

The Changing Culinary Map Of Singapore

The Singapore Food Culture of today had evolved since its colonial days as a British Colony. Before it was founded by the British, it had a small population of about one thousand, with about 900 natives, 20-30 Malays and Chinese (1). Life then was simple with jungle produce, fishing, small scale trading and piracy being their main source of income and food. Singapore being a natural and strategic port attracted people from all over the world bringing with them their own cultures as well as culinary traditions. The Singapore Cuisine was derived from the intermingle and fusion of the various food cultures of the predecessors of the Modern Singapore. The present levels of political development among former British colonies have historical roots and have been shaped by the extent to which they were ruled either directly or indirectly during the colonial period (2). Singapore having been directly ruled by the British since its founding in 1819 had been strongly influenced by British cultures including culinary habits. Similarly the British, being the ruler of a vast expanse of colonies had absorbed natives' customs and culinary habits such that the British in different colonies had differing culinary habits depending on the composition of the colony's population. The vastness of the British properties was well illustrated as in Figure 1 (3). Initially started as a race for the Spice trade, the British ended up as the strongest empire of its times and had profound influences in the shaping of culinary cultures and habits throughout the world due to the cross influences of its various colonies and the direct influences of the British colonial masters whom the natives strive to emulate.

Fig 1

History of the Kopi Tiam

As the main naval base for British navy in the East, Singapore attracted a lot of migrants from China and India. Both of these countries have rich cultures in food. The culinary habits of both of these continental countries varies widely even within their own countries. India with its Kashmiri, Punjabi, Hyderabadi and the likes and China with its provincial cuisines from Teochew, Hainanese, Cantonese among others. The best of these were integrated and modified to suit the palates of the ruling British elites. A typical dinner for the British elite consisted of soup, fish, joints of Bengal mutton, Chinese capons, Kedah fowls, Sangora ducks, Yorkshire hams, Bombay ducks, salted turtle eggs and omelettes washing down with pale ale. These was followed followed by a dessert of macaroni puddings and custard with champagne and tropical fruits (4). The Chinese from the province of Hainan normally worked for the British during the colonial era and had learned the techniques of making coffee. The habit of drinking coffee was inherited from their colonial masters (5). Kopi Tiam was a dialect translation of coffee shops. Such Kopi Tiams were mainly owned by the Hainanese who had honed their skills by working for the British. Given that there is a lot of different dialect groups from China such as the Teochews, Cantonese, Hainanese, Hokkien, this particular trade was dominated by the Hainanese because of the special relationship between the

Hainanese and the British colonial masters. The Kopi Tiam is an local derivative of the Western cafes but with a lot of localizations built in to cater to the taste of the local population.

Fig 2 – Old Kopi Tiam (6)

The Kopi Tiam in Singapore had very humble origins as a small-scale economic enterprise which were normally found in early settlements of plantation, workplace, village, street or neighborhood in nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial Singapore. They sold cheap drinks, nibbles and meals to hungry male immigrant workers who came by the thousands from China, India and the Malay Archipelago (7). The initial Kopi Tiam had the owner selling the coffee and drinks while subletting some space to operators of food stalls to serve the typical customer who would be a young male migrant worker who came to Singapore in search of better job prospects. Such workers left their families in their home countries and were typically alone with no one to cook for them. Kopi Tiam slowly became a place for social gatherings, news and chats and for the occasional Chinese Chess game. The first generation of Kopi Tiams served the food requirements of the typically male migrant workers as well as provide them with a place for social gatherings. The typical coffee was served differently from the British and was essentially a hybridized version with sweet condensed milk and a piece of butter. Breakfast was kaya (egg jam) toast with half boiled eggs. Regular Hainanese meals such as chicken rice, curried chicken and beef noodles were also served for lunch and dinner.

Fig 3 – Standard Kopi Tiam Breakfast (8)

The Evolution of the Kopi Tiam

Colonial Singapore was undergoing radical social changes as more and more of its population made it their homes rather than consider Singapore as a transit point where they could work, earned enough money and go back home. Consequently there were gradual changes in the nature of Kopi Tiams too. The menus of the Kopi Tiams started to change as they catered to customers of other dialect groups and other races such as Malays and Indians. It was usual to see the typical Kopi Tiam owned by Hainanese but having its food stalls sublet to those of other dialect groups and races such that a wider variety of food was served to attract the growing and changing population who were eating out. Such adaptations of the Kopi Tiams were credited for the developing of the Kopi Tiam into a public institution and the strong public culture of eating and drinking by the 1950s (9). A drastic change occurred in the immediate years of independence and nation-building from the mid 1960s until the the 1980s. Massive urban renewal occurred with kampungs (villages) being resettled into Housing and Development Board (HDB) flats. The design and infrastructure of the urban settlements allow for Kopi Tiams to be situated together with the housing estates (10). The centralized positions of the new Kopi Tiams allowed it to reclaimed its role as the meeting place of the neighborhood population not just for food and drinks but also as local gathering places. The

concentration of the population in the housing estates meant brisk businesses for the Kopi Tiams who had evolved to serve the increasing density of population by having more stalls with wider variety of food. The government policy of encouraging women to join the work force meant a lot of families with two working parents and hence a lot of families eat outside due to their convenience and cheap prices. The traditional Kopi Tiams boomed serving all three meals, breakfast, lunch and dinner and even supper to cater to the needs of the nearby residents. The presence of a multiracial and multicultural population also meant that as time passed, some of their culinary cultures were hybridized and became truly Singaporean food. Some examples are Laksa, Fish Head Curry and MeeGoreng. The Fish Head Curry was made famous by Indian stall holders and was known as Indian Fish Head Curry and is widely available, though a typical Indian from India will not know of such a dish.

Fig 4 – Indian Fish Head Curry (11)

The Kopi Tiams had by then became part and parcel of the Singaporean's life. A necessary outlet for daily eating outs and social gatherings.

Modernization of the Kopi Tiams

The typical Singaporean eating out habits attracted overseas franchises such as Starbucks and McDonald's to setup shop in the heartlands of Singapore in direct competition with the Kopi Tiams who are losing out to these competitors in terms of the ambiance and services.

Fig 5 – Contemporary Kopi Tiam

Fig 5 shows a current Kopi Tiam which is normally open air with no frills and no thrills renovations. I remembered as a kid, going to to Kopi Tiam was a treat for a birthday or some special occasions. The contemporary Kopi Tiam on the other hand frequented by Singaporeans as a daily routine activity rather than for special occasions. It is not uncommon for me to have my three meals in the Kopi Tiam of my neighborhood. This is typical of most Singaporeans as well. The contemporary Kopi Tiam is under threat by a new generation of Kopi Tiams which will be called food courts to separate it from the present Kopi Tiams. Such food courts have the characteristics of the existing Kopi Tiams with air conditioning and comfortable ambiance that can match any fast food restaurants. There is however a main difference in the way such food courts are run. They are typically belonging to a franchise which may be operating many such food courts with central kitchen and having the advantages of economy of scale. Such food courts are increasingly overtaking the contemporary Kopi Tiams due to its similarity to the contemporary Kopi Tiams and the fact that they are air conditioned, having better ambiance and being competitive in prices as well. Singaporeans are taking to food courts as their new hangouts and for social gatherings and meetings as most such food courts have wireless Internet connectivity.

Fig 6 – Food Court (13)

The typical traditional Kopi Tiams are slowly giving way to the professionally managed new Kopi Tiams or food courts to become the main places for Singaporeans daily dining out food outlets. However, not all is lost for the traditional Kopi Tiams. Some of these Kopi Tiams still retain their traditional appearance but are increasing sophisticated in their branding taking for instance KillineyKopitiam and Ya Kun Kaya Toast. Such Kopi Tiams retained the nostalgic past of Singapore culinary habits but emphasizing on the traditional Hainanese food that were served in the past. They retained their appearance but differs according to how they are being run now. Most are franchising out their brands with relative success in Singapore and South East Asia. Ya Kun for instance is run by Ah Koon's children. But it is no longer a one-stall business, having grown to 30 outlets in Singapore, with a presence in six other Asian countries. To its credit, Ya Kun has tried to retain the traditional feel of its first coffee stall by furnishing its outlets, wherever possible, with charming old-school wooden stools and tables (14). Such modern managed traditional Kopi Tiams has in turn managed to attract not just the typical Singaporean eating out, but also geared towards the higher income segment of the population as well as tourists.

Conclusion

The humble cafe like shops first pioneered by the Hainanese cooks of the British Colonial masters served its culinary and social function in the evolving Singapore society by first serving migrant workers with no families to cook for them. Its principal functions evolved with the independence and growth of the Singapore state to serve the general heartlands population living in HDB estates providing families with cheap and affordable meals as well as social gathering locations. With the rapid modernization of Singapore, the humble Kopi Tiam had changed management styles to become the food courts that serve the general public as well as evolving into niche traditional and nostalgic Kopi Tiams for the more affluent Singaporeans as well as tourists. During the journal of the times, these Kopi Tiams are instrumental as a medium for the hybridization of food from British, Chinese, Indian as well as the other races that form Singapore to give Singapore its own brand of Singapore Food which carries with it the rich heritage of the culinary cultures from which it is evolved and yet having a separate identity to itself.