



## The Southeast Asian Lady {Boy}

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### Abstract

Singapore, a city-state with a decidedly cosmopolitan character, projects an urban image of sparkling modernity, wealth and well-being to the world. In the shadow of powerful architectural landmark and on the margins of an opulent society, however, the conditions of poverty and exclusion in which a good half of the population lives are hidden.

The true portrait of Singapore is therefore engraved by a deep fracture, exacerbated by the multi-ethnicity of the population. And it is in the context of these profound contrasts, as sometimes can happen in the most extreme situations, that extraordinary miracles occur. And here the miracle was performed by the kitchen!

Although the city is one of the most expensive in the world, street vendors contribute to supplying food in a cheap and varied way (and not only for the less wealthy). The importance of their contribution has been recognized by the local government which supports them with specially dedicated facilities and services. This is how the Hawker Centers were born, real "community dining rooms" whose fundamental social role has prompted UNESCO to include them in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

**IMAGE** | *Singapore, Skyline of Marina Bay Sands. (Source: <https://pixabay.com/photos/city-singapore-marina-bay-sands-1283634/>).*

### Keywords

**Singapore, Hawker Center, Unesco, Marina Bay Sands, Sentosa, Orchard Tower, Gai Lan, Tom Yum Soup, Guida Michelin, Singapore sling**

## Introduction

Call it *The City of the Lion* or an *Asian Tiger*, a westernized country or an oriental melting pot, either way Singapore undoubtedly is a cosmopolitan city-state, a place where different cultures, interests and traditions blend together and where aspirations, wishes and dreams – even those that are better left unsaid...! – come true.

We ought to remember that cosmopolitanism is never hassle-free nor disappointing. The disappointment of the blue-collars for instance, who account for a good half of the population and that cannot afford an accommodation in the city. This working class is therefore compelled twice a day to join a crowd of hundreds of thousands of people that every dawn and every dusk queue for never ending hours at the custom to Malesia to cross the border on their own feet through the strict of Johor.

Not to mention the frictions between the descent of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Indonesian who at the beginning of the XIX Century, merged at the extreme south of Malaysia and populated the commercial outpost founded under the British protectorate of the English Company of East Indies, nowadays developed in one of the most important harbours worldwide.

Leaving in the shadow the sad real lives of the poorest working class, the most prominent image of the city is given by those that flaunt their richness and, if you believe that in 2009 Singapore was classified as the metropolis with the highest density of resident billionaires, then they account for a good number! The city of Singapore offers to the white-collars high wages, efficient public transports and the greatest choice of entertainments; the whole Sentosa island is a fun fair, both for kids and the grown-ups.



*Sentosa Island.  
Suspension bridge  
between Sentosa and  
the island of Palawan.  
(Source:  
<https://pixabay.com/photos/sentosa-beach-singapore-rope-bridge-2525668/>).*



The heat of the tropical climate is cooled down by the shades of futuristic skyscrapers, by the urban parks, which are real tropical forests and the luxurious Botanic Gardens. The city seduces and enchants with the power of its visionary landmark, such as the Marina Bay Sands area, planned by Moshe Safdie and rendered popular worldwide by the longest and highest infinity pool, or the museum of ArtScience, realized in the shape of a flower. The municipal government takes care of the tranquillity and safety of its citizens by imposing severe behavioural rules: capital punishment is applied to major crimes and drug trafficking, while hefty fines are for those caught walking naked in their own apartments or do not flush the toilet! Not unusual to hear Singaporeans or resident expats shouting loud how privileged they are in living in the city of Singapore. Their content is so high that they do not feel the need to travel not even for tourism anywhere else in the world, proudly stating they would never leave Singapore for anything in the world as they already have everything they need. They seem to be fully satisfied to live a life that, thinking carefully, might closely resemble the one of Truman Burbank in the movie "The Truman Show".



*Singapore, Marina Bay Sands and ArtScience. (Source: <https://pixabay.com/it/photos/singapore-marina-bay-sands-marina-5653556/>).*

As unfortunately often occurs in many main capital cities, the portrait of Singapore is engraved with a deep fracture between the wealthy middle-class and the poor working-class, further exacerbated by the multi-ethnicity of the population. But good news is that, sometimes, from the most extreme situations, the most extraordinary and unexpected miracles happen. And it is the case to say that, here, the miracle was realized by the cuisine!

Although the city is one of the most expensive in the world, it is surprising to find that eating out turns out is very cheap, even cheaper than home cooking. The phenomenon is due to the many food courts, that can be found anywhere in the city, filled with closet-sized stalls selling street food. At any time, between 11 a.m. and 11 p.m. noodles, soups, rice, ravioli, kebabs are available for purchase; as well as grilled, steamed and fried food; freshly squeezed fruit juice, sweets and fruit.

Since the '60 – when Singapore became an independent Republic – the phenomenon of street food has been under the regulations of the municipal government. The street stalls, often lacking running water and electricity, had very precarious hygienic and sanitary conditions; rubbish, stray animals, rodents and parasites contributed to make the situation worse. Alongside the introduction of high-quality standards, the government built the so-called *Hawker Centers*, dislocated in several parts of the city. These food courts were specifically designed to enclose street stalls and were

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equipped with toilets, tables and shared eating areas for customers. Every day, a multitude of people, ranking from the poorest to the wealthiest, from workers to tourists, goes to the *Hawker Centers* of Singapore. Here, for a few Singaporean dollars, you can pick your favourite food with plenty of choice off the multi-ethnic stalls and sit in the shared tables, enjoying your meal surrounded by many other customers and passers-by.



Singapore, Chinatown Food Street. (Fonte: <https://pixabay.com/photos/singapore-chinatown-3057916/>).

But hey! Do not even start thinking that this street food isn't good or of doubt quality just because it is very very cheap. In 2016, indeed, a miracle (actually the second going on in our story) happened: two stalls located in the Hawker Centers of Singapore, the *Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice and Noodle* and the *Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle*, received one of the much-desired Michelin stars. Afterwards, forty more stalls were awarded a star and also the *Bib Gourmand* (the award given to restaurants that offer great food at reasonable prices).

This extraordinary miracle was also recognized by UNESCO which, in 2020, added the *Hawker Centers* of Singapore to the Representative List of intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity under the name of "Hawker Culture in Singapore: community dining and culinary practices in a multicultural urban context". The *Hawker Centers* have been recognized as "community dining areas" for any pocket, where people of different social background gather to share the experience of food but also to enjoy shared seating areas where they can play, read or just faff about. The *Hawker Centers* also play a crucial role in enhancing the interactions of an extremely heterogeneous community, thus reinforcing a fragile social framework.

And now, let's move on and talk about serious stuff. What food can be found in the *Hawker Centers*? It is quite difficult to define a local cooking due to east influences from China, Malaysia, India and Indonesia, which through the years have unavoidably blended with a more westernized flow. Among the most characteristic dishes of Chinese derivations, the *Gai Lan*, or broccoli in oyster sauce. The recipe consists in boiled Chinese cauliflower tops garnished with a thick sauce made with simple syrup and soy sauce, powdered onion, oyster sauce, sesame oil and finished with the inevitable sautéed garlic cloves.



Of Korean descent, the beefsteak is served raw on a red-hot plate placed on a wooden platter; the customer is free to personalize the cooking time between *blue* and *well-done*, by eating it immediately or leaving it to slow-cook on the heat. Standing ovation to the *Tom Yum Soup*, Thai-derived dish, prepared with shrimps, mushrooms, tomatoes, onions, garlic, ginger, lime juice and leaves, lemongrass, fish sauce, coriander, chili, red hot chili sauce, sugar and condensed milk (the latter ingredient introduced by the British in colonial times).

*Tom Yum Soup.*  
(Fonte:  
<https://pixabay.com/photos/tom-yum-soup-tai-food-soup-6126147/>).



This soup is a real classic and it is served also outside the *Hawker Centers*; in the *Orchard Towers*, located in the Singaporean shopping avenue, you can certainly find one of the best. Although prostitution is illegal and homosexuality considered a crime, alongside the soup, the *Orchard Towers* offers kind "companies", waiting to be bought for the evening with an expensive *Lady Drink* in the red-light bars of the *Four Floors of Whores*. A mix of Philippine music bands, Asian prostitutes and Thai Ladyboy, which brings us to mind the warm atmospheres of the unforgettable scene of the *danse de couple*, directed by Peter Bogdanovich in the movie *Saint Jack*: Shirley Bassey, with her sensual voice, on the notes of "Goldfinger" swings the dance between a platinum blonde Chinese and a Thai transgender. The show was a gift from Jack Flowers – together with a Cuban cigar and a Scotch whisky – to his Western guest as a warm welcoming to Singapore.



*Frutto of durian.* (Fonte:  
<https://pixabay.com/photos/singapore-durian-fruit-juicy-food-314915/>).

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As for original local food, however, a few exceptions are worth of mentioning. The *durian*, for instance, is a tropical fruit characterized by a prominent feature, which overcomes all the others by an extra mile: the stench. The disgusting smell of this fruit costed an expensive toll: it cannot be carried on public transport or brought inside hotels. There is not much we can actually say about this funny fruit because it is rare to meet someone who dared to taste it (...or survived after such a dare!).

Fortunately, the name of the city of Singapore has been, however, associated to something tastier and more appealing. Ngiam Tong Boon was the bartender of the prestigious Raffles Hotel (the hotel named after Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, the founder of the city of Singapore – 1819). In 1915, almost a century after the foundation of the city of Singapore, Ngiam invented the cocktail *Singapore Sling*.

Today, the cocktail is in the list of IBA classics; a well-done *Singapore Sling* needs Gin (invented in Italy), Heering Cherry Liqueur (Danish liquor), Triple sec (French distillate), Bénédictine (a digestive made in Normandy), Grenadine (pomegranate, fruit of South-Asian origin), lime juice (Asian citrus), pineapple juice (Caribbean fruit) and Angostura (a bitter made in Venezuela by the Prussian doctor Siegert). We undoubtedly gather the idea that Ngiam elaborated its *Singapore Sling* to pay honour to the cosmopolitan and multicultural character of Singapore!



*Singapore sling.* (Fonte: <https://pixabay.com/photos/singapore-sling-cocktail-thailand-5947604/>).

For its many contradictions and its unusual lifestyle, Singapore certainly requires a good open-mindedness and strong guts. Emerged from the fusion of multiple Far Eastern cultures and forged by severe British colonialism, the city has launched into a wild race to compete with the most powerful industrialized capitals in the world. In an effort to attract business and increase GDP, Singapore dazzles and enchants with its glittering attractions and the promise of a more modern world than modernity itself. Too bad, however, that around the corner, to put it in Banksy's words, the dust keeps being hidden under the carpet! Singapore, indeed, clumsily tries to hide the trash that herself produces; the same waste that, however, collectively define such an irresistible cosmopolitan character.



In conclusion, Singapore is a city that opens new roads to the interpretation of urban phenomena and digs alternative underground tunnels to the impeccable perfection of the surface. From the cheapest Michelin-starred dish in the world and a Ladyboy as seductive as cheeky, in Singapore there is something for everyone's taste!

*Post scriptum.* Once again, the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has imposed severe travelling restrictions to the author. This article was written thanks to the precious help of Mrs E. and Mister G, who collaborated by sharing their stories as direct witnesses and great connoisseurs of the city of Singapore, of its traditions and the inimitable street food. Mrs. R.'s wit has contributed to the interpretation of cosmopolitan phenomena. Thank you, guys!

### English translation by Ester Badami

#### REFERENCES FOR CITATION

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