

Eating out in Singapore

15 Mar 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

Of all the many informants around the world who have kindly helped me seek out the most fascinating food, no-one has fulfilled this role more assiduously than wine importer Alan Wong in Singapore.

He not only offered to meet us at Changi airport, but en route to our hotel explained how he had spent the previous week trying out different hawker stalls in search of the most authentic *bak chor mee*, pork noodle soup, to show me.

Three hours later, in the company of 10 other wine-obsessed Singaporeans, several of whom had set out on this pursuit during their student years at Oxford, we were presented with numerous dishes of Eurasian food, a style of cooking I had never encountered before.

On a visit to Singapore two years ago Wong had introduced me to the [Peranakan cooking](#) now undergoing such a renaissance across the state. This rich and spicy food had originated in the 16th century when Chinese traders sailed south and married the women then living along the straits of Malacca. But this, I now learnt from Quentin Pereira, one of the very few practitioners of Eurasian cooking at his restaurant Quentin's, made it something of a parvenu.

A century before, Portuguese traders travelled east from India and created what is now known as Eurasian food. It is even hotter than Peranakan although it incorporates many similar ingredients, most notably *buah keluak*, the dark nuts that add such a distinctively unctuous flavour to whichever meat they are cooked with.

Two outstanding dishes were an oxtail *debal* curry, *debal* meaning left overs in Creole Portuguese, and Kristang beef stew, a beef soup that clearly shows the influences of the two cultures. The soup was watery, as the Chinese like their soup; full of cabbage and carrots from the West; and then enlivened by large pieces of cinnamon bark, star anise, cloves and pepper.

The following day Wong and I met at the Hong Lim Centre, between Singapore's financial district and Chinatown, to put his research to the test.

Like many other buildings that house floors of hawker stalls, this centre would win no design awards as it has grown organically from what was initially a wet market on to which a car park, shops and flats above have been attached. But there is no doubting the single-mindedness of those in charge of stall number 02-16, clearly named Tai Wah Pork Noodle. They have been concentrating on making pork noodle soup since 1939 - with considerable success.

The customer choice is simply thin or thick noodles. After that, the challenge is to find a table and chair (the place is so popular at lunchtime) and wait for your plastic bowl and chopsticks to be delivered. Alongside the noodles in the clear stock will be a spicy combination of minced pork, liver, pork crackling, fish balls, small flat fish and won ton dumplings. All for £3 per large bowl.

It was most encouraging to read in the following day's *Straits Times* that the Singapore government is now taking an active interest in the future of these hawker stalls. As they become vacant, preference is apparently to be shown to those who are dedicated to food quality rather than those who can simply pay the highest concession fee. I do hope this works, as these stalls are one of Singapore's most obvious natural resources.

At three other restaurants, the Japanese Aoki, the recently opened Vietnamese restaurant Annam and the incongruously located Wild Rocket, I was to be introduced to another tenet of restaurant management particular to Singapore, this time in a far more modern context. As it is extremely difficult to hold on to talented staff, it is quite common for restaurants to be joint ventures between a restaurant management company and the chef.

In the case of Aoki and Annam, three doors from each other on Claymore Hill by the Shaw Centre, management is in the hands of Les Amis group, run by stockbroker Desmond Lim, while the kitchens are masterminded by Kunio Aoki and Nguyen Quoc Nam (pictured right) respectively.

Despite their proximity, each maintains their national character. Aoki sushi restaurant is an elegant expression of Japanese refinement, our lacquer boxes replete with miso soup; a generous bowl of sushi rice topped with thin slivers of tuna; and a particularly fine plum wine jelly at the end. And we absorbed the lesson that can be gleaned while sitting at any fine sushi counter, of just how impeccably well organised Japanese chefs are.

Annam is much noisier but Nam is intent on convincing Singapore that his native food is far more than just inexpensive noodles and pho, their beef consommé. Highlights from a kitchen that is barely six months old included a sizzling crisp pancake filled with prawns and bean sprouts; grilled chicken with sticky rice cakes and a dipping sauce of finely grated lime skin; and a grilled patty of eel and pork. This was ambitious but well-priced Vietnamese cooking I have not encountered even in Paris.

Finally, to Wild Rocket on the ground floor of the Hangout Hotel in Mount Emily which Willin Low has rented from a far-sighted landlady for the past seven years since abandoning the law to become a chef. Perhaps it is this lack of formal training that makes his mastery of spicing so admirable and seemingly effortless. A pomelo salad with crunchy diced winged beans; fried chicken wings stuffed with rice and water chestnut; a timbale of duck confit with yam cake; and a puree of black sesame with milk ice cream were all examples of modern Singaporean cooking at its best.

Quentin's, www.quentins.com.sg, 139 Ceylon Road, Eurasian Community Centre, +65 6348 0327

Hong Lim Centre, 531 A Upper Cross Street

Aoki, www.aoki-restaurant.com.sg +65 6333 8015

Annam, www.annam.com.sg, +65 6735 6656

Wild Rocket, www.wildrocket.com.sg, 10A Upper Wilkie Road, +65 6339 9448