Out and about in Singapore

19 May 2010 by Nick Lander/FT

The open door to the wine cellar revealed an impressive collection. The aromas from the kitchen next door were alluring, and the waiter and waitress could only be described as wildly enthusiastic.

But although the printed menu listed eleven wines and three Hakka dishes, specialities from one of the more itinerant Chinese tribes, with the food as good as any restaurant, this meal was taking place in the home of a food and wine lover in Singapore. The waiting staff were his 10-year-old daughter and nine-year-old son. (See Quintarelli v Dal Forno.)

In between the second course of abacus seed, balls similar to gnocchi but made of yam and so called because of their similarity to the balls of an abacus, and kong bak, slices of marinated pork in a bun (which prompted several references to high cholesterol levels from the diners), I asked the table for suggestions on where I should eat over the next two days.

When my notebook was handed back it was full of recommendations, several illegible as three round the table were doctors, but the consensus was obvious - I should head for breakfast to the **Tiong Bharu market** (picture above taken by James Chan for www.motochan.com), a 10-minute taxi ride north of the city centre.

At 8.00 am the following morning, in already sweltering heat, five greedy men, all survivors of the previous night's dinner, sat down at a small corner café opposite the market to be handed plastic bowls and chopsticks and chili. These were promptly followed by bowls of clear, peppery pork rib soup and dark brown strips of bean curd, white rice cakes and tang oh, a steamed, green vegetable. When I offered to pay the bill of Sin$30 (£15) for five, I was promptly rebuffed. 'You can pay when I come to London', one said with a smile. 'It's far more expensive there.'

There were two other reasons these considerate hosts wanted me to breakfast here. The first was its location in an area built in the 1950s and still made up of buildings no more than two or three storeys high, in marked contrast to so much of this city seemingly stretching into the sky.

The second is the market next door with food stalls on the ground floor and a circuit of food stalls, tables and chairs on the first floor. These include many of the hawker stalls common to the rest of the city, serving prawn noodles, chicken and rice and carrot cake, made in fact from radishes and rice flour. One particularly popular stall is Teck Seng Soya Beanmilk, where Ah Song and his wife begin this laborious process every midnight to serve their first customers at 5.30 am with fresh bean curd and warm soy milk.

This market is becoming increasingly popular with Singaporeans, particularly at the weekend, because it reminds so many, my host explained, of what the city was like 50 years ago.

The importance of holding on to Singapore's culinary past is undoubtedly what drives chef Damian D'Silva, who will open the next version of his **Soul Kitchen** restaurant in Singapore's National Museum in late July.

My question to D'Silva about his favourite restaurant immediately brought a smile to his face and we set off to the Changi Road, about a 10-minute drive from the airport, for an unforgettable meal at a roadside restaurant called **Seng Kee Black Chicken Herbal Soup** and in business since the early 1970s.

Its setting is far from romantic. Across the road is a petrol station and during the day motorcycles from the shop next door crowd the pavement. But at six in the evening these are put away and two sets of shutters are opened to reveal a storeroom for the tables and chairs, which replace the motorcycles, and the kitchen. Within minutes the tables are packed and remain so all evening.

Customers order by standing in front of the kitchen and looking at photos of the finished dishes or at round metal trays of food cooled, not that effectively, by several rotating CDs. But what the kitchen may lack in modern equipment it makes up for in the flavour of what it produces and extraordinary value for money. Steamed tail of a red snapper, clams in a sauce that managed to be sour, spicy and sweet, fried tofu with minced pork, beans with spicy sambal chili, plus rice and beer came to Sin $50 (£25) for two. And this remains the only restaurant ever where I have been served by a waiter with a pair

of pliers, tools which the waiters use to carry the very hot metal plates from the steamer to the table and then twirl, rather like a cowboy with a gun, on their way back to the kitchen.

Seng Kee is a one-off but the eleven branches of the Imperial Treasure Restaurant Group are giving great pleasure to many across the city.

Founded by Alfred Leung in direct competition to the restaurants run by Crystal Jade Kitchen, of which Leung used to be an integral part, **Imperial Treasure** serves exemplary Chinese food at various price points.

While their most recent opening, a fine-dining restaurant in the Marina Bay Sands Casino, is already popular with the Chinese high rollers excited by its top French wines, I headed to their much less expensive noodle and congee restaurant in the basement of the vast Ion shopping mall that opened last August on Orchard Road.

With an expansive paper menu offering over 200 items, comfortable leather seats and an open kitchen, this is an ultra-modern version of a dim sum restaurant that will delight any shopper. Congee, noodles, the flakiest roast pork puffs and an assortment of dim sum that covered the table brought the bill to Sin$80 for two (£40).

Finally, the past, present and future of Singapore merge on the second floor of 38A Seah Street, right by Raffles Hotel, now home to **Carrie Chen Chunjin's Tea Bone Zen Mind**, her shop and tea room.

As a little girl, afternoon tea become a fixture in her life because her grandmother served it to the British forces. Today, she blends tea from China and Taiwan and commissions artists to produce exceptional teaware. This was a small but memorable example of how food and hospitality imbue the life of this enterprising city.

Seng Kee Black Chicken Herbal Soup, 467 Changi Road, 0065 6746 4089

Imperial Treasure Noodle & Congee House, ION Orchard #B3-17, 0065 6509 8283

Tea Bone Zen Mind, 0065 6334 4212.