

IN THE 1800S, ITINERANT PURVEYORS OF FOOD from all over Southeast Asia plied their dishes on the streets of Singapore. The food was fresh, cooked by experts, reasonably priced and sold from stalls that reflected the variety of Southeast Asia—Chinese cuisine here, there Malay, Indian here and everywhere influences from the West.

That scene is little changed in the 21st century. Across Singapore, about 18,000 street-food sellers operate stalls in more than 110 so-called hawker centers, where the government ensures high hygiene standards.

The looks, smells and tastes of hawker culture have won the hearts and stomachs of food critics and lovers around the world, including the late Anthony Bourdain. “Most cultures, most places, they treat street food like a problem to be solved,” Bourdain told the Travel Channel. “But for me, it’s the number one reason to come to Singapore.”

The rise of hawker centers parallels the rise of Singapore itself. “In Singapore, the tale of how a humble fishing village in Southeast Asia evolved into a buzzing modern metropolis often comes in spoonfuls of peppery pork rib soup or bites of fried egg noodles at its hawker centers,” said a 2021 story in *National Geographic*. “Hawkers are so central to Singapore life that the country recently led a successful campaign to have the practice inscribed on the 2020 UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.”

Guides to hawker stalls are ubiquitous and the eating experience is unanimously revered. But what really stands out about Singaporean street food is its overall consistency. After all, no stall surrounded by competitors can afford any dip in quality. In 2016, a Singapore hawker named Chan Hon Meng won the first-ever Michelin star awarded to a street-food stall.

A hawker center can be found within a 10 or 15 minute walk from most homes and offices. Typically they are open from dawn to dusk, though a stall selling porridge may be open only until early afternoon. Many Singaporeans consume most of their meals at hawker centers, which offer free seating and tables.

Food fatigue is unlikely simply because the variety is so great. A typical dinner may cost around S\$5 (US\$3.70) to S\$7, depending on the location of the hawker center. At some, you could get a meal for as cheap as S\$3.

One dish for which hawker centers are known is “mixed rice.” This is a bowl of rice topped with



Michelin-Starred STREET FOOD

ingredients of the customer’s choosing with gravy or curry drizzled on top. There are other variations of this in Singapore, with the Malay iteration of it called “Nasi Padang.” It is the perfect representation of Singapore’s multicultural heritage—a mish-mash of different cultures to form a flavor that is uniquely Singaporean.

Seats can be hard to find during lunch hours at the hawker centers. For that reason (and because of the heat and humidity), the Brunswick team in Singapore typically takes away food from their favorite hawker stalls to dine in the air-conditioned office.

Singapore’s **HAWKER CENTERS** stand apart for quality, variety, price and popularity. By **JAY KOH** and **GLORIA HOH**.



Chan Hon Meng at left, is the first Singapore street food chef to win a Michelin star. His popular stand, Hawker Chan, is shown below.



But here's a tip: In Singapore, where laws and rules are taken as gospel, there exists an unspoken convention that is observed by all in hawker centers, known in Singaporean slang as "chope." It involves placing a small item, such as tissue packet, umbrella or even a namecard, on a seat or table to indicate it is informally reserved. Originally a way for people

to save seats while they order their food, the act of "choping" has become a widely accepted cultural norm in Singapore. Unsuspecting neophytes to hawker center culture are therefore often caught off guard when they realize that no tables and seats are available after placing an order for their food, and are subject to the miserable inconvenience of standing around with a tray of food, waiting for an empty seat.

The Singapore government has taken to including hawker centers in the rollout of new digital and social initiatives. In 2022 and 2023, the government distributed SGD\$300 worth of vouchers redeemable at hawker centers, in a move designed to help cushion the impact of rising inflation and a hiked goods-and-service tax at hawker centers.

For 12 years, Chua Yi Ok has operated the Seng Hiang Bak Chor Mee stall at Bedok 85 Market: "We have kept our recipe original since 40-plus years ago, because we believe in passing down tradition and retaining the taste of traditional Bak Chor Mee." Eventually, his son and daughter will take over the family business.

But many hawkers say the younger generation dreams of futures outside of hawker centers. Or young hawkers experiment with traditional recipes in ways that shock veteran hawkers. Says Chua: "Some people put fried chicken cutlets in their Bak Chor Mee—it looks visually appealing but ruins the traditional flavor of the dish."

In 2020, the government introduced an initiative called the Hawker Development Programme (HDP). The goal is to equip the upcoming generation of "hawkerpreneurs" with the essential business skills and inspiration required to succeed. The Hawker Centre 2.0 Incubation Stall Programme is also one of the many measures taken, providing low-cost incubation stalls to support new hawkers in starting their businesses. Furthermore, the government has launched the SG HawkerFest, a yearly event aimed at celebrating Singapore's hawker culture and heritage. The festival showcases an array of activities, including food tasting, cooking demonstrations and performances, all aimed at promoting and preserving the hawker trade.

Bourdain, who made at least four trips to Singapore, believed in arriving with an appetite. "On any 24-hour trip here you'd be foolish to not plan at least three meals at any one of the hawker centers," he said on the Travel Channel. ♦

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