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Commentary: Why are we willing to pay S\$20 for a bowl of ramen but not bak chor mee?

Singapore's hawker food wins accolades abroad. Yet, Singaporeans are still hesitant about dishing out more than S\$5 for a bowl of bak chor mee, observes foodie and Associate Professor Margaret Chan.

By Margaret Chan

13 Jun 2017, Channel NewsAsia

SINGAPORE: Earlier this month, Singapore's Hill Street Tai Wah Bak Chor Mee emerged first in the annual Top 50 World Street Food Masters list, making it the second time the hawker has been lauded internationally; it was one of two hawkers here to be awarded a Michelin Star earlier.

Out of the top 50 in the World Street Food Masters list, 14 were Singapore hawkers. It says something about the high standards of our hawker fare in Singapore.

Yet, Singaporeans are a spoilt lot when it comes to food, and the people we take most for granted are hawkers.

WE EAT A LOT OF HAWKER FOOD

A 2015 survey of eight cities conducted by IKEA the furniture store found that Singaporeans did the least home cooking. Out of 1,271 Singaporean households, only 22 per cent cooked every day, compared to about 49 per cent in London, Paris and Shanghai, and 54 per cent in Stockholm.

This is probably because most Singaporeans eat at hawker centres. Eighty-one per cent chose to eat at hawker centres when not at home, according to a 2014 survey by Weber Shandwick.

Yet, we are very receptive to foreign food. When asked if Singaporeans would welcome a new exotic ingredient from a foreign country, 44 per cent said yes, but were confident that this would not impact local food culture. Forty-three per cent said the foreign ingredient would be absorbed into and become local food culture.

Either way, the Singaporean is blase: 86 per cent believe that cheap and authentic food will always be available in Singapore. This explains why we will pay S\$20 for a bowl of ramen but will scream "murder" if a bowl of bak chor mee costs more than S\$5.

ABUNDANCE DRIVES PRICES DOWN?

Singaporeans are very proud of our Singapore food. In September 2009, then Malaysian Tourism Minister Dr Ng Yen Yen said that chilli crab and Hainanese chicken rice were Malaysian but had been hijacked by another country. A food fight erupted on the Internet.

No one pelted anybody with rotten tomatoes, but Singapore food experts including K F Seetoh of Makansutra and restaurateur Violet Oon had to be called in to mollify frayed tempers.

So there is fierce loyalty and ownership, no doubt, but this has resulted in a perverse response: “Why should we pay for what is ours?”

Another problem is the ubiquity of our Singapore food. It would not be Singapore food if it cannot be found everywhere in Singapore.

Marry two economic ideas: The economics of abundance with the scarcity principle and you and I know without the economists having to tell us so, plenty of the same drives down prices. Less is best, so you need to play hard-to-get to get noticed.

A major stumbling block with that argument is that our palates have become discerning. My father would not eat fried Hokkien mee unless it was from the Upper Serangoon Road stall at the junction of Lavender Street, and no bak kut teh would pass his lips but the pork ribs soup from the now defunct Ellenborough Market.

Yet, Singaporeans today would not know gourmet Singapore even if you shoved their faces into the food. They do not see that top class char kway teow has to be fried individually, plate by plate, and yes with lard. They do not see that there may be an argument for paying “ramen prices” for a heavenly offering - the individual kway teow noodles almost melting one into one another - fried with the passion and strength of an Olympic breaststroke champion.

When I was little, we had favourite foods that we called “opium”. “Aiyoh, got to have my opium today, if not die,” was an often-heard phrase.

If you will not travel from one end of Singapore to another for that one and only nasi lemak, expect to eat an undistinguished lump of rice with a fried sausage, slice of Maling luncheon meat and a sunny-side up egg where the yolk is no longer runny.

A WARNING TALE: THE TING TING MAN

How many of you have eaten the candy from the “ting ting man”? This was the nomadic vendor who walked around with a large tray of the sweet on his head and a folded wooden frame on one shoulder.

Stop him and he would open the frame and set the tray on it. Then with a hammer and chisel, he would chip pieces of halva-like candy with a chirpy “ting ting ting”. The ingredients were cheap - sugar and maltose - but the preparation was arduous. The sugars had to be cooked to somewhere between a soft and a firm stage, then pulled until white and chewy.

Yet, we refused to pay more than 10 cents for a serving so the poor hawker could not afford to settle in a stall and got chased off the roads by the health inspectors. One Singaporean food, dead as a dodo.

By the way, across the Causeway, there remain a few ting ting men who are venerated as national treasures, the custodians of Malaysia’s intangible heritage.

Margaret Chan is Associate Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies (Practice) at Singapore Management University’s School of Social Sciences. She has also been a food critic for almost 18 years, most notably as editor of Wine and Dine.