

THE East has always been associated with good food – the adjoining East Coast Road, Joo Chiat Road and Siglap area forming a holy trinity of dining hangouts. Tanjong Katong Road isn't sitting out on the action with a new influx of F&B and cultural hideouts springing up in the past year or so; giving the street its own identity as it enters the fray.

While Tanjong Katong may traditionally be associated with the Eurasian and Peranakan community, an eclectic mix of F&B outlets occupying the quaint shophouses lining the street these days has progressively been popping up. Apart from traditional coffee shops, there are "Hawkers Food 2.0" – famous brands that have grown too big for the cramped stalls of hawker centres, and are looking to expand into a chain of eateries armed with their well-guarded recipes. It started with the ever-popular Punggol Nasi Lemak, which is mobbed the moment they open at 5.30pm.

But the competition is heating up with new tenants Ng Ah Sio Bak Kut Teh (from Rangoon Road) and Eng's Noodle House (from Dunman Food Centre) which serves wonton mee. A stone's throw away, there's an air of colonial times with Big Bad Wolf and Smiths Authentic British Fish and Chips, both serving pub grub and catering to the expats there. They're joined by a new outlet of Bar Bar Black Sheep (their fourth) which officially opened just last week at the other end of the street.

Elsewhere, there's a smattering of desert places such as Cupcakes with Love (which also sells quaint little teapot sets) and Ice Cream Gallery, both of which opened in the last 12 months. But it's not just a food street; for health buffs, there's Boxing Fitness: Muay Thai which moved from Big Splash at East Coast Park five years ago.

"There are more people on this street now, and we are able to draw more people down," says owner Timothy Kao of Big Bad Wolf. He does not see the newer eateries as competition, but rather as part of a movement which will grow the area as a food and hangout haven.

Agrees Priscilla Long, owner of cafe With a Pinch of Salt: "It was much quieter back then. Right now, Tanjong Katong is very happening". The cafe has been on the street for four years, and while business initially suffered a little with the newcomers, things are now back to normal, reveals Ms Long.

That's probably because the crowd is as eclectic as the food, and there's always something for everyone. From expatriates to families, local to international school students, teachers and even bohemian types, proprietors have observed a good mix of clients which bolsters their business. "It's a very weird area – there are really local F&B places, then there are those that expats like to go to, and they are all doing well," says owner of Bar Bar Black Sheep Bernard Ng, who adds the existing semi-detached houses just behind the street means businesses have a captive audience.

Agrees Smiths' Sean McKenna: "Tanjong Katong has a nice mix of all things



YEN MENG JIN



WALK-IN ART
Art and design collective PHUNK (far left) shifts its focus to fine art with exhibitions drawing a hip Katong crowd (left), who flock to view pieces such as Yeo Wanqi's Notice Unnoticed (above), produced under the mentorship of local artist Kumari Nahappan, known for her outsized sculptural statements weighing tonnes



ECLECTIC MIX
With a critical mass of affluent residents, speciality shops such as Cupcakes with Love (top), Ice Cream Gallery (above) and Boxing Fitness: Muay Thai (left) are thriving on the energy along Tanjong Katong's frenetic thoroughfare

Foodies look East

Tanjong Katong allures with its many splendoured haunts. **By Tan Teck Heng**

and it felt like an up-and-coming place: homely feel, open environment, and a convergence of all the ethnic races." Adds Bruno Soligny of Bruno's Pizzeria & Grill: "I noticed there're a lot of condos being built here, which means more business, so this is a good location."

That's the reason outfits are now plunging into the azure waters of Tanjong Katong – as the area develops, they are seeing gaps for business opportunities everywhere. "My shop is the one and only Muay Thai centre in the East," says Yeo of Boxing Fitness. While demand for this particular sport has dropped a little, Mr Yeo still has loyal clients who are looking for a fun way to keep fit. "Also, this location is good because if they want to go for a run, there is a park down the road behind our shop – very convenient," he says.

Even art and design collective PHUNK has shifted their premises to a 1,800 sq ft lot on the street. "There are no galleries here in the east, and there are many affluent and cultured people here – they'll come," says artist and partner Jackson Tan.

The move also marks a new beginning – PHUNK lost their furniture and 17 years of archived artist prints when the commercial warehouse they were stored in during the shift caught fire. The clean white look of their new studio and gallery space can be said to represent their rise from the ashes of the traumatic loss. "It inspired us to think differently," says Mr Tan of the accident. "We used to work more like a design studio, but now we're doing more fine art, and the space is going to be an artist-in-residence kind of space, and all our

fixtures are modular – it can be used as a gallery, a workshop, or as an events space."

It's currently hosting art exhibition *Transmission: Kaleidoscope*, which features works by young artists trying their hands at a new medium out of their comfort zones under the supervision of a veteran mentor.

Tanjong Katong's historic architecture is also proving to be a draw. "There's the charm of the shophouses, with high ceilings and wooden beams," says Big Bad Wolf's Mr Kao. "A shopping mall has higher traffic, but everything is cookie-cutter and very generic; we want to be in a neighbourhood where we can get to know our regulars and provide them a service."

A lot of our friends in the creative line are all moving to the east," adds PHUNK's Mr Tan. "I guess it's just a really nice place – it's near the beach, you can cycle or jog there, and it's got a bohemian and chill-out vibe, and it's very historical, which provides inspiration."

Add to that, Tanjong Katong's proximity to the city makes it ideal for Smiths' Mr McKenna, who says: "It takes like 10 minutes to get from town to here."

Agrees Eng's co-owner and chef Desmond Wong: "Easily 80 to 90 per cent of our clients are new ones since we have shifted – some even seem to be the Shenton Way types, and we are very happy with that."

"Most Singaporeans know Tanjong Katong Road," says Desmond Ng of Eng's Noodle House who set up shop only three weeks ago. "It's easier to convey the message that we have shifted to this new loca-

tion rather than somewhere less well-known."

And PHUNK's Mr Tan is confident that the area will be the next hotspot, joining the likes of Haji Lane and Chinatown which were places they were previously located at. "We don't orchestrate it, but somehow, wherever we go, the place changes," he says. "Maybe it's our foresight, or perhaps it's our branding and people follow us, but we are always at the right place and at the right time – and we feel that Tanjong Katong is the next place."

Which is why it's becoming increasingly difficult to get a shopfront on the street: the owners of Eng's and Bar Bar Black Sheep eyed specific lots for two years before stepping in. "After finding out that this space is up for rent, I immediately called up the agent to schedule a meeting the next morning," says Eng's Mr Ng. "Within 12 to 16 hours, I had already signed the contract."

It's because parking and F&B permits are major issues to contend with. Bar Bar Black Sheep's Mr Ng observes that some outfits have difficulty loading and unloading goods, for instance.

That's why F&B brands that are looking to set up shop must bank on securing spaces that already come with the relevant permits and licences, because applying for a Change of Use approval can be complicated. Many of the newer outlets like Eng's for instance moved into spaces occupied by ex-F&B businesses that have either closed or moved out. And because it's a residential area, liquor licences restrict sales of alcohol to midnight.

Eng's Noodle House
287 Tanjong Katong Road
9am to 11pm; closed on alternate Mondays

FOR many, the crowning glory of Singapore's traditional cuisine is cheap and good hawker fare, but stuffy, rundown hawker centres can mar one's meal.

That's why a growing number of successful hawkers – like Eng's Noodle House – are shifting to alternative premises like shophouse lots, and serving up a concept alongside their signature dishes. Eng's new outlet along Tanjong Katong Road (it was previously fondly known as the "famous wonton mee stall" in Dunman Food Centre) boasts multiple ceiling fans for ventilation and custom-made benches to recreate the feel of being served at a roadside hawker stall in the old days.

As an added service, the staff carry a signboard to alert customers to "summon aunties" or parking enforcement officers sightings. What's more, prices are kept low at \$4 for a normal bowl with very substantial amount of noodles and wontons. "I don't want to insult my customers, and have people say that Eng's is getting more expensive because it's going upmarket – there's no point selling noodles at \$7," says Desmond Ng, who resigned from his previous occupation in IT sales to take over the business from his father Thomas Ng.

"I want to continue with the business because I want to give my father something to be proud of," says the younger Mr Ng. "When he drinks kopi at the coffee-shop I want the other uncles to say, 'Wah Eng, your noodles are now famous ah!'"

While Mr Ng senior used to prepare the egg noodles and char siew himself, Eng's now gets a supplier to do it because of issues surrounding F&B permits. However, the recipes are still the same – Mr Ng says



OODLES OF TASTE

Eng's Noodle House, previously hailed the "famous wonton mee stall" in Dunman Food Centre, is all the rage in its new Katong address where foodies scarf down its closely guarded family recipe of char siew noodles and plump, fresh wontons (above)

a slightly heftier price for noodles and char siew customised to his specifications.

To get the right consistency, noodles are blanched alternately in boiling and cold water. The sauce for the dry version is a savoury blend with a strong hint of pork lard, and it isn't too sweet. "If it's too sweet, it spoils the taste," says Mr Ng. "I also don't use vinegar – it's very bad for the body."

And unlike other incarnations of the Cantonese dish, the noodles are flavourful enough to stand on their own without chilli sauce, so a bottle is available for custom-

Bar Bar Black Sheep
362 Tanjong Katong Road
11am to 12am, kitchen opens from 12pm to 10pm

ALONGSIDE traditional coffee shops and old-school convenience stores such as Katong News Agency sits the fourth newly minted outlet of Bar Bar Black Sheep.

Launched just last week, it's already gaining a reputation for its bustling evening crowds. While it may look polished with a black interior, red ceilings, artfully exposed brick and sleek wooden furniture – complete with a selection of draft beers and wines – the concept is really something quite familiar to the average Singaporean.

"We try to be an upmarket coffee shop," says owner Bernard Ng, and it was inspired by a question he asked himself: Why do coffee shops always have to have the same plastic chairs and tables? Why can't we get proper furniture and better quality food that's pricier but still cheaper than a restaurant?"

That's why Mr Ng only directly runs the drinks and service side of the business, and leases out kitchen space to independent F&B operators such as Shaan Northern Indian, as well as two others specialising in Thai and Western cuisine.

"We try to keep our prices low so the food is value for money," says Mr Ng, pointing out that most dishes – which come in sizeable portions – cost around



UPTOWN COFFEE SHOP

Bar Bar Black Sheep's Katong outlet is the fourth on the island, and it has prided itself on catering to a select clientele who are drawn to a rustic ambience. Their butter chicken with garlic naan (right) and spicy green curry beef burger (above) are crowd-pleasers

\$10. So he's not worried about bleating the competition down the street, which is generally considered a food haven.

He tells BT Weekend that the northern Indian dishes are a hit with the expatriate crowd, and it's not a surprise after a sampling of Mutton Mysore, which gets three bags full on a rating scale. The lamb melts in your mouth, and it's stewed in a sauce that's just spicy enough to leave a tingling warmth.

Then there are also fusion dishes such as spicy green curry burger, which despite sounding exotic tastes like comfort food. It's a tad too salty, but the ground beef has

ers who can choose the amount of spice they want. But be warned: it's made from an especially potent formula which suits Peranakan taste buds, so add it sparingly, advises Mr Ng.

In addition, the wontons are so tasty that Mr Ng has received a request from a French private caterer to cater for a party of 80.

Expansion plans are on the cards – Desmond is looking to set up at least two more storefronts, with one in a central location. To attract quality local chefs, he's also envisioning a semi-air conditioned central kitchen that can prepare Eng's own noodles and char siew in the future.

But "the recipe is the most important – it cannot change", says the older Mr Ng, who prioritises taste over business.

"My wonton mee is really the traditional type," he says, so it's no surprise that it won the Hawker Masters awards just last year, beating two other popular contenders. "It's made like this all the way – straight from my father's hands," says the man who's guarded his father's recipe for more than 50 years.

That's why the kitchen is slightly understaffed right now – it's hard to find chefs who meet Ng senior's high standards. Considering that business has increased three to four times from its hawker centre days, the father-son duo are working long hours to get orders to the table.

"We are very new and have only set up shop for the past three weeks, and we try our best to meet customers' demands," says Mr Ng, "and we sincerely apologise to disappointed customers who did not get to eat our food".

So for those thinking about making a trip down to sample Eng's noodles, arm yourselves with oodles of patience – waiting time can go up to 20 minutes. You may even need to share tables, but it's well worth the trouble. **TTH**



the flavour of a home-cooked meal. The new space at Tanjong Katong holds true to Bar Bar Black Sheep's style: "We like the traditional two-storey shophouse and we've got a corner lot, so it's more spacious. A shopping mall won't suit our laid-back concept. That's why I like it!" says Mr Ng.

He continues: "We try to look for residential areas that are a bit more upmarket – if we're located in the heartlands I don't think we will work as well." **TTH** tthan@sph.com.sg

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Ng Ah Sio Bak Kut Teh
248 Tanjong Katong Road
10am to 11pm daily

WITH many of Ng Ah Sio Bak Kut Teh's customers living in the east travelling all the way to the main store in Rangoon Road for a meal, it seems like only a matter of time before the eatery decided to set up shop in Tanjong Katong. And it did exactly that recently, making it the third branch (after another at Marina Bay Sands) to be opened by the Jumbo Group of Restaurants which now oversees Ng Ah Sio's extension.

The brand has been Mr Ng Siak Hai's pride and joy since 1977 and he's been wearing his fingers to the bone carving out a reputation for his black pepper soup over the years. The new outlet occupies the space of a former pub; its interior maintains a traditional authentic ambience with marble-topped round tables and old Chinese-style stools giving the place a warm and cosy environment.

"Restaurant ambience matters as we value our ability to bond with people through food. We do this through striving to provide great taste and service," says Ang Kiam



SOUP HAVEN

Ng Siak Hai (left), founder of Ng Ah Sio, outside the newly opened Katong outlet; the eatery in the 1970s (above); and its famed Bak Kut Teh spread (right)



Meng, CEO of Jumbo Group of Restaurants. He adds, "Since we are located in Katong which is culturally rich, we decided to promote the locality's Peranakan heritage by featuring custom-made tile designs and restoring the old shophouse with modern comforts such as air-conditioning and new restrooms."

Indeed, Ng Ah Sio's expansion to Tanjong Katong follows other established names in F&B which target diners looking for affordable meals (the usual soup ranges from \$5.50 to \$8.50, depending on the grade of ribs). Despite the competition, the outlet has been drawing the crowds daily.

From pork ribs to braised pig's large intestines and the latest offering, braised duck, Ng Ah Sio is constantly reinventing itself by expanding its menu. And, says Mr Ang: "By the fourth quarter of this year, we would be opening the fourth Ng Ah Sio outlet."

With expansion in mind, quality control between the different outlets is crucial. Mr Ang is quick to assure customers that the food in all outlets are prepared from a central kitchen. "We are very strict on quality control measures to ensure the consistency of our signature tastes," says Mr Ang. "This extends from the spices used to the freshest choice of meat and other ingredients."

And you can tell from the taste – when piping hot, the clear broth done Teo-chew-style is a potent brew.

It's pretty ironic though that the dish – traditionally prescribed in Singapore's early days by Chinese physicians for coolies who could not afford tonics to boost their constitutions – is now becoming a mid-market delicacy.

But spanking new air-conditioned premises also mean that diners can now tuck into a bowl of sinus-clearing bak kut teh without working up too much of a sweat.

By Aaron Justin Tan
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