal with one particular hawker dish and end with a list of the best hawker stalls where you too can have your hawker food epiphany.

As I spoke with the hawkers, it became apparent to me that a lot of the dishes that we often take for granted are truly, uniquely Singaporean. Take Hokkien mee for example. This is a dish you will not find anywhere else in the world. Even the humble chwee kueh (water cake), which has its roots in Swatow, China, has evolved into a dish that is unrecognisable in its place of origin. As I listen to the personal stories of these hawkers, I am slowly weaving together a fabric of our society that has played a pivotal role in forging our nation's culture. Much of this information still exists only as oral histories, and I feel privileged to be able to document them.

Hawker food is no ordinary food. It is food that has fed our forefathers and provided simple sustenance for a developing nation. Hawker food is cheap, blue-collar food sold along the streets. It was cooked by migrants for migrants, each looking for a way to make a living in a foreign land. Our hawker food is neither elegant nor classy, but it embodies the essence of being Singaporean. Ask any Singaporean what he or she misses most about home and invariably, the answer would be laksa, prata, chicken rice or char kway teow.

Food has been my passion since I was weaned. I must have inherited it from my mother, who is an excellent cook. She earned her diploma as a Masterchef in Australia at the age of 50, graduating at the top of her class, which comprised mainly chefs half her age. I remember spending my childhood in the kitchen observing her as she went through different obsessions – from pandan chiffon cakes to Black Forest cakes, bak changs (Chinese dumplings) to curry puffs, she made them all. That was how I first became fascinated with food and the art of cooking.

Growing up, one thing we never did much of was eat at hawker centres. At least, we never went all out to find the best hawker stalls Singapore had to offer. But when I settled back in Singapore after living overseas, I decided that I should try to find the best hawker stalls around. Finding such information online was difficult, and it frustrated me to look at mouth-watering hawker food on the Internet, but not have information about where to eat the best version of it. To counter this, my plan was to make sure each of my blog posts had a nice photo, a proper write-up, a rating, and the address and opening times of the hawker stall. And I made sure everything was catalogued properly for easy reference.

As an avid photographer, I decided that my photographs should aspire to induce drool, and drive the reader to develop an irresistible craving. I thought that if my write-up and photographs could get someone to go halfway across the island to eat something, I would have succeeded. Food photography has since taken off in a big way and it is not uncommon to see food bloggers lugging around DSLRs at hawker centres. My food photography workshops, which are sponsored by Canon, are always packed as more and more enthusiasts endeavour to join us.

*ieatishootipost* has evolved from being a personal blog to a community of foodies. We now have a burgeoning Facebook fan page of over 10,000 fans, an active forum, Twitter-kakis and over 6,500 readers logging in daily to check out the latest blog posts. We hold regular "makan sessions" where readers are invited to descend upon an appointed place to feast together. These "makan sessions" are where readers get to meet each other in person and befriend other foodies.

These friendships are what I will treasure long after I stop writing the blog. I got to know all of the *ieat* team members through the blog and quite a few have been supporting me since the very early days. Our makankakis have even gone on overseas trips together and I am looking

forward to the day when *ieatishootipost* can claim to be a matchmaker for our very first foodie wedding!

Another group of people who have become my good friends are the hawkers themselves, many of whom have seen queues outside their stalls after being featured on the blog. This phenomenon has come to be known as the “*ieat effect*”. One particular hawker Auntie was so happy that she even came to my clinic with New Year goodies to express her gratitude. I am really happy that I can help these hawkers and have such an impact on their lives.

I have always felt that as a community, we can make a difference in the lives of those who are less fortunate than ourselves. Each year, the *ieat* team organises events to raise support for various charities. This year, I travelled to Sandakan, Malaysia to see the plight of the displaced children who have no access to education or healthcare and returned with the resolve to help these children. With the support of our community, we are now looking at ways of raising awareness and support for these kids through the blog.

This book is my attempt to find the best of the best hawker food, and along the way discover Singapore’s fascinating food culture. I hope it will become your companion in seeking out the best stalls to eat around Singapore.

Life is short and health is precious, so remember: never waste your calories on yucky food!

**Dr. Leslie Tay**





## THE SINGAPORE HAWKER SCENE

**Nostalgia is a precious commodity in Singapore.** In our fast-paced society where land is scarce, most places have a limited life span. So, you are not likely to find the old oak tree where Grandpa was supposed to meet Grandma and run away together. Many significant spots that my wife and I fondly remember from our dating days have either been renovated or demolished. Even Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong's old dating hotspot, the National Library at Stamford Road, is no more.

The hawker scene in Singapore has, likewise, undergone significant changes, much like the rest of our society. You can catch a glimpse of the past at the "Singapore Living Galleries: Food", a permanent exhibit at the National Museum of Singapore (*see pg 10*). The exhibit takes you back to a time when hawkers hawked their food along the streets – balancing a pot of satay gravy on one end of a pole and a charcoal grill on the other end, shouting "Satay! Satay!" to get people's attention. I had always assumed that the word 'satay' is Malay in origin, but recently learnt that it actually derived from the Tamil word "sathai" which means "flesh", and it was the South Indian Muslims who brought the dish to South East Asia!

Over at the "Tok Tok mee" exhibit, I saw how the "Tok Tok mee" hawkers

used to ply the streets of Singapore in their three wheel wooden carts. Their assistants would announce their presence by knocking on bamboo slabs and also help to take orders for the noodles. Once the noodles are cooked, they would deliver the hot piping bowls of noodles directly to the customer's doorstep! Yes, home delivery was alive and well in the good old days!

Hawkers have since been evacuated off the streets and relocated into hawker centres. But that was just the first phase. Now, we are seeing a second phase, where hawker centres are being upgraded into spanking clean, well-ventilated facilities, with clean restrooms to boot.

If you want to eat great food, you have to look for hawkers who are passionate and proud of their heritage and cooking. There are a few types of hawkers nowadays. You have those in food courts who are hired by a boss to run a stall. These hawkers won't know anything about the food they are serving. Then, you have the hawkers who merely buy factory-made stuff to sell – like most beancurd and ngoh hiang (fried pork rolls) hawkers. They are more like food traders rather than hawkers. But, most of the highly rated hawkers belong to a third category – they know their dish inside out, insist on having the best ingredients, and most of the time, this means that they prepare most of the food from scratch. These are the Uncles and Aunties who have been serving up fantastic meals at ridiculously affordable prices day in and day out, most of them work with a smile and a good sense of humour. Yet, as Singaporeans evolve and expectations rise, will we become hard pressed to find hawkers who passionately cook dishes passed down through generations?

I have made it my personal mission to support hawkers who are passionate about providing us with better quality hawker food. I just love the old Uncles at Bukit Merah View Food Centre who still insist on making their carrot cake from scratch, starting by grinding their own flour at the back of their stall. I also love the Teochew Ah Chiks and Ah Sohs at Lao Zhong Zhong who continue to make their ngoh hiang (fried pork rolls) fresh every day,

despite the mass availability of factory-made ones. And how about the Uncle who sells the preeminent prawn mee at Pek Kio Market and Food Centre, blending six seafood ingredients to create a prawn soup that can hardly be found anywhere else, even in restaurants?

Another encouraging and exciting segment of the hawker community is also emerging. These are the young-and-upcoming hawkers. A new generation of hawkers who are energetic, innovative and creative with their food. It is always interesting when bankers turned hawkers, like Tina Tan from Hock Lam Street Beef Kway Teow at China Street, or Ho Kuen Loon from Funan Weng Ipoh Hor Fun, take their family's recipe and give it a new twist to keep up with the trends. Then there are what I call the Hawker Hunks, like the young muscular man who sells epok epok (Malay curry puffs) at Eunos Central. Such individuals provide eye candy while dishing out delicious food – what more could women want?

Finally, there are the hawkers who are willing to try out new dishes or flavours, sometimes at the suggestion of hungry and greedy customers, like myself! These hawkers span the generations. I have encountered enterprising young hawkers as well as passionate elderly hawkers who take on new risks and score success, like pork belly satay and Godzilla da pau (big pau).

We Singaporeans are an honest bunch. We know our faults and we openly admit them. Impatient, rude, unforgiving and downright kiasu (afraid of losing), we sigh in frustration when we experience graciousness in other societies and lament that we can't be the same. But hey, all is not lost. There is still a lot of goodness out there, and it is as close as the hawker that you buy your food from every day! If you want to see more graciousness in our society, it starts from yourself. And one of the first people I think we should start being more gracious to, is our humble hawker who works so hard everyday to feed us but often doesn't get the credit he or she deserves.

## ABOUT THE SINGAPORE LIVING GALLERIES: FOOD

Before the 1960s, hawker centres were far and few between. Back then hawkers hawked their food out on the streets.

The scenario is recreated at the National Museum of Singapore under a permanent exhibition called Singapore Living Galleries. Here you can find food-related artefacts and sound installations that take you back to a time when satay and Hokkien mee were sold out of pushcarts, when the streets were filled with the sound of clanging woks and ladles, and hawkers called out to passers-by at the top of their voices from their makeshift stalls.

Among other things, the exhibition also showcases a wide variety of Chinese, Indian, Malay and Peranakan spices and includes an installation that allows you to sniff at their enticing aromas.

A must-see for those that are curious about the history of hawker food and how Singapore's street food culture reflects the nation's ethnic diversity.

### National Museum of Singapore

93 Stamford Road, Singapore 178897

[www.nationalmuseum.sg](http://www.nationalmuseum.sg)

Singapore History Gallery: 10am to 6pm daily

Singapore Living Galleries: 10am to 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.





## LOCAL LINGO

### WHAT I SAY WHEN THE FOOD IS EXTREMELY TASTY AND REALLY HITS THE SPOT

**phwaa say** | say!

**phwaa sayah** | say ah!

**sedap** tasty

**shiok** really hits the spot

**shiokadelicious** shiok + delicious

**shiokadoo** shiok + yabba dabba doo

**shiokadoodle doo** figure it out yourself

### TERMS OF ENDEARMENT USED ON PEOPLE, USUALLY HAWKERS

**Ah Beng** young Chinese man

**Ah Chik** Chinese uncle

**Ah Hia** Chinese older brother

**Ah Mah** Chinese grandma

**Ah Peh** Chinese old uncle

**Ah Soh** Chinese auntie

**ang moh** literally means "red hair", denotes a westerner

**Auntie** mature Chinese lady who probably has kids of her own

**Food Nazi** someone whose food is so good that he can afford to be nasty to everyone

**Lao Ban Niang** lady boss

**Mak Cik** Malay auntie

**makankaki** a portmanteau of makan (food) and kaki (friend) – a friend who you meet to eat with

**Pak Cik** Malay uncle

**Uncle** mature male, 40 and above or at least looks it

### OTHER FOOD-RELATED TERMS

**cze cha** literally means, "cook fry", refers to a stall that sells cooked food of different styles

**jerlak** what you feel when you have overeaten

**MSG** stands for monosodium glutamate, the stuff that hawkers use as a shortcut to make their food tasty

**umami** a Japanese word for the fifth taste, which gives food its savoury, full-bodied flavour. MSG makes food umami

**wok hei** means "breath of wok", that unique smoky flavour when food is fried on a superheated wok

### TYPES OF NOODLES

**bee hoon** thin rice vermicelli

**kway teow** flat rice sheet noodles

**mee kia** thin egg noodles

**mee poh/mee pok** flat egg noodles

# BAK CHOR MEE





If we have friends from overseas coming to Singapore, how many of us would think of bringing them to eat bak chor mee? No, it is either chilli crab or chicken rice – but bak chor mee is a dish close to Singaporeans’ hearts. Simple. Delicious. Underrated.

**W**henever I meet Teochew stallholders, our conversation will invariably be in Teochew, and when asked why they are so popular, the standard answer is, “Chngee (fresh) ah, everything is chngee.” The Teochew fussiness about freshness is a well-worn cultural trait – Teochews live near the river in Guangdong Province, so, unlike, for example, Szechuan cuisine, where the emphasis is on spices, Teochew cuisine is quite bland in comparison, emphasising on the freshness of ingredients.

One characteristic of good bak chor mee is of course, freshness. Teochew hawkers who pride themselves in making the best bak chor mee have always told me in typical Teochew hao lian (proud) fashion that they use the freshest black prawns, the freshest pork, the freshest everything.

And it does make a difference. Despite being, at its core, just a basic dish of noodles, pork and vinegar, bak chor mee is the third most favourite dish among Singaporeans, after Hokkien mee (#1) and chicken rice (#2), according to the polls done on my blog. If we have friends from overseas coming to Singapore, how many of us would think of bringing them to eat bak chor mee? No, it is either chilli crab or chicken rice – but bak chor mee is a dish close to Singaporeans' hearts. Simple. Delicious. Underrated. And above all, chnggee (fresh). Very chnggee.

Today, bak chor mee is still as good as it was in the past. People are always saying how good chicken rice, char kway teow or Hokkien mee was in the past. But for bak chor mee, I haven't heard many people complain that it was so much better in the past. Apart from freshness, bak chor mee is really about the noodles. So, you need to start with a good quality egg noodle. With each mouthful, you should be able to enjoy the aroma of the noodles that has been lightly flavoured by pork lard, with the vinegar just cutting through the oil and getting the salivary glands working. I prefer my noodles QQ (al dente), with a firm bite and sufficient curl to give you that serrated feel as you slurp it up. The balance of chilli and vinegar has to be just right, and the combination of pork and sauce really shiok.

There has been much discussion on the difference between mee poh tar, Teochew kway teow mee and bak chor mee and there will be people who would stick out their necks to define 10 different subcategories of mee poh, which is also commonly called mee pok. The way I see it, Teochew mee poh tar – "tar" meaning dry – is a spectrum of different varieties. On

one end, you have mee poh tar, which strictly speaking is just blanched mee poh tossed in chilli and oil with some fishballs and maybe fish cakes thrown in. And at the other end of the spectrum, you have bak chor mee, which, strictly speaking, should only include minced pork, but the lines of demarcation have been blurred and that is why you often get freshly sliced pork, liver and fishballs in your bak chor mee. Some hawkers also add fresh prawns, keow (fried wantons), and pork ribs!



Ask anyone where the best bak chor mee in Singapore is and invariably **Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle** will pop up. The noodles here are really QQ (al dente), the chilli shiok, the lard fresh and the black vinegar just gets your salivary glands working overtime. I really love the soup here. My usual fare is a big bowl of wanton soup with sliced pork, minced pork and pork balls.



**Seng Kee Mushroom Minced Pork Noodles** has been in business for over 20 years. It was at Eunos before moving to Upper Changi Road. Mr Lee's trademark is the way he makes lots of clanging noises when he is cooking. His bak chor mee is one that you really must try. The noodles are the thin, flat type, with excellent eggy flavour. Being QQ (al dente), they have a very good bite. The ribs are stewed until the tendons become gelatinised, so you can eat the whole thing without leaving any soft bones behind. The sambal chilli is also really shiok, very flavourful and not just plain hot. Mr Lee explained that in order to create a unique sauce that goes into his bak chor mee, he slices up the mushrooms and leaves them overnight to extract the juices before combining them with his secret blend of herbs and spices. I really like the sauce!

The other star of this stall is the fish maw soup. I have never tasted soup this good that goes with bak chor mee. It is chock-a-block full of fish maw, minced pork, pork slices, black fungus and liver. The soup is so full of pork protein precipitates that even if you feel like you need an extreme umami boost (like after having spent a week eating hospital food), I can guarantee that a bowl of this soup will actually be “too much” for you. A very, very shiok and satisfying bowl of soup! The secret ingredients of the soup base are the specially imported dried scallops, grade A fish maw (threadfin no less), old mother hen, tipoh (dried sole fish) and others! By the way, Seng Kee also sells fantastic crab bee hoon (see chapter on crab).



Also in the East is the Uncle at **132 Mee Poh Kway Teow Mee**. He is the original mee poh man of East Coast, having first started his business at the old Siglap Market almost 40 years ago. When I asked him just what makes his stall so special (it was voted the best mee pok in the East Coast area by *The Straits Times*), he opened up a big bag of medium-sized prawns and told me in typical Teochew hao lian (proud) fashion that he uses the freshest black prawns available in the market. Everything from the pork to the prawns is very, very fresh. And because he insists on using the freshest ingredients and on doing everything the same way he has been doing it for the past four decades, people are willing to illegally park their BMWs, sit around and eat popiah while they queue for 40 minutes, just to satisfy their mee poh craving.

My impression is that Uncle’s mee poh tastes very lively and fresh. The first mouthful of that piping hot and fantastically QQ (al dente) flat noodles and you know you are savouring freshly fried pork lard with the combined flavours of freshly blanched prawns, pork and fishballs. It is rumoured that the





MACPHERSON BAK CHOR MEE

chilli here has got buah keluak (Indonesian black nut) in it which gives it that special smoky, savoury flavour. The soup is done the traditional way, using only pork leg bones to prepare the stock. Uncle frowns upon the use of scallops, old mother hen and other less traditional stuff to “sweeten” the soup.



If tradition is not your thing, and you are more keen to savour New Generation mee poh tar, then head over to **Ah Guan Mee Pok** at Syed Alwi Road. Eric is one enterprising hawker who has brought Japanese ramen concepts into the preparation of our humble mee poh tar, hence taking it to a whole new level. Eric’s mee poh is outsourced, but made to Ah Guan’s exacting recipe. The mee poh, also known as mee pok, is portioned by weight, then squeezed tight to make it curly. During the cooking process, a timer is used to make sure that each portion of noodles is cooked for exactly 36 seconds.

At Ah Guan, you can only order mee poh as Eric feels that his recipe does not work well with mee kia. This is exactly the kind of thinking that the Japanese apply to their ramen. For the Japanese, each bowl of ramen is designed to perfectly pair a certain type of noodle to a certain sauce, and this cannot be changed by the customer as it would affect the intended flavour. Another thing that cannot be requested is tomato sauce, as Eric feels this will spoil the taste of the noodles. Instead, the noodles are flavoured with a special sauce and vinegar, and you have a choice of whether you want chilli or not. What I like about Ah Guan is that you have the option of adding really good stuff, like scallops, crayfish and fish slices, to your mee poh. For just a few more dollars, this New Generation mee poh tar can be packed with extra goodies that make it all the more delicious!



The one characteristic of good bak chor mee is freshness of the ingredients, and the bowl of piping hot bak chor mee at **Ah Kow Mushroom Minced Pork Mee** stall tastes really fresh. Those who like their bak chor mee with a bit more vinegar will appreciate the unbridled use of black vinegar here, which is reportedly a special brand of traditional black vinegar from China. The noodles were QQ (al dente) and were complemented very well by the sauce. They were generous with the crispy tipoh (dried sole fish), which was a bonus because I simply love the stuff.



However, the best value, most elaborate and freshly made bak chor mee I have ever come across is **Teochew Street Mushroom Minced Meat Noodle** in Chinatown. It is really frustrating that there never seems to be a time where the queue takes less than 15 minutes! But then again, I guess everybody knows a good deal when they see one. Each bowl of mee poh tar here is prepared on the spot. Uncle will turn aside to make some dumplings, while waiting for the noodles to cook, then turn back to toss his noodles a few times before turning to his chopping board to slice a few pieces of meat. I also noticed that he would pinch the noodles every time he cooked a batch, in order to see if they were cooked perfectly. All these procedures really slow down the process of producing one bowl of noodles, which definitely contributes to the length of the queue.

There is no doubt that his ingredients are fresh and you really do get quite a few goodies. In each bowl, there is one medium-sized peeled prawn, which tastes like it is a sua lor (sea prawn), rather than a farmed one, several slivers of crispy tipoh (dried sole fish), one dumpling, one pork ball, slices of lean meat, minced meat, braised mushrooms and, something that is unique to this stall, a piece of braised pork skin. All the ingredients are excellent but I can't give this stall top marks because I feel the noodles and sauce lack a bit of flavour.

## THE BEDOK BATTLE OF THE BAK CHOR MEES



When we talk about bak chor mee, most people refer to the dry version with vinegar, chilli and whether they want liver or not. But, somehow when they talk about the bak chor mee at Fengshan Food Centre in Bedok, everyone seems to know we are referring to the soup version of the dish. It almost seems as if this is the only place that serves bak chor mee soup!

Many people know about these two bak chor mee stalls at Bedok's Fengshan Food Centre. They stand side by side, but which one is better? Both stalls have got their fair share of accolades, but the inner stall, **Xing Ji Rou Cuo Mian** (no. 7), seems to have a longer queue of people than the outer stall, **Seng Hiang Food Stall** (no. 8). So, is this a case where people are simply following the crowd, or is no. 7's bak chor mee really significantly better than no. 8's? I decided to settle the issue once and for all.

Just by looking at the two bowls of bak chor mees, one will notice that no. 8's bowl is bigger. However, the contents look quite similar. Perhaps no. 8's has just slightly more minced pork than no. 7's. Tastewise, the noodles of both stalls are similar. I wouldn't be surprised if they shared the same supplier! The soup of no. 7 is just slightly more tasty than no. 8's but the difference is so small that unless you ate them side by side, I doubt you would be able to tell the difference.

So there you have it. The herd mentality works! The stall with the longer queue – no. 7 – does have the better bowl of noodles. However, if you ask me, I would just order from whichever stall has the shorter queue.



If you are craving bak chor mee in the middle of the night, head down to **Seng Huat Eating House** at Bugis for your foodie fix. This 24-hour stall serves very nice handmade fishballs. The hawker said that handmade fishballs are smoother in texture and have better bounce, compared to the factory-made ones. He was right!

I have never been impressed with bak chor mee stalls that substitute tomato sauce for chilli when you order a bowl of bak chor mee mai hiam (no chilli). To me, a good bak chor mee should taste good even without chilli, as long as they use a good mushroom sauce and a dash of good quality black vinegar. The mushroom sauce at Seng Huat is what makes the dish so good – mushrooms are rich in natural glutamates which give food that savoury umami flavour. This stall uses both tomato sauce and mushroom sauce to flavour their noodles. They use such a small amount of tomato sauce that the taste does not dominate the bowl of noodles. Instead, it adds a complementary tang and sweetness that makes the noodles very well-balanced.



Finally, one must not forget about **Joo Heng Mushroom Minced Pork Mee**, which makankaki Damien told me is quite legendary and is still drawing the crowds. This is indeed a fine bowl of bak chor mee. The flavours are nicely balanced and you can whiff the eggy aroma of good quality egg noodles with that first mouthful. The texture of the noodles are nice and QQ (al dente). However, although it is as great as the other mee pohs around, it does not really stand one head above the rest.



## LESLIE'S TOP PICKS FOR BAK CHOR MEE

### Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle 4.5/5

The noodles are really QQ (al dente), the chilli shiok, the lard fresh and the black vinegar just gets your salivary glands working overtime.

466 Crawford Lane #01-12 S190466,  
9.30am to 9pm, closed on 1st and 3rd Mondays  
of the month

### Seng Kee Mushroom Minced Pork Noodles

4.75/5 for fish maw soup  
4.5/5 for bak chor mee

The fish maw soup is chock-a-block full of fish maw, minced pork, pork slices, black fungus and liver.

316 Changi Road S419792, 8am to 4.30pm,  
open everyday

### 132 Mee Poh Kway Teow Mee 4.5/5

Everything from the pork to the prawns is very, very fresh. Voted the best mee pok in the East Coast area by *The Straits Times*.

MP 59 Food House, 59 Marine Terrace #01-05  
S440059, 7am to 3.30pm, closed on Mondays  
and 1st and 3rd Sundays of the month

### Ah Guan Mee Pok 4.5/5

If tradition is not your thing, try this new generation mee poh tar, based on Japanese ramen concepts.

69 Syed Alwi Road S207648, 7am to 9pm,  
open everyday

### Ah Kow Mushroom Minced Pork Mee 4.5/5

They are generous with the crispy tipoh (dried sole fish), which is a bonus.

Hong Lim Complex Temporary Market and  
Food Centre, 10 Upper Pickering Street #01-17  
S058285, 9am to 7pm

### Teochee Street Mushroom Minced Meat Noodle

4.25/5

The best value, most elaborate and freshly made bak chor mee. The queue is never less than 15 minutes.

Chinatown Complex Market, 335 Smith Street  
#02-23 S050335, 12.30pm to 9pm, closed on  
Mondays and Tuesdays

### Seng Huat Eating House 4.25/5

Handmade fishballs that are smoother in texture and have better bounce, compared to the factory-made ones.

492 North Bridge Road (opposite Parco Bugis  
Junction) S188737, open 24 hours everyday

### Joo Heng Mushroom Minced Pork Mee 4.25/5

Eggy aroma of good quality egg noodles you can whiff with that first mouthful.

Ang Mo Kio Market and Food Centre,  
628 Ang Mo Kio Avenue 4 Street 61 #01-86  
S569163, 7am to 2pm

### Xing Ji Rou Cuo Mian (inner stall) 4.5/5

Seems to have a longer queue of people than its close competitor stall no. 8. The soup is just slightly more tasty.

Fengshan Food Centre,  
85 Bedok North Street 4, Stall 7 S460085,  
5pm to 1am, closed on Mondays

### Seng Hiang Food Stall (outer stall), 4.25/5

Has just slightly more minced pork than stall no. 7. Tastewise, the noodles of both stalls are similar.

Fengshan Food Centre,  
85 Bedok North Street 4, Stall 8 S460085,  
5pm to 12.30am, open everyday

## A C K N O W L E D G E M E N T S

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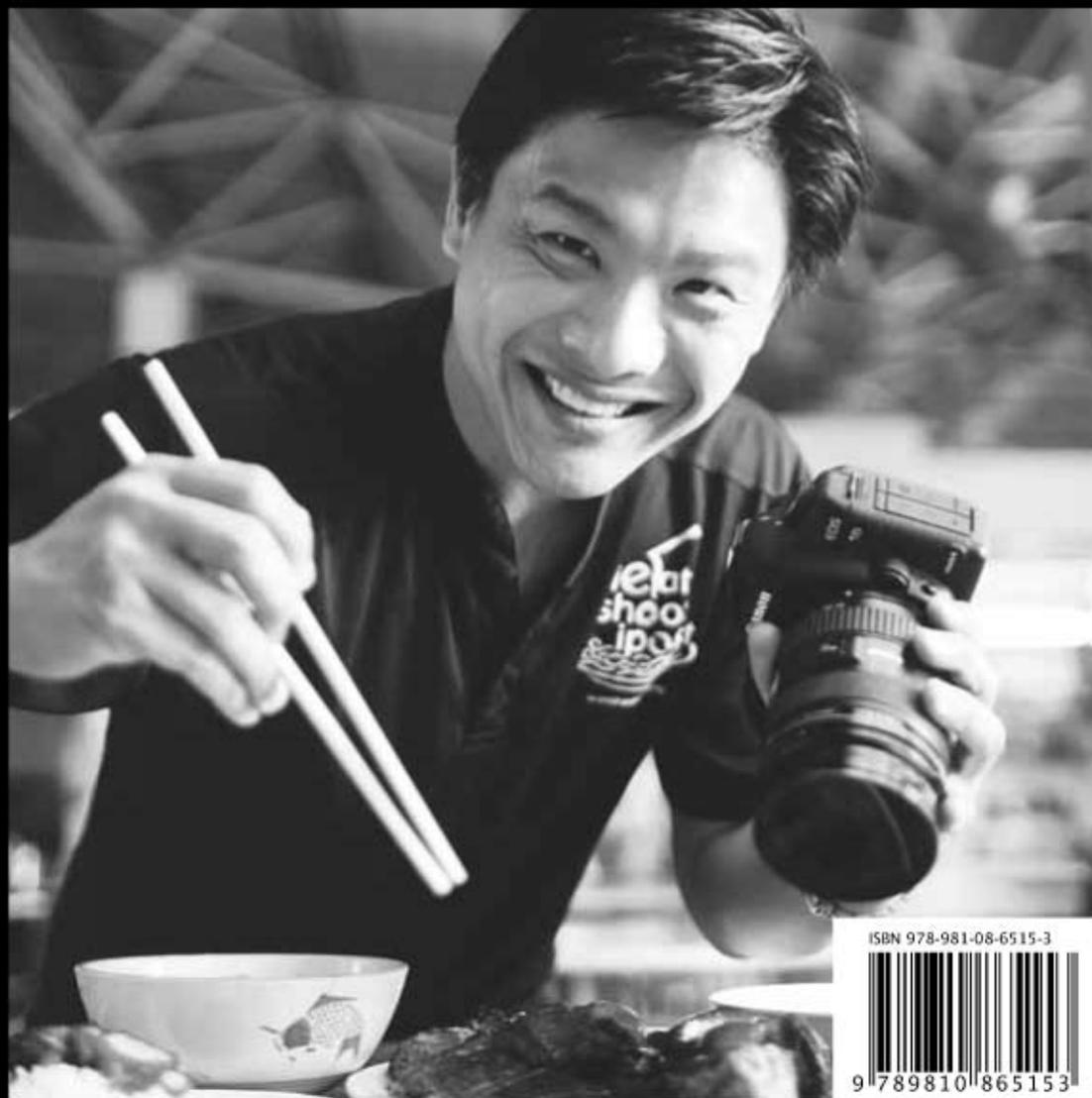
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What is the difference between bak chor mee and Teochew mee?  
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How do you make milky fish soup without milk?  
What are the signs of a good rojak stall?  
Where can you find pork belly satay?  
Which came first, white or black carrot cake?  
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