

# Food Fight! What is Asia's best city for dining? Two foodies take sides

By Robert Templer

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Singapore -- It was as a child in Singapore that I learned to love food. I developed a preference for bold tastes, for spices, for ingredients with nose-crinkling aromas. I discovered that one of the great pleasures is the variety and inventiveness you find in a city that really cares about eating.

Despite the lack of continuity and in many cases an unnecessary government emphasis on hygiene over atmosphere, Singapore is still the best place in Asia to eat. No other city has the same combination of variety, inventiveness range and passion. Penang and Kuala Lumpur have better hawker food; Melbourne and Sydney have better, more innovative haute cuisine. But Singapore is alone in the region in having everything.

Most important of all, Singaporeans love food. Politics may arouse little passion here, but food is another matter. Web sites on the subject abound and most of them provide forums where Singaporeans vent surprisingly strong views on all culinary matters. At a recent gathering of the Singaporean community in Hong Kong, a group of comedians showed a videotape of themselves ordering and eating at a hawker center in Singapore. Forget the fact that in few cultures does eating evoke enough sentiment to make the cut into such a comedy skit. There was another message here: This is what Singaporeans give up when they leave home. The best way to eat in Singapore is to buy Makansutra, a pocket guide to hawker food written by a group of devotees whose enthusiasm knows no bounds. They also have a Web site ([www.makansutra.com](http://www.makansutra.com)).

## FULL TEXT

Asia's best culinary influences meet in Singapore, where passion for traditional and fusion foods runs high, writes Robert Templer.

Singapore -- It was as a child in Singapore that I learned to love food. I developed a preference for bold tastes, for spices, for ingredients with nose-crinkling aromas. I discovered that one of the great pleasures is the variety and inventiveness you find in a city that really cares about eating.

My earliest memories of appreciating food rather than just consuming it are of eating fried noodles in the now-defunct night market in the main parking lot on Orchard Road. Out of the flashing woks and bubbling vats came dozens of types of noodles -- fried, steamed, in soups of hundreds of different flavors. The air was filled with an alluring smoke from satay grills and superheated pans. After eating my char kway teow, lips feeling puffy and bruised from early experiments with chilies, I'd be taken across the road for a soothing mango ice cream from the Cold Storage supermarket.

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You can eat anything from African to American, from Brazilian to Balinese, from dozens of regional Chinese cuisines to a range of food, high and low, from South Asia. There is great street food as well as restaurants with \$5,000 bottles of wine. No less than three local traditions -- Chinese, Malay and Indian -- all have remained distinct and at the same time have cross-fertilized to produce some of the best fusion food around.

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So why does Singapore stand out from other cities in Asia? For starters, it is an immigrant city, and it is these places that tend to have the best food. The Chinese who came to the city over the centuries brought foods from across China. From India came a completely different cuisine, while the British and others introduced European foods to Singapore.

But it is not just a matter of bringing together people from wide-ranging places and allowing for the cross-pollination of their foods. Immigration frees people to eat what they want. Many countries in Asia, and most notably China, had sumptuary laws that restricted what people could eat. Feudal societies inculcated an attitude that only the higher classes should eat the best food, and in China, Maoism took this to an extreme during the Cultural Revolution by making anything but the most basic diet a political crime. When people are freed from feudal constraints, food becomes less about class and more about money -- and Singapore now has no shortage of that.

In places where status was removed from position of birth, people needed to find new ways to distinguish themselves. In Singapore, the Peranakan culture that blended Chinese and Malay with some other colonial influences placed enormous importance on domestic life. Running a household and being able to cook often elaborate meals helped set your family apart.

Sadly, much of this culture has faded in the face of modernity, but Peranakan food has seen something of a revival in the past decade, moving out of people's homes into restaurants. There are now no shortage of great Peranakan restaurants -- from cheap family style places like Ivins that serve up steaming bowls of curries and soups to more up-market restaurants like Blue Ginger that pride themselves on the rigor with which they uphold Peranakan tradition. Dishes like ayam buah keluak, a chicken curry cooked with black nuts from Indonesia, takes days to prepare. The time and effort is reflected in an incomparable richness in this lush, complex dish.

Singapore is a competitive society, as indeed most countries of immigrants are. This is the sort of place where people fight each other and crash through glass doors to make sure they get their Hello Kitty dolls from McDonald's. The kiasu culture, as it is known, is as strong as ever, as shown by the city's many buffets, where people pile their plates high to get the most for their money. The good side of the kiasu culture, and yes there is one, is that restaurants in Singapore have to provide good value for money.

You don't find the obscenely overpriced and overrated food that you do nowadays in Hong Kong, where high rents and greedy, unimaginative owners have wrecked the city's restaurant life. It is rare to leave a restaurant in

Singapore feeling irritated and extorted by the mediocrity of the food and the extent of the bill, feelings that I find all too common in Hong Kong. Five or six dollars gets you a great meal in any number of hawker centers in Singapore. Even the higher-end restaurants are more reasonable, although prices can reach the sky for top Cantonese or French food.

Unlike Hong Kong Chinese, for example, Singaporeans seem to have genuinely embraced all the foods that are available to them, crossing over boundaries of race and culture with an unusual ease. Eating fragrant curries and lime-scented mulligatawny soup in the cool, lofty white space of the Tiffin Room at Raffles were Chinese tai-tais, a group of young Chinese celebrating a birthday and several turbaned Sikh businessmen marking a deal. Not far away at the cafeteria-style Banana Leaf Apolo in Little India you can find almost the same mix of people eating off banana leaves with their hands.

Singapore's place as a port and now international business center also has contributed to its culinary richness. In the early days it meant that all kinds of spices and other products were available. Nowadays it means that all kinds of talent, ideas and information come to the city. It has been a popular destination for chefs from Australia, now the breeding ground for some of the best cooks in the world. Justin Quek, the chef at the refined, lushly beautiful Les Amis Au Jardin, was quick to adapt some of the techniques pioneered at El Bulli, the restaurant in Rosas en Cala Montjoi in Spain, where the chef Ferran Adria has put a surrealist spin on haute cuisine with his truffle foams, agar-agar noodles and sugar-wrapped caviar.

For all the inventiveness available, I find myself on any trip to Singapore busily eating the classic dishes that are rarely available or as good elsewhere. Laksa, fried carrot cake, fish head curry, otak-otak, roti prata, curry puffs, Hainan chicken rice, nasi lemak and about half a dozen other foods have to be sampled before I can even think about trying anything new. Given how many great things there are to eat already, it's amazing anyone comes up with anything new. And almost all these classics are available in most hawker centers, the Amoy Street Hawker Center being one of my favorites.

Singapore has become a great place to eat but there is no room to rest on its laurels. Service often leaves a lot to be desired and many restaurants struggle to keep good staff. Younger Singaporeans will not want to put in the long hours and back-breaking labor needed to run a hawker stall. Varieties of plants and animals are being lost in the process of agricultural standardization in neighboring Malaysia and Indonesia, where most of Singapore's food is grown.

Singapore's culinary culture has come together from a fortuitous mix of forces that have given it something vital and precious that is well worth looking after.

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