

Singaporean fusion without confusion

Singaporean cuisine is often underestimated as being merely multicultural street food, but Ruby Gao says there's more to it than crab and coconut milk.

Singaporean cuisine is a famous hybrid of multicultural influences, fusion without confusion and a passion for tradition. Young Singaporean chefs are reinterpreting street snacks sold by hawkers into fine dining fare.

For a long time, Singaporean cuisine has seemed comparatively tepid and obscure in Shanghai.

"I don't need to go to a Singaporean restaurant for a bite of Indian curry and Fujian-style fried noodles. Why not just choosing an Indian or Chinese restaurant and that will be much more authentic," says Faye Gu, a local who expresses many people's views of Singaporean food.

But Singaporean cooking is much more complicated than what Gu thinks, and it should not be stereotyped.

"I will order some fusion food in a Singaporean restaurant, especially those mixing Chinese and Malay. These are the true genius of Singaporean cuisine," says Du Caiqing, chef de cuisine at Hyatt on the Bund, who has worked as a guest chef at Grand Hyatt Singapore.

Fusion not confusion

"Singapore food is a summation of all the different cultures, including Chinese, Malay, Indian and Peranakan (Chinese/Malay). These all converge and results in a distinctive culinary culture that brings out the best of each cuisine's style and flair," says Wong Chin Yee, Singaporean executive sous chef at the Fairmont Singapore & Swissôtel The Stamford.

Fairmont Singapore is just above Raffles City, which collects many popular local brands, such as Grandma's Kitchen featuring Chinese-Malay home cooking and Ya Kun known for its kaya toast.

Some famous Singaporean dishes demonstrate the cultural hybrid. Chilli crab, known as Singapore's national dish, combines European, Chinese and Malay cuisines.

Mud crab is stir fried in semi-thick gravy made from soy sauce, tomato puree and Malay spices and served with Chinese *man tou* (steamed buns). Butter and beaten eggs are added to give the crab a buttery flavor and more textures.

Fish head curry, the head of red snapper stewed in a thick Indian curry, is an example of cooking Chinese ingredients in a classical Indian way.

Peranakan cuisine or Nyonya food is a major part of Singaporean cuisine. It refers to the cooking of the descendants of Chinese immigrants who settled in Singapore, Penang (Malaysia) and Indonesia. "This is the epitome of cultural integration," says chef Wong from the Fairmont Singapore.

Examples include laksa and otak otak. Laksa are rice noodles cooked with fried bean curd puff, shrimp, fish and coconut gravy. It's rich, creamy and spicy. Otat otak is fish mashed with chili paste, coconut milk, lemon grass and garlic, wrapped

City Garden

The newly opened restaurant is one of the hottest dining destinations because of good food and moderate prices. The menu includes nearly all classical dishes. Some of the foods, such as curry, are adapted to the Chinese palate and are milder and sweeter than what's typical in Singapore.

Ambience: Wooden blinds, white curtains, blue chairs, mosaic wall and tropical plants create a post-colonial Southeast Asian atmosphere. At the door stands a street sign showing directions for Chinatown and Orchard Road, two famous places in Singapore.

Pros: Great variety. Menu features modern dishes like coconut cheese cake.

Cons: Crowded and noisy. Service is not very efficient.

Recommended: Grilled pork neck; laksa, curried shrimp (milkier and milder for Chinese palates); mango juice.

Price: 70 yuan per person

Address: 303, 1350 Sichuan Rd N.
Tel: 6611-9777

Pulau Ketam

This is probably the first fine dining restaurant in the city that features Singaporean chili and pepper crab. Cofounder Vincent Liu hopes to create the Morton's of crab houses, referring to the famous Morton's steak house, a global chain. Crabs are imported. Singaporean chef Jason Lim insists on the authentic Singaporean way to prepare crab.

Ambience: A fusion of modern and traditional. Stainless steel ceiling lighting and Western-style table settings work with wooden screens bearing traditional Malay patterns and wooden blinds.

Pros: Crabs are freshly sourced from Indonesia and Sri Lanka, each weighing at least 1 kilogram. There are elegant private dining rooms with tatami mats accommodating eight to 10 people. These are suitable for business dinners. Service is friendly and efficient. Guests receive a complimentary drink and warm, moist towel. Some window seats offer a nice view of Xintiandi.

Cons: Prices are extremely high.

Recommended: Black pepper crab; deep-fried prawns coated with cereal; coconut juice; garlic-flavored noodles.

Price: 450 yuan per person

Address: 123 Xingye Rd
Tel: 5306-3706

in a banana leaf and grilled over the charcoal. It has a strong coconut aroma and spicy taste.

Kaya toast, the must-try Singapore breakfast food, is a Chinese adaptation of French toast. The fruit jam typically used to spread on toast is replaced by local jam kaya, a combination of coconut cream and pandan leaf.

These kinds of mix-and-match broaden the ingredients and spices, enriching the flavor and complementing the original cuisine.

Preserving the old taste

In addition to fusion foods, some dishes in Singapore originated elsewhere but have been adapted and elaborated upon in the island nation.

Bak kut teh, pork rib simmered in broth made from herbs and spices, has a light meaty flavor and strong herbal taste. The excellence of the dish is often used by gourmets and food critics as a standard for judging the quality and authenticity of a Singaporean restaurant. The dish

Dining in Shanghai

Shanghai has around 30 Singaporean restaurants, and the quality is uneven. We pick two of them that have a good reputation and many repeat customers.



▲ Curried shrimp at City Garden

▼ Black pepper crab at Pulau Ketam



dates back to the 19th century when Chinese dock workers on the Malay Peninsula at the cheap ribs cooked in herbs to boost their energy.

Hainan chicken rice includes a bowl of steamed rice (first fried in chicken fat, then cooked in chicken broth), a dish of steamed chicken, soy sauce and chili paste. Although the recipe originated in what is now China's Hainan Province hundreds of years ago, it wasn't well known until it was developed in Singapore.

"Singapore cuisine distinguishes it-

self through its preservation of age-old recipes. Everything — flavor, histories and stories — is passed down from one generation to another,” says chef Wong from the Fairmont Singapore.

Although Singaporean food is multicultural and diverse, there are common ingredients.

Seafood of all kinds is popular. Coconut milk is often used, whether in savory seafood dishes or sweet desserts. Pandan leaves are another favorite: sweet, floral, piney and citrusy.

Upscale street food

Singaporean cooking is often not considered part of fine dining because many snacks and dishes are made and sold on the street. The taste is excellent but the presentation is a little rough.

Over the past three years, some Western-trained Singaporean chefs are trying to change that, re-imagining and elevating the recipes for proper dining tables. Notable among them is Willin Low, founder and head chef of Wild Rocket, a fine dining restaurant in Singapore.

His creations are known as Mod Sin, for Modern Singaporean.

For example, chef Low deconstructs traditional chili crab and turns it into crab meat linguini with chili tomato cream.

He transforms otak otak into roast red snapper with otak otak sauce and baby sprouts. “Most of the dishes are inspired by Singapore flavors, hawker dishes or food I grew up with as a child,” the chef says.

Dining in Singapore

Only by visiting Singapore can visitors truly experience the beauty of the cuisine due to the fresh, quality ingredients and many talented chefs.

Shanghai Daily offers tips for a Singapore food trip.



Curried fish head at Kopi Tiam



Pork ribs coated with coffee sauce, a signature dish at No Signboard Seafood Restaurant. — Ruby Gao

Kopi Tiam

Kopi is Malay for coffee while *tiam* is Fujian dialect for shop.

The restaurant name refers to a traditional cafe in Southeast Asia serving street food and beverages. It's a place where diners can enjoy authentic taste in a nostalgic, air-conditioned atmosphere.

Ambience: There are wooden shelves lined with kettles, and a barrel containing colorful chopsticks.

Pros: It's a good stop for first-time visitors because the menu is diverse, including all signature Singaporean dishes, from laksa and curried fish head to *bak kuh teh*, or pork rib soup.

The restaurant is located in a five-star hotel so the staff are well-trained, speaking both Mandarin and English, and able to explain each authentic dish and its history.

Cons: Prices are comparatively higher than in some independent restaurants but still affordable.

Recommended: Curried fish head (served with Indian-style crispy flat bread); *bak kut teh* (lighter than the version sold on the street); Hainan chicken rice, *teh tarik* (hot Indian milk tea known as pulled tea made from black tea and condensed milk).

Price: 250-300 yuan per person

Address: 2/F, Swissôtel The Stamford, 2 Stamford Rd
Tel: (65) 6431-6156

No Signboard Seafood Restaurant

This is locals' first choice for chili and pepper crab due to the chef's insistence on the freshest ingredients. “No Signboard” refers to its origins as a street stall without a sign in a hawkers' center.

At that time it sold family recipe for white pepper crab. Now it's a modern restaurant featuring Singaporean seafood and other dishes with both Fujian and Cantonese influence.

Ambience: Streamlined furnishing, black leather chair and traditional Chinese home-style table settings create a modern and cozy experience.

Pros: All the seafood lives up to its reputation. Customers can request any style of preparation, including steaming, stir-frying and deep-frying. Waiters are fluent in both Mandarin and English. There's an outdoor dining area with a view of Marina Bay.

Cons: Service is friendly but not too efficient. Chili crab is sometimes sold out due to rigorous sourcing and limited volume.

Recommended: Chili crab, pork ribs coated with coffee sauce, deep-fried prawns coated with cereal, tofu stuffed with seafood and topped with minced meat, longan juice.

Price: Around 200 yuan per person

Address: The Esplanade, 8 Raffles Ave
Tel: (65) 6336-9959