

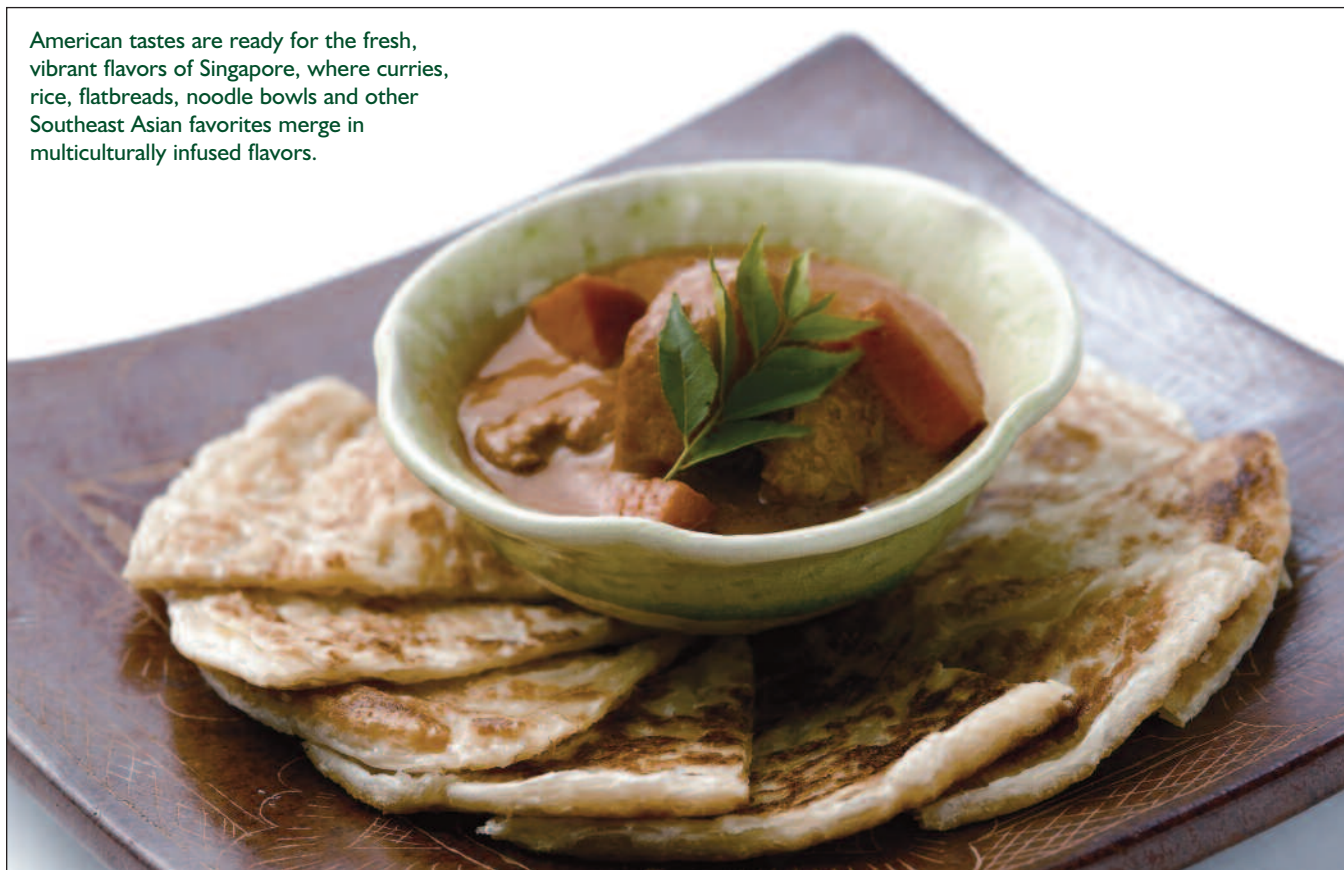
# SINGAPORE

## Street Smarts

The street fare of one of the world's greatest dining destinations is ready to roll onto American menus

BY ROBERT DANHI

American tastes are ready for the fresh, vibrant flavors of Singapore, where curries, rice, flatbreads, noodle bowls and other Southeast Asian favorites merge in multiculturally infused flavors.



IE SINGAPORE

Street food is fast by design and inexpensive by necessity, but it is prepared with whole, fresh ingredients and minimally processed foods. In Singapore, as in many parts of Southeast Asia, street-food “hawkers” are truly masters of their craft, cooking these dishes day after day their entire lives. A family may spend generations perfecting their own interpretation of wok-charred fresh rice noodles with stir-fried shrimp and sausage or sesame seed-battered, deep-fried baby bananas.

Amazingly enough, most of these delicious and authentic flavors can be created in a few minutes, a real selling point that should appeal to American foodservice operators. Now is the time for U.S. chefs to tap into the Singaporean street-food potential.

With a solid research-and-development process, a creative outsourcing program and comprehensive training, domestic operators can achieve the authentic flavors and maintain the culinary integrity, ease of production and speed of delivery inherent in Singaporean street food.

### THE SINGAPOREAN MICROCOSM

With only 246 square miles of total landmass, Singapore is made up of one main island and 58 much smaller outposts, but its culinary presence is huge, making it one of the world’s top food destinations. Throughout Southeast Asia, cuisine permeates culture and everyday life, and food pours out into the streets. From the narrow alleys of Chang Mai to the concrete jungle of Saigon, the streets of this savory-sweet region are lined with gastronomical indulgences.

What makes Singapore unique is its dedication to maintaining a traditional street-food culture while also providing clean and ultra-modern hawker centers so that diners can enjoy a full array of dishes, from “chili crab” to carrot cake (which isn’t a dessert but rather a steamed and fried white-radish dish). An added bonus of the hawker-centric approach to street food is the entertainment value; guests sit back on plastic stools and tables and watch the vendors at work in their culinary battleground.

Along with unique eating centers, Singaporeans developed their own brand of fusion as a result of being positioned in the crossroads of Chinese, Malaysian and Indian commerce and immigration, furthered by British colonization. The food reflects a distinctly Singaporean blend of these cultures, from Indian-influenced roti prata flatbread to Hainanese chicken rice and the proliferation of soft- and hard-boiled eggs, carried over from British breakfasts. These elements combine to produce an exotic, intriguing, yet accessible culinary destination where hungry Western travelers can enjoy a Southeast Asian gateway experience.

### STREET FOOD IN NEW SETTINGS

Just as Singapore has developed a more refined version of Southeast Asian culinary culture, Singaporeans have taken their street food out of the hawker centers and into the dining rooms and kitchens of some of the finest hotels and restaurants in the world, creating a sort of cross-technical fusion in which the food is adapted to new settings.

The best example of a fine-dining version of Singapore’s street foods is found at Straits Kitchen, located in Singapore’s posh Grand Hyatt hotel. Chef Brian Cleere and his team have been able to take the foods of the streets and reposition them in a fine-dining environment without sacrificing one bit of flavor. Their efforts are a good guide for American operators looking to try their hand at bringing street foods inside, whether for white-tablecloth, quick-service or any dining style in between.

“The concept behind Straits Kitchen,” Cleere explains, “is to provide an a-la-minute buffet, in which the most popular local hawker favorites remain authentic in terms of flavor and taste; the only difference is that they are presented in a contemporary marketplace setting, straight out of the wok at the Chinese kitchen, out of the tandoor oven at the Indian kitchen and hot from the grill at the Malay kitchen,” he says, referring to the restaurants’ multiple “theater kitchens.”

## QUICK-TAKE

THIS STORY TAKES A LOOK AT:

- ▶ The culinary and cultural influences that make Singapore street food unique
- ▶ How Singapore’s cuisine made the trek from the streets to fine dining
- ▶ Six greatest hits from Singapore hawker centers and ways to make them work on any menu



ROBERT DANHI: WWW.CHEFDANHI.COM

Grilling fish in banana leaves is a healthy, aromatic technique, and the chile-tamarind sauce of traditional *ikan bakar* packs plenty of flavor.



ROBERT DANHI, WWW.CHEFDANHI.COM

## TRANSLATING STREET LANGUAGE

Cleere is confident that American tastes are ready for Singapore's distinctive noodle dishes, Malay-influenced satays and its version of Indian prata, naan, tikka, curries and rice. More proof comes from a recent collaboration between hip-hop superstar Chris Bridges, a.k.a. Ludacris, and one of the country's leading chefs of Singaporean cuisine, Chris Yeo of the Bay Area's Straits Café and Sino. The two soon will bring an upscale Singaporean café to Bridges' hometown of Atlanta.

American tastes are indeed ready for the foods of Singapore, but many of the authentic flavors may need to be adjusted for mainstream diners. For example, ingredients such as pungent dried shrimp and fiery chile pastes should be used carefully, so as not to offend relatively sensitive Western palates. Following are six Singaporean street-hawker dishes ready for American menus.

**1 CHAR KWAY TEOW:** *Stir-fried rice noodles with shrimp and Chinese sausage*

**Appeal:** Familiar rice noodles with a soy-based sauce are stir fried to achieve *wok hei*, that "breath of wok" that is a trademark flavor of authentic stir-fried street food.

**Original Version:** Chinese sausage and rich cockles (small clams) are nestled in fresh, tender rice noodles, while dark and light soy sauces create a deep-brown color without being overly salty.

**Modified for Mainstream:** Use rehydrated rice noodles for consistency and availability and add shrimp or clams for a slightly modified version with surefire appeal.

**2 POH PIAH:** *Fresh spring rolls with jicama, dark soy sauce and spicy-sweet spread*

**Appeal:** Fresh, non-fried spring roll with familiar hot and cold components

**Original Version:** The *Nonya* version (the term for blended Chinese and Malay cultures) uses freshly made

rice-flour wrappers for a result that is much like a French crêpe; it's slathered with a spicy-sweet, soy-based sauce, then stuffed with a cooked soy-sauce-seasoned mixture of julienned yam bean (jicama), shrimp, pork, lettuce, cucumbers, bean sprouts and cilantro — all presented as a large, freshly wrapped delicacy.

**Modified for Mainstream:** Create the sauce with a mixture of readily available plum and hoisin sauces, outsource the unsweetened crêpes or another version of a thin, pliable wrapper, and this one is ready to go.

**3 NASI LEMAK:** *Fragrant coconut rice with shrimp sambal, fried peanuts and crispy fish*

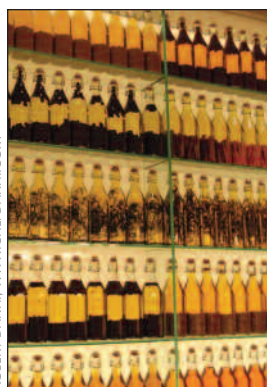
**Appeal:** A rice dish that is gently infused with the flavor of coconut milk, so that it has all the flavor without the richness

**Original Version:** Pandan leaf (the aromatic leaf of screw pine) and coconut-milk-infused rice are at the center of this dish, while hard-boiled eggs, sliced cucumbers, deep-fried whitebait (small anchovy-like fish) and fried peanuts form the next layer. Various curries and sambals (chile pastes or sauces) are added to order, creating the ultimate breakfast food. Yes, this is for breakfast!

**Modified for Mainstream:** For mainstream tastes, move this dish to lunch or dinner service. Adding some coconut milk to the rice cooker is simple enough, but you'll need to omit the still rarely available pandan leaf and consider changing the fish and eggs to fried rock shrimp, fresh crabmeat or other small bits of protein for broader appeal.



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The Straits Kitchen in Singapore's Grand Hyatt gives street food a sophisticated marketplace treatment with displays of fresh ingredients and sauces.

**4 IKAN BAKAR:** Grilled banana leaf-wrapped fish with chile-tamarind sauce

**Appeal:** Natural banana-leaf wrappers are a healthful and flavorful way to trap steam while grilling. Opened tableside, en papillote style, these bundles release their aromas for guests to enjoy, creating an element of dinner drama.

**Original Version:** Fresh banana leaves are toasted over an open flame to make them more pliable. A large spoon of sambal is placed on each leaf, followed by a piece of skate (stingray); the leaves are wrapped around the fillings, and the bundle is cooked on a griddle or grill, creating a mouthwatering aroma when opened.

**Modified for Mainstream:** Use a variety of fish — sea bass or salmon would hold up well against the fiery sambal — and toss in some colorful julienned vegetables for a more complete and visually appealing menu offering.

**5 KATONG LAKSA:** Creamy curried broth with short rice noodles, clams and laksa leaves

**Appeal:** This dish ties into the noodle-bowl appeal and uses a familiar coconut broth flavored with chile, garlic, shallots and galangal (a ginger-like rhizome) for an aromatic, yet not too intensely spicy, dish.

**Original Version:** The term “laksa” refers to a family of noodle-based soups of Southeast Asia. Singaporeans have developed a

penchant for using evaporated milk instead of the coconut milk used in the laksa lemak of Malaysia and the better-known curries of Thailand. Also, in Singapore, the noodles are cut shorter, enabling the grab-and-go convenience of using a spoon instead of chopsticks.

**Modified for Mainstream:** Pre-made laksa spice pastes are becoming widely available, making this an easy preparation with the addition of broth and evaporated milk or even coconut milk; as in many noodle-bar settings, guests could choose to top laksa with julienned vegetables, herbs, precooked proteins and a variety of sauces.

**6 TEH TARIK:** Frothy, bittersweet, pulled Ceylon tea

**Appeal:** This “pulled,” or dramatically poured, tea is a great opportunity for tableside service; its sweet flavor and rich frothiness will appeal to Americans’ thirst for hot specialty drinks.

**Original Version:** A blend of Indian and Malay cultures brought about this strong brew, sweetened and enriched with condensed milk. The theatrical preparation involves pouring the tea between two oversized cups while slowly pulling the cups further apart, creating a long stream of frothy tea and a foamy top.

**Modified for Mainstream:** The ingredients can remain the same, or a tea base can be outsourced, but use a menu descriptor like “teaccino” or “Singapore tea latte” and make sure to train staff well before starting the theatrics tableside. Consider adding this to dessert service with a pyrotechnic version; the addition of ignited brandy will create some impressive fireworks. ☺

ROBERT DANHI is an expert in the cuisines of Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. His book, “Southeast Asian Flavors” will be released in October 2008. Robert leads Chef Danhi & Co. and consults with educational organizations, food manufacturers, restaurant chains and professional associations; robert@chefdanhi.com or www.chefdanhi.com.