

The Ice-Ball Seller

For ten cents, it was a treat worth the wait

By Rosie Wee

A member of the baby boom generation, I grew up in Singapore in the 1950s and 60s before the invasion of the digital age, food courts and Integrated Resorts. As I recall my youth, flickering thoughts like a shifting montage of life's vignettes filter through. I remember...

... a sultry afternoon at Singapore Chinese Girls' School in April 1962. My friends and I had just finished a game of netball and we looked forward to the taste of a cold, dripping ice-ball to satiate our thirst. We didn't need to look far for we knew that our friendly Indian ice-ball seller would be at Emerald Hill Road, a short distance from the school. With flushed faces, damp hair and beads of sweat glistening on our foreheads, we scurried toward the ice-ball stall.

It was a mobile cart with a counter that served as a worktable. A canopy shaded the counter and under the canopy hung a huge kerosene lamp. On the counter stood jars of concentrated syrups, red beans, tiny cubes of gelatinous green and pink *agar agar*, and crystal-like *atap chee* from the seeds of the mangrove plant. Next to these was a big plastic tub that contained a mixture of pink syrup and tiny fruit seeds that looked like frogs' eggs. In the centre of the counter stood an improvised ice-ball scraper – a wooden stool with the centre spliced to hold the blade. Above the scraper the vendor placed a rectangular block of ice, and above the ice, a folded towel to protect his hand. Between the canopy and the worktable were several wooden tiers which held rows of bottled aerated water, tins of evaporated milk and glasses for the cold drinks he sold in addition to ice-balls. At the side of the counter, suspended by a hook, hung a pail of water used for washing up. The cart was a miniature mobile restaurant.

On seeing us approach, his face beamed with pleasure, revealing a set of milky white teeth, which stood out starkly against his gaunt and weather-beaten face. He was clad in the emblems of his trade: a worn-out singlet and a checked



sarong reaching a little above his knees. He wore flip-flops and the veins of his legs protruded like ropes on a homemade swing.

"Ah Miss, you want ice-balls yah?" was his usual way of greeting us.

Occasionally flies would hover around the stall. Undaunted, we waited eagerly for the ice-balls, finding it fascinating to watch how he dexterously moulded soft, fluffy slush into concrete-like ice-balls. With one hand on the towel that held the ice and the other below the blade, he rhythmically scraped the ice backward and forward, the slush falling like simulated snow into the seasoned red palm that was numbed and calloused by years of toil. When his hand was about half-filled, he shaped the slush into a semi-circular ball and filled the centre with teaspoons of red beans, *agar agar* pieces and *atap chee*. He then continued scraping until once again there was a mound of slush in his palm. He skilfully shaped this, added it to the first half and created a compact ice-ball. Next, he topped it with red, brown, and green concentrated syrups and creamy evaporated milk.

Intoxicated by the scent of evaporated milk mingled with bean paste, my friends and I waited in turn for him to mould each ice-ball. When at long last, he placed a colourful, cold, dripping ice-ball into my eager hands, I relished the luscious ice and savoured the oozing syrup. For 10 cents it was certainly a treat worth waiting for!

Editor's note: Serving as a member of the research team for the recent Singapore 1960 exhibition inspired Rosie Wee to reminisce about an aspect of her childhood.

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