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Don't give up on hawker centres

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WITHER the future of the Singapore hawker centre? Such was the burning question on everyone's minds at the two-day World Street Food Congress (WSFC) Dialogue 2015 which ended on Thursday.

The second edition of the WSFC was held in an open field on Tan Quee Lan Street, attracting 220 people for its Dialogue sessions, where delegates from all over the world came together to discuss the many aspects of street food, including its historical significance and how best to further its appeal. A food festival featuring street food from Singapore to South America and the US continues until Sunday.

The WSFC - which was first launched in 2013 to celebrate the street food culture of the world and to drive dialogue and action to preserve the world's food heritage - is organised by local food consultancy Makansutra. Delegates included social restaurateur Claus Meyer from Denmark, chef-entrepreneur Ian Kittichai from Thailand and Peter Lloyd, the executive chef of London's Spice Market restaurant.

Beyond the prepared speeches was the Dialogue/Hackathon - designed to give attendees a platform to have their ideas and suggestions heard on how to deal with pressing issues such as the dwindling number of hawkers as the old ones retire with no guarantee that the younger generation will take up the mantle, or even carve out new careers as hawkers.

The "uncool" factor is what stops many from being a hawker. As Charlyn Yap, founder of social enterprise Shiok Collective puts it, "It just isn't cool to Instagram a hawker centre meal - it's such a common feature that nobody thinks it's worth mentioning."

She has a simple, if untenable, solution to prod youngsters to cook: "Parents should stop cooking for their children. When you live at home, things come easier. If a good hot meal wasn't waiting for me at the end of a work day, I'd start making it myself, like I did when I was studying overseas. Hawker food would be better appreciated if people understood the effort involved in making it, and what better way to learn than doing it yourself?"

Catherine Ling of food blog Camemberu suggests giving young hawkers some notoriety to help garner interest in the industry. She says, "Get (young hawkers) recognised, make them rock stars!"

Another issue affecting the sustainability of hawker centres raised was that Singaporeans don't have a healthy appreciation for the heritage and sheer amount of effort that goes into making a dish the old-fashioned way instead of relying on mass production.

Douglas Ng, a 23-year-old hawker who operates the Fishball Story stall at the Golden Mile Hawker Centre on Beach Road, says: "There are a lot of obstacles for young hawkers like me. I'm a pioneer but I serve a traditional dish. We have to educate the consumers about appreciating and understanding the history, so we can preserve it."

Mr Ng goes to work at 4am to make all his fish balls, which contain pure fish meat and no flour, by hand.

Along with the rental (which can be as much as S\$25,000 per month in Marina Bay Sands' basement food court), Mr Ng points to the difficulty in finding younger labour and being unable to raise his prices for fear of losing customers.

He explains, "While ingredients are becoming more expensive, hawkers can't charge people more because it seems that they care more about the price of a dish than its actual quality. My staff are also quite elderly, because young people don't think it's cool to work in a hawker centre."

Bjorn Shen, 32, chef-owner of middle Eastern restaurant Artichoke, agrees that Singaporeans take local food for granted: "People are willing to pay S\$50 for a bowl of ramen and S\$12 for a plate of aglio olio, but complain about a S\$0.50 increase in the cost of a bowl of handmade fishball noodles."

It could be that there is a lack of awareness about how much effort it takes to be a hawker. Daren Teo, a culinary student at Temasek Polytechnic, suggests, "We should teach culinary students local cuisine instead of the current focus on French cuisine. Once the effort involved in making local food is understood, people will be willing to pay a higher price for it, and we can keep our street food culture alive."

Another question raised was about second-generation hawkers passing down their stall to third-generation ones. Paul Liew, 34, who has taken over his parents' seafood restaurant in Bukit Merah, Keng Eng Kee Seafood, says: "The only way continuity will happen is if there's love and passion involved. We'll get our kids to help out, and hopefully, they'll want to continue our legacy, but we don't want to force them into a business that requires long hours and a lot of hard work."

In order to sustain the hawker culture and lend a touch of respectability to the profession, Makansutra founder KF Seetoh believes that hawkers could also use some education in terms of how best to present their stalls and themselves. This would include knowing the history of their stall, the heritage behind their dishes, and how to strategically price their items based on where their stall is located. The classes could be made available online for free, or be subsidised by crowdfunding initiatives.

While there are no hard and fast solutions to the issues, dialogues like this help to keep the discussion going, in the hope that a long-term solution will eventually emerge as a natural progression.

The World Street Food Congress: Jamboree, featuring food from 24 street food vendors from around the world will be held at the open field on Tan Quee Lan Street, opposite Parco Bugis Junction. It will be held today from 4pm to 11pm and on Sat and Sun between 1pm and 11pm. Entry is free, and food prices start from S\$4.50. Please visit www.wsfcongress.com for further enquiries

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