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From
Kopi peng
to Cold-brew

The perks of being
a coffee addict in
Singapore

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GO POP-UP GLAMPING IN AUSTRALIA

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FOUR 'HOODS
DRIPPING IN ART





STANDING THEIR GROUND

Singapore's coffee-drinking landscape has evolved in two different directions: the speciality cafés springing up all over the island, and the diehard heartland and kopitiam stalls purveying the traditional local alternative. Rachel Eva Lim seeks out some of the city's coffee luminaries

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ILLUSTRATION
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PHOTOGRAPHY
CHLOE CHENG & DOMINIC PHUA/
DAYDREAM

It's a sweltering afternoon and I've trekked halfway across the country for one thing: Heap Seng Leong's famous *kopi gu you* (coffee with butter and condensed milk). I place my order at a counter lined with a large abacus, a coin-operated orange telephone from the '70s and plastic jars filled with assorted snacks. The soot-spotted walls, strung with stained cotton *kopi* (coffee) filters, have seen better days. Bottles of soy sauce and pepper, accompanied by repurposed medicinal jars that contain sugar, furnish each marble table. In the far corner of the *kopitiam* (coffee shop), an elderly man

hunches over his afternoon pick-me-up, pausing between loud, appreciative slurps to gaze out through the shop's entrance at nothing in particular.

Shi Pong Hsu, 80, the owner of Heap Seng Leong, is dressed in light-blue striped pyjama bottoms and a loose white singlet. As regulars filter in, he churns out cup after cup of kopi, funnelling the liquid with just the right flick of the wrist to prevent spillage. His movements are deft, methodical and executed with a practised skill – the product of having honed his craft for more than 40 years. The resulting kopi is velvety and robust, the saltiness from the >



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The deft hands of Shi Pong Hsu at the helm at Heap Seng Leong; exterior of Tong Ah Eating House; cups of kopi being churned out; Tang Chew Fue, owner of Tong Ah; Ryan Kieran Tan, proponent of the third-wave coffee movement and the man behind the Curious Palette brand



● Kopitiam is an important aspect of community living ●

butter cutting through the sweetness of the condensed milk.

As Singapore's continued urbanisation transforms the character of the city, places like this have become increasingly hard to come by. But in this modest establishment, amid the scraping of corrugated metal on burnt toast and the vigorous clinking of spoons, I've found a slice of old Singapore – and a pretty good cup of joe. Kopitiam have long been a quintessential aspect of community living in Singapore. According to Jahan Loh, whose book *One Kopi at a Time* explores the Lion City's coffee culture, kopitiam were initially frequented by immigrant workers who couldn't afford the tea enjoyed by their British colonial employers. Over the years, these social spaces have evolved into eating houses that also serve a range of food – but the kopi, which retails for just over \$1, has remained the main draw.

"Local blends are actually 90% coffee; the other 10% is butter and sugar," Loh discloses. He adds that

the unique roasting process used by kopitiam suits Singapore's humid climate – the butter and sugar work to caramelise the beans and lock in the flavour. One proponent of this roasting method is Tang Chew Fue, 52, the fourth-generation owner of Tong Ah Eating House on Keong Saik Road. Having worked at this kopitiam since the age of 13, Tang has had a front-row seat to the gradual gentrification of his neighbourhood. Over a spread of kopi drinks and kaya toast, he tells me how this residential area was once better known as a red-light district.

Today, Keong Saik's shophouses accommodate chic new bars, brunch spots, boutique hotels and office spaces. After rental disputes forced Tang to relocate his shop from its original location in 2013, the property was sold to foreign investors for a tidy sum. When I ask whether business has been affected by the growing popularity of speciality coffee shops, Tang quickly downplays the competition. "We're





ABOVE:
Customers and brews at Curious Palette;
(below) Tan gets to work

doing completely different styles of coffee,” he insists.

Although Tang reckons that these trendier coffee shops cater to a different market, there’s no denying that their rapid proliferation over the past few years has injected the local food-and-beverage scene with fresh energy. Aligning themselves with the third-wave coffee movement – with its focus on the quality and sustainability of the beans, as well as knowledge of the supply chain – these cafés have tapped into a customer base that’s thirsty for more than a local kopi or standard Starbucks brew. Aluminium filter pots and chipped glass cups are shunned in favour of sleek La Marzocco espresso machines, and Chemex and AeroPress brewing equipment, while their interiors reflect a Scandinavian influence.

“Two demographics that I hoped to cater to were locals who were returning from living abroad, who

> SPECIALITY CAFÉS

▶ CURIOUS PALETTE

The spacious and welcoming interior – complete with plush grey sofas, indoor plants and lots of natural lighting – makes this the perfect spot to while away an entire afternoon.

64 Prinsep St, +65 6238 1068;
fb.com/curiouspalette

▶ JEWEL CAFE AND BAR

Jewel claims to be the first coffee shop in Singapore to adopt the popular cold-brewing method, which entails steeping coarse coffee grounds in cold water for around 24 hours.

129 Rangoon Rd, +65 6298 9216;
fb.com/jewelcafeandbar

▶ THE TINY ROASTER

Other than their signature West Street blend and in-house roasted single-origin beans, they also sell green coffee and snazzy equipment for those who want to try out home roasting.

106 Clementi St 12, #01-62;
www.thetinyroaster.com

▶ CHYE SENG HUAT HARDWARE

This is the flagship store of the local speciality coffee giant Papa Palheta. Their name pays tribute to the former metal and hardware companies that once occupied this section of the neighbourhood.

150 Tyrwhitt Rd, +65 6396 0609;
cshhcoffee.com

▶ COMMON MAN COFFEE ROASTERS

Part café, part coffee bar and part wholesale roasting operation, they supply freshly roasted beans to cafés around Singapore, and also conduct free weekly public cupping sessions.

22 Martin Rd, #01-00, +65 6836 4695;
commonmancoffee.roasters.com

▶ NYLON COFFEE ROASTERS

Prioritising the sourcing and roasting process, their owners make annual sourcing trips to farms around the world. Their signature Four Chairs blend changes throughout the year, based on seasonal availability.

4 Everton Park, #01-40, +65 6220 2330;
nyloncoffee.sg

▶ ORIOLE COFFEE + BAR

Founded in 2008, and named after the delightful yellow tropical bird, Oriole was one of the pioneers of the local third-wave coffee movement. They also have a dedicated roasting outpost, with an array of beans available for in-store purchase.

96 Somers Rd, #01-01, +65 6238 8348;
oriole.com.sg





☕ Soil, altitude and temperature all play a role in developing flavour ☕

couldn't find good coffee, and people who wanted to learn more about speciality coffee," says Ryan Kieran Tan, the owner of Curious Palette on Prinsep Street. After developing his craft at a slew of Melbourne cafés, Tan set up an operation that would educate customers on the origin of their coffee, enlighten drinkers as to the regions that produce coffee beans and introduce enthusiasts to brewing methods that would yield contrasting tastes.

"The soil, altitude, atmospheric composition, temperature and secondary crop all play a huge role in developing flavour," Tan tells me. True to form, the Costa Rican coffee I order comes with an information card detailing the provenance of the beans. Prepared using a Kalita Wave dripper – a conical device in which boiling water is poured, mingles with ground coffee and re-emerges through a small opening – it has a rich chestnut hue, an orange-blossom aroma and a lingering sweetness, despite not containing a single grain of sugar.

This focus on the coffee's source is shared by Adrian Khong of Jewel Cafe and Bar, which only

serves single-origin arabica coffee from countries such as Ethiopia, Brazil and Guatemala. "I wanted to give customers a range of choices instead of serving just a house blend," Khong explains. "Some like a heavier body, while others prefer a more acidic taste." Like most owners of speciality roasters, he uses a lighter roast in order to enhance the flavour of the beans without denaturing them. He notes that his customers have become more discerning, and are now able to distinguish between coffees with different origins and brewing techniques. "Initially, people were sceptical about our ability to deliver better coffees than those available at well-known, international chain cafés," Khong says, "but I think that question has pretty much been put to rest."

Connoisseurs with pickier palates also flock to The Tiny Roaster in Clementi, founded by former home-roasting enthusiasts Tiffany Joy Chan and Alex Chong. Instead of serving espresso-based drinks, they've chosen to focus exclusively on black coffee brews. Chan tells me that this is the best way to appreciate coffee, as it's served in its purest form. "You can >

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: Adrian Khong of Jewel Cafe and Bar; interior of Jewel; Khong serves single-origin coffee from Ethiopia, Brazil and Guatemala



➤ KOPITIAMS

HEAP SENG LEONG

Look past the creaky red plastic chairs and dusty ceiling fans, and this is the ideal place to enjoy a leisurely cuppa, while feeling like you've been transported back to another time. 20 North Bridge Rd, #01-5109

TONG AH EATING HOUSE

Owner Tang Chew Fue whips up innumerable cups of kopi to the sound of a Chinese opera soundtrack. Get there early to sample his steamed kaya bread, which he reserves for his morning customers. 35 Keong Saik Rd

CHIN MEE CHIN CONFECTIONERY

This historic gem in the east of the island is a favourite of Jewel Cafe and Bar owner Adrian Khong. Their unique kaya toast consists of buns, rather than bread slices, slathered in a generous layer of home-made jam. 204 East Coast Rd

DA ZHONG CAFE

As part of the Hainanese Village Centre, this hole-in-the-wall establishment does a roaring trade. The constant queue outside their stall is a testament to the excellent quality of their kopi. 105 Hougang Ave 1, #02-20

SINGAPORE CAFÉS



FROM TOP:

Tiffany Joy Chan works the roast to serve fragrant black coffee at The Tiny Roaster (centre); (below) author Jahan Loh talks Singapore coffee over kopi and toast



TIPS FROM THE LOCALS

KOPITIAM TALK

Local drinkers use a number of terms to customise their kopi, but these 15 examples are the most common. Adding the word “peng” to the end of your order will get you an iced drink, while saying “da bao” means that you’ll get your kopi in a takeaway plastic bag.

Kopi: coffee with condensed milk

Kopi o: black coffee with sugar

Kopi si: coffee with sugar and evaporated milk

Kopi gu you: coffee with butter and condensed milk

Kopi o kosong: black coffee

Kopi si kosong: coffee with evaporated milk

Kopi gah dai: coffee with more condensed milk

Kopi siew dai: coffee with less condensed milk

Kopi o siew dai: black coffee with less sugar

Kopi si siew dai: coffee with less sugar and evaporated milk

Kopi gao: strong coffee with condensed milk

Kopi o gao: strong black coffee with sugar

Kopi po: weak coffee with condensed milk

Kopi o po: weak black coffee with sugar

Kopi sua: double order of the same drink

really taste flowery and fruity notes in a black coffee,” she says. She also believes that sugar and milk can mask bad roasting techniques, and serving coffee black thus motivates them to deliver a superior product. “Black coffee is so translucent that we have to put all our energy into roasting the beans well, so as to produce the best cuppas,” she says.

For now, speciality coffee is a booming market, but Tan and Chan foresee it gradually narrowing down. They believe that those trying to make a quick buck off the third-wave trend – those without a true passion for coffee – will eventually shut down. But Khong has a slightly different take. “Although it’s getting more crowded, we are far from that saturation point,” he says, reckoning that more coffee shops will open in

the outlying heartland areas to cater to customer demand.

The jury’s still out on whether kopitiam culture will be able to keep up as Singapore speeds into the future. “The problem is the sunset nature of kopitiam,” Jahan Loh says. “After this generation, none of the younger ones will want to take over the trade. It’s a dirty job, and it’s not exactly glamorous.”

In order to ensure the longevity of kopitiam, Loh thinks that Singaporeans need to “start making heroes out of their own culture” by supporting such time-honoured institutions instead of limiting their patronage to speciality coffee shops. The public can only hope that both factions will thrive for years to come, and continue to caffeinate the local population the way they know best. 9

a day in Singapore...

So you've found yourself in Singapore this July? Well done you! Here's a virtual cookie! July is a great time to be here. This is a great time to feast – a great time to treat both your palate and your eyes; Fall in love with shopping again with our talented local artisans along our famed Orchard Road stretch, all in one afternoon! Efficiency in Singapore? Aye check!

From **18-24 July**, local market and fair organiser, Free Folk, takes over **ION Orchard's Event Hall at B4** once again, to bring you a feast for your senses with **OmNomNom Festival**. This time, creative boutique props and design studio, Imaginator Studios has jumped on board as a collaborator! Famed for creating sets that bring you into another worlds and beyond, Imaginator Studios will bring you down the rabbit hole, to a fun and fantastical Instagram worthy marketplace.

While Imaginator Studios ensures a visual treat, Free Folk will fill your plate, a feast fit for Kings and Queens with an array of food vendors from all over Singapore gathered in one place just for your delight. And if that isn't enough, splurge on a selection of trinkets, and other gifts, carefully curated or even crafted by local artisans. Here you'll find souvenirs worth writing home about!

Located in ION Orchard, the glitziest shopping mall along Singapore's most famous shopping and entertainment strip, Orchard Road; access to everything else that could delight your senses is easy and convenient, that is if your senses needed more! So do drop by (and get real cookies)! You won't wanna miss this collaboration.

For more details, please follow our social media pages:



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Free Folk Chinese New Year Market



Free Folk Chinese New Year Market



Zouk set - Imaginator Studios