

# A Taste of Katong's Past

Childhood memories of hawker fare down a narrow lane

By Cynthia Wee-Hoefer

I grew up in 'Big Drain' Lane in the Katong area on Singapore's East Coast. Our small community of terraced houses was graced by the daily procession of food hawkers who came down the lane on foot, by bicycle, pedal-cart and trishaw. These itinerant hawkers represented the many different cultures and identities that converged in Singapore after World War II.

Like the food sellers themselves, our neighbourhood represented several ethnic groups, religions and languages. But when it came to food, we were united in the good fortune of having a wealth of snacks and meals catered by these hard-working hawkers whose culinary skills enriched our own lives and cultures.

My sister and I counted at least 35 hawkers who plied our street. In the morning, the first to come was a Malay boy toting a basket of *nasi lemak* – rice cooked in coconut cream and paired with a dollop of spicy *sambal*, a sliver of fried egg, a fried fish and a slice of cucumber, all bundled in banana leaf.

Next came the Indian *putu mayam* man who cycled around with an aluminium steamer pot piled with tiers of palm-sized tangles of steamed rice-flour noodles. He spooned the noodles onto a sheet of paper and topped them with orange-tinted sugar and snowy grated coconut.

Around the same hour came the Teochew lady selling *soon kueh*, steamed rice dough parcels filled with

cooked bamboo shoots and shredded *jicama* topped with viscous black sauce and a trail of dark red chilli paste.

As children with limited pocket money, our introduction to hawker treats began with small tastes of *yong tau foo*, *mee goreng* or *rojak* shared by an older sister, aunt or parent. When we were a little older, still in our school uniforms at tea time, our first choice was the *roti bhai* (bread man) who had a throaty call of *roti, curry pup, biskut* as he cycled along the street with his box of creamy white semolina biscuits and rock-hard sweet rusks. The curry-puffs, layers of crisp flaky pastry around a curried potato filling, were prepared by the bread man's fellow Bengalis in a shophouse in Onan Road.

My hero-hawker was the *mee goreng* (noodle) seller, the handsome Kabir, a tall, slim Indian lad with a smile that revealed beautiful white teeth. We liked to raise ourselves onto the pedal of his pushcart as he fried the onions, cut up the *chye sim* (mustard greens)

and tossed the noodles in a cast-iron wok over a charcoal fire. One day Kabir announced that he was going to join the army. To this day, I have never eaten *mee goreng* as good as his.

During the durian season, the intriguing *kao luck* (chestnut seller) did double duty selling durian, pedalling through the quiet lane late at night, his bike lit by a naked carbide flame, beseeching customers with *lu lian, lu lian* (durian, durian) in his thick Hokkien accent. With his missing front teeth, an untidy moustache and slit eyes peering from thick spectacles held together by a rubber band, he was a caricature from a Chinese pantomime.

We paid the hawkers in cents, not dollars, good value for food cooked on the spot or delivered still warm from a kitchen whose provenance we never questioned. We didn't pay heed to hygiene and I don't remember anyone complaining of upset stomachs or food poisoning. Today, all food for public sale must be prepared in factory kitchens approved by the Environment Ministry and food handlers must have food-handling certification. Though I recognise the need for food safety, I lament the loss of the genuine and individualised flavours of the varied hawker foods I knew as a child.



Mee Goreng

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Cynthia Wee-Hoefer, a former journalist, enjoys writing about her childhood during the early years of Singapore's independence.

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Photos courtesy of the author