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Title: Singapore hawker fare beyond the red dot

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SINGAPORE — Singaporean street food vendor fare has been making waves around the world. On Thursday (June 22), Michelin Singapore released the 2017 Bib Gourmand list, and 20 of the 38 that made the list were hawker stalls - of which three were new to the list.

Earlier this month, the annual Top 50 World Street Food Masters list was released at the World Street Food Congress in Manila and 14 were Singaporean. Hill Street Tai Wah Bak Chor Mee – already lauded with a Michelin star last year – clinched the number one spot.

Singaporean street food's rising popularity was first given a boost last year when the Michelin star was awarded to two Singaporean street food vendors (Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle at Crawford Lane and Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice and Noodle in Chinatown).

Chef and TV food host Anthony Bourdain, who was recently at the congress in Manila, believes that there is "intense interest" in Singaporean street food, and he revealed that the Bourdain Market – a permanent international street food market – he is opening in New York in 2019 will be modelled after Singapore's food centres.

Businesses are also lending their weight. For example, Tiger Beer launched Tiger Streets – a campaign pairing street food with its beer that saw Chan Hon Meng of Michelin-starred Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice and Noodle work on collaborative dishes with international Michelin starred restaurant chefs at events held in various cities from Auckland to New York and Kuala Lumpur.

Besides an opportunity to showcase Singapore's varied dining landscape to international markets, participation in such events is part of developing capabilities in local chefs, said Singapore Tourism Board's director for attractions, dining and retail, Ms Ranita Sundramoorthy.

"Beyond nurturing culinary talent, our participation in international events also gives local chefs a chance to showcase their craft to a wider audience, and in turn, brings Singaporean cuisine and our dining offerings to the forefront," she said.

“Exposure to an international playing field is key for our culinary talents to be aware of global trends in dining, and understand how it impacts Singaporean culinary traditions,” she added.

Overseas Experience

Creating Singapore street food and cuisine outside of the country can be challenging. Most hawkers who have done so faced challenges translating their dishes abroad due to a variety of reasons, from manpower shortage or lacking the exact type of key ingredients.

Vicky Quek of Kway Guan Huat Joo Chiat Popiah and Kueh Pie Tee, who has travelled to three destinations – Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Al Ain – for the Dubai Street Food Festival, as well as to the street food festival in Copenhagen said it was tough for her team of three, herself included. “It wasn’t easy loading and unloading all our food supplies from the coldroom and the refrigerated van, and when we arrived at the destination, it took us 12 hours for all the food prep and then we did the cooking late into the night.”

But it was not just the labour challenges the team had to deal with, adding that “we couldn’t find the same kind of turnip that we normally use and the suppliers had to source them from Mexico, which tasted slightly different – sweet with a tinge of bitterness. So we had to make some adjustments to re-create the right taste.”

Still, she said, the rewards outweigh the difficulties.

Quek said: “It was such a great sense of achievement to see Singaporeans who were living there thanking us profusely because they hadn’t tasted such authentic flavours for years.

“Beyond that, the local people in Dubai, for example, were very fascinated with the popiah skin-making demonstration. Customers kept returning for more with lots of positive feedback saying that our popiah was very delicious.”

Street food eateries Keng Eng Kee Seafood and HK Street Old Chun Kee were invited to participate in the World Street Food Congress in Manila, and both said that on returning home, the experience of travelling overseas to represent Singapore in international events added to their businesses’ credibility and reputation.

But it was the interaction and exchange of ideas with fellow hawkers internationally that was most invaluable, they said.

Chef Chan Chung You of HK Street Old Chun Kee shared: “Before I participated in the World Street Food Congress, I was like a frog stuck in a well, only aware of what is happening in Singapore.

“I was resistant to improving my cooking methods and recipes. It was good to meet many other cooks from around the world and see what they are doing,” he said, adding that “while it is important to be rooted in some aspects of cooking traditions, my experience made me realise the importance of continually improving on age-old recipes to try different tastes and add new flavours”.

But not everyone believes that change and evolution is necessarily the only way to go. Some feel affirmed in keeping with traditions and view sharing their food on the world stage as akin to sharing their culture and heritage.

Mohamed Hussin bin Mohamed Abdul Kader Malim of Alhambra Satay said: “When I saw the queues (at the 2016 Food Jamboree at the World Street Food Congress), I was rather surprised that so many people wanted to eat satay. My cooking skill is an asset because I can share my Malay culture with others through my food.”

Makansutra and World Street Food Congress founder K F Seetoh said sharing Singapore’s hawker food beyond our shores is telling the Singapore story to an international audience.

“Everyone has a story to tell of who they are and where they come from. That plate of rojak is a portal into someone’s world of food culture – who they are and where they come from. So it’s not just a platter of deliciousness you’re eating but a story on a plate, where you are introduced to a world of people, flavours and places,” Seetoh said.

Future of Singapore Street Food

Change is the constant in Singapore’s street food scene, said Seetoh. “It will always evolve, whatever you have now was trending and fusion many years ago... It’s about unearthing dying heritage foods and making them trendy again.”

But, Seetoh noted, the lack of continuity plaguing Singapore’s street food scene in the dearth of next generation hawkers is still pressing.

He hopes to “seed a new breed of hawkerpreneurs who will have a new spin on the food that they cook, whether it be heritage or progressive street food” with his dream of setting up a world street food academy – which dissects “street food culture craft into teachable nuggets”, including social media, stall design, demographics, pricing and plating. And in doing so, hopefully “(create) opportunities for hawkers to open stalls not just in Singapore”.

Bourdain shares the same sentiment on preserving the treasure of street food culture and sharing it on an international arena. He said: “To the extent that we can replicate (street food) and bring it to places like New York, Paris, San Francisco, Los Angeles, surely the world will be a better place.”