



Pork and spice and all things nice

Bak kut teh – literally translated as ‘pork rib tea’ – is a comforting soup for the Singaporean soul, a meaty broth of fork-tender pork ribs slow cooked with a plethora of Chinese herbs and spices. Served with rice and dough fritters on the side, the meat is dipped in black soya sauce with chilli and enjoyed at any time of the day from breakfast to late night supper.

But where do you get the best bak kut teh in Singapore? After a round of intense voting, the following have emerged as winners in The Business Times/Knight Frank CEOs' Hawker Choices 2012. **BT Weekend** does its taste test.

Founder Rou Gu Cha
347 Balestier Road ☎ 6352 6192
Open 12pm-2pm, 6pm-2.30am.
Closed on Tuesdays

THE walls are plastered with pictures of satisfied customers – smiling movie stars and TV personalities from China, Hong Kong and Singapore – and the dimly lit interior looks like it could use some help from the lighting shops nearby, but then no one goes to Founder Rou Gu Cha for the atmosphere.

Founder, as it is commonly known, sits at the top of the *bak kut teh* heap, at least as far as the bosses surveyed by BT are concerned. And that makes Chua Chwee Whatt – the “Founder” in question – a happy man.

In the early 1970s, Mr Chua, 67, was a pig farmer in Seletar – one of the last of a

dying breed – who enjoyed going regularly to *bak kut teh* stalls. He tried many places but felt that most of them were lacking in quality, mainly due to poor raw ingredients. So he decided cook the dish himself, using his own pigs.

Mr Chua was born in the Choa Chu Kang area, and he felt comfortable testing his recipes out on friends from the old neighbourhood. His recipes were self-taught, so he called himself Founder. By the late 1970s, he had started a small shop there, and business was good. Later, government redevelopment meant he had to move from Choa Chu Kang, and he also had to give up his farm. By 1988, he had reinvented himself as a full-time restaurateur.

Meat from seven-month-old pigs is the best for pork rib soup, says Mr Chua, whose father was also a pig farmer from Fujian province. If the animals are slaugh-



tered too young, the meat is less tasty; too old, and the colour of the meat will be a little too dark, he says. He is also adamant that drinking tea before consuming *bak kut teh* enhances the flavour of the soup.

Not surprisingly, the pork ribs at Founder are tasty, if a little less tender than at other places, while the soup is clear and light, sweet and less peppery. A portion of regular pork ribs is priced at \$6, while the longer, flatter prime ribs favoured by the younger generation goes for \$8. The preserved vegetables are served with finely chopped garlic and this dish is a perfect accompaniment to the main attraction.

Mr Chua is still a permanent fixture at Founder, which he runs with son Chua Cheah Koon. A daughter looks after a branch of the restaurant at nearby Rangoon Road, which opened last year. The pork rib soup business is rewarding but hard work, says Mr Chua. “As a pig farmer, I had more free time in the evenings – with *bak kut teh* the hours are a lot longer.”

By Geoffrey Eu

STILL THE BEST

Left: Founder Bak Kut Teh dishes up tasty ribs, if a little less tender than at other places, while the soup is clear and light, sweet and less peppery. Chua Chwee Whatt is still a permanent fixture at the Balestier Road outlet, which he runs together with son Chua Cheah Koon



ALL PHOTOS BY YEN MENG JIN

APPEALING

Left and above: Ng Ah Sio is the quintessential modernized version of a humble food stall made good, with an intense, peppery soup and in-house blended tea that cuts through the fat.



Ng Ah Sio Pork Ribs Soup Eating House
208 Rangoon Road
Opening hours 6am-2pm
Closed on Mondays

If Founder is a typical family-run business, Ng Ah Sio is the quintessential modernised version of a humble food stall made good, so good in fact that it has been bought over by the Jumbo Seafood group – a move akin perhaps to a decent Premier League team being funded by oil money from the Middle East and elevated to another level altogether.

All the trappings of a well-organised corporate enterprise are there, including a slick retro-style interior, service staff hooked up with microphones and the restaurant's back story printed in large bold-face letters along one wall. The restaurant location on the quiet end of Rangoon Road still exudes some local charm however, and the *bak kut teh* at Ng Ah Sio is still one of the best in town.

The intensely peppery soup imparts a solid rush that will jolt you awake faster than anything from a high-falluting gourmet coffee joint. The ribs are notably tender, and the in-house blended tea – sweeter and less bitter than the usual – serves as a good counterpoint by cutting through the fattiness in the meat and soup.

Ng Ah Sio's story is well-documented. Its origins date back to the 1950s, when the business was started by Ng Mui Song (Ah Sio's dad), who operated a pushcart stall in the River Valley area catering to labourers who worked in the godowns there. In 1977, Ah Sio moved to a stall in New World Amusement Park and worked out a new recipe, enhancing the pepper taste.

The restaurant is a popular destination for locals and out-of-towners alike. On any given morning, camera-toting tourists can be spotted sitting down to a meal of the signature spare ribs (\$8) or regular pork ribs (\$5.50).

The meat is very tender and although the accompanying dishes have an assembly-line quality to them, the appeal is hard to dispute. **GE**

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The Business Times/Knight Frank CEOs' Hawker Choices 2012 is a guide to the best street food in Singapore as chosen by Singapore's top executives.

How it works

A master panel of 10 distinguished professionals (listed below) created a master list of hawkers for each food category. This list was subsequently sent out to The Business Times' CEO Club, comprising all the top management of companies based in Singapore, who were invited to vote for their favourite stalls. The stalls with the most votes are then visited by BT Weekend's food reviewers and featured in a weekly spread in the Living section. The objective of this series is to create an unbiased guide to the best hawker food in Singapore, as well as create a platform to help preserve the old cooking traditions that are in danger of dying out. This series will run for 24 weeks, after which the content will be compiled into a guidebook, with sales proceeds to go towards furthering this and other charitable causes.

Our master panel members

Tan Tiong Cheng (chairman, Knight Frank Pte Ltd)
Alan Chan (CEO, Singapore Press Holdings)
Chong Siak Ching (CEO, Ascendas)
Elim Chew (president/founder of 77th Street)
Edmund Koh (chief executive of Singapore wealth management division, UBS)
Professor Tommy Koh (Ambassador-at-Large, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Singapore)
Kwek Leng Peck (executive director, Hong Leong Asia)
Allen Lew (CEO, SingTel)
Ng Lang (CEO, URA)
Philip Ng (CEO, Far East Organization)
Seah Kian Peng (CEO, NTUC Fairprice Co-operative Ltd)