

# FOOD IN THE 'HOODS



From Katong and Upper Thomson to Greenwood, Duxton and Holland Village, Singapore's great dining enclaves have benefitted from evolving naturally.  
**By Desiree Koh**



Sabio's Mussels



In this multi-ethnic layer cake of gastronomic adventure, dining is literally a melting wok and pan sharing the same stove. Go around any corner, and you'll run into a place to eat. We debate over which hawker stall serves the best version of Hokkien mee. We slavishly attend World Gourmet Summit events. We couldn't wait for Marina Bay Sands and its trophy case of Michelin-starred chefs to open up its doors. But there are some very special enclaves — food 'hoods — where we know to go to for a specific dining experience.

I get up on a Sunday morning, hop on my bike, and head to New Leaf Park Paradise coffee shop in Siglap for Hakka-style *yong tau foo* and a platter (or two) of *kway chap* with my parents. On the way home, I stop at Chin Mee Chin Confectionery, which looks exactly the same as it did 60 years ago, for Singapore's best kaya on charcoal-toasted buns, because no Sunday morning is complete without it. I potter around Parkway Parade and then head

to Glory on East Coast Road for a nasi padang lunch, an embarrassment of coconut milk riches, then go around the corner for a slab of Awfully Chocolate ice-cream. Sometime between that and dinner at Naïve, a modern presentation of pure, clean vegetarian cuisine that tastes less chaste than it sounds, a packet of freshly steamed *putu piring* appears, molten *gula melaka* erupting as soon as I lay a finger on one.

On any given Sunday, breakfast could have been at Old Airport Food Centre waiting patiently for 45 minutes at the *lor mee* stall. Lunch could be at Five Star Hainanese Chicken Rice or Guan Hoe Soon for Peranakan or Smokey's for barbecue.



49 Katong Laksa

And we could dine out every night and never get bored. Margarita's for Mexican, Al Forno for Italian, Private Affairs for upscale French, Big Bad Wolf for down-home Western, Quentin's for Eurasian and Heaven On Earth steamboat if we're feeling guilty.

(The best Katong laksa is from my Mother's kitchen, so there's no need to leave the house for that.) A complete selection of artisanal dessert joints, from Ice Cream Gallery and LICK to Kim Choo's kuehs and Pavé chocolatier, hits any spot we might have missed.

This routine has taken place for the 22 years of my life that I didn't live abroad and describes a Singapore food cluster. Within the span of a 10-minute bike ride, I can get satiated satisfactorily at all of the above food joints and more, while getting my groceries, a massage, packages mailed or a new lamp. And I'm not alone.

### **A nucleus and synergy**

Residents of the Upper Thomson, Greenwood Avenue, Serangoon Gardens, Sixth Avenue and Holland Village neighbourhoods will say the same thing of their enclaves. These are self-contained, local-serving communities that have, for many reasons, carved indelible



Old School Delights

reputations in our culinary consciousness with a homegrown heritage of storied specialties and swashbuckling contemporary chefs. Most started as clusters of hawkers serving middle- to upper-class families. As food writer and consultant Christopher Tan puts it, “a nucleus of independent outlets around which synergy builds, leading to the enclave growing organically over time as like-minded businesses are drawn to the area”. He describes this process as “a synergy” driven by ethnic identity, social identity and shared aesthetics.

So much so that Old School Delights’ Olivia Teo, a life-long “Eastie,” lobbied hard to open her paeon to home cooking in her *kampong*, but had to settle for Upper Thomson when the Siglap spot she had in mind was taken up by another eatery. But it worked.

“We’ve really built our regular base,” says Teo, who has been in business for a year and a half, and gets patrons who come out of curiosity or the media, online and word-of-mouth buzz. On top of the Upper Thomson area’s “nostalgic feel with the shophouses, which fit our theme and concept,” Teo believes that “good food and ingredients made from scratch” have drawn diners from as far away as Woodlands and Pasir Ris to Old School Delights.

In fact, it’s the restaurateurs and chefs who found a home by accident, chance or luck, that have been most successful in staying on, as opposed to those who decided that you could never go wrong in, say, Holland Village, because there’s always a steady and ready flow of diners.

Timothy Kao, who recently opened gastropub Big Bad Wolf in Tanjong Katong, found his spot when driving by one day, far from his West Coast stomping grounds, and thinking the ground floor of a shophouse would work. Steve Hansen of BROTH, newly arrived in Singapore 11 years ago, turned the corner onto Duxton Hill — then overrun with pubs and colourful characters — and decided an empty storefront was where he wanted his bistro.

“The fact that there was nothing else around and knowing that in Singapore, if the product is good, people will come regardless of location, reassured me that it would work,” says Hansen, who will be celebrating 10 years as the first proper restaurant in the area. “What attracted me was the quirkiness of it, that it was beautiful to look at in a great environment, yet had that risqué element — it made it more interesting as a location.”

Others, such as Susan and Hevé Cotton of Cotton Bleu on Upper Thomson, and Marc Wee of Arbite in Serangoon Gardens, chose their locations because they’re residents of the area and wanted to provide “good food at affordable pricing to the middle-class and heartlanders,” according to Wee.

One thing everyone can agree on: establishing your niche within a food enclave, on top of great food, is a major key to success.

“When we were negotiating for this place, La Petit Cuisine was getting ready to open,” says Susan Cotton. “We thought it could be a good thing because there weren’t any French places and then, all of a sudden, there were two. It’s not really a competition because our menus are different — we change ours according to the season and our place is a very different concept overall.

“The fact that we’ve got such diversity and each one is doing something different, aiming for a different market, makes me so happy because the worst





l'Entrecote

thing that could happen is the neighbour trying to emulate us or one of the other businesses,” says Hansen, who shares Duxton Hill with a brasserie, a tapas bar, a Russian restaurant, a British gastropub, and a modern Singaporean bistro. “The pie has grown bigger because those other restaurants have brought a new market in. It’s great — it’s had a positive effect on my business,” she adds.

Old School Delights’ Teo doesn’t feel the competition at all “because we all have different versions of *mee siam* and every version is unique in its own style”. Her *rempah* dish is her restaurant’s calling card. “It’s good to have options.”

### Authenticity rules

Since most food enclaves started out serving their local communities, parking

is prime real estate here, but that hasn’t stopped Singaporeans from braving traffic tickets and waiting woes — in fact, playing hard to get makes the meal even more desirable.

What there is, is a lot of outdoor dining space. During down time in the afternoon, most restaurants are empty inside, while their patios are crowded with al fresco nibblers and noshers.

This Western-style dining — not such a long way from the old practice of stooping by hawker stalls on the street — has been imported by expatriates and Singaporeans who have lived abroad. In fact, a significant percentage of the most popular food enclaves’ patronage is made up of upwardly mobile locals and their foreign counterparts. And that’s why these clusters feature cuisines as common as *chai tow kuay* might be in Vienna: Middle Eastern in Holland Village, a French tabac on Greenwood Avenue, Brazilian on Sixth Avenue, Spanish tapas on Duxton Hill, for a start, with authentic settings, ambience and spirit to match.

“You could walk in here and think that you’re in Spain — it’s not comfortable because you’re all standing, but if you go to a tapas bar in Barcelona, everyone is standing,” says Paolo Randone of Deliciae, which owns l’Entrecote and Sabio on Duxton Hill. “People want a real experience. Singaporeans have travelled, they know Europe better than I do.”

Although most food enclaves feature independent businesses or offshoots of small local franchises, they haven’t flown under the radar of the big players — but not generic, dime-a-dozen global conglomerates. Crust, an irreverent Australian gourmet pizza

chain, chose its landing spot at Holland Village, because it “has a very Australian al fresco feel and fits the target crowd perfectly” and extended to Upper Thomson for its “vibrant night crowd and a palpable lack of quality pizza offerings”. Les Amis Group, better known for five-star culinary presentations, has Peperoni’s pizza parlours on Greenwood Avenue and in Siglap.

“We definitely try to fit into the enclave,” says Raymond Lim, Les Amis Group director.

“We look at the potential of the populace in the area and the existing supply and see if there is a niche for us to fill.”



Sabio



Raymond Lim



## If you build it, will they come?

Fifteen years ago, Dempsey was an unruly military complex of the Central Manpower Base and barracks shrugging off the remaining vestiges of colonial plantations when Country City Investment (CCI) transformed it into a nightlife destination. The hill hasn't stopped buzzing since.

"The historical buildings were a hidden gem, surrounded by lush greenery only five minutes from the city," says Nicholas Ng, general manager of CCI.

"We had the vision of making it a lifestyle destination for both Singaporeans and expatriates, whether they are looking for that twist on a weekend or want to indulge in a scrumptious meal with their loved ones."

In piecing together what they dub "Paradise Found", CCI — and in particular, director Florence Tan who is an automotive parts dealer with no food and beverage experience — realised that the right tenant mix was most important. Tan, who wanted to recreate the feel of her overseas dining adventures, personally vetted restaurants both local and abroad in curating the menu of options offered today, from gourmet outlets such as Culina and Jones The Grocer to local upshots House, RedDot BrewHouse, The Disgruntled Chef and Tippling Club. In addition, CCI encouraged restaurants to offer breakfast, and recruited retail tenants so that Dempsey Hill would draw customers all day long. You can now drop your kids off at Singapore's biggest kindergarten, buy groceries, get a manicure, browse an art or antique gallery, and stop for lunch all in one spot, within a couple of hours. And the parking is free.

Not lost in the revamp is Samy's, which has dished out fish head curry from Block 25 on Dempsey Road for more than 30 years, since Nagajyothi Mahendran's grandfather opened the restaurant in the former Civil Service Club.



Samy's fish head curry



Dempsey Hill

"When the redevelopment came about, it was quite traumatic," says Nagajyothi. "We couldn't decide if we should stay, but we decided to because we have a large following here. And it didn't affect our business — it was more positive because the whole place is more lively now and created more awareness for our restaurant."

Besides some small roof renovations and a new coat of paint, she said, "Our customers told us not to change — they didn't want a modern restaurant they could find anywhere else."

Samy's extended its menu to include north Indian cuisine that would attract tourists and expatriates, and introduced promotions, tourist package tie-ins and marketing campaigns, to keep increasing the crowds that stream in.

Samy's rental is now almost six times what it was when the property belonged to the government.

"That's the heaviest burden for us, but we're still the cheapest restaurant in Dempsey. It's good — my father and grandfather were happy with just the regulars coming back. I learned a lot when I took over."

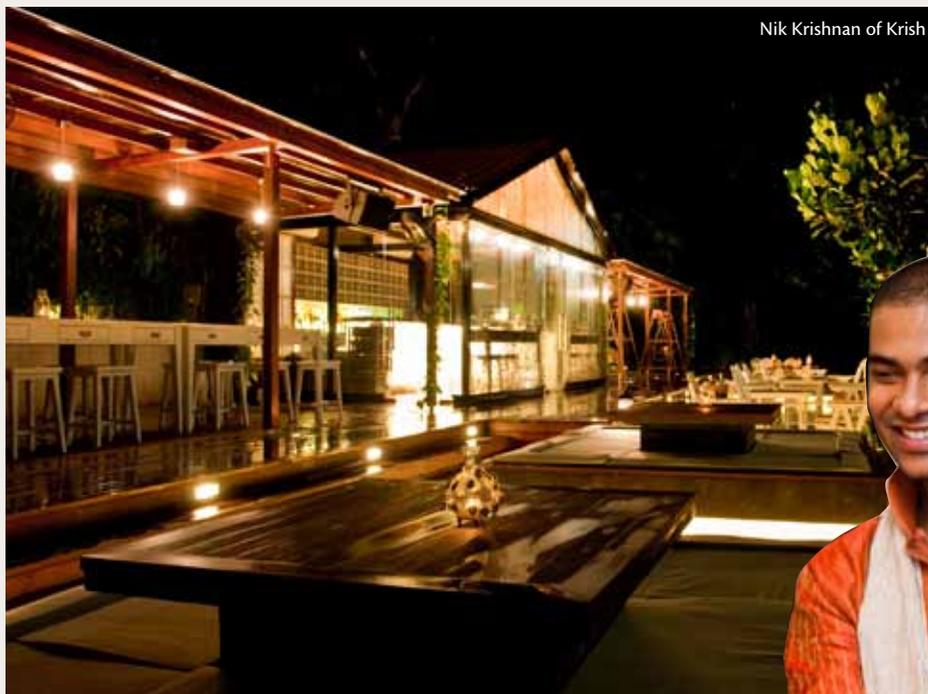
According to CCI's Ng, Dempsey's rental is offered "at market rate despite the success", without increasing criteria in the tenants' leases. Across the board, restaurants in food enclaves that continue to boom report that landlords — all independent property owners — have been understanding and moderate in rent increases.

## Sometimes it takes time

Spurred by the success of Dempsey Hill, developers were quick to transform more colonial clusters, such as Gillman Village and Rochester Park, into the same idyllic, Edenic cul-de-sacs away from downtown, but still offering excellent epicurean choices in spacious former British bungalows. However, Gillman Village has since folded, and despite star attractions such as Goodwood Park's vaunted Minjiang and the well-reviewed Krish, Rochester Park has had several spots empty for the better part of the last two years.

Critics point to inaccessibility, realtors with no experience in food and beverage properties, and the fact that these are one-stop destinations — after that great dinner, most patrons balk at having to drive or take a cab to their next agenda for the evening. Food writer and consultant Chris Tan believes that “Gee, let’s have an enclave!” food clusters have less flavour of attraction and depth than those that grew up slowly and naturally.

“I fear that overmuch speculation runs the risk of hoarding developing enclaves, leading them to blossoming too early and dwindling too early,” says Tan.



Nik Krishnan of Krish

Nik Krishnan of Krish opened here two years ago, because it was “affordable for the amount of space I got” and the opportunities that came with room offset the disadvantages of the area.

“On hindsight, being close to town would be a hell of a lot better for us,” says Krishnan. But by building a large, sprawling bar with plenty of room for lounging, Krish answered the “where next?” question for guests without involving transportation, and hosts a thriving schedule of events, weddings and corporate parties. The bar, which Krishnan had always wanted next to his restaurant, is an attraction in itself, the site of a popular weekly pub quiz every Wednesday evening. And if Rochester Park restaurants have been able to hold on, the payoff is in sight — by next year, a new shopping mall with a hotel and condo complex will open next door, and already the opening of the new science parks and nearby residences has introduced a higher flow of diners strolling over.

“It would have been quite tough two years ago, but it’s a little bit easier now,” says Krishnan. “I do think it’s an up-and-coming place.”

Kelvin Ng, director at food and beverage consultancy Straits Food Services, begs to differ. “Having an MRT at your doorstep may not necessarily equate to higher sales”.

A good restaurant operator will take time to understand the trade zone and identify gaps or overlaps in the market coverage of where the restaurant is located. Ng also points to factors such as front and back of house design, lease negotiations, creating a unique brand identity and people management as essentials in running a successful eatery. That’s running a restaurant by the book, however.

For everyone who’s done well in a successful food enclave, from Holland Village Fried Bee Hoon to modern renditions of *nasi lemak* at The Wok

& Barrel on Duxton Hill, it all begins with incomparable cooking and a singular passion that goes from the chef’s imagination to the diner’s heart and gullet. That’s running a restaurant by the menu. **S**