

Singapore Hawker Centers: Origins, Identity, Authenticity, and Distinction

Abstract: Foodways in Singapore embody the anxieties of the island-state—namely heritage, race, identity, and authenticity. Hawking in Singapore was initially seen as a nuisance that had to be tolerated and later regulated by both the colonial administration and newly independent government. The relocation of hawkers to centralized food centers marked the imposition of order and hygiene onto a squalid industry. Street peddlers, once an administrative problem, were refashioned into a potent symbol of Singapore’s heritage. Hawker food has also been used as a trope of multiculturalism to unite a racially diverse people. The influx of foreign workers from the mid-1980s presented new tensions that shed light on the cultural power of food to articulate

inclusion and exclusion. Markers of authenticity, namely historical traditions and artisanal expertise, map haphazardly onto the realities of actual foodways. Finally, a breed of connoisseurs, who grew up in a cosmopolitan nation-state, was birthed in the 1990s. Embracing the low culture of hawker food, local foodies impute new cultural meanings to hawker food that embody the tension between distinction and democracy.

Keywords: hawker food, national identity, multiculturalism, authenticity, foodies

ENTER MAXWELL FOOD CENTER, a hawker center located near Singapore’s Central Business District. It is home to more than one hundred hawker stalls, all arranged in rows flanking the common seating area. There is no air-conditioning; on a typical weekday afternoon the heat is palpable. But this does not deter the local faithful: dozens of professionals, dressed in shirts and dresses, stand in line for their favorite stall. One immediately knows which stalls offer the best food by the length of the queue. Many, among them locals and tourists, are willing to sacrifice forty-five minutes in line for a plate of Tian Tian Hainanese Chicken Rice. This stands in stark contrast to Heng Heng Hainanese Chicken Rice, whose owner is perched against the counter waiting for those who are deterred by the queue to patronize his stall. The *auntie* of the latter is rather curt, having been up since dawn preparing to feed the hundreds of hungry faithful for the day. In exchange for a mere \$3.50, one receives a generous portion of poached chicken on oily rice served on an olive-green plate.¹ You also get a plain broth (in which the chicken was cooked), a dark, sweet soy sauce, and the famed chili sauce without which the dish is incomplete. There is no pretension about Singapore’s national dish. It is efficient and rustic in both preparation and presentation. The first bite in and one knows that the hype is justified. The chicken is tender, albeit not the tastiest—Wee Nam Kee’s and Boon Tong Kee’s chicken is sweeter. But the fluffy rice is infused with the fragrant aromas of garlic, ginger and *pandan*.² It is simply sublime when

mixed with the rich dark sauce, the sweet and savory combining wonderfully. The chili, with its combination of sweet, sour, and tangy, lifts the palate and accentuates the chicken. It is little wonder why Gordon Ramsay bowed to the maestro behind this humble plate of rice.³

Singapore is all about food. To document the nation’s history without attending to the single most-loved and talked-about aspect of life is to completely miss the point. Why do Singaporeans eat the food that they do? What does it mean to them? Food is never just about physiological sustenance, nor choice about environmental availability (Trubek 2014). Hawker food in Singapore is a trope for multiculturalism and a tool for nation building, yet a demarcating line for racial inclusion and exclusion. Its origins have colonial and immigrant influences, yet it is heralded as authentic and local. Hawker food reveals the aspirations and anxieties of this unique cosmopolitan, multicultural city-state.

Food has always occupied a central position in the history and heritage of Singapore. Yet, despite the many conversations surrounding the topic, there has been a significant lacuna in written accounts of the island’s history. Recognizing this, the National Environment Agency of Singapore commissioned Lily Kong (2007) to produce an illustrated history of hawker centers. Lai (2010) later told a story of migration and cultural diversity through the evolving nature of the *kopitiam*.⁴ In recent

years, a wave of scholarship has begun to recognize the centrality of food in Singapore's history. Nicole Tarulevicz was the first to write a book-length history of Singapore food through a cultural lens. In *Eating Her Curries and Kway* (2013), Tarulevicz tells the story of Singapore since colonial times through the many meanings that food has for the society. For a fledgling nation, food is at once a metaphor for multiculturalism, a building block to the Singaporean identity, and a means of evoking nostalgia. Jean Duruz and Gaik Cheng Khoo, in *Eating Together* (2014), conceptualize food, space, and identity in Malaysia and Singapore, devoting a chapter to hawker centers. I build on this historiography by reworking what food reveals about multiculturalism, authenticity, and distinction through the hawker center. By attending to a specific site where local food is most distinctly prepared and consumed, we can ask specific questions about what is eaten and what is meant.

The story of the hawker center is told in four parts. We start with the itinerant pushcarts, where street hawking took its first form. Hawking was initially seen as a nuisance that had to be tolerated and later regulated by both the colonial administration and newly independent government. The relocation of hawkers to state-built food centers marks the imposition of order and hygiene onto a squalid industry. The street peddlers that were once an administrative problem were refashioned as a potent symbol of Singapore's heritage. Secondly, as hawker food became more cherished, it was utilized both as a trope to articulate multiculturalism and as a means to unify a racially diverse people in a common public space. The influx of foreign workers from the mid-1980s presented new tensions that shed light on the cultural power which food has to articulate inclusion and exclusion. Thirdly, the markers of authenticity, namely geographical specificity, historical traditions, and artisanal expertise, are interrogated through case studies of the infamous *laksa* wars and the birth of Ya Kun Kaya Toast. Finally, a breed of connoisseurs who grew up in a cosmopolitan nation-state emerged in the 1990s. Embracing the low culture of hawker food, local foodies impute new cultural meanings to hawker food that embody the tension between distinction and democracy.

Refashioning Hawkers: Origins and Transformations

THE HAWKER PROBLEM

The era under British colonial rule in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the influx of immigrants from China, India, and the Malay Archipelago to the Malayan peninsula. As a result, the population in Singapore ballooned from 11,500 in 1825 to 91,000 in 1864. The Chinese population in the 1800s was almost entirely the result of immigration, most

arriving aboard fleets of junks (Cameron 1865). The majority found work in the ports, plantations, and mines, plying their trade in manual labor. Cheap and convenient meals were thus in huge demand. Itinerant hawkers met this need, providing an affordable lunch in the form of "economical rice" and *tuk tuk* noodles.⁵ The food would often be consumed on the go, although some hawkers provided seating in the form of makeshift wooden tables and chairs. The food of the itinerant hawker was mostly carbohydrate based, with a modest portion of meat and vegetables accompanying the rice or noodles. Food was fuel, and there was no time for fancy preparations and presentations. Even in today's affluent Singapore, some of these traits persist in hawker food. However, much of the food that is consumed in today's hawker center looks different from that of the early twentieth century. Take chicken rice, for example: in the 1850s, Hainanese immigrants ate plain rice with boiled chicken, some variant of *Wengcheng* chicken common in Hainan (Vasu 2014). According to the National Museum of Singapore Food Gallery, the first hawker to sell chicken rice had rolled the rice into balls wrapped in banana leaves in the 1920s (Chou 2014).

Itinerant hawkers, the predecessor of the modern hawker center and *kopitiam*, were not always celebrated. The upsurge in the numbers of hawkers posed a problem for the colonial administration, as they crowded the streets and polluted the sidewalks (Henderson 2000).⁶ The economic depression saw increasing numbers of immigrants pouring in, many of whom were drawn to the profession for its low startup cost and lack of prerequisites. The "hawker problem" was soon getting out of hand. The *Straits Times* published a photograph of Trengganu Street "completely blocked to traffic by street hawkers and the buying public" (Unknown 1950a). In addition, improper sanitation among hawkers was linked to the numerous cholera and typhoid outbreaks in the early twentieth century (Ghani 2011). Hawkers were unsightly, unhygienic, and unlawful. In 1950, the Singapore Hawker Inquiry Commission convened at Victoria Memorial Hall (Unknown 1950b). Despite numerous statements of intent and attempted regulation, the number of hawkers continued to surge, reaching as many as 26,000 according to some estimates (Henderson 2000).

Following the independence of Singapore in 1965, hawkers would face stringent regulation under the new government. In 1968 a nationwide census was taken, allocating licenses to 18,000 hawkers and outlawing the rest (Kong 2007). Two years later, when the Housing Development Board (HDB) began its national housing projects, centralized hawker centers were constructed along with the housing projects in a systematized fashion (Kong 2007: 31; Lai 2010). The first modern hawker center was built in 1971, and since its inception it has been



FIGURE 1: *Lau Pa Sat (Telok Ayer Market)*, where locals and tourists can feast on hawker delights in a colonial setting at any time.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BENJAMIN AW © 2014.

closely tied to the HDB residential estates, or “heartlands.” In 1974, the government clamped down on illegal hawking aggressively, raiding popular hangouts and impounding hawkers’ vehicles (Ghani 2011). This brought the swift and comprehensive demise of itinerant hawking in Singapore. The transplantation of hawkers to fixed quarters radically changed some aspects of food. Chicken rice balls effectively disappeared, since plates replaced the banana leaves in the hawker center (Vasu 2014). Numerous hawkers were forced out of business, their specialty dishes disappearing from the public scene.

REPACKAGED: A NATIONAL ICON

The pliability of culinary artifacts over half a century is demonstrated clearly in the instance of chicken rice. Once used as a symbol of solidarity with the Communist regime in China at the time of Singapore’s independence (and termed “Communist chicken”) (Chou 2014), chicken rice is now appropriated as a beloved national symbol of a metropolis. Hawkers themselves also underwent a transformation in the period of the 1970 to the 1990s. From squalid food vendors that needed “cleaning up,” hawkers would be repackaged by the government as guardians of a cornerstone of Singapore heritage. An exemplar of this is Orchard Road Carpark Hawker Center. Affectionately known as Glutton’s Square, itinerant hawkers used to push their mobile wooden carts into the car park opposite Specialists’ Shopping Center, where they sold dinner and supper. At its peak, as many as eighty stalls were selling *hokkien mee*, *char kway teow*, *bak chor mee*, *satay*, and *ork luak* to hundreds of ravenous customers. Concerned with hygiene and

overcrowding issues, the government shut down the operation in 1978, relocating the vendors to the now-famous Newton Food Circus and Cuppage food center (RemSG 2012). Domesticated in a centralized space, hawkers were much easier to regulate. Shortly after, the National Environment Agency (NEA) implemented a hygiene-grading standard that the hawkers had to pass in order to maintain their license. The issues that irked the government—uncleanliness and overcrowding—were thus resolved by the hawker center. By the 1990s, the attitude toward hawkers had changed. Newton Food Circus started to be featured as a tourist attraction, where one could “taste the nation.”

Another notable case is Lau Pa Sat (literally “old market”), formerly Telok Ayer Market. It was Singapore’s first wet market (i.e., a market that sells fresh meat and produce), built in 1825, iconic for its Victorian architectural and characteristic octagonal shape. In 1973, the government converted the wet market into a hawker center, and relocated many hawkers there. Since then it has become a popular eating destination for office workers. In the same year, the National Heritage Board declared Lau Pa Sat a national monument for its historic and cultural value.⁷ Following its closure and subsequent reopening in 1989, La Pa Sat has since become a top tourist attraction. Its lively atmosphere, where hawker food and drinks are on sale twenty-four hours a day, romanticizes an imagined past. The renegotiation of the identity of the hawker center, from regulatory space to national icon, is not purely a top-down phenomenon. The popularity of hawker food to the population is an important factor in the history of its identity. To a large degree, the government actually adapted to its citizenry’s obsession with food to co-opt it in the making of a national identity.

Hawker food now invariably features in Singapore's public image. In a rapidly changing metropolis, where the cityscape is constantly evolving, hawker food maintains a much-cherished link to a cuisine purportedly stable through time. Although this resistance to change is largely illusory, hawker food remains hugely successful in allaying the anxieties of nostalgia in a fast changing metropolis.

For a nation with fifty years of history, hawker food is the cornerstone for building a sense of belonging. In 2007, the Overseas Singapore Unit organized the inaugural Singapore Day in New York City. A carnival-styled event designed to recreate the familiar sight, sounds, and (most importantly) tastes of home, Singapore Day aims to "help overseas Singaporeans stay connected with their country" (Wong 2008). Needless to say, hawker food is the main highlight of the event. The bulk of the budget is allocated to flying hawkers and setting up stalls to cook up the most delectable local fare.⁸ Undoubtedly, the food is what attracts most of the people, and substantial effort is put into ensuring carnival-goers get the real deal. The chefs helming Balestier Bak Kut Teh commence the cooking the day before the event, boiling the stock overnight to tenderize the pork ribs and draw out its flavor.⁹ The steaming bowl of pork rib soup, served with dough fritters, will no doubt be the star attraction of the carnival. That is testament to the transformation of hawkers, from an administrative problem to national treasure.

Making of an Identity: Food and Multiculturalism

Food has always occupied a pivotal position in the construction of the Singaporean identity. Although the tiny island state is replete with national symbols (flags, songs, national service, monuments, and festivals), few evoke the emotive appeal that food does (Chou 2014). Especially among locals, a bowl of *laksa* is much more poignant than a bouquet of Vanda "Miss Joaqium" in evoking sentimentalities of homeliness. Specifically hawker food has featured heavily in both national and individual accounts of the making of the Singapore self.

MULTICULTURAL GLUE

Locals popularly view the hawker center as a site of nation building and community bonding. Simon Tay conceives of the hawker center as an "informal and relaxed atmosphere, to meet, mingle and interact" (quoted in Kong 2007: 89), and Lily Kong (2007: 19) celebrates it as a place where "all social types gather—CEO and office cleaner, grandpa and junior, Chinese, Malay, Indian and others." This idea has such currency in Singapore that political candidates make it a point to advertise

their presence there to emphasize their connection to the man on the street.

The issue of race is deeply entangled with the construction of a national identity. Singapore was defined as a constitutionally multiracial state when it gained independence in 1965. The state "racializes" people into one of four categories: Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Others (CMIO). These categories were established with somewhat greater specificity in colonial times: In the mid-nineteenth century the British administration divided the population of Malaya into Aborigines, Malays, Chinese, Natives of India, and Other Asiatics (Cameron 1865). In 2014, the 3.3 million citizens comprised 76% Chinese, 15% Malay, 7% Indian, and 2% designated "Others" (National Population and Talent Division 2014: 15).

Singapore's pre-independence history, as part of Malaya until 1965, was one fraught with racial tensions (Chua 2003).¹⁰ As part of the colonial legacy, the population was racially segregated into residential enclaves. Race was thus the divisive factor, demarcating potential fault lines in the newly independent state. Fearing that physical segregation would foment distrust among racial communities, the government intentionally set out to reverse the physical separation of racial groups. The newly minted Housing Development Board thus relocated much of the population from racial enclaves to newly constructed high-rise estates. Multiracialism was imposed on the population in the form of racial quotas. The modern hawker center was created at this period, with a two-fold purpose. First, it consolidated all the hawkers into a centralized space that could be easily regulated. Second, it was to serve as a public social space to facilitate racial integration. The hawker center can thus be seen as one of the many sites deliberately constructed to reverse racial segregation (Sin 2002).¹¹

Food, in the popular imagination, is central to the creation of a national identity. In Singapore, the discourse is centered on multiculturalism: where each race retains its own distinctive features while coexisting harmoniously. Tarulevicz (2013) rightly notes an acute self-awareness of race as a cultural identifier in Singapore, as well as the prevalence of food as symbols of aspired multiculturalism. A common example is *rojak* ("mixture" in Malay): a popular dish comprising dough fritters, fried bean curd, cucumber, pineapple, and bean sprouts all tossed in a rich black shrimp paste dressing and topped with crushed peanuts. *Rojak* is a microcosm of multiculturalism: each ingredient retains its distinct taste and texture, but all are united by a common factor. The cucumbers, pineapples, and fritters do not simply coexist; they represent unity in diversity.

Another potent food symbol is *kueh lapis*, which has two main variants. The first usually has nine multicolored layers and is made of tapioca flour, *pandan* leaves, and coconut

milk. Each layer, although different in color, tastes identical. The differences are merely visual, not substantive. The second version has about eighteen layers, and is a common treat during the Lunar New Year festival. Infused with nutmeg, cinnamon, and brandy or rum, the soft cake is sweet, fragrant, and buttery. Making *kueh lapis* requires painstakingly alternating between layering and steaming, a reminder of the hard work needed to construct a multicultural, multiethnic society.¹² This multicultural harmony cannot be taken for granted, but must be purposefully and delicately crafted. In Singapore, ethnic crossovers in food—both in consumption and cuisine—are taken to be success stories of multiculturalism. Duruz and Khoo (2014) have rightly observed that in popular imagination, histories of preservation, borrowing, and innovation in food preparation framed by exchanges across ethnic borders produce distinctly “Singaporean” dishes and flavors. Food is celebrated as “an edible intersection of Singapore’s multiculturary cultures” (ibid., 96). Yet the state is diligent in emphasizing that this racial harmony cannot be taken for granted and was the result of many years of vigilance and tolerance.

INVISIBLE DIVISIONS

But food can unite people as much as it also can effectuate divisions and demarcate boundaries between people. Singapore’s hawker food is no exception. Kong (2007) describes hawker centers as inclusive and unifying: a space where all walks of life congregate in search of a meal. But such aspirations map haphazardly onto the realities in hawker centers. Although the hawker center is open to anyone, both physically and socially, its inclusivity has its limits. For people who do not fit neatly inside the CMIO rubric, the barriers to entry are not physical or economic but cultural. Since the mid-1980s, in the era of post-colonial economic globalization, there has been a steady influx of foreign workers (Lai 2010).¹³ The majority of foreign workers find work in the construction sector (from India and Bangladesh) or as domestic helpers (from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Myanmar) (National Population and Talent Division 2014: 5). People from these ethnic backgrounds, while comprising a sizeable proportion of the island’s population, do not find food in hawker centers that vaguely resembles home.

Hawker food, used powerfully as a means of defining the national identity, simultaneously includes and excludes (Bourdieu 1984: 56). While Indian and Malay food are commonplace, the representation of Filipino and Bangladeshi food is virtually nonexistent in hawker centers. Despite the increasing popularity of Filipino cuisine materializing in the form of restaurants along Neil Road and Cuppage

Road¹⁴ since the 1990s, the hawker center has resisted the appeals of *halo-halo* and *longsilog* save the occasional stall at Lau Pa Sat.¹⁵ The ubiquity of the toiling foreigner is concomitant with the invisibility of his ethnic cuisine (Ray 2014: 225). This is partly a result of licensing regulations, since only Singapore citizens and permanent residents can apply for a hawker’s license.¹⁶ As Filipinos and Bangladeshis are immigrants on temporary work permits, they are naturally excluded from the hawking occupation. Their ethnic food is thus lacking in representation within hawker centers. Hawker centers primarily cater to the local, predominantly Chinese, Malay, and Indian population. The invisibility of such cuisines in hawker centers, purportedly representative of Singapore’s racial inclusivity, attests to the barriers of integration for foreign workers. This was not always the case. The itinerant hawker of the early twentieth century was almost invariably an immigrant. Hainanese people, despite being relative latecomers and a small minority, soon dominated the food scene in the forms of the *kopitiam* and pushcarts (Lai 2010). The appropriation of hawker centers as sites of nation building, regulated by national agencies, has left immigrants with fewer options to express and assert themselves via culinary means.

In contrast, since the 1990s, stalls offering “Western grills,” pizza, pasta, and muffins started gaining currency in hawker centers.¹⁷ The attendant emergence of “Western” hawker stalls can be read not just as a response to a demand for such cuisines, but also as a selective integration of certain ethnicities into the population. Stalls offering purportedly Western food are frequently run by the Hainanese, many of whom worked as chefs for the British during the colonial era (Cheong 2014). But the gradual and certain rise of stalls experimenting with American, Italian, and even French can be seen as appealing to the prestige of such cuisines among locals. The selectivity of which cultures are deemed prestigious enough to be represented in hawker centers actually rehearses many racial hierarchies that are popularly renounced.

What we eat, and indeed what is sold in hawker centers, can tell us a great deal about ourselves. In this instance, food is used to demarcate boundaries between class and racial divisions (Leong-Salobir 2011). Further, what is sold at hawker centers can be used as a cultural barometer of the prestige and integration of cuisines. While recognizing that consumer multiculturalism is itself inadequate in combating racism and inequality (Buettner 2012: 143–74), representation of a cuisine in the hawker center speaks of first steps with respect to the inclusion of a culture in the wider Singapore society.¹⁸

Defining Authenticity: *Laksa Wars* and Kaya Toast

Char kway teow is one of the most beloved hawker delights in the nation. Flat rice noodles, cooked in batches, are fried with lard over a high heat in a large wok. Eggs, bean sprouts, cockles, and *lup cheong* (Chinese sausage) are thrown in and tossed in a thick, sweet, black sauce. This dish is a notorious calorie bomb, high in fat and with virtually no fiber. None of its fans are under any delusion: it is a guilty indulgence, worth every ounce of cholesterol and fat.

How did *char kway teow* become one of the most emblematic hawker foods? Perhaps it epitomizes the general culinary aesthetic that defines hawker food—oily, savory, and carbohydrate-heavy. Tarulevicz (2013) rightly identifies this humble noodle dish as belonging to the lower classes that worked in manual labor. These traits are by no means self-evidently desirable, and indeed recent health trends have contested the trade-offs inherent in such foods. The presentation of *char kway teow* also has an unspoken convention: it looks nonchalantly and hurriedly plated. Locals will no doubt protest and exclaim how mouth-watering a plate of Hill Street *char kway teow* looks, but the visual aesthetic is one of unadorned charm. Priscilla Ferguson (2014: 238) observes the primacy of spectacle in French food, where the display of food rivals its taste. Hawker food is the polar opposite, where display is completely subverted by taste. Or more accurately, an impression that the noodles were hurriedly tossed onto the plate connotes a rustic allure.

The defining features of hawker food—traits that delineate authenticity—can be reified to a particular culinary aesthetic described above, a remnant of its humble origins. But that is not the whole story. Drawing on sociological treatments of choice and distinction, Johnston and Baumann (2014: 70) identify several markers by which authenticity is socially constructed and articulated. Authenticity becomes a powerful means by which worthy and unworthy food is demarcated, beyond a seemingly obvious sense of quality. Hawkers and consumers often unwittingly employ such markers in marketing authenticity. Characteristics beyond the corporeal—namely tradition, geography, and simplicity—are crucial to authenticity.

LAKSA WARS

The world of hawker foods is no stranger to brands. Virtually every stall is unique, like Tian Tian Hainanese Chicken Rice, Zhen Zhen Porridge, and Seng Hiang Bak Chor Mee. Even more common in stall names is a specific locale. The geographical specificity of a stall speaks to the traceability in its



FIGURE 2: *Char kway teow*, served over banana leaf and accompanied with the popular sugar cane juice.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON TSE © 2011.

historical origins, denoting a sense of longevity and tradition that is associated with authenticity. The “laksa wars,” as it turns out, were a fight over the coveted brand of Katong Laksa.

In 1963, Ng Juat Swee and Ng Chwee Seng started selling laksa at Katong district stall no. 49. The stall, initially named Marine Parade Laksa, steadily gained a loyal clientele due to the aromatic and savory curry broth.¹⁹ In 1998, the Ng brothers moved out when their landlady, Mrs. Teo, wanted to raise the rent. The stall was taken over by Nancy Lim, and renamed 328 Katong Laksa. This remains the most recognizable brand name for laksa in Singapore to date. In a short period of time three other stalls selling the same dish emerged on the same street, while the Ng brothers restarted their business. In all, there were five laksa stalls within the fifty-meter stretch along East Coast Road. Competition was tough, and after a newspaper review by food consultant Violet Oon in 1999 ranked the stalls, the one rated the worst reported huge losses in business.

Stall no. 47 closed down soon thereafter. As of today, three of the stalls in Katong remain, while a number of franchise outlets have opened across the island. The appeal of the brand suffered as the franchise stalls tried to operate in food courts, and the venture ceased in 2003 (Chee 2006).

Interestingly, all the stalls lay claim to the coveted branding of the original Katong Laksa. In this case, because all of the stalls emerged from the same street, geographical specificity is crucial to authenticity. But the street means more than just a traceable lineage to the “first” emergence of laksa. Duruz (2011) suggests that perhaps laksa has escaped its Nyonya origins and assumed a new place-bound identity, emblematic to Katong as a space of eclectic borrowings.

The advent of Prima Taste gives us an interesting point of comparison to Katong Laksa. Prima Taste is an international food manufacturing firm, famous for its ready-to-cook meal sauce packs. Like television dinners, Prima Taste’s selling point is convenience, except it claims to equip the consumer with the spice blends to recreate “authentic tastes and flavors.” The quality of the laksa stock that one makes using a Prima Taste spice packet is not significantly inferior to that of 328 Katong Laksa. The only substantive difference is that Katong Laksa utilizes fresh coconut milk (Seetoh 2005). Nonetheless, few would consider that to be a comparable experience. Most view it as a temporary “fix” when living overseas, far from the real deal. Part of the explanation is that eating is not merely about the material substance of food, but also about the setting in which the act of consumption is performed. In fact, Katong Laksa might simply be the taste of the place (Duruz 2011: 611). When the narratives and history of a street become so intertwined with a dish, geography becomes integral to consumption. Laksa must be eaten in Katong, and when in Katong, one must eat laksa.

YA KUN KAYA TOAST

Johnston and Baumann (2014: 76) argue that “food is deemed authentic when it is seen to emerge fresh from a simple way of life, a simple mode of presentation, and maintains its straightforwardness all the way to the plate.” This kind of simplicity, they note, belies the complex and labor-intensive nature of the production of such foods. The handmade noodles, slow-roasted coffee, and home-baked bread all exemplify the genre of food that is celebrated as authentic. This brand of authenticity combines several features that are proving to be increasingly desirable. First, the devotion to purity and integrity in food production is distinguished from negative associations of industrial processes. Second, the human element puts a face to the food, tracing a definite origin. The food is trustworthy because the maker is identifiable. A case in point is Ya Kun

Kaya Toast, one of Singapore’s most successful homegrown brands, which capitalizes on both of these in its marketing strategy.

Fifteen-year-old Loi Ah Kun arrived in Singapore by boat from Hainan Island, China. In 1944, he started a small coffee stall business at Telok Ayer Basin, serving coffee, tea, soft-boiled eggs, and charcoal-grilled toast. Together with his wife, Ah Kun perfected a unique homemade *kaya* (a *pandan*-flavored coconut and egg jam) spread that was divine with toast. As soon as he could, Ah Kun began roasting his own coffee beans, honing his skills in pursuit of the smoothest and thickest cup of *kopi-o*.²⁰ After more than fifteen years at Telok Ayer Basin, the stall was relocated to *Lau Pa Sat*, where it took on the name Ya Kun Coffeestall.²¹

Its origins—of a hardworking man from humble origins serving homemade toast and coffee—is crucial to the Ya Kun Kaya Toast brand. Ah Koon is the embodiment of the romanticized past (Loi 2012):

To Ah Koon, service involved sacrifices. Although home was a cubicle at 15-B Cross Street which was just across the road, he chose to spend his nights sleeping on the hard wooden countertop at the stall in order to be on time to serve his first customers at 5 am. When these customers barked their orders, he would, with a chalk in hand, scribble their preferences furiously on the same countertop he had slept on.

The contempt for modern industrial processes are not masked, articulated by bold slogans like “Screw the French Press, We’ve got the Sock” and “How would you like your eggs? Wet and Runny or Runny and Wet? The Same Menu since 1944.” The longevity of traditional methods speaks to the quality of the product, and the brand asserts that it has stood the test of time because it has remained true to its origins.

Interestingly, the quintessential Singapore breakfast of *kaya* toast and soft-boiled eggs finds its roots in a British classic: toast and eggs (Lai 2010). *Kaya*, according to some accounts, was born out of swapping the coconut milk and *pandan* for milk and vanilla pods from Portuguese egg jam (Duruz and Khoo 2014: 46).²² The hybridity of its true origins, of a British-Hainanese descent, is noticeably missing in Ya Kun’s advertising campaign. Such reifications of “ethnically pure” foods belie the culinary exchange and mutual influence of British and Singaporean cuisines (Leong-Salobir 2011; Cameron 1865).²³ Ya Kun Kaya Toast has also adapted to changing tastes in its clientele. Today, it offers trendy inventions alongside traditional favorites, like Cheezy French Toast with Kaya, Green Tea Frostyz, Ice Cream Toast, and Sweet and Sour Chicken Sandwich.

The qualities of authenticity are thus more complex than a particular culinary aesthetic or a lineage of particular geographical or historical origins. What constitutes hawker



FIGURE 3: Ya Kun Kaya Toast's signature posters, protesting the industrial food process.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON TSE © 2011

food has never been fixed, and remains in a state of flux. The emergence of “Western food” in hawker centers, as well as the reinvention of traditional fare (think ultra-adventurous creations like durian and cheese *prata*), has stretched hawker foods to new horizons.²⁴

Connoisseurship: Foodies and Gurus

Ruth Reichl (2007) observes that “steaks get bigger, the food comes faster, and the seats become more comfortable” if you are recognized as the *New York Times* food critic. Going undercover in the world of fine dining in the Big Apple, Reichl laments that from the reception to the check, diners are being constantly judged and their performance drastically influences the dining experience they receive. This is in stark contrast to hawker centers, which are unashamedly “low culture.” In a hawker center, ladies in dresses sit in a communal space, adjacent to a table of elderly men in singlets (i.e., sleeveless undershirts) and shorts. The realm of hawker food presents a curious case of connoisseurship, in which the upper class is not regarded as having a privileged sense of taste. The “foodies” of Singapore shun snobbishness while trying to assert distinction, presenting tensions with the democratic ideal of hawker food.

Bourdieu (1984) contends that taste is culturally constructed, yet also internalized and thus naturalized. In any act of consumption, especially in eating, taste is related to social class, and aesthetic preferences perpetuate class distinctions. Johnston and Baumann (2014: 55) observe a distinct genre of connoisseurs, termed “foodies,” who consciously differentiate

themselves from the gourmets who specialize in highbrow cuisines. Among such foodies, nonelite and authentic food is highly prized. But as the previous section has argued, authenticity is often imputed and in flux. Local food critics adeptly present themselves as island-trotting food enthusiasts, with authority primarily linked to experience instead of a superior palate.

It is well known in Singapore that the people who know where to find the best hawker food are the taxi drivers. They combine an intimate familiarity with the island’s geography and an unpretentious search for good eats. For many years they have been hawker food’s unofficial connoisseurs. Experience is what counts, not social class. The ones who have sampled a wide variety of places claim the right to determine what is authentic and worthy. The affordability of hawker food means that connoisseurship becomes relatively inclusive, in that anyone who aspires to be a foodie can potentially be one. In other words, the foodie is self-made.

Perhaps the most famous foodie is K. F. Seetoh, entrepreneur and photojournalist, who founded Makansutra. A play on the Malay word *makan* (meaning “to eat”) and a particular Sanskrit textbook, Makansutra has been rating hawker food since 1998. Its claim to authority is founded on experience: Seetoh has sampled and ranked more than 700 stalls covering the entire range of hawker offerings across the island. While this is only a small selection of the 15,000 stalls across Singapore (Yeoh 2014), the three chopsticks rating (accompanied with the label “Die Die Must Try”)²⁵ from Makansutra is coveted by hawkers and recognized by locals. Makansutra has seen huge success

since releasing its inaugural guidebook in 1998 and television travelogue series in 2001 (Makansutra 2013).

Another authoritative foodie is Dr. Leslie Tay, the man behind the award-winning food blog, *ieatishootipost.sg*. Tay is a family doctor by day, and an avowed foodie for life. A television series and three books later, Dr. Tay is now regarded as one of the foremost authorities on Singapore food.²⁶ His claim to expertise is that he “has spent almost a decade roaming around Singapore in search of the best hawker food.”

Seetoh and Tay are entrepreneurial foodies, who are part of a cohort who in the late twentieth century distinguished themselves through social media and television as authorities on local food. Food critics of gourmet food, such as Reichl, review restaurants to make sure people do not waste their money in fancy restaurants that fail to live up to certain standards. But in hawker centers, where a meal typically costs less than four dollars, instead calories and the opportunity cost of a good meal are at stake. *Ieatishootipost.sg*'s motto is “never waste your calories on yucky food!” Similar to food critics, foodies position themselves as aids to the public by sampling the good and weeding out the bad.

Yet distinction is peculiarly democratic in Singapore. Foodies are circumspect about implying their taste buds are any more discerning than the average Singaporean, despite that being the essence of distinction. Food reviews constantly reference the popularity among discerning locals:

Situated within the central-east area and along Crawford Lane, lies a humble but famous pork noodle stall. All ingredients are freshly prepared for [Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle's] loyal customers daily. Reasonably priced, you get springy noodles, pork slices, minced pork, wonton, pork balls, slides of pork liver, crisp-dried fish and soup. It is spicy, sour, sharp and yet porky at the same time. For at least 60 years, their pork noodles had received favourable public attention from the media and of course Makansutra. WARNING: Be prepared for at least 30 minutes wait at peak hours. (Makansutra review of Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle, 2013)

Here, Makansutra devotes little attention to an actual description of the taste and texture of the noodles. That Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle is “famous” and that loyal customers wait in a half-hour-long queue are vindication enough of its quality. *Ieatishootipost.sg*, to determine the best *bak chor mee* in Singapore, chose to consult local “netizens” via an online poll. Based solely on the nominations, Tay decidedly “declared that the Best Bak Chor Mee crown belongs to Hill Street Tai Hua Bak Chor Mee.” In the post, Tay equates popularity as synonymous with quality:

We were supposed to nominate the top ten Bak Chor Mee in order to start voting. . . . There were a few that were mentioned twice but there was one runaway favourite with 12 nominations which was Hill Street

Tai Hua Bak Chor Mee at Crawford Lane, the next nominee with 4 nominations was 132 Mee Poh Tah. So there really isn't any need to vote as we have a very clear winner. I think it also goes to show that there are quite a lot of popular Bak Chor Mee stalls in Singapore and they are all more or less the same standard such that aside from Tai Hua, no other stalls really stood out. (*ieatishootipost.sg*, April 4, 2011)


The food critic in Singapore seldom goes against the wisdom of the masses. His job is to publicize the stalls that have already passed the democratic test of the people, often evidenced by the length of the queue. This presents a different dynamic from the class valence argued by Bourdieu, where the connoisseur monopolizes the authoritative palate. In hawker food, the hierarchy is overturned. The critics perpetuate the tastes of the people, not vice versa. This is indicative of a community that resists institutional constructions of authority, subverting the opinions of celebrity critics vis-à-vis that of the general population.

This article has provided a brief sketch of the variegated landscape of Singapore hawker food. Hailed as the unofficial national treasure, hawker food represents a fecund site of exploring the anxieties and peculiarities of the nation-state. The history of hawker food reminds Singaporeans that the most beloved foods were first pedestrian subsistence for immigrants before they became a trope for multiculturalism or an icon of cosmopolitanism.

Food can bridge ethnic and cultural barriers, but it can also perpetuate racial distinctions and hierarchies. Domestic workers feature prominently in foodways across Singapore homes, but are conspicuously missing from hawker centers. In colonial times, the British tried to spatially distance themselves from the “dirty and untrustworthy” worker, but their reliance on the latter for food meant a notable failure in segregation (Leong-Salobir 2011: 174). Today, with an educated and ambitious new generation aspiring toward white-collar occupations, many are anxious about the continuation of the hawker tradition. Increasingly, immigrants are starting to helm the woks and pans that hold the soul of the nation, bringing hawker food back full circle.

The notions of authenticity and connoisseurship take on unique local valences in the hawker centers, which are by no means universal or self-evident. Appadurai (1986: 25) defines authenticity as a standard that “measures the degree to which something is more or less what it *ought* to be” and is a criterion apt to “emerge just after its subject matter has been significantly transformed.” Accordingly, ideals of authenticity only acquire meaning after hawker food has morphed noticeably from its origins. This entails that the food we eat today is different from the past, even though tradition and nostalgia are key markers of authenticity. With time, what is authentic—or

more profoundly, what authenticity is—will continue to morph and transmute.

In 2016, the *Michelin Guide* released the inaugural Singapore edition, awarding Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle and Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice & Noodle a prized Michelin star each. Singaporeans were starkly divided on the results; the queues multiplied for the two stalls while many denounced the French guide for an inadequate understanding and coverage of hawker food (Seetoh 2016). It is unsurprising that local foodies are holding their ground against the global brand synonymous with connoisseurship. Only time will tell, but for now Singaporeans are taking Michelin's hawker guide with a pinch of salt. 

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NOTES

1. The rice is technically called *you fan*, which means oily rice. The rice that accompanies most chicken rice dishes is cooked with margarine or butter, chicken fat, chicken stock, garlic, and ginger.
2. *Pandanus amaryllifolius* is a common tropical plant, a cousin of the screw pine leaf. It is widely used throughout Southeast Asian cooking to flavor rice, confectionaries, and bread.
3. In 2013, SingTel organized The Hawker Heroes Challenge, held at Newton Food Center. Gordon Ramsay competed with three of the top hawkers in Singapore, who were chosen by popular vote by Singaporeans: Jumbo Seafood Restaurant (Chili Crab), Tian Tian (Hainanese Chicken Rice), and 328 Katong Laksa. Ramsay was given two days to learn how to cook these local favorites from the masters themselves, after which a thousand guests would vote between Ramsay and the Hawker Heroes based on a blind taste test. Ramsay lost by six percent of the popular vote, although he managed to edge out the chef of Jumbo Seafood Restaurant. That event cemented Singaporean pride in their hawkers, two of whom triumphed against the celebrity chef.
4. *Kopitiam* is literally “coffee shop” in the Hokkien dialect. *Kopitiam*s are typically privately owned, with the stalls leased out to independent vendors who prepare a variety of cooked food. This is in contrast to hawker centers, which are owned by government statutory boards.
5. Economical rice, the term arising from it being an economical option, is still hugely popular in hawker centers today. The Chinese run most of these stalls, which offer an impressive variety of precooked condiments to go with white rice. *Tuk tuk* noodles are somewhat rare in Singapore today.
6. In 1931, it was estimated that nearly half of the ten thousand hawkers on the streets of the Colony of Singapore were unlicensed.
7. Lau Pa Sat remains the only food center in Singapore to be recognized as a national monument.
8. This year's Singapore Day will be held in Shanghai, and the tentative lineup already promises at least fifteen hawkers. I personally was present at the 2014 London event, where I spent much of the time queuing for chicken rice, *char kway teow*, *bak kut the*, and carrot cake.
9. *Bak kut teh* (literally “meat bone tea”) is a peppery herbal soup made from simmering pork ribs and other spices. “Teh” refers to the Chinese tea that accompanies the soup to wash down the oil and fat from the pork ribs. This dish was popular among Chinese coolies in the nineteenth century.
10. The merger between Singapore and Malaya, then understood to be a self-evident economic necessity, proved to be difficult for the Malay-dominated peninsular Malaya led by Tengku Abdul Raman and the largely Chinese leadership of the People's Action Party (PAP). The merger fell through in two years without violence. The history of separation is popularly rendered in Singapore as being “kicked out” of Malaysia. Although Singapore has been very intentional in avoiding the making of national identity along racial lines, racial tensions resulting in riots and divisions have always been a source of anxiety.
11. A well-known example of governmental intervention to combat the onset of racial enclaves is the imposition of racial quotas in public housing projects funded by the Housing Development Board since 1989. Many contested that this was in fact a political maneuver to disperse minority races throughout constituencies to maximize chances of the incumbent government's reelection, as well as the success of the policy. Regardless, the result is the creation of entities that facilitate multiracial occupation of a physical communal space.
12. Its original symbolism, particularly outside of Singapore, is that of promotion and progress, thereby granting good fortune with its consumption over the Lunar New Year. Symbolism in food, whether in its proximity in pronunciation with positive words in Mandarin or its aesthetics, is particular potent among the Chinese people.
13. As of 2014, 26 percent of the total population of Singapore, or 1.6 million people, consists of nonresidents.
14. Gerry's Grill and 7,107 Flavours are two of the most highly rated Filipino restaurants in Singapore, located near the Central Business District.
15. This is an iconic hawker center in Singapore, introduced in *Repackaged: A National Icon*. Tapa King and Mang Kiko's Lechon are the two Filipino stalls out of the fifty-four stalls as of 2014.
16. Further, the National Environment Agency also specifies some additional requirements for certain vendors. For example, some stall vacancies might be stipulated for only halal food or Indian food.
17. Two very popular stalls that have received critical acclaim by local foodies for their grilled chicken chop are Western Barbeque at Old Airport Road Hawker Center and Kallang Western Barbeque at Bedok Hawker Center. The chicken chop is served with French fries, baked beans, cucumber, and sometimes a soft roll. Typical offerings are Mixed Grill, Sirloin Steak, Fish and Chips, and Sausage and Eggs to name a few.
18. Buettner makes the point that despite widespread consumption of “Indian” food across Britain, many diners remain ignorant and intolerant toward the South Asian population, having gained little meaningful awareness or social interaction from such experiences. This is applicable but not completely true in the case of hawker centers, which are by nature a shared public space. The conscious selection of hawker stalls from the late 1960s to the 1980s reflects the range of accepted cultures that form the multi-ethnic Singapore population. The later inclusion of Western food into hawker centers mirrors the influx of European expatriates in the 1980s, making up the “Other” in the CIMO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, or Others) model.

19. Laksa in Singapore is a coconut curry soup, served with thick rice noodles and garnished with cockles and fishcake. In Katong laksa, the noodles are normally cut up into smaller pieces so that the entire dish can be eaten with a spoon, without chopsticks or a fork. It is distinctly different from *assam laksa*, commonly served in Malaysia, a sour fish-based soup made from sour mangosteens.

20. Local slang for black coffee, without milk but with sugar. There is an entire vernacular for ordering coffee in its various forms in Singapore, ranging from *kopi kosong* (coffee without milk or sugar), *kopi siew dai* (coffee with condensed milk and sugar), *kopi si* (coffee with evaporated milk and sugar), *kopi peng* (coffee with condensed milk, sugar, and ice), and so on.

21. “Ya Kun” is simply the Mandarin transliteration of “Ah Koon.”

22. This substitution was done based on thrift and availability, resulting in a uniquely Eurasian jam.

23. In fact, in the mid-1800s the British in Singapore were having curry and rice routinely for breakfast. Cameron (1865) describes a typical European’s dinner in Singapore of an eclectic mix of roast beef and mutton, followed by curry and rice, and all manner of sambals, native pickles, and spices.

24. *Roti prata* is a flour-and-butter pancake that is tossed and handled with oil, and fried on a flat grill. It is usually cooked upon request and commonly served with a side of curry. It is traditionally a savory dish, plain and egg prata being the most popular. Roti prata has been a food that has seen much experimentation, leading to ice cream prata, chocolate prata, banana prata, and so on.

25. Makansutra ranks hawker stalls by giving them a rating with chopsticks as a unit. Two chopsticks denotes “Excellent,” Two and a half chopsticks “Don’t Try Regret la” (This is Singaporean slang: “If you don’t taste it you’d probably regret it”), and Three chopsticks “Die Die Must Try.” Ratings below two chopsticks are usually not given, typically because Makansutra only reviews stalls that are already well known for culinary excellence.

26. In 2013, Dr. Tay cohosted an eight-part television series, *8 Days Eat!*, which showcased the best of Singapore food embellished with nuggets of hawker history and secrets to discovering the deliciousness of Singapore food.

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