

# Southeast Asian Smorgasbord

## How to find the best street food in Singapore

**T**here are three great things to do in Singapore. Marvel at Lee Kuan Yew's strongly apolitical, chewing-gum free legacy; shop until they literally refuse to take your credit card; and eat. Southeast Asia's littlest city-state is positioned at the great culinary crossroads of Malaysian, Indonesian and Chinese influences, but friendly as well to Indian, Thai, Burmese, Khmer and, of course, British flavors. A stroll down any street will

turn up a delightful bevy of such tastes. But a strategic approach to the roadside offerings will ensure that you can sink your teeth into some of Asia's greatest flavors.

Singapore's street-side bounty is divided up into four major regions of the city: Chinatown, Little India, Arab Street and Lau Pa'sat, where it all comes together. And for real chew-and-stroll fare, nothing beats the vendors working the warren

of back street alleys hidden in the city's neighborhoods. Not only are Singapore's street-side offerings easy on the traveler's wallet, the confluence of flavors and influences will lead to new taste discoveries.

### Chinatown

We started our wandering light-of-food and heavy-of-small-change in a red and gold paper-festooned Chinatown. The crowd was dense with pre-New Year's



Boat Quay at night



shoppers, and vendors were out in full force to catch the day's hungriest scavengers. Happily we fell under the gaze of Mr. Ho, a 32 year old vendor working the busiest section of Smith Street. Mr. Ho sells the modestly termed King of Coconuts (SNG 2 each). He hacked open one of the larger ones for us, its icy juice a refreshing salve in the muggy, hot surrounds. The nifty straw-spoon gadget that accompanies the king coconut is perfect for scooping out the sweet white flesh inside.

Further down Smith Street, the shopping fully gives way to the business of eating, and Chinatown's food stalls line up one after the other. Several men of Zhong Zhong Fine Spice No. 19, a bright green stall outfitted with no less than five hot oil woks, struck us as heavy hitters. I sidled up to the crew as they were firing up their wares and came away with a Ngo Hiang prawn cracker (SNG 1), the specialty of the stall. In 2003, Zhong Zhong won the Green Book Best Food award for fine culinary skills in the arena of the prawn cracker, so we knew we were in good hands. The snack, measuring a full five inches in diameter, was packed with three large, deep fried prawns. Mr. Pei, the proprietor of the stall, admitted that the cracker had deep Malaysian roots. "But the flavor, the way we spice it, is Singaporean," he insisted. It was crisp, crunchy and came coupled with a small dish of sharp chili dipping sauce.

Clean, friendly and with prime outdoor seating, we were immediately drawn to Hjh Esah for selections from *halal*-oriented cuisines of Malaysia and Indonesia

### Little India

The manic Serangoon Road is the coursing center of Little India and, while remarkably busy at nearly any hour, it becomes most intensely packed on Sunday nights when seemingly the entire Indian population of Singapore comes out to buy groceries, drink tea and hang out. This is decidedly the best time to stroll the street for a plate of Indian flavors.

Serangoon Kaaraikudi Banana Leaf Restaurant features fine south Indian food and a good amount of street-side seating, important for taking in such a thrumming scene. The restaurant exclusively features pre-set meals, each arranged on a banana leaf. From our plastic street-side vista we had a chicken masala meal (SNG 4) that arrived paired with *sorka* and okra, each doused in milky, spiced sauces and countered with a small amount of *raiha*, a light vegetable slaw served in a cooling yogurt broth. The vegetarian biryani (SNG 3.50) featured a similarly flavored selection of *sorka* and stewed potato with a dollop of marinated eggplant. The curry fish head (SNG 5.50) stared us anxiously in the face, but proved most worthwhile for its fine broth.

### Arab Street

Along Arab Street, Southeast Asia's Muslim cultures come together in a confluence of colors, flavors and styles. In the shadow of the golden dome of Singapore's grand Sultan Mosque, a funky side street named Bussorah features a range of souvenir shops, coffee houses and cafes. Clean, friendly and with prime outdoor seating, we were immediately drawn to Hjh Esah for selections from the *halal*-oriented cuisines of Malaysia and Indonesia.

Speakers pointing to the street blasted a steady stream of Indonesian pop radio and we sat outside amid the profusion of Bahasa Malay and Indonesian languages being spoken. Frosty mugs of Hjh Esah's limejuice, made from many bitter, local *jeruk nipis* and perfectly sweetened with simple syrup, soon arrived to help us drink in the scene. Hjh Esah's menu sticks to the basics, including *sate*, *soto ayam*, *mee soto*, *nasi campur* and *roti john*, literally the regional answer to the sloppy joe. Our bowls of





### Roast duck, Singapore-style

soto ayam (SNG 4) or Indonesian style chicken soup, came stacked with pieces of sautéed chicken and a tangle of yellow noodles in a rich, oily broth spiked with young bean sprouts and spring onions.

After the meal we wandered deeper into Arab Street and stayed for many long hours in the stately Samar, a true Middle Eastern cafe in the classic sit-and-talk coffee-or-hookah tradition. The meaning of Samar, we were informed, is "to indulge oneself in entertaining conversation with good friends while enjoying great food." Indeed.

### Lau Pa'sat

The best of Singapore's flavorful range sings inside Lau Pa'sat. A former wet market built in the 19th century, Lau Pa'sat has been converted to showcase Singapore's famous flavors for both the white-collar set of the nearby office towers and passing tasters alike. The beautiful, wrought iron rooftop protects from sudden

downpours, while its breezy, open-air stylings render Lau Pa'sat a street food connoisseur's Mecca. Here the chili crab rubs shoulders with the Hainan chicken, alongside all manner of Indonesian mee. Lau Pa'sat is the cathedral of Singaporean street food.

We came in on the prowl for Singapore's classic take on Hainan chicken rice, but were initially stumped. The regal Whampoa Nanxiang Chicken Rice shop, the flagship for such things at Lau Pa'sat, apparently enjoys the odd Saturday off. Still, we happily compromised with a serving of you jifan (SNG 5) under the helm of Bao Luo Wan Xiang, and found that sometimes chicken rice travels by way of Hong Kong. Here was a bolder dish that, while lacking of the crisp refinement of Hainan's typical ginger edge, arrived much doused in a heavy Hong Kong sweetness that managed to cling endearingly to wedges of fragrant steamed chicken.

The dish came coupled with a white plastic bowl of mellow chicken stock dotted with spring onion. It seemed a benchmark moment, a departure from the Singaporean incarnation and reinterpreted with a sidestep to a third culinary school. Seated as we were beneath whirling 1940s fans, the fragrance of so many food stalls mingling under one delightfully, decidedly British roof, it was hard to find fault with Hainan's Hong Kong cousin. ■

**Chinatown:** Zhong Zhong Fine Spice, stall no.19, Smith St. (no phone)

**Little India:** Serangoon Kaarakudi Banana Leaf Restaurant, 127-131 Serangoon Road (65-6396 4646)

**Arab Street:** Hjh Esah, 62 Bussorah St. (65-9649 8241); Samar, 60 Kandahar St. (65-6398 0530) samar@singnet.com.sg

**Lau Pa'sat:** Bao Luo Wan Xiang, Street 8, Lau Pa'sat Market, 18 Raffles Quay



Possibly the finest prawn cracker in the world ...



A scent of the subcontinent: flower garlands in Little India