



History never tasted this good

Cleverly transformed old buildings that now offer unique experiences of the culinary kind

By Desiree Koh | 04 April 2012

A historic chapel with a bit of scruff and a former military barracks with hidden pillars promise to serve you more than just good food. Having undergone a dramatic makeover, each of these buildings also takes you back into the past in chic, über cool settings, developed with a strong respect for the buildings' architectural history. It is testimony to how Singapore's heritage can heap healthy servings of charm onto the overall dining experience.



Artichoke (161 Middle Road, Sculpture Square; Tel: 6336-6949)

For Singaporeans, dining is a religion, so it made sense for owner Bjorn Shen to pick the courtyard of a historic chapel as the setting for Artichoke.

A veritable shrine to Mediterranean cuisine, the restaurant's menu is laced with Moroccan, Spanish, Turkish, Lebanese and Greek influences, that include lamb merguez sausages with fried eggs for breakfast and barbequed calamari with Chermoula spices for dinner.

Built in 1870, the main building, now called Chapel Gallery, first served as the Middle Road Church before becoming the Baba Malay Methodist Church. It later became the grounds of the Methodist Girls' School, with nine Indian girls for its first students. Over the years, the premises took on other roles, as the May Blossom Restaurant during the Japanese Occupation and as a car workshop for a brief period in the 1980s.

The building then fell into disuse, but in 1995, architect-turned-sculptor Sun Yu-Li saw the artistic potential of the forgotten and deteriorating structure. He later led the four-year restoration of one of Singapore's few remaining Gothic-style buildings, transforming it into a 2,034 sq ft gallery dedicated to three-dimensional art. Great care was taken to preserve the building's entire external façade, which includes distinctive circular vents and arched windows.



Its adjoining site, once a budget hotel, now houses the Sculpture Square office, library and a smaller gallery. The third space within the area is of course Artichoke, a hip eatery where patrons can choose between dining in rustic-chic indoors and going alfresco in an intimately-lit courtyard.

"Half of Artichoke's success can be attributed to its centralised location," says Shen. "But it's extremely charming too... You are dining next to a little orange chapel. How often do you find yourself in such a setting?"

The space also exudes a sense of romance, he adds, explaining why it is also a choice location for couples who want an unforgettable setting for tying the knot. Shen's only wish – that more heat-shunning Singaporeans would choose to sit outside and enjoy the distinctive ambience created by the mingling of nature's beauty and clever lighting. The experience simply whisks

"When you sit in the al fresco area, the sights and sounds of the surrounding traffic and pedestrians are obscured... If you close your eyes for a moment, you could imagine yourself anywhere besides Singapore."

Nonetheless, it does not under-deliver on charm on the inside. Kitted out café style, diners settle into mismatched chairs set against wooden tables, and dine under faux vintage lights.

Shen considered 50 other locations for Artichoke, but knew that Sculpture Square would be the perfect spot the moment he saw it. "I said to my designer, 'Do as little as you can to it, because we want to preserve this place as it looks. It looks a little scruffy, but that's what it's supposed to be,'" he says with a wry smile.



House (8D Dempsey Road, #01-01 to 06 Tanglin Village; Tel: 6475-7787)

When sitting in the patio at House – in a colonial setting that dates back to the 1800s, and surrounded by lush greenery – you'll immediately feel a comfortable sense of ease.

Complimenting the arresting view are soft touches – indoor plants, vintage chairs and tables, and the heady scent of aromatherapy oil. Tucked into the end of Dempsey Hill, it sits apart from the rest of the establishments, so it is easy not to feel a part of the Dempsey bustle.

With such a tranquil vibe, it is hard to imagine the deep military connections that this space once had. This 35,000 sq ft green-coloured building was once part of the British military barracks. Later, it became a part of the Central Manpower Base complex, where young Singaporean men reported for National Service for the first time.

These days though, it is a café, bar and beauty emporium. "We fell in love with the fact that it is in a relatively central location, yet feels like a different world altogether," says Jerry De Souza, House's Creative Director. "We also love that this building is rich in history."

Apart from tending to logistical requirements such as plumbing and electricity, and a fresh wash of green paint, De Souza tried to maintain most of the barracks' original structure, and instead worked around it, to create a raw, industrial feel. The building's existing patterned air vents even inspired the design of one of the walls within the restaurant that echoes the same pattern.



Efforts to preserve the structure uncovered design elements the team could not have dreamt up, admits De Souza. While pressure-washing the interior walls, a thin layer of concrete peeled off to reveal gorgeous pillars beneath. These were incorporated as a design feature.

The biggest change was to remove the existing walls and install full-length glass panels throughout the building to give patrons a feeling of being 'enveloped' by the surrounding verdant foliage.

There is a clever play with space – and not just in the dining area, points out writer Rachel Klye. "I loved the bathroom – I could dance in there! It was extremely spacious, and even had a barbershop chair. They were even playing swing music! Overall, I also loved the old-school charm and vintage décor. I'd definitely go back."

De Souza has also ensured the restaurant embodies aspects of its heritage. Some dishes are stylishly served in mess tins. One may also enjoy cocktails served in tiffin containers. Some mustries are its metre-long sausage, American sliders, truffle fries and the signature skinny pizzas inspired by the humble paper *prata*.

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