

#ASIA

# A Definitive Guide To The Best Restaurants, Hawker Stalls & Hole-In-The-Walls In Singapore

Local experts, chefs and bartenders weigh in.



ASIA

SINGAPORE

FOODANDBEVERAGE



By Jacqueline Parisi 20 JUNE 2019

Singapore is not a destination whose gastronomic culture can be characterized in a singular way, nor can it easily be equated to that of another, seemingly similar city. Instead it's peppered with nuance, as any great cultural hub is, with a cuisine that exists as a direct by-product of its geographical proximity to neighboring Asian countries—and to its immigrant past, and present.

GET STARTED

## Plan Your Trip

Destination



Ex. Tokyo



Get My Itinerary

DISCOVER

## Top Stories

- 1 A Guide To Cultural Etiquette In Singapore Beyond The Chewing Gum Ban
- 2 A Divisive But Delicious Question In Singapore: Chicken Rice Or Chili Crab?
- 3 Chef Ivan Brehm Of Singapore's Nouri On Soulful, Brainy Fusion (Not Confusion)
- 4 A Singapore Photo Tour, By Photographer Katie June Burton
- 5 The 10 Best Cocktail And Wine Bars In Singapore

EXPLORE MORE →

In preparation for the World's 50 Best Restaurant Awards, taking place on Tuesday, June 25 in Singapore, we set out to better understand the story behind this small island city-state off southern Malaysia—a story of contrasts that manage to coexist in perfect harmony.

We spoke to expats sitting side-by-side with locals, explored from Marina Bay Sands to Chinatown, met Michelin-starred chefs who eat at hawker stalls on their days off, and came to realize that—unlike cities like Paris, Rome or Tokyo that scream their culture out loud for the world to hear—Singapore whispers, quietly but confidently welcoming the curious, *the hungry*, to take a closer look.

## An Immigrant History That Spawned A Multi-Cultural Cuisine

When Dr. Kwan Lui first established At-Sunrice Global Chef Academy in 2001, the goal was to focus on Singaporean cuisine, namely herbs and spices. It was for leisurely cooks, not professional chefs. But when Johnson & Wales approached her to ask about a summer exchange program for culinary arts students, she began to rethink the format. Today, At-Sunrice is Singapore's premier professional cooking school, accepting 70% local students (all of whom receive a 70-90% government subsidy to attend) and 30% foreign students (primarily hailing from India, China and the United States).

But if you ask Lui, an international ethos is nothing new. From day one, Singapore has been what she calls "an entrepôt." Ships would arrive at the thriving ports with cargo to be exported and re-transported. Fast forward to the dawn of aviation and Singapore quickly developed a reputation as a critical hub due to its proximity to other Asian countries—a reputation that has stood the test of time. In fact, according to recent statistics published by Changi Airport, a staggering 62.2 million travelers pass through the airport every year.

It is precisely because of this immigrant legacy that Singapore's cuisine exists today as an amalgamation of three main ethnic groups: Chinese, Indian and Malay—three strands of a single, unique cultural thread best experienced at hawker stalls.

## Destinations

- Africa ▼
- Asia ▼
- Europe ▼
- Middle East ▼
- North America ▼
- Oceania ▼
- South America ▼

### GET INSPIRED

## Featured Journeyer



SUKHJEET BATT

Experiencing Japan  
With A 16-Month-Old



"We'd used Journy before for little, 2-3-day trips here and there, but this was a bigger trip with a lot more things we wanted to fit in and see and do—and it was so easy."

SEE A SAMPLE  
ITINERARY



### GET INSPIRED

## Travel by Interest



Food & Beverage

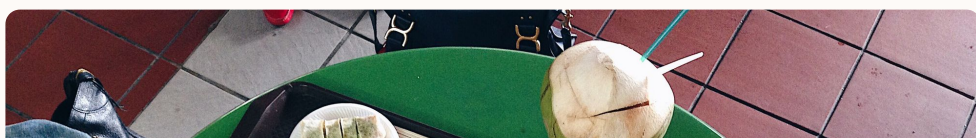
These open air food markets, which are typically found in city centers, developed in response to the immigration and rapid urbanization of the late 1800s up through the 1950s. They dish out generous portions of affordable food in an otherwise expensive city, and are a loud and proud point for Singaporeans. Just this past March, in fact, Singapore submitted its hawker culture to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.


Lui herself has a laundry list of hawker favorites, including **Alimah's Kitchen**, where she can almost always be found digging into soto ayam (a spicy Indonesian chicken soup), lontong (rice cakes wrapped inside banana leaves) and mee siam (thin Malaysian rice vermicelli noodles). But for the freshest Hokkien mee, a Fujian Chinese dish of egg and rice noodles stir-fried with egg, pork, prawns, squid, vegetables, sambal sauce and lime, Lui heads to **ABC Brickworks**, where she can top off her meal with a cup of coffee from **Hylam Street Old Coffee**.


**Maxwell Food Centre** is a go-to for Lui's nephew, Chris Wong—who was born in Singapore and now calls New York City home—as it is for Ivan Brehm, the Brazilian-born chef who helms the kitchen at **Nouri**, a one-Michelin-star restaurant that, appropriately enough, specializes in the concept of “crossroads cooking.” The standouts? Chicken rice, a must-try, signature dish of poached chicken, seasoned rice, chili sauce and cucumber garnishes, which arrived in Singapore along with immigrants from the Hainan province of southern China.

**READ MORE:** [A Divisive But Delicious Question In Singapore: Chicken Rice Or Chili Crab?](#)

Wong also tells us not to miss laksa (coconut noodles), cheese prata with curry (great for a late-night snack), mee goreng (Malay fried noodles), oyster omelettes and, of course chili crab (occasionally spelled as *chilli crab*)—one of Singapore's signature hawker dishes prepared by stir-frying crab meat in a thick, sweet and savory tomato and chili-based sauce that, despite its name, doesn't carry an *oppressive* level of heat.





 Family Friendly

 Outdoor Adventures

 Relaxation


 Wellness

 History, Art, & Architecture

 Hotels & Accommodations

 Shopping

 Local Culture

 Travel Hacks

GET STARTED

## Talk To Our Travel Experts For Free



### How can Journey help you?

We custom-build itineraries so you can jetset stress-free

Schedule a free call







The list goes on and on, and it's not uncommon to hear locals and expats alike debating over their favorite spots. But hawker stalls aren't the only pockets of diverse ethnic cuisine in Singapore. There's a handful of small, hole-in-the-wall eateries reflective of this multi-cultural ethos—like **Madras New Woodlands** and **Murugan**, two south Indian spots that Brehm recommends.

"At New Woodlands, you have to get the coconut appam," he tells us, "which is a fermented, coconut-based quick bread. It's fried in a shallow wok, and the bread ends up preserving the shape of the wok so it looks a bit like a bowl. Crispy on the outside, soft and chewy on the inside. And at Murugan, they have cakes made from dal and rice that are traditionally had for breakfast with a few chutneys. It's impossible to just have one. They're steamed to order and absolutely phenomenal."

Gypsy Gifford, one of Felder's top students who works as an Assistant Professor, Chef-Instructor at CIA Singapore, is a regular at **Xiao Ya Tou (XYT)**, a tiny, nondescript restaurant with local foods prepared by locals "but in a slightly cleaned-up way."

Their Hokkien mee, for example, deviates somewhat from the classic—it's made with an extra rich pork broth and served with large prawns and dumplings that Gifford praises as "perfectly balanced in acidity and heat"—but without losing the essence of the dish. Another favorite is the classic fried rice with green beans and pork, made with Brussels sprouts instead. It's just enough of a departure from tradition to justify the name Xiao Ya Tou, which translates to "little rebel," and their Instagram bio description, "naughty modern Asian cuisine."

"In Singapore, it feels like there's high-end cuisine and there's hawker street cuisine," Gifford explains, "but it's challenging to find those mid-level restaurants where you think YES this feels like home, and the service is great, and the food is consistent. And that's why I love the dining experience at XYT. It does that on so many levels, and I could go there again and again and again."



*XYT's Hokkien Mee | @xiaoyatou.sg*

But it's not just the food that draws Gifford in. The decor plays a part as well.

"Abby Lim [the owner, who also runs **Symmetry**] has fully committed to Chinese vintage kitsch," Gifford tells us, "so the whole thing is completely covered in Chinese paper umbrellas and old vintage drawings. It's great to see a place from a younger generation so committed to their funkiness."

---

Seeking out and preserving these pockets of diverse ethnic cuisine is exactly what Tony Boey has dedicated himself to in retirement. His blog, which was awarded the accolade of best food blog in Malaysia in 2013 and Singapore in 2014, shines the spotlight on less-well-known traditional restaurants under greater threat of disappearing than hawker stalls—due, Boey argues, to globalization altering the taste preferences of the younger generation as they eschew the greasiness and starch of heritage dishes. Plus, as it is, hawker stalls are more profitable than restaurants due to the relative simplicity of their dishes and the volume at which they're able to be produced.

"People from my generation—the baby boomers—are reaching retirement, and now we're trying to look for things we had when we were growing up."

and now we're trying to look for things we had when we were growing up," he explains. "And I'm looking for those that are still remaining, and very similar to what they were in the 50s. I want to look for the ordinary things which are fading away rather quickly."

When we spoke, Boey had just published a blog post on [Quan Xin Yuan Seafood Restaurant](#), one of the last bastions of traditional Hokkien mee in Singapore along with a few rarely found heritage dishes, including fried sweet potato cakes and braised pork with steamed buns.



*A spread of traditional dishes at Quan Xin Yuan / @triciatyler*

"Quan Xiang Yuan is the place to enjoy and learn about the cuisine that excites our forefathers," Boey writes. "It is the place to take Ah Kong [grandfather] and Ah Mah [grandmother], to reconnect with the flavours from their time. I am sure they will thank you for it."

## An Immigrant Present Shaping Singapore As A World-Class Dining Destination

Singapore as the world knows it today still boasts a vibrant expat community—a result, Wong tells us, as much of geographical factors as government decrees. With an encouraging immigration policy, Singapore developed a reputation as "the Switzerland of Asia," unapologetically open



to the world. The result? Chefs from every corner of the globe arriving to Singapore's kitchens and dining rooms in droves.

"There's quite a lot of chefs who have cooked in fantastic places outside of Singapore—either Europe, the United States or further east in Asia," explains Brehm, whose restaurant Nouri receives an even-keeled mix of about 60% locals and 40% expats and tourists. "And they all came at pretty much the same time to a place that values the work they're doing at the level they like to play in. These incredible people who would be of unbelievable talent anywhere else around the world, and they've all gathered in this little city. It's amazing."

But as Brehm can attest to, it has also made the mid-to-fine dining restaurant scene fiercely competitive. Unlike chefs in New York City or London, whom Brehm argues can better support competition when catering to an extensive demographic, chefs in Singapore are competing for each other's customers. It's a small island, and only until recently has the tradition of eating out taken hold. Chefs have no other choice but to be on top of their game.

"The diversity of expats in the chef community has made service and the quality of the offering second to none," says Brehm. "You have to keep reinventing yourself, refining your tasting menu concept, refining your service and thinking of hospitality through and through."

Singaporeans don't just accept diverse Western flavors; they embrace them—which, for Foster, is a result of the local community being so well-traveled. "The local palate is very open to trying new things," he explains. "Their food IQ [is] very high. Now with smaller sustainable hydroponic farms, and even sustainable fish farmers it will take the food culture to another level."

But this hospitable welcome of gastronomic diversity isn't the only draw for foreign chefs. Singaporeans welcome Western flavors as eagerly as Western chefs *want to learn* about Asian flavors.

Take Felder, for example, who found herself drawn to Asia from a very young age.

"I've always been very Asian focused," she explains, "and I can say that about all the [CIA] faculty that aren't Asian and are with us in Singapore. The minute I had enough money to travel, I began investigating the cuisines of this grand continent—starting with Japanese, then Vietnamese and Cambodian.

Gifford can relate. Growing up in a small agricultural town in southern California, Gifford's world view and awareness of different cuisines was limited. And yet, she found herself enraptured by Bob Barker as he gave away trips to Singapore on the classic TV show, *The Price Is Right*.

"It stuck in my mind as a magical place that people won trips to," she says, laughing.

Upon moving to New York to attend the CIA in the late 90s, Gifford found herself in an introductory "Cuisines of Asia" class, where the professor proceeded to open a jar of hot bean paste to pass around the room.

"It was THE MOST incredible thing I've ever smelled in my life," recounts Gifford, "and the professor went on to talk about the regions of China in the context of Cantonese or Peranakan cuisine and I thought OMG there's regions of China? Looking back, it was this classic scene of a small town girl getting awakened to cuisine."

When Gifford made a conscious decision later in life to live on every continent for a significant period of time in an effort to better understand the world from *within* different continents rather than quick jobs overseas or two-week rushed vacations, it made sense that she chose Asia—and specifically Singapore—first.

"This is my first stop on a long and drawn-out trip around the world, and I've been here since 2013."

---

The expat community has extended beyond the world of food to beverages as well. Dan Martin Gerick is the perfect example.

This Baltimore-born, New York City-bred entrepreneur is disrupting the beverage scene in Singapore with **BUSHWICK**, the first kombucha brewery in Southeast Asia producing everything from the requisite kombucha to turmeric elixirs, cold-brewed bulletproof coffee and kefir.

It started six years ago when Gerick moved to Singapore and, after drinking kombucha almost every day in the states, was unable to find it anywhere. So he set out to create it for himself—but not as an exact replica of the product most Americans are accustomed to.

“I make a shelf-stable kombucha that’s raw, pasteurized, carbonated in the bottle and low alcohol,” Gerick explains, “so there’s no refrigeration for two months, and then after it’s just to control the carbonation levels. We don’t water it down with fruit juices, and it’s brewed in a way that the acidity is balanced by fermentative and additional flavors. It’s actually more like a craft beer than kombucha.”

Gerick recently launched with Scoop Wholefoods, the largest organic and bulk natural food store in Asia, in addition to securing an exclusive deal with one of Singapore’s old-school chains, Salad Stop.

“It’s flying off the shelves,” he tells us. “Sales are skyrocketing.”

## Dining That Runs The Gamut

There’s a high-low ethos to Singapore’s dining scene that offers something for quite literally every traveler, on any budget... an apt reflection of the diverse population of locals and expats.

At the upper echelons of fine dining—on top of the city's signature Waku Ghin by Chef Tetsuya Wakuda—sits **Burnt Ends**, number 10 on the Asia’s 50 Best list for 2019 and the recipient of a Michelin star in 2018. It’s the quintessential upscale steakhouse that seems to come up again and again—with everyone from Foster to Brehm, Felder to Sasha Wijidessa (Singapore local, and a bartender at the award-winning cocktail bar, **Operation Dagger**) praising chef-owner Dave Pynt’s mastery of the grill and waxing poetic about the just-charred flavor that earned this Australian-style BBQ powerhouse international acclaim.



"The smoked quail egg with caviar is a crazy way to start," says Foster. "A few other must-haves are the slow-cooked and smoked king crab legs, anything beef (especially the 70-day dry-aged ribeye), the scallops and the pulled pork burger (it's the best I have ever had). Most of the seating is in front of the open kitchen bar, so it truly is dinner and a show."





*All of the dishes at Burnt Ends are prepared over custom-made grills and oven fired by coal, apple or almond wood | [burntends.com/gallery](https://burntends.com/gallery)*

In the Dempsey neighborhood—a short drive from the Singapore Botanic Gardens—you'll find the world's first Michelin-starred Peranakan restaurant, **Candlenut**. And downtown, keep your eyes peeled for **Jaan By Kirk Westaway**, an intimate, 40-seat restaurant showcasing the best of reinvented British cuisine. And a short, five-minute drive away from Burnt Ends, yet another one of the best restaurants in Singapore: **Odette**, a two Michelin star French restaurant that this year claimed the number one spot on the list of Asia's 50 Best restaurants.

Seasonality, terroir and artisanal produce are the buzzwords at Odette, a name that French chef Julien Royer chose to pay homage to his grandmother.

"I owe everything I am to my family, especially my grandmother, Odette," Royer writes. "She showed me how the most remarkable dishes can come from the purest ingredients and taught me the importance of adding that 'little something' to create dishes that excite the palate and fill the heart. Her devotion to people and ability to demonstrate love through food continue to inspire the Odette experience."





*Left: Noir de Bigorre Pork Rack with apple, cider and jus gras | Right: Toasted buckwheat cream, pecan nuts, guanaja and jivara chocolate and sustainably-sourced honey from Singapore's only local bee conservatory, Nutrinest | [@odetterestaurant](#)*

Also worth noting in the world of French fine dining, **Les Amis**, a Michelin-starred spot and favorite of Felder. It specializes in classic French cuisine and is the first-born of the Les Amis Group, home to a total of 20 restaurants in Singapore. France-born executive chef Sebastien Lepinoy works side-by-side with a Singaporean pastry chef, Cheryl Koh.

"It's absolutely magnificent with the caviar, and white asparagus. Foie gras and fava beans, and the most exquisite unpasteurized cheese you've ever



tasted," says Felder. "Truly fine dining with impeccable service."



*Left: Golden osetra caviar served with delicate asparagus jelly and coulis |  
Right: Pheasant served in a tourte with duck foie gras and drizzles of natural  
jus | @lesamisrestaurant*

Felder also has a deep respect for the work that Brehm is doing at **Nouri**, of how in touch he is with "the essence and functionality of an ingredient" through his philosophy of crossroads cooking—a philosophy that is

grounded in the belief that cuisines are a living, breathing product of intersecting cultures across time and space. In short, food does not exist in isolation.

Born in Brazil to a second-generation family, Brehm always found himself questioning claims of authenticity or identity in cuisine. He didn't have a name for it at the time, but now that he has found a way to channel it in the kitchen, he does.

"The deeper you look into cultures, the more you realize that things are not as they really seem," explains Brehm. "To call something your own—as a particular dish from a specific country or region—is to sell your understanding a bit short. Cultures are living, breathing things and very much a product of appropriation and assimilation. Instead of dedicating it to rhetoric and offering it to a specific culture or protecting a particular side of the world or tradition, we put that whole thing into question with full intent of reminding people that before we are from a place, we are all people and we share that first."

Consider the Wild Rice Stem, for example, which draws upon universal preferences for lacto acidity and regional ties between Northern France and Southern India.



*Wild Rice Stem at Nouri | [nouri.com.sg](https://nouri.com.sg)*

When Nouri's research team set out to learn more about this meaty and dense vegetable akin to white asparagus that's commonly eaten in Asian countries, they happened upon records from the 16th and 17th centuries showing that King Louis XIV had chartered the French East India Company to set up trading outposts in Pondicherry, a city in Southern India. The French acquired spices (cloves, nutmeg, sugar, pepper), which proved critical in Europe to preserve meats during the harsh winters. What's more, the research team came to better understand how our evolutionary development has primed us towards acid and glutamate-rich fermented foods for their probiotic benefits.

And the Wild Rice Stem was born.

It's this sort of meticulous anthropological and historical research, which Felder calls "cerebral," that allows the team at Nouri to understand why dishes with very similar profiles are born simultaneously in different parts of the world. From there, they build a menu honoring those traditions in a way that makes them relevant for today.

"The dishes on the menu are meant to trigger connections with people irrespective of where they are from and what experiences they have had," explains Brehm. "And that is because of the research which is solely dedicated to making these connections meaningful."

**READ MORE:** [Chef Ivan Brehm Of Singapore's Nouri On Soulful, Brainy Fusion \(Not Confusion\)](#)

When Brehm gets the chance to escape the restaurant (and the research books), he doesn't necessarily stick to fine dining—to discreetly scoping out what the stiff competition is up to. Instead, when he goes out to eat with friends and family, it's almost always to dive into the local food scene at hawker stalls or hole-in-the-wall restaurants. "It enriches my vocabulary so I can better understand what connections I want to express in our restaurant," he explains. "Without understanding or seeking to understand this side of town, the picture is always incomplete and imperfect of how big and wide the offering of Singapore is."

Foster agrees.



"It's amazing that you can go from eating \$4 Hokkien noodles at a hawker center to splurging on a Michelin-starred meal with the best meats from around the world prepared in modern and classic cooking techniques at places like Burnt Ends."

---

For dinner that sits somewhere in between, Foster swears by **Meat Smith**, a meat and potatoes joint proving to the world that "real-deal barbecue" doesn't just *exist* outside of America's traditional barbecue heartlands, it thrives.

"What can I say?" exclaims Foster. "It says it in the name! Beautiful smokey tender brisket, pork ribs, fried chicken, brisket spring rolls with a selection of the house BBQ sauces to dip in, house-brined pickles [and] cornbread that's just like my grandma's. The staff always remembers your name and your drink. My poison of choice is the Smoked Negroni. Hay-smoked meats and smoked cocktails—what a combo."

**READ MORE:** [The 10 Best Cocktail And Wine Bars In Singapore](#)





*Left: 10-hour smoked beef, short rib, beer-battered onion rings, green chili ranch & yuzu slaw / Center: Crinkle-cut fries with pulled pastrami, cheddar cheese & beef jus / Right: MeatSmith x Burnt Ends collaboration burger /*  
*@[meatsmith\\_sg](#)*

Foster is also a regular at **Blue Label Pizza**, a restaurant he calls “the most consistent joint on the island.” Although it errs on the pricey side, it’s no ordinary slice. It’s the (self-proclaimed) best pizza in Singapore, with dough made from long-fermented sourdough and inventive topping combos like the Summer In San Sebastian pie, which comes with chorizo ragu, Hokkaido octopus, Espelette chilli and aioli.

An entrepôt indeed.

## The Co-Existence Of Financial Success And Cultural Vibrancy

Victor Yue is a retired Telecom engineer now active in the Singaporean Heritage Society. He's friends with Boey.

While deeply entrenched in the diverse local culture, Yue admits that this culture is so often clouded by the financial success of the city—a success that sends a message to the world that Singapore has sacrificed culture for the sake of finance. That it's nothing more than a modern city, the economics for which have been (and still are) fueled by the steady stream of immigration. “Full stop.”

Indeed it seems the common thread running through all our conversations—with Yue, Boey, Lui, Gifford, Felder, Foster, Brehm—is that the culture is there, but that you have to look beneath the surface to find it.

“In Singapore, you have to search for that culture with open eyes and an open heart,” Gifford tells us, “but without trying to put an expectation of a previous world view onto this place. I can't say that the culture I want is European art or theater, because if I define culture like that I'm not going to find it here.”

What you *will* find is martial arts, and dragon boat racing, and tai chi. You'll find an incredibly strong Muslim, Buddhist and Hindu community. Chinese dumpling festivals and grand bazaars during Ramadan for Muslims to break their fast. You'll wake up to breakfast or brunch of toast with coconut and custard jam—a legacy of the British occupation—and end the day with wagyu, Indian dal, sushi, peking duck, dim sum, Thai, Korean, Italian, Spanish, Mediterranean, or pork dumplings at a Chinese restaurant with a side of vintage kitsch.

“The culture exists, but it's expressed at a community level,” says Brehm.

“To get that level of depth here, you have to be invited. When you do get there, it's magical—there's so much to learn, see, hear and experience—but you have to befriend the country.”



Which is exactly what we intend to do.

Interested in the cuisines of other Asian destinations? Discover the [25 best restaurants in Kyoto, Japan](#)—omakase include.



### Top Related Stories



Maldives vs Bora Bora:  
Where Should You Go?



The 25 Best  
Things To  
Do In Sri  
Lanka



Japanese  
Culture  
Guide: TV,  
Movies,  
Books,  
Manga,  
Cooking,  
Fashion, &  
Home Decor



RECIPE:  
Doenjang  
Jjigae



(Korean  
Fermented  
Soybean  
Paste Stew)

#### ABOUT US

[Our Team](#)

[Expert Network](#)

[Jobs](#)

[Terms](#)

[Privacy](#)

#### DISCOVER

[Travel Stories](#)

[Destinations](#)

[Partnership  
Opportunities](#)

[Refer Friends](#)

[Gift Cards](#)

[#gojourny](#)

#### NEED HELP?

[FAQ](#)

[Chat us live](#)

#### SMILE GUARANTEE

We stand by our service and proudly offer a 100% happiness guarantee. Learn more [here](#)

Get weekly travel inspiration

[See a sample itinerary](#)

[Sign Up](#)



Schedule a free consultation call

[Get in touch](#)

Download the Journy app:

App Store

Google Play

Stay in Touch

