

THE BUSINESS TIMES

SINGAPORE

BT Living

Pork and spice and all things nice

2,429 words

22 September 2012

Business Times Singapore

STBT

English

(c) 2012 Singapore Press Holdings Limited

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

Tel 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 slaughtered 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."

Geoffrey Eu

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 boldface 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-faluting 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.

Geoffrey Eu

Outram Ya Hua Rou Gu Cha

7 Keppel Road #01-05/07, PSA Tanjong Pagar Complex.

Tel 6222 9610

Open 6am-4am, closed on Mondays

The popular place known as Outram Ya Hua is another impressive looking operation, run like a large local-style restaurant and occupying a sizeable space on the ground floor of a nondescript building on Keppel Road, in the shade of an AYE/ECP flyover. At noon, there is a quiet buzz in the restaurant and the sound of constant traffic just beyond the tables that line the railing along the length of the restaurant. It builds to a crescendo by 1pm, when just about every table is filled.

The restaurant seats around 200 and features a clipboard-style menu with 23 dishes listed on it, including just about every pig part imaginable. There are also several braised items on offer, including pig's trotters and fried bean curd. For variety, there is also fresh sliced fish soup and tang oh (Garland Chrysanthemum) soup.

The soup - the Teochew version commonly found in Singapore is made from boiling pork bones with garlic and pepper - is peppery but not overwhelmingly so, with an underlying sweetness to it. The meat is tender and tasty enough but the soup, served in shallow bowls, is likely to cool down rather too quickly - which is one of the reasons why all **bak kut teh** establishments offer a "top-up" soup service to keep the meat immersed in liquid and the customers immersed in liquid enjoyment.

It is commonly acknowledged that the best time to eat **bak kut teh** is in the early morning - preferably for breakfast rather than supper, of course - and that you should have a cup of kung fu tea beforehand to cleanse the palate. At Outram Ya Hua though, there is a steady stream of customers throughout the day - ample testimony to its lasting appeal as an all-day (and night) type of cuisine.

Geoffrey Eu

Old Tiong Bahru Bak Kut Teh

Block 58 Seng Poh Road #01-31

Tel 6224 4990

Open 6.30am-9pm. Closed on Mondays.

While there's certainly something to be said for the "big" players in the **bak kut teh** business, it's also nice to go to a neighbourhood kopi tiam for an old-fashioned fix. One such place is Old Tiong Bahru **Bak Kut Teh**, in a corner space facing Tiong Bahru Market. It's been run by Tay Chiew Lang and her husband Ko Kok Yong for more than 20 years and according to her, they offer the "least pork smell" soup in the business.

Singapore-born Madam Tay's parents were hawkers who had a Teochew porridge stall in Wayang Street. Her older brother taught her a recipe for pork rib soup and she's been dispensing her version of it over the years, tweaking it every now and then but keeping the same basic stock. She orders a fresh supply of pork daily from four different suppliers.

The soup here is clean tasting, less peppery and sweeter than normal, while the ribs are tasty and tender. The preserved vegetable and braised trotter dishes are particularly noteworthy. There is a distinctly non-assembly-line feel to the place, with a regular clientele made up from neighbourhood "uncles" who come during the early morning. According to Mdm Tay, they always order the regular pork rib (\$7.50) while the newbies will go for the premium ribs (\$6), where the meat is more tender.

Geoffrey Eu

Sin Heng Claypot Bak Koot Teh

439 Joo Chiat Road

Tel 6345 8754

Open 7am-4am. Closed on Mondays

Sin Heng is a singular tale of three sisters and two versions of **bak kut teh**. The story started in 1983 when the appropriately named Tey sisters - Sue Hua, Chui Hua and Siew Hua, who hail from Pontian in Johor - started a stall in Bedok Reservoir serving Teochew (pepper-based) and Hokkien (herb-based) version of the dish.

The sisters were working in non-culinary fields but had the opportunity to learn the dish from a relative who owned a stall in Owen Road. They developed their own recipes and emerged with the "special herbal" claypot (\$8, \$12, \$20 and \$30, depending on size), which feature ribs cooked in a herb-based soup with pig's liver, kidney and stomach as well as mushrooms, vegetables and beancurd skin. A more restrained prime rib version is priced slightly lower.

The Teochew version of the soup features a more peppery taste, although there is a distinctly herbal edge to it. The colour of the soup is also noticeably darker. As advertised, the dishes are served in claypots, with the soup bubbling in the pot. "Serving the food in claypots is different - it keeps the soup warmer for a longer time and also brings out the flavour of the ingredients better," says Alan Soo, son of Sue Hua and a member of the second generation cooking team, along with his cousin Adrian Neo.

Geoffrey Eu

Ya Hua Bak Kut Teh

#01-01 Isetan Office Building 593 Havelock Road

Tel 6235 7716

Open Tues and Thurs, 11am to 2am Wed, Fri and Sat, 11am to 3am Sun 11am to 10pm. Closed on Mon

Diners know they are in for some good **bak kut teh** when they can smell the fragrant soup in the air even before entering this no-frills restaurant.

Owner Gwee Peck Hua who has over 40 years experience cooking **bak kut teh**, learnt the ropes from the late Ng Mui Song, father of Ng Ah Sio, who has outlets at Rangoon Road and Tanjong Katong Road.

When he died, Mdm Gwee was encouraged by regular customers to set up her own shop, and she opened Ya Hua at Outram Park in 1992. The shop moved to Havelock 10 years ago.

Mdm Gwee cooks the Teochew-style **bak kut teh**, which is a clear and peppery soup. She begins cooking the broth, made from pork bones, pork ribs, garlic and ground peppercorn, an hour before business starts. New batches are continually made during the day.

The garlic and pepper provide just enough kick without overpowering the sweet and tasty broth. Another plus: no worries of having garlic breath after.

Prices start from \$6 for an individual portion of **bak kut teh** with five pieces of spare ribs. The meat is lean and tender, and only Indonesian pork is used as "it is tastier", says Mdm Gwee. She also recommends the prime ribs, from \$7.50 a bowl, as they have some fat on them, "so they are juicier".

Other popular items on the menu include the liver soup, for \$6.50, which comes slightly bloody, and the kidney soup for \$7.50. "Cleaning the kidney well to get rid of the smell takes time so we charge a bit more," says Mdm Gwee.

The salted vegetables, \$2 a portion, and the dough fritters, for \$1.50, are also popular add-ons. The dough fritters thankfully do not have a rancid oil taste.

The broth is best drunk steaming hot, making it most comforting to have on a rainy day. But even the current hot days are not keeping hungry diners away, judging from a recent lunch crowd.

Tay Suan Chiang

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)

APPEALING 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. - PHOTO BY YEN MENG JIIN

Document STBT000020120921e89m0000u