

Singapore Management University

Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University

Research Collection Institute of Service
Excellence

Institute of Service Excellence

11-2017

The future of local food

Eng Su LEE

Follow this and additional works at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/ises_research



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#), and the [Food and Beverage Management Commons](#)

Citation

LEE, Eng Su. The future of local food. (2017). *Excellence Explored*. 6-8.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/ises_research/64

This Magazine Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Institute of Service Excellence at Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research Collection Institute of Service Excellence by an authorized administrator of Institutional Knowledge at Singapore Management University. For more information, please email cherylds@smu.edu.sg.



THE FUTURE OF LOCAL FOOD

◆ Restaurateurs Lee Eng Su and Lee Chan Wai share their views on Singapore's hawker food culture and how they want to change Singapore's food industry.

There are many negative assumptions about Singapore's F&B industry; many of them are accurate. The industry doesn't pay well; there is little career growth; the hours are long; there are no safety nets. But the team behind The Coconut Club is determined to make headway in this space.

"Cooking is a thankless career in Singapore," explains Lee Eng Su, co-founder of the restaurant, "but there are two things we can do: provide careers for cooks that will allow them to be successful early in their lives, and improve the standard of local food."

Eng Su and co-partner, Lee Chan Wai, are impressively committed to their cause. They refer to their team as family and frequently raise the idea of creating a safe space for their family at work. Two hours after lunch service, we find ourselves sitting in on a staff debriefing session, where they're taking turns to discuss everything from how they're feeling to a difficult situation that had happened during service. Tips and ideas are exchanged freely. Jokes are made; guidance is shared. It is clear this team has real camaraderie.

You've known each other for over 20 years. What made you decide to go into the Nasi Lemak business together?

Eng Su (ES): I moved back three or four years ago and was frustrated with Singapore's hawker food culture. Wages haven't increased for 20 years while the cost of living has gone up. Hawkers are still

selling food at very low prices and people expect local food to be cheap – \$30 for ramen is no problem; \$10 for *bak chor mee* is unacceptable. I eventually came to the conclusion that talk is cheap. If I want to change the way things are, I have to have a viable business selling quality local food and charging appropriately to show it can be done.

I never thought *nasi lemak* was a great dish until Chan brought me to the *nasi lemak* convention in Kuala Lumpur in 2014. I was blown away by how highly executed Malaysian *nasi lemak* is. In Malaysia, *nasi lemak* isn't a dish; it's a cuisine. I was cooking French and Mediterranean food at the time and I came to realise that Malay cuisine is probably one of the world's greatest cuisines.

But there's more to a restaurant than its food, right? What about your service?

Chan Wai (CW): We're fairly casual but we work hard in the background. The experience is like welcoming someone into your own home. Everyone understands that concept: you want guests to have a good time. You want them to taste the food and understand the effort you've put in without forcing it on them. We share this same sense of purpose whether young or old.

Have you formalised your training process?

ES: The training has evolved. At the beginning we went on about philosophy, but we also wanted our service to be sincere. We think that's lacking in Singapore — they're professional, courteous, kind... but they're not emotionally involved.



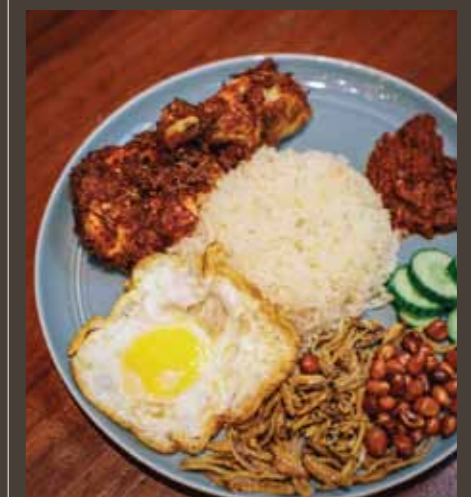
So we encourage our staff to be themselves — they don't have to fake a spiel about the food if they're naturally shy. And we empower them — they don't have to be submissive if a customer is rude or offensive.

Is that what you mean by sincerity in service? That there's no standard approach?

CW: Well, we did explore having set responses to everything at one point. We still have a bit of that, but if you're going to let your servers use their personalities to win people over, then you can't have too many standard phrases. Our approach comes down to communication. For example, we might not be serving *Kueh Salat* today because the coconuts weren't up to scratch, but the front-of-house team is responsible for delivering that message in their own way.

ES: Sincerity has an emotional starting point. Most companies start from a technical point

like KPIs — qualitative or quantitative indicators that are determined in numbers. But our team is like family to us, so we start with things like love, generosity, forgiveness, and the general bonding between staff. Using these tools allows for deep personal growth, which naturally translates to great, authentic service.





“

We're not just bosses. We have extensive pre- and post-service briefings where we sit for almost an hour to talk.

”

How else do you keep the team motivated?

ES: I believe laziness is a symptom, not a character trait. If someone is lazy, it's because they haven't felt motivated in the right way, so showing them respect and love is important. We trust them with who we are — we show them our own pain.

We're not just bosses. We have extensive pre- and post-service briefings where we sit for almost an hour to talk. At the beginning of service we talk about how we feel, and after service we check in with them again.

CW: Yeah, we also spend a lot of time coaching them on professionalism. We teach them that there is joy and satisfaction in doing a good job even when they're in a bad mood. We involve them in decision-making and set examples for them whether in the kitchen or in our interactions with suppliers and customers. They take their cues from us.

ES: We also spend equal effort with everyone to bring them together and create opportunities to socialise outside of work.

Like taking the team to the *nasi lemak* convention?

CW: Yeah, a lot of people think it was ridiculous that we opened on 22nd October and closed the entire restaurant on 4th November to take everyone away

for the weekend. But what better way to translate the experience we had at the *nasi lemak* convention than to take them there!

ES: We're not trying to motivate them so we make money. We've given some of them two raises in a few months and three rounds of bonuses since we opened. They also have the freedom to say anything to us. We want them to know that this is a safe place to work and we take their careers seriously. The trust we've built is like a family's. We work for them and they work for us.

A few weeks ago, one of our waitresses was asked if she was the boss by a guest. When she said no, the guest questioned why she looked so happy and motivated when she wasn't in charge. That was a huge compliment to us. The motivation and level of execution become apparent when staff take ownership of the service.

It's our collective ambition to continue to create spaces in Singapore where real human interactions can exist on a level that's sincere and generous. Restaurants are the best setting for this and bringing our staff along for the journey is everything. ✦