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Title: Singapore hawkers to feature in Anthony Bourdain's International Street Food Market in New York

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Author: Sharon Sim

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MANILA – Come 2019, a Singapore-style hawker centre – complete with the Republic's very best street vendors – is set to open in New York and will occupy a space the size of three football fields.

The permanent international street food market will house some of the best street food hawkers in the world curated and brought under one roof. Intermingling with the hawker stalls will be a butcher, fish monger, a fresh produce market and small business vendors from a worldwide selection selling anything from specialty dried goods to Iberico ham.

The man behind this mammoth market also lends his name to it: Anthony Bourdain, food and travel television host, chef and author. The Bourdain Market is his passion project in which he hopes to preserve the "sense of controlled chaos of a living, breathing, stinking market" that is relished in the authentic experience of street food markets around the world.

Speaking at the World Street Food Congress held in Manila, Bourdain shared that he has roped in long-time advocate of Singaporean hawker food and founder of Makansutra, K F Seetoh, to be the hawker curator and consultant to the project.

But would a market similar to Singapore-hawker centre work in New York? Bourdain is confident it would.

"Singapore solved the problem of street hawkers in an elegant way. (It) understood that these heritage street vendors - multi-generational operations of people who have been doing the same things very, very well over time - were businesses worth saving and that this was something to be treasured and preserved," he said.

"They moved them into enclosed spaces, imposed certain regulations to ensure safe food handling, and now you can go to this cleanest of city-states and line up with people rich and poor – all of whom value the \$2.95 plate of noodles just as much as something in a fancy restaurant. Why don't we have this in New York, or Europe or the rest of the world?"

“It’s shocking to me,” Bourdain added, “This is a question that myself and others like Seetoh have been asking ourselves and why we’ve been trying to put together this enormous project in New York that will finally bring together the things and, specifically the people, who do what they do so well.”

IN PROGRESS

While still in its gestational period – the building is in its pre-construction phase – the process of curating street hawkers is underway.

Drawing on his extensive experience and network of industry peers, Seetoh said he has so far shortlisted hawkers hailing from Vietnam and Philippines to China, India and, of course, Singapore. The curating of the hawkers from Europe, the Americas, Africa and all other parts of the globe has yet to start.

On the criteria for selecting the hawkers, Seetoh explained that for a stall to take up a unit in the Bourdain Market, they must be able to export and replicate their dishes well.

Seetoh said: “Some cannot, they can only use the leaves from their backyard. Given a new, slightly different ingredient that didn’t come from the market that they normally buy from, they can’t adapt.”

Speaking in English is not a necessary criterion, Seetoh said, but they should “have the operational finesse to know and carry out what having a hawker stall in a market like this in New York would expect from them”.

Bourdain did not reveal how many hawkers would be from Singapore, but would only say that the total number of stalls from around the world could range anywhere from 50 to 150.

When pressed for his wishlist of Singapore stalls, without naming any specific hawker, Bourdain said: “We need a very good char kway teow stall, chicken rice, laksa, nasi lemak and black pepper crab. Those are just the baseline before we even look further to other varieties.”

INTENSE INTEREST IN SINGAPORE FOOD

Bourdain believes there is “intense interest” in Singapore food in New York.

“It’s been covered a lot on television and written about and people have the general sense that it’s a wonderland of food and they are very curious about it,” he said.

Fellow speaker at the congress Greg Drescher, vice-president of strategic initiatives and industry leadership at the Culinary Institute of America shared similar views. “Singapore is known for its food and sheer variety of it. Americans travel there because they know that they can get everything in one place.”

And ever the champion for Singapore street food, Seetoh believes Singapore is “peerless” when it comes to the range of food offered.

“You go to a hawker centre, you can find French, Italian, Cambodian, Thai, Japanese food. Singapore is kind of in the lead in street food operations,” he said. “Internationally, people perceive us to be very well-grounded as far as what we know the potential of street food to be.”

SINGAPORE PRIDE

Paul Liew from Keng Eng Kee Seafood, one of the hawker stalls participating in the Congress shared: “As a Singaporean and someone from the industry, I am very proud that we can showcase the authentic, traditional tastes and experience that Singapore hawker food has to offer.

“I want to show that our food is so much more than just chicken rice and chilli crab. Bourdain’s involvement with Singapore cuisine through the market will bring even more people to understand our food and our culture,” he added.

Bourdain wants his international street market to be all about authenticity. The New York chef and TV host said: “With any passion project, you shouldn’t consider: what people want, what do they expect, is there a market in New York for char kway teow.

“I don’t really care. I love it. And I’m pretty sure that if New Yorkers are introduced to really good char kway teow, they will love it too. The determining factor to me is that if a Singaporean grandmother and her hipster grandson come to this market, that both them will immediately recognise it to be authentic.

“We’re talking a riotous collection of the real deal. I just want it to have the same tastes and flavours that I fell in love with.”