

Singapore's Hawker Stalls

By Rachel Khanna

Hawker stalls are quintessentially Singaporean and have existed since Singapore's founding. Early migrant labourers from China, India and the Arab lands saw an opportunity to earn an income by selling foods from their home countries. Over time, new dishes reflecting a fusion of culinary traditions and some typically Singaporean ones, were developed. Peranakan food, for example, is a melding of Chinese and Malay culinary traditions.

In the late 1960s, just after Singapore became independent, the government decided to regulate hawker stalls by issuing licences to hawkers and building hawker centres. There are now over 107 markets and hawker centres with about 15,000 hawker stalls in Singapore.



Laksa and Otak



Fishball noodle soup

Today, Singapore's hawker tradition is at a crossroads. On the one hand, many traditional hawkers are getting old and finding it difficult to pass their businesses on to their children or other relatives, so a tradition risks being lost. On the other hand, inexpensive hawker food has virtually become a necessity in households where time or money are in short supply.

I decided to try a few different hawker stalls for myself. My first stop was the Peranakan Katong Laksa stall in

Holland Village. *Laksa* (meaning 'spicy sands') is a rich, rice-noodle soup with fish, prawns, cockles and squid in a spicy curry sauce. The 'chef' poured the sauce over the noodles and seafood and emptied it several times before deciding that he had the right proportion of curry sauce, noodles and fish. The key ingredient is the sauce, made with blue ginger (*galangal*), garlic, shallots, shrimp paste, shrimp stock and coconut milk. The *laksa* is topped with bean sprouts and often accompanied by *otak*, a typical Peranakan dish made from fish paste marinated in spices and coconut milk, wrapped in banana or coconut leaves and grilled.

For my second stop, I opted for a typical Chinese dish of fishball noodles at the Li Xin Chao Zhou Teochew Fishball Noodle stall. The Teochew are the second largest Chinese group in Singapore, originally from the coastal areas of Guangdong Province, China. Their cuisine is known for its fish dishes, particularly steamed fish. This hawker stall is part of a chain started in 1967. Teochew Fishball Noodle soup is a light noodle soup with fishballs. There is a choice of six different kinds of noodles that are then covered with a light fish broth in which the fishballs are cooked. These are small, round balls of yellowtail fish paste and are deliciously light and fluffy. The fishballs and noodles are accompanied by a spicy chilli sauce to lift the flavours of the fish, another Teochew culinary tradition.

My final stop was at a traditional South Indian hawker stall – Heaven's Indian Curry in Ghim Mo. This stall serves the traditional South Indian fare of *thosai* (also known as *dosa*), *appam* (hoppers – which are fermented rice-flour pancakes) and *puttu mayam*. The *thosai* is a soft yet crispy pancake made of rice flour (occasionally made with wheat flour). It is often filled with potato curry and served with coconut chutney and *rasam*, a light vegetable curry. When I went to the stall at 12:30 pm the *appams* were already sold out so I opted instead for *puttu mayam*, a light pancake made of rice-flour noodles, served with shredded fresh coconut and palm sugar; a sweet flavour to end my meal!

No visit to Singapore is complete without a trip to a hawker stall and many people will not hesitate to give their opinion on the best ones. For this article, I searched out the best of the stalls and tried some of their signature dishes. I was amazed by the culinary diversity of the foods, as well as how traditional cuisines had evolved and fused to produce a variety of dishes found in Singapore.

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Sunday morning hawker centres are vibrant, smoky, noisy and full! Tables of men sit to vigorously debate or play board-games. Other diners eat and natter. People fly around with plates of noodles, coddled eggs and kaya toast, serving 'kopi-tai' throughout the breakfast session. The smells are wondrous, punctuated by the rattle of spoons in cups and the scraping clank of metal on wok as more delights are prepared for the ever-hungry hordes of diners.

All photos by the author, sketch of hawker centre by Siobhan Cool