

341 of 1000 DOCUMENTS

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Hawker food fan; Nothing stands between Prof **Lily Kong** and her passion for hawker food

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PROFESSOR **Lily Kong** loves hawker food so much that even a fainting spell could not stand between her and a bowl of her favourite pig's organ soup from Tiong Bahru Market.

The fit of dizziness happened in 1989, when the National University of Singapore (NUS) vice-provost (education) was at the market for breakfast.

She had just returned the night before from a wintry London, where she was pursuing her doctoral degree, and says the sudden weather change and jet lag made her go weak in the knees.

Eyes widening, the 42-year-old says: 'I was thinking, 'Oh no, I'm going to faint.' So I immediately sat down to rest. But as soon as I felt well enough, I was off buying all the hawker food I'd been craving.'

Indeed, it is this deep-seated passion for hawker fare that made her jump at the opportunity to write a commemorative book on the development of hawker centres when she was approached by the National Environment Agency, which manages the food centres.

Titled Singapore Hawker Centres - People, Places, Food, the 176-page book was launched earlier this month.

The geography professor says: 'There are many well-known guides to hawker centre food, but there isn't a readable, accurate and well-researched book that recognises hawker centres as a social institution and distinctive landscape icon in Singapore.'

To keep the book lively, she peppers it with interesting anecdotes, including an account by Mr Goh Chin Tong, the former head of the hawkers department, on his skirmishes with illegal hawkers as a young public health inspector, which included choppers being swung about.

After spending eight months researching the book and visiting some three dozen of the 113 hawker centres here, Dr **Kong**, who is single, maintains that her love for hawker grub has not waned.

'Hawker centres are a convenient source of food, which I grew up eating. And it's what I miss when I'm away from Singapore.'

Which is your favourite hawker centre?

I've known Tiong Bahru Market since I was a child and I love the food there. I grew up near Gillman Heights but my mother, who lived in Tiong Bahru in her younger days and was friendly with the market vendors there, would return weekly to do her grocery shopping with me and my siblings in tow. If we behaved ourselves, we'd be treated to pig's organ soup and ondeh ondeh (coconut-filled glutinous rice balls) from the hawker centre. Those stalls are still in operation.

What are some hawker foods you enjoy?

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Fried Hokkien noodles and chicken satay from the West Coast Drive Hawker Centre, ondeh ondeh, chwee kueh (steamed rice cakes with fried preserved radish bits) and pig's organ soup from Tiong Bahru Market and prawn noodles from the hawker centre at Old Airport Road.

Having written a book about hawker centres, do you often get asked to recommend hawker centres to dine at?

Yes, I do. For those looking to find a hawker centre with great ambience, I'd recommend the East Coast Lagoon Food Village because it's right by the beach. If food is the criteria, I think Tiong Bahru Market offers a variety of good food. And for foreign visitors, a trip to the Newton Food Centre is a must simply because it has been mentioned in nearly all travel guides on Singapore.

Where do you go for non-hawker fare?

When I have to entertain visitors to the university, I usually host them near the campus. Made In China at the Chinese diaspora museum Hua Song in Pasir Panjang Road is a popular choice and it serves a delicious seafood platter.

When time permits, I also dine at Hua Ting Restaurant in Orchard Hotel for its fine dim sum, Shiro in Greenwood Avenue for its Japanese food and The Tavern Pub and Restaurant in River Valley Road, which serves excellent grilled wagyu beef.

Are you a good cook?

I can cook to feed myself but if you ask my mother, who's Peranakan and a very good cook, she wouldn't think so. That said, I grew up helping her pound chillies and I have inherited some of her recipes, including a dish called otah prawn. It's actually a coconut curry dish that has whole prawns cooked in the same curry paste my family uses for making otah (banana leaf-wrapped fishcake), and it includes dried chillies, shallots and turmeric.

What is your comfort food?

Chicken macaroni, and porridge with century egg and shredded pork. My mother used to feed me these dishes whenever I fell ill as a child, and they always made me feel better. I find them nourishing and tasty, and I crave them when I feel unwell, homesick or jet-lagged.

Which NUS canteen do you like?

The Arts canteen for its beef char kway teow, but the stall closed when the hawker retired in 2000. However, the yong tau foo (stuffed bean curd and vegetables) is good too.

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Singapore Hawker Centres - People, Places, Food is on sale at all major bookstores for \$40.

WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST MEAL BE?

I will have a little of everything: satay, Peking duck, suckling pig, putu piring (steamed rice flour cakes filled with palm sugar), durian and fresh oysters.

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