

SMA NEWS



A PSEUDO-PHILOSOPHICAL
APPROACH TO EATING

PHILOSOPHY OF FOOD

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin, Guest Editor



Snowflake wagyu, special grade karubi beef in Japan.

Many of my friends ask me what my philosophy of food is. Actually, I haven't given much thought to this at all. This is my first attempt articulating my take on food, so please forgive me if some the points made here are not agreeable with you.

We take history from our patients. Taking history is likened to "his story": the patient's story.

Food is no different. Every dish tells a story. Food is an integral part of culture and we learn more of our own and other peoples' culture when we understand this. Many people and guides tell others where to find good food. That is important. But more fundamental is to understand the definition of good food.

The first thing I believe in is that one should always meet food on its own terms. I see many Singaporeans who bring jars of *belachan*, chili and so on and add them liberally to anything they eat while they are overseas having foreign food. This is not meeting the food on its own terms.

Another example is *wanton mee*. I hear comments like, "I don't like the *wanton mee* in Hong Kong: no chili" and other similar refrains. That is trying to make Hong Kong *wanton mee* become Singapore's version. The fascinating world of food becomes a lot smaller when we adopt such an attitude. Food is about diversity and confluence of cultures. Appreciating this diversity and confluence is key to eating well.

Another common example is when you see many Singaporeans eat sushi

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or sashimi in fine Japanese restaurants. At such places, the *nigiri* sushi already comes with a dab of *wasabi* beneath the fish. That is really all the *wasabi* that is needed to enjoy sushi. There is no need to mash a huge glob of *wasabi* into a small plate of soya sauce and then soak the sushi thoroughly in this concoction. In fact, most Japanese do not put any *wasabi* into the soya sauce when eating sushi. They only do so for sashimi and even then, they use only a little. Too much *wasabi* simply masks the flavour

of the rice or the fish. We end up eating *wasabi*, not sushi. I think Singaporeans add much more *wasabi* because we like spicy food and try to make the sushi as spicy as possible, and that maybe we are ignorant as well.

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The next thing is that we need to understand the ingredients and the quality of the ingredients. To do so, we need to have a little knowledge of geography and environment. For example, why do Russians make good vodka, French wine and cognac, Germans beer, Japanese sake, Scottish malt whiskey and so on? The answer is pretty simple if we know it – alcohol is simply the enzymatic process of converting sugar to alcohol. So farmers simply laid their hands on whatever sugars or carbohydrates they could find in their environment and then converted it to alcohol. In Russia, the climate is too cold for grapes and hence potatoes were used. Similarly, this was the case



A little wasabi would do....

for barley in Northern Europe. With the advent of metals that can withstand heat, distillation was discovered and beer could be converted to whiskey, wine into cognac and so on.

Another example is beef. Soft, juicy and flavourful beef is prized. How is that achieved? There are basically two ways but first, we have to understand what makes beef (or any meat) tough. Meat is tough because it is mainly muscle, fascia, fibrous tissue and some fat. Meat gets tough because of fascia and other fibrous tissue content, as well as muscle hypertrophy from muscle use. (Remember anatomy and histology? Useful here too.) Unhealthy fat on the other hand, is soft and flavourful. The Japanese created the famed marbled *wagyu* by giving the cow plenty of rest and lots of food (to fatten it). The animal is massaged often from young. The result is that tough, thick fascia doesn't come into being and fat is found inside the fascia and between the muscle bundles. The meat is soft, hence the Japanese and Chinese term "snowflake beef" to describe top grade *wagyu*.

The Western world, in particular the Americans, have another approach altogether. They also feed the animals well (but not to the same extent as the Japanese). They then hang the beef in cold rooms (not freezing) for a few weeks to induce a slow rot. The rot softens the muscle and fascia. Most of the rotting flesh and fascia is removed before the steak is carved out of good meat. When we eat an aged steak, we are actually eating partially rotting meat (that's the truth folks) and maybe you will notice this the next time you eat an aged steak – the muscle fibres are not as clearly delineated in the cross-section surface of a muscle (say a rib eye or a tenderloin). The next thing is that aged beef doesn't quite bleed even when it's cooked rare. That's because the red blood cells have haemolysed during the ageing process. Dry-ageing also has the important feature of letting water evaporate (as compared to the cheaper wet-ageing method). As water evaporates, flavours concentrate and the steak is tastier. But a 500g dry-aged

steak could have weighed maybe 700g before ageing. That is why a dry-aged steak is so expensive.

But even with ageing, marbling (that is, fat) is still desired for texture and flavour; hence the premium one pays for a sirloin or a rib eye steak. Fatty meat is also more forgiving when it comes to cooking. You can overcook a fat cut but a thin cut will taste terrible.

Another example is that of pasta and sauces. Why do certain sauces go better with certain types of pasta and not with others? Why is angel-hair pasta almost always paired with a light sauce and not with a heavy one? The reasoning behind it can be traced to the flavour-intensity of a sauce versus the surface area-volume ratio of a particular type of pasta. The higher the ratio, the less intense the sauce and vice versa. So an understanding of what sort of ingredients and the environment you are dealing with is important. In fact, bakers, salad bars and Japanese *udon* makers will tell you that even the humidity level is important.

But I have to admit that some other information may actually not be very useful to the enjoyment of food. For example, you may not want to know that the fragrant orange bits of sea urchin (AKA *uni*) you eat in Japanese food are actually the gonads of the echinoderm. Or that the sweet double-boiled Hashima served as dessert at Chinese dinners are



Wagyu beef.

actually the fallopian tubes and uterus of the gravid snow toad.

Understanding the cooking method is the third point in appreciating food for me. Basically cooking (other than when we eat raw food), in its most elemental sense, is really about bringing physical and chemical change in food ingredients through the transference of heat energy. The transfer of heat is by three ways – radiation, conduction and convection. I am no big fan of molecular cuisine, but cooking is really simply the use of a combination of convection, conduction and radiation to change food (primary school science). But to



Live uni sashimi on sale in fish market in Hakodate, Hokkaido.

master cooking or just to appreciate food requires more in-depth knowledge. A simple example is stir-fried vegetables in a wok. A traditional cast-iron wok is shaped such that most of the heat is concentrated in its small centre area. The whole point of stir-frying is that the intense heat concentrated there cooks and desiccates the vegetables quickly, leaving them crunchy and tasty. You really can't do Chinese stir-fry in a saucepan or skillet because the flat surface distributes heat. The result is that water seeps out of the vegetables, together with the ingredients' flavours. Worse still is the teflon-coated wok. The teflon prevents burning precisely because it distributes heat evenly. A teflon wok is useful for frying an omelette or steaming fish but to use it to stir-fry a plate of *kai lan* is almost an oxymoron, if not tragic.

Sometimes, even the conduction properties of the receptacle are important. I remember many lamented that the *meepok* in the old Singapore General Hospital (SGH) Housemen's Canteen tasted different when they used disposable styrofoam bowls instead of the reusable melamine ones during the SARS outbreak. I suspect that was because styrofoam was a poorer conductor of heat than melamine and the *meepok* cooled down too rapidly. The *meepok* tasted better when melamine bowls were used again after SARS. But then again, everything in Housemen's Canteen tasted better after SARS, I suppose.

On the other hand, hotter is not necessarily better. I was taught that steamed fish must always be eaten hot because it will taste fishy when cold.



Melamine power in old Houseman Canteen, SGH

But some steamed fish are eaten cold. An example is the Teochew steamed mullet. You can eat it hot when it is steamed with preserved plum and salted vegetables with lots of sauce. You can also steam it dry without any soup or sauce. Cool the fish for about half an hour and yes, the fish does taste a little fishy but the sweetness of the flesh really comes into its own when cold and dry – there are no other accompaniments to distract you from the flavour of the flesh. And since it is dry-steamed, the fish's flavours do not escape and dissolve into the stock. Serving food is like serving wine – the correct temperature is very important.

Another facet of cooking methods is the knowledge of oil and its heat capacities, viscosities and other qualities. When we gush over a dish because of the *wok hei*, we are really talking about the heat of the wok and the energy transferred to the food. To have *wok hei* persist, you need oil with a specific high heat capacity so that temperatures don't drop quickly in the plate. For that, you need animal fat. So a plate of vegetables fried with say, chicken oil versus another plate fried with corn oil in the same wok will have more *wok hei* (in addition to the fact that chicken oil is tastier than corn oil). Viscosity of oil is really important when it comes to mixing and tossing. Remember when Singapore had no pork during the Nipah virus outbreak and noodle shops used vegetable oil instead of lard? The result was that no matter how long you tossed the noodles in the plate or bowl, the oil stayed as a puddle at the bottom and didn't coat the noodles and they were a pale shadow of their usual self.

How did the cuisine evolve to its current state? This is perhaps the most difficult question we have to grapple with, but it is an important one. An example is Malay food. To most of us non-Malays in Singapore, we think it is a homogenous cuisine but it is not. In fact there are many different types of Malay food. It tastes different in different parts of Malaysia. For example, Kelantan's Malay food is heavily influenced by Thai cuisine. Many Kelantanese will tell you they cannot take very spicy food.

Another example is the humble *soon kueh* snack. Our local Teochew version is stuffed with a turnip-based mixture. The truth is that the real *soon kueh* in China is stuffed with bamboo shoots, hence the name means "bamboo cake". But when our forebearers from China first migrated to South-East Asia, bamboo shoots were impossible to come by in a tropical climate, hence they used turnips instead although they kept the name of the food. Our Hainanese chicken rice in Singapore is also evolved from Wenchang (a city in Hainan province) chicken, which cannot be found here.



Penang chee cheong fun. "So smooth, so delicious..." says this GP

Perhaps the biggest threat to Singaporean Chinese food (I cannot comment on the other races) is the loss of our dialect culture (notwithstanding the benefits of our Speak Mandarin Campaign). If you think about it, all Chinese food is dialect-based. There is really no such thing as a monolithic concept of Chinese food. There is only Chinese dialect-based food – Cantonese *wanton mee*, Teochew *bak chor mee*, fried Hokkien *mee*, Hakka *yong tau fu* and so on. But as we lose our roots, the ability to really appreciate these foods also erodes as we fail to appreciate the diversity of our dialect backgrounds and their respective cuisines.

To underline this point, we go to the last and most practical question: **What are the key performance indicators for assessing the dish?** Let us now return to where we began:

wanton mee. So what makes for a good *wanton mee*?

Like what we learnt in medical school, it is useful to dice up a complex subject and explore it in parts. First, let us recognise that there are at least three phenotypes when it comes to *wanton mee* and the commonality is the presence of *wanton* and the *mee* (not even *char siew*).

The Singaporean and Malaysian versions are usually dry and the soup is not an important part of the equation. The Singaporean one is heavily-dosed with chili sauce (usually the garlic-ky and vinegary kind) and tossed with lard. So here, the quality of the chili sauce is paramount and the noodles must be springy (or “Q” in Hokkien). The *wanton* is usually prawn meat mixed with pork but seriously,

Duck eggs render the *mee* more springy and flavourful. After the noodles are made, they are aged for one to two days for the dough to develop structure and flavour. A good clue to whether the stall sells good *wanton* noodles is whether the uncooked *mee* looks grey, dusky and even sallow (like chronic renal failure patients). Bright, cheery-looking yellow noodles do NOT make good *wanton mee* in Singapore, Malaysia or Hong Kong.

When the noodles are finally brought to the stall, they are cooked in boiling water, then blanched in cold water and then put back in boiling water again (which we do likewise in Singapore and Malaysia). Finally, they are placed in a bowl of soup. But the placement of the noodles is also an art. Traditional stalls will put a Chinese spoon inverted into

the foodies look for. Getting a good piece of meat is important. The sort that has a thin layer of fat intercalated between two layers of muscle is most desired (actually this comes from near the armpit of the pig, I am told). Then it is sprinkled with a sugar-laden dry seasoning and some soya sauce, maybe *hoisin* sauce, spices and so on, and almost immediately roasted. This is key. Water is a bad thing in making *char siew*. Water dissolves the sugar crystals and as a result, the meat won't burn too well. The meat should really be coated with sugar crystals, which is why one cannot let the seasoned meat stand too long as well, as exosmosis will occur – the seasoning is hyperosmolar which then draws the moisture out of the meat. The water drawn out dissolves the



Making char siew

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not much attention is paid to the *wanton*. It's the *mee* and the chili sauce and maybe the quality of the *char siew* (which is another subject by itself) that are under scrutiny. The Malaysian version is also dry and the emphasis is also on the noodles and the sauce must be soya sauce-based and mixed with lard and oil fried previously with shallots. The taste of the soya sauce blend is key. The *char siew* quality should be excellent – fatty and charred. Again, the *wanton* doesn't really take centre stage.

The Hong Kong/Canton version is soup-based. In fact, when you order *wanton mee* in HK, they will serve you *wanton* noodle soup – it is assumed to be so and no questions are asked. And there, they have refined it to an art. First, the soup is boiled with pork bones, beans, yellow chives and most important of all, dried fish. The soup must taste delicate and refined. Next, the noodles. The *mee* must ideally be made with duck eggs and NOT chicken eggs.

the bowl then place the noodles on top of the inverted spoon. Then a little soup is placed in the bowl that covers only the bottom half of the noodles as the noodle's position is elevated by the inverted spoon. This is not to say the boss is stingy on soup but rather, to prevent the noodles from getting soggy too quickly. Too much soup would mean the noodles are swimming in a sea of water which will soften them too quickly. The *wanton's* skin must be soft and the prawn really fresh, and seasoned with just the right amount of seasoning and spices. The *wanton* must not be too big or too small, just the right size to pop into your mouth with a good crunch.

Finally a word on *char siew* since we are on the subject of *wanton mee*. *Char siew* is roasted pork. In other words, it must be roasted and preferably slightly burnt. Only two things burn in *char siew* – fat and sugar. Muscle doesn't burn well. Hence lean *char siew* is really not what

sugar coating and also makes the meat less juicy. Once the sugar dissolves away from the meat, it is left swimming in seasoning and won't burn well when roasted.

This can be deduced by observing the centre of the cross section of *char siew* slices in excellent *char siew* stalls in Malaysia (I personally think *char siew* from Kuala Lumpur is the best in the world) and it is always white. In other words, it hasn't been seasoned for long.

So there you have it, an approach to the appreciation of *wanton mee* (and *char siew*).

I hope some of you have enjoyed reading this as much as I have writing it. I don't think it amounts to a philosophy. It's more a rambling of sorts. Since stepping down as SMA President in 2009, I have not written anything consequential or significant for the *SMA News* until this issue. I wish to thank the Editor, Han Chong for giving me this opportunity. SMA