

In Singapore, eating is a national pastime. Now with a new wave of openings and international acclaim, has it become the greatest food destination in the world? *William Drew* reports on the Lion City's finest eateries

Photography by Rebecca Toh & Lauryn Ishak
Interviews by Delle Chan

1.3521° N, 103.8198° E

The Lion eats tonight



A



As the man in possession of what many describe as a dream job – overseeing The World’s 50 Best Restaurants list – I have a confession: until some five years ago, I had never set foot in Singapore. What’s more, I held some pretty uneducated views on the place. In particular, its food. Before my first visit, I foresaw a highly regimented, fantastically clean but somewhat anodyne society, where the restaurant scene was notable for shipping in high-profile “celebrity” chefs from the US and Europe. Throw in some chilli crab and the obligatory Singapore Sling at Raffles and that was Singapore done, right? How wrong can one food follower be? And, if my unthinking assumptions were off the mark back then, they are doubly so now. Because, in the past few years, Singapore has speedily progressed from one of Asia’s gastronomic standard-setters to sit proudly among the global elite of food cities.

So what is it that makes the Lion City challenge the likes of New York and Tokyo in the international dining stakes? In simplistic terms, it’s down to a near-unique combination of variety and quality. Where else can you find a scene so strong across the board, from premium dining through mid-level, down to street food, backed up by the recent and rapid development of its bar scene? Singapore currently boasts, among other attractions: three restaurants ranked in the top 10 of Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants; a burgeoning “Mod-Sin” (“modern Singaporean”) movement led by chefs such as LG Han and Willin Low; Asia’s top-rated bar, Manhattan; and its high-profile hawker centres, which now include the world’s first Michelin-starred street-food stalls. Evelyn Chen, a seasoned observer of her home city’s food-and-drink landscape and the chair of the voting panel for Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants, believes the upswing in fantastic restaurants sitting somewhere between the elite and hawker stalls is particularly telling. “While award-winning restaurants by imported pedigreed chefs like André Chiang of Restaurant André, Julien Royer of Odette and Ryan Clift of Tippling Club have put Singapore on the foodie radar, these names are increasingly being mentioned alongside restaurants by up-and-coming local chefs such as Willin Low, Jason Tan, LG Han and Malcolm Lee,” she says. “So, when food tourists come to Singapore, they are beginning to realise that the city has much more to offer than they imagined, be it Peranakan cuisine at Candlenut, Singapore-inflected French >



The inventor

Willin Low

“Modern Singaporean cuisine celebrates local flavours in a way that has never been done before, whether that’s by using a different ingredient, or a new cooking technique, but ultimately, the spirit of the original dish has to shine through.” So says Willin Low, describing the style of cooking also known as “Mod-Sin”, which the 45-year-old lawyer-turned-chef invented at his restaurant, Wild Rocket, in 2005. From Indian-inspired tandoori beef short-rib to pappardelle pasta in oxtail *rendang* (a Malay dish of coconut milk-stewed meat), Low’s imaginative creations straddle different cultures and pay homage to Singapore’s diverse culinary past. The style has since spread city-wide. “When we first created Mod-Sin, people said that it would just be another trend. I’m glad to say that, 12 years on, it has survived – it’s everywhere now.”



Clockwise from above Chicken rice is a Singapore staple; Michelin-starred street food at Hawker Chan; Pollen was set up by star British chef Jason Atherton; the bar at Long Chim



The matriarch

Violet Oon

Mention Peranakan food in Singapore and 68-year-old Violet Oon is invariably the name that comes to mind. The cooking doyenne helms three restaurants in the city, including National Kitchen (*right*), each celebrating the distinctive flavours of a celebrated cuisine formed during the 15th century as a result of intermarriages between Chinese immigrants and local Malays. Today, the rich, spicy and coconutty flavours of "Nonya" food are exemplified perfectly in Oon's hearty, home-style fare, from *ayam buah keluak* (chicken stew with mangrove tree nuts) to *sambal udang* (fried prawns in spicy sauce). "Peranakan food is one of the best in the world," she says. "The amount of effort and skill that goes into preparing each dish is really quite amazing. It's an exquisite cuisine, and I'm gratified that there is a place for it within Singapore's culinary landscape."





Clockwise from top Violet Oon's sambal udang; Marina Bay Sands hotel; local favourite chilli crab; and truffle-topped, sweet-onion purée at Corner House.



cooking at Corner House or modern Singaporean at Restaurant Labyrinth,” adds Chen. It is also significant that the likes of Chiang, who hails from Taiwan, acclaimed young French chef Royer and UK-born Clift all forged their estimable reputations in Singapore rather than their respective homelands.

So, what's behind Singapore's dramatic gastronomic rise? One of the keys may lie in its relatively short history: specifically the fact that it is not encumbered with a long culinary heritage or a tradition of food production, which means it has been free to blend, acquire, import and adjust myriad elements to create its own unique offering. Despite the growth in premium dining destinations, Singapore's culinary culture is founded firmly on street food. The dishes at the heart of that – chicken rice, *laksa* (spicy soup), *hokkien mee* (prawn noodles) and others – while specific to Singapore, are the happy result of immigration from Malaysia (of which the city-state was once part), Indonesia and, in particular, China.

Claude Bosi, the chef behind the recent revitalisation of Bibendum in London (exquisite food in one of the UK's most beautiful dining rooms), is a passionate advocate of Singaporean street food. “I was first invited to Singapore by [fellow chef] Jason Atherton when he opened a restaurant there, called Pollen, a few years ago and I fell in love with it. I've been back six times since. The respect for food, the time and effort and passion that people put into it, is unbelievable. In one city you have so many different styles of street food all sitting alongside each other in the hawker centres – each place specialising in just one dish, which they spend years perfecting.” Daniel Humm, chef-owner of the world's No 1-ranked restaurant, Eleven Madison Park in New York, visited Singapore for the first time a couple of years back. He fell in love with the legendary “chicken rice”, a dish where a whole chicken is poached, combined with rice cooked in the



chicken's fat, and served with dipping sauces. “It's super simple, but so delicious; we must have had it four or five times over the few days we were visiting, it was that good,” he says.

The Singaporeans effectively invented the collective street-food market. Its simple formula is to take the authenticity and flavour of on-the-street food and showcase it in a clean and customer-focused environment. That is where hawker centres differ from the literal street food of, say, Bangkok or Mumbai. While eating on the street has merits of accessibility (high speed, low price) and a certain raw-edge attraction, it can also involve fighting with traffic fumes, hordes of people and scoffing while standing up, not to mention potential cooking-safety issues.

“Singapore was first known as a street food paradise before it morphed in recent years into a vibrant food city where one could go from a S\$2 (US\$1.50) *roti prata* [fried flatbread] breakfast at a *kopitiam* [coffee shop] to a S\$5 chicken rice lunch in a hawker centre to a S\$500-a-pop dinner in restaurants >



The artist

Janice Wong

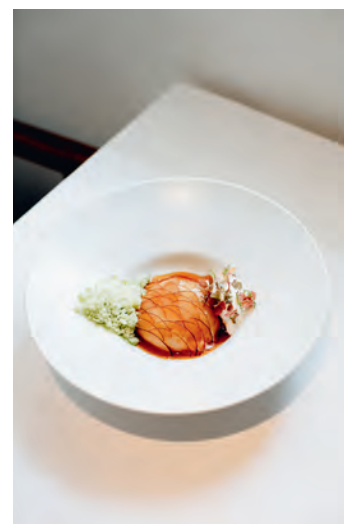
For Janice Wong, food is fundamentally art. At just 34 years old, the pastry chef is already renowned both for her avant-garde dessert creations and her whimsical food installations.

"I would say that my culinary philosophy is playful and progressive. When I first started out in 2007, I focused on serving up plated desserts that look like art pieces. But in 2011, I started experimenting with creating art from food." This complex interplay between studio and kitchen is clearly expressed at her eponymous restaurant set, fittingly, in the National Museum of Singapore, where the abstract interior is just as creative as the cooking. "Fortunately, it's possible to introduce progressive cuisine in a place like Singapore. As a young country, we aren't limited by a long culinary history. This enables us to set our own rules, which in turn creates a dynamic food scene."

The philosopher

André Chiang

For André Chiang, food goes beyond mere taste. Instead, it's imbued with deep personal meaning. The 41-year-old is renowned for his Octaphilosophy, a culinary worldview centred on eight principles: unique, pure, texture, memory, salt, south, artisan and terroir. Each dish served at his eponymous restaurant is tied to one of these concepts. Foie gras jelly topped with black truffle coulis embodies memory, for instance, as it's reminiscent of the first dish he remembers tasting. This distinctive brand of gastronomy hasn't gone unnoticed: earlier this year, Restaurant André was the only Singapore restaurant to rank on the World's 50 Best Restaurants 2017 (#14). "I think our win has helped put Singapore on the global map," he says. "Every day, people travel from all over the world to eat here – it's amazing."



1.3521° N, 103.8198° E
SINGAPORE



Clockwise from left Atlas is one of Singapore's hottest new bars; Restaurant André is in the top 10 of Asia's 50 Best Restaurants; as is Odette

"Whether you are eating at a hawker stand or a fine restaurant, everyone is so welcoming and proud to share their craft"





The Michelin man

Chan Hon Meng

Creator of the cheapest Michelin-starred meal in the world – a S\$3 plate of soya sauce chicken-rice – Malaysia-born chef Chan Hon Meng's success hasn't come without hard work. Arriving in Singapore in 1987, he spent over 20 years perfecting the recipe of his signature dish before opening his first hawker stall in 2009. In 2016, he became one of the first street-food chefs in the world to be awarded a Michelin star. "I never once expected it," he says. "But it was a turning point in my life." Today, queues of an hour or more are common at his stand in Chinatown. The secret to his success? Hard work, he shrugs. "Singapore's hawkers cook some of the best food in the world, so I believe that Michelin will recognise more of them in future. As long as they work wholeheartedly, they can reach world-class standards."



like Waku Ghin," says Evelyn Chen. "It's this diversity at different price points, plus the sheer range of cuisines on offer, that makes Singapore stand out from its peers." From Bosi's visit earlier this year, he cites his experience at Restaurant Labyrinth, led by local chef LG Han, as the most memorable. "He's taking inspiration from street food and reinventing it for a modern restaurant setting," he says. Like many other chefs and visiting gourmets, Bosi is also a big fan of Burnt Ends, the Teck Kim Road barbecue joint run by Australian chef Dave Pynt. Between them, Labyrinth and Burnt Ends epitomise the growing strength of the mid-range restaurant scene.

It's not just about restaurants, either. Once notable more for grandiose colonial-era bars in swanky hotels, of which there are many fine examples, the Singapore drinking scene is hitting new heights thanks to innovative speakeasies such as 28 HongKong Street and its new bar-restaurant sibling, Crackerjack. At the minimalist Operation Dagger there is not a big drinks brand name in sight; instead you will find shelves lined with apothecary-style tinted bottles, from which they fashion bewitchingly original cocktails. Meanwhile at Native on Amoy Street, owner-bartender Vijay Mudaliar sources all his ingredients from the surrounding region with many foraged. And if you're looking for big names, they don't come much bigger than Roman Foltán, formerly of London's Artesian, who launched Atlas earlier this year.

Daniel Humm was struck by the people's pride in their work. "I love how accessible everything is, but still with an incredible sense of hospitality. Whether you are eating at a hawker stand or a fine dining restaurant, everyone is so welcoming and proud to share their craft."

In 2013, the launch edition of the Asia's 50 Best Restaurants awards took place in Singapore, returning in 2014 and 2015. The annual event programmes – including chef masterclasses, workshops, collaborative dinners, culinary tours and the gala awards – certainly helped shine an international spotlight on the city's gastronomy. Evelyn Chen adds, "Hosting Asia's 50 Best gave the city the opportunity to showcase the intricacies of our dining landscape at every level. The annual awards has also been instrumental in unearthing some great restaurants that would otherwise have been 'hidden gems'." In 2016, Michelin joined the South-East Asian party with its debut *Singapore Guide* and the recent 2017 edition captured a food scene in even ruder health, with a number of standouts such as the seriously good European-Japanese fare of Waku Ghin. In a city made up of a tapestry of influences, a strong interest in food and drink provides a unifying cultural thread in Singapore. The combination of smart investment, a willingness to adapt and learn fast and a burgeoning self-confidence has turbo-boosted Singapore's ascension to its own star status. Of course, I always knew it had potential...



Etihad offers one
daily direct flight
from Abu Dhabi
to Singapore.
etihad.com