

U R WAT U EAT

By Dr Toh Han Chong, Editor

Generations X, Y and Z today are famous for downsizing their vocabulary in their daily communication via SMS, social networking and in casual conversation. The other concern is that these next generations are eating more junk food and instant meals that are upsized on unhealthy sugar and fat and downsized on real nutrition.

Urbane friends have pointed me to the joys of eating lovingly prepared food, made from fresh produce and largely organic ingredients. There is now a quiet revolution to improve the way we eat. At Googleplex in California, schools across England whose kitchens have been transformed by chef Jamie Oliver, and at the Cleveland Clinic, Ohio, food is now cooked from the freshest produce and in the healthiest of ways. CEO of Cleveland Clinic, Dr Toby Cosgrove, even expressed that he would not wish to hire any fat people for Cleveland Clinic, a statement that proved controversial. The highlands of Sardinia and the island of Okinawa have some of the world's healthiest people, and the most centenarians. These communities possess very low rates of heart disease and hormone-related cancers. Their secret to longevity include a plant-based diet, being fulfilled and active at work till ripe old ages and not stuffing their faces at meal time, strong social support systems and in the case of the Sardinians, a wine power-packed with polyphenols.

Everytime I dine with Dr Wong Chiang Yin, Guest Editor of this current food-themed issue, he savours his food with such overwhelming epileptic pleasure that I feel like Billy Crystal sitting opposite Meg Ryan in the famous scene in Katz's Deli, New York City, from *When Harry*

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Met Sally, where she goes into escalating vocal spasms of climactic ecstasy. I used to eat to live but thanks to Dr Wong Chiang Yin and other gourmand friends, I am now learning to live to eat, in terms of more slow food than fast food.

Many doctors can mark their medical milestones around food memories. I remember spending my afternoons after kindergarten in Tiong Bahru Polyclinic (it no longer exists today) where my mother used to work. The nurses would take me to buy ice-cream in crunchy colourful cones; my favourites were peanut and sweet corn. As a kid, while my father did cardiology rounds at the Singapore General Hospital (SGH) on Sunday mornings, I used to go up and down the wrought iron Otis lift in the SGH Bowyer Block and buy candy from the nearby provision shop along the corridor run by Mr Ali. Today, Mr Ali is in his sixties, and still runs his hole-in-the-wall shop that has, by a remarkable coincidence, relocated back to the National Heart Centre. He has been in SGH for fifty years, and when I just met

him, he was teary-eyed as he told me that he had been asked to relocate, presumably because of building work that would be taking place around his shop.

In medical school in England, apart from greasy hospital food of usually rubbery roast beef, cold broccoli and cakey potatoes, a regular weekend activity was going down to London's Chinatown to eat *siew yeh** with my friends from Hong Kong. It was easy to spot me, the Singaporean. The Hong Kong students would be suave and cool in dark Hugo Boss trousers, Armani overcoat, Italian loafers and white silk shirts moving stylishly in slow-mo like a scene from *Infernal Affairs*, and *suaku* not-suave-not-cool-me would keep up in Giordano polo shirt, baggy jeans and running shoes. But 80's and 90's England food-wise would be defined by Mad Cow Disease, and those of us beef-eaters living there then had some concerns that, years later, we could end up like lunatic gibberish *gila* monsters with hemiballismus and choreoathetosis.

During my medical student's elective in 7th Division Sarawak deep in the

interior beyond Kapit, I went with a Methodist medical team in a longboat up the Balleh River. One night, banked by the river, the wiry Iban pastor in our team of four went into the dark jungle, fired off a few shots, and we saw the fallen beast – a giant wild boar. While carving up the boar, a revelation stared us in the face. It was a pregnant female. We ate the roast meat in a reflective sombre mood, albeit grateful for the food laid before us, as we only had rice and water on the boat.

The only time I had the privilege of fine dining in all my years in England was my graduation lunch treat by my parents at the Waterside Inn in Bray, perched beautifully on the Thames, and run by the legendary Roux brothers. My preconceptions of cocky wait staff in such posh joints were flung out the window as the restaurant staff were warm, effusive and completely professional. Tasting the amazing food at the Waterside Inn was a Meg-Ryan-in-ecstasy die-die-must-try experience. I imagine the staff of Bumrungrad Hospital, Bangkok, emanate similar hospitality, and there is much hospitals can learn from the best service standards of the food and beverage industry.

As a houseman at the National University Hospital (NUH), I was always grateful for those steaming midnight noodles that medical staff nurses Zarina and TC would offer me after a bone-tiring crazy on-call day in full throttle. I bumped into Zarina, now an NUH oncology nursing officer, at Great World City recently and it was great to catch up. Medical officer postings in Tan Tock Seng Hospital (TTSH) assured routine visits to Whampoa Market and Balestier Road. Year after year, TTSH staff were fed and fuelled with Whampoa Market sugar cane juice, chicken rice and *rojak*.

Thinking back to my research fellowship in Houston, Texas, conjures up smells of Cajun catfish and jambalaya, pizzas the size of car tyres, Goode Company's sizzling BBQ beef brisket and beans and Shipley donuts. And of course the visit to Mexico's Ciudad Juarez, which was a necessary stop to extend my H1B visa. Thankfully, I did not know then that Ciudad Juarez was the most dangerous

city on Earth and the *numero uno* global murder capital. Following a full winter's day in the immigration office that could have come out of a Quentin Tarantino movie, we sat in a run-down Juarez fast food restaurant styled after the big American fast food franchises. The French have asserted that fast food is the most dangerous export of American cultural imperialism, contributing seriously to the global obesity epidemic.

Recently, a local chef asked me to watch the *4 Year Old McDonald's Cheeseburger* on YouTube, which revealed that industrialised fast food sold by supersized monopolistic food companies contained unreal food substances in their meats and French fries, and that their true nutritional value was put into question. Worrying industrial food production practices include cows unnaturally



force-fed on corn instead of grass to overfatten them, dairy animals injected with recombinant growth hormones, chicken pumped up to grow plumper breast meat and become too heavy for their legs to support, animals squashed in unacceptably overcrowded conditions and fed with litres of antibiotics that cause resistance to bacteria, processed meats contaminated by potentially deadly bugs like E. Coli and genetically-modified foods whose real dangers to human health have not been sufficiently evaluated.

After our fried chicken and fries meal, we finally crossed the Rio Grande on foot to El Paso in Texas, together with hordes of Mexicans, and I wondered how many of them would end up in poorly paid jobs as meat-packers in slaughterhouses and as fruit-pickers for these mega-powerful

food corporations, that have been accused of putting profits over people. Ten billion animals per year are killed to feed the insatiable meat-craving appetites of the world's population, and as more animals are reared to industrial strength to supply demand, livestock is now the second highest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions after energy.

The SARS epidemic carried with it images of styrofoam box after styrofoam box of packed meals being transported to the healthcare professionals silo-ed in the various hospitals and centres. We later learned that this mysterious coronavirus was likely transmitted to humans from the civet cat, a delicacy in southern China, an animal that was known to be housed in terrible caged conditions in hot spots like Guangzhou. Even as the Fast Food Nation does its own big belly navel-gazing, the emerging superpower China is now dealing with crises like the melamime-tainted milk, fruits preserved in carcinogens, exported seafood containing putrefying bacteria and fish contaminated with banned chemicals.

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“You are what you eat”, and if this was taken literally, I would resemble a large piece of crispy oily Kentucky Fried Chicken or a fleshy durian. In 2010, I have resolved to eat healthier. Happy New Year! SMA

* *supper*