

By Dr Hsu Li Yang, Editorial Board Member

The Good Food Doctor: heEats•heShoots•heposts...



His day job is that of a family doctor (one of two founding partners of Karri Family Clinic) in the Tampines heartlands. But Dr Leslie Tay is far better known for his blog and forum at <http://ieatishootipost.sg/>. With more than 150,000 unique visitors each month and a busy forum comprising more than 1,000 members, Dr Tay is the most read and influential food blogger in the country. He has been featured in almost all local mainstream media, and is often sought after for his opinion as a “food expert” – a title he is quick to deny. Covering mainly hawker fare, with occasional digressions in places more “worthy” of being featured in *Sensory*, his motto is: “never waste your calories on yucky food”.

Dr Tay was kind enough to grant *SMA News* an interview, conducted at Ah Mei Café at Eastpoint Mall. I must confess to considerable anticipation at the prospect of meeting the man for the first time – after all, I do visit his blog regularly, and find his reviews and scores “spot on” with my own tastes after I have tried out some of his recommended dishes. And from the many comments posted after each review, this seems to be a fairly universal view.

Hsu Li Yang (HLY): Leslie, thank you very much for agreeing to participate in this interview with the *SMA News*. What made you start this “ieatishootipost” food blog?

Dr Leslie Tay (LT): I had been overseas for a long time and when I finally came back to Singapore, I began to appreciate just how much of a Singaporean I really am. You know, my perfect breakfast would be two *roti prata* with a cup of *teh tarik* or *kopi* and *kaya* toast. Sometimes I feel we take our very own Singapore food for granted, that is, until we live overseas.

About two years ago, I suddenly felt that even though I love Singapore food, I don’t really know where all the good stuff is – where’s the best *hokkien mee*, the best chicken rice and so on. So I decided, okay, let’s go and try all these food as a hobby. When I was young, my father never really brought us out to eat at all the famous hawker places, because he believed in home-cooked food.

I started researching on the internet, going to (online) forums, seeking out people who know where the good places are, and then going to try them out. And because I’m an avid photographer, I decided I would take pictures (of the food) as well and then post them on the forums. Pretty soon, people were saying, “Hey, picture quite nice what, why don’t you start a blog?” And I went, “What’s a blog?” to which they replied, “Just go and see some of the other food blogs *lah*.” So, I started blogging, posting photos and reviews... and before you know it I got featured on the *Straits Times*.

When I started blogging, I found that it was difficult to gauge how good a dish was based primarily on what people say. They might say that a particular *hokkien mee* is good, gooey with a nice *wok hei* (wok fragrance), but without a photo, you really have no idea what the food actually looks like.

HLY: That’s true.

◀ Page 20 – The Good Food Doctor

LT: I want to see roughly what the dish looks like, where it (the stall) is and what the opening hours are. These are the most pertinent information that I want and can't get online. Of course there is the *Makansutra* guide. But as you know, it is not personal and not available online.

I decided to write in a way that will not bore people to death because if you just put up a picture and say this *hokkien mee* is sticky, dry, “*ho jia*” or “*bo ho jia*” – it makes for boring reading doesn't it? So I thought I'd put in some more interesting stuff, like...

HLY: Like “Food Nazis”?

LT: Yes, Food Nazis, where the hawkers are abrasive yet people still frequent their shops because their food is so good. Another good one is my tag about President Nathan's frequented hawker stalls, and there is also a tag on “ieat experiments” which chronicles my attempts at doing totally non-randomised and uncontrolled trials on useless hypothesis like whether *tarik-ing* (pulling) tea actually makes a difference to the taste of the drink. So basically, I try to make my blog more than just a directory of good food, and write about stuff that is close to the hearts of Singaporeans.

HLY: At the time you started, there was only you, but now in your entries, you always talk about other people's views. Do you have a team that goes around to rate all these places with you?

LT: When I first started, I was the only one. After some time, people started writing to me saying, “Hey, can we come along?” And I was like, “Okay, if you want to come along, come along *lor*.” Food tastes are very subjective. If I have five persons tasting the same dish, I get different perspectives that I can incorporate into my review. It makes the review more robust as it provides different perspectives on the food.

Initially, I had maybe a handful – about five or six *kakis* (friends). Then I thought, you know, these *kakis* are also eating a lot of other things, but they can't share it on my blog, so I started a forum to stimulate more interaction. Now, there are over a thousand persons who have signed up on the forum! Amongst these, there is a core group of about twenty or so persons who will always be organising things, so the forum sort of runs by itself, like an association.

These *kakis* of mine are a nice bunch of people. I think the whole atmosphere of the blog is based



Epok Epok, rating: 4.25/5

Epok Epok Central
Blk 4A Eunos Crescent
Eunos Crescent Hawker Centre, #01-09
7am to 7pm daily
Closed on Mondays

upon my personality and my outlook in life. I am a Christian, so I tend to attract people along the same “wavelength”. Of course, there are also people of other faiths but we try very hard to keep everything family-friendly, so nobody uses bad words or deliberately tries to create discord. We like to say that we have a nice *kampung* spirit amongst our community of “ieaters”.

When I started out, I had some criticism from more experienced foodies who said, “*Wah lau*, what do you know *lah*.” Well, I might not know as much as they do but I do know what I like and what I don't like and I just say it as it is, even though I may not know the intricacies of this food and how it is made. Some food may not taste so good to me, but if it is a famous dish and other people seem to like it, I will just write it as such.

HLY: Like the *babi guling* (roast pig) in Bali.

LT: Yeah, everybody raves about that one. I ate it and it's okay *lah*, but no big deal. I think honesty and integrity go a long way. After two years, I hear people say things like, “you can trust this guy – he just says it as it is” and I know my policy of just focusing on “telling it as it is” works. Of course,



Hillstreet Char Kway Teow, rating: 4.75/5

Address: Hill Street Fried Kway Teow

Blk 16, Bedok South Road, #01-187

Opened for lunch till about 4pm. Then around 6pm till he runs out of food.

Closed on Mondays.

we have restaurant owners inviting us to review their eateries. I guess a lot of people will wonder whether they can still trust an invited review – if people invite you to eat then of course you might just write a nice review and so on but I stick to what I believe in.

At our last charity event, we managed to raise a few thousand dollars to help some underprivileged children. Most people will say, “Hey, they’ve done a good thing”, right? But one person wrote, “Aiyah, they’re just doing it for publicity *lah*.” My *kakis* and I looked at it and thought, *cho ho* (do good) and people complain, *bo cho* (do nothing) also people complain, so you might as well do something.

HLY: *Bo pian* (what to do) – the world is like that. Anyway, your top score (for the food reviewed on the blog) is 4.75, why doesn’t anything exceed that?

LT: Well, I did give a 5 once, but that was for a particular foie gras dish that Chef Edward Voon did for me at the Aurum. That one was really very good! But it was a very unique dish, you see. There is really nothing to compare it with. To me, that really hit the spot, and it was the only 5 I ever gave.

Otherwise, if you are talking about *hokkien mee*, there’s bound to be something better out there. There’s always room for improvement. Perfection is, if you are talking about hawker food, not achievable. If you want to strive for the perfect chicken rice, a lot of things need to be done. Firstly, you would have to handpick old mother hens that weigh at least 2 kg and have laid eggs twice

– no more and no less. How many hawkers can do that? If you’re talking about Western food or very unique stuff where the chef spends two days just to prepare one dish, going into a lot of details about everything, then perhaps you can find that elusive perfect score.

There are only about thirty 4.75s, a few more 4.5s, and mostly 4.0s in the blog. Anything below that and there is no point blogging. I make it a point *not* to talk about bad food. There are other bloggers who like to be “food critics” but I’m basically just a guy who likes to go out there and report on where the good stuff can be found. I don’t think people are interested in finding out where the bad food is right? I do critique the more famous and well-established places, because I feel that they are quite stable, and if I really don’t like it, I can just say so and it would not affect their business. For those small stalls where the hawkers are trying to make ends meet, there is no point in saying bad things about them; they still have to feed their family and pay the bills like all of us.

HLY: So how do you differentiate then? Your system of grading is very close – 4.25, 4.5, 4.6, 4.75?

LT: Anything above a 4 is worth going back to eat again. 4.75 means that I want to go back tomorrow and eat it again – it’s that good. 4.5 – after I’ve eaten it, I want to bring my family back to try it sometime soon. 4.25 – it’s worth going, but something’s not quite there, they could improve a bit more. 4 – I might not go back next month, but I will definitely try it again some time. Anything below that, like 3.5 – it’s good enough to eat, but I wouldn’t think of going back again. Anything below a 3, don’t touch it!

HLY: You guys go around about twice a week, right? How do you choose where to go?

LT: It depends on what I feel like eating then, and what people have been recommending. A lot of it seems to happen by coincidence but I’d like to believe that there is some divine intervention involved. Otherwise, how would I have been able to come up with something interesting three times a week for two and a half years?

Just the other day someone text-messaged me, “Hey Dr Tay, we are the City Harvest Business Breakthrough Group and one of our friends just started a restaurant selling Western food, we went to try the food – it’s pretty good. He also trains girls from the girls’ home to be waitresses.” They know that I like this sort of

◀ Page 22 – The Good Food Doctor

angle – I like to encourage all these hawkers to do their bit to help others. I'll just wait for something that prompts me to go down one day. If I'm supposed to go there, something might happen or someone might just say, "Hey, we heard about this place in Joo Chiat; you know, we went to try and it's not bad!"

HLY: Do you think that your blog is evolving to become more socially oriented? At the start it was just about food, now there are entries like the one about the ABC Brickworks hawker who helps to reform prisoners.

LT: Well mine is essentially a blog about Singapore life revolving around food. It's about our culture and its nuances; about us looking at ourselves and how uniquely Singaporean we are... Sometimes, it's a very tricky thing, and I do talk a little about political issues, but sort of disguised around food. We don't talk about it directly because the last thing I want is for the government to look at my blog as political! When I wrote about the Geylang turtle soup, I did mention about the state of prostitution in Geylang and how it has spread to even our heartlands. Being a parent, I am of course concerned about how it is affecting our kids. I know for a fact that a lot of people in the public office are reading the blog, so hopefully somebody will take note.

Interestingly this blog has helped me in my practice. A lot of patients who have already read my food blog come to me and they go "Hey Doctor Tay!", as if they know me already. In general practice, it is important to be able to communicate with your patients. I find that this blog is a very nice ice-breaker, because food is close to the hearts of most Singaporeans. Even if the patients don't know me as a foodie when they come in, we try to talk a little about food and I show them the website, and suddenly we are talking like old friends. From my clinic and practice point of view, it (the blog) has been a very good way for putting people at ease.

The blog has also been a good means of teaching my patients the kind of food to avoid if they have certain medical conditions. The whole philosophy of "never waste your calories on yucky food", which is my blog's tagline, is based on the premise that we have been given a finite amount of calories to "expend" (i.e. consume) in our lifetime. It's just like what people have been saying about the heart having a finite number of heartbeats. If you "over-



President's teh tarik, rating 4.6/5

Hilmi Sarabat Stall
Marine Parade Food Centre
#01-146
5.30am to 11pm

expend" calories in your early years, then you get fat and develop all kinds of diseases and probably die earlier. Not wasting your calories just means that in any given day or week, you have a certain number of calories you can "expend" and you should do so wisely. If you eat healthily, it is like saving your calories from that meal which you might then splurge later on something really good. If you have to eat *char kway teow*, then just go and eat the nicest one and enjoy it! Enjoy the lard and whatever, but in between, "save up" on your calories.

That's my way of explaining eating in moderation which I feel is more practical and effective when it comes to counselling patients. Most patients get confused and lost in all the details. All you need to tell them is this simple principle: Every now and then they can splurge, but they cannot splurge all the time. By the way, I also have a "healthier choice" tag too, where you can find the best *yong tau foo* in Singapore.

HLY: That also ties in with what I wanted to ask you. As a doctor, how do you reconcile telling people about *char kway teow*, "armpit" *char siew*, and all these things?

LT: It basically boils down to the level of LDL cholesterol. If a patient's LDL is high, I would tell

◀ Page 23 – *The Good Food Doctor*

them, “You’ve got two choices. I’m not here to tell you to take the pill or diet. You know yourself whether you can diet or not. How is your lifestyle? If your LDL is this level, you should be avoiding all this stuff. If you can’t, please just take a pill. You take a pill until the level comes down, and then you may be able to get off the pill.” I think it is counterproductive to just tell the patient that they have to take the cholesterol pill for life straightaway... That turns a lot of people off and they might be resistant to starting anti-cholesterol medications. Alternatively, you can advise them, “Look, you should take the pill first because your LDL level is very high and we need to get it down. If you can bring it down and at the same time change your lifestyle, then we can trial you without the pill and see if you can maintain it.”

The patients can see that I’m not overweight even though I love food. The way I control my weight is like that: For breakfast I have my 5-greens juice – calories saved up for lunch, which can be two *roti prata* with curry. For dinner, usually lots of fruits and less carbohydrates. I pace myself. When the weekend comes and there is a big meal – whack. I also look out for my cholesterol and make sure it remains in the healthy range. I find that a lot of patients are receptive to this.

HLY: Yes, and it obviously works for you.



2.5 3 3.5 4 4.25 4.5 4.75 5

Beef pie, rating: 4.25/5

Big Ben's Place
15 Swan Lake Avenue (Opera Estate)
68760737
Mon-Sat 12pm-10pm

LT: I exercise too. I go for a run a few times a week or when I can.

HLY: This blog, now that it is so popular – do you see it as an avenue for doing your charity work, because you now have a few charity initiatives?

LT: This is one of the main reasons that I’ve started the blog. After all I’m a doctor; my livelihood comes from the practice so whatever I can get out of the blog is extra cash for things that I feel strongly about. Right now, it’s not earning much but I would like to see this blog, if it ever becomes a business, give me the extra means to support some of the charities I am familiar with. Before I started my clinic, I used to go on mission trips to the rural villages in Chiang Mai. When I had my own practice, I couldn’t because of the work. I still keep in contact with all these missions and I know their needs. But it is sometimes difficult to work with people so far away, which is why I started working with AG Home (Andrew and Grace Home for teenage delinquent girls) in Singapore. I was actually looking for an orphanage, but there are none here! I spoke to the pastor of AG Home, and thought he was doing a good job, so we started supporting his work.

We have managed to raise some money through organising charity dinners but perhaps more importantly, the blog is a vehicle to let other people know of the needs out there. And for AG Home, we’ve managed to get many other people involved. There was one guy who wrote in and said, “Hey, I’m a trainer and sportsman. I want to volunteer my time to help train the girls and I’ve this number of Nike track shoes I can procure for you.” Then there was a restaurant owner who donated kitchen equipment and volunteered her time to help the girls set up their own café.

So far, despite its popularity, I haven’t really pushed for many advertisements on the blog. Sometimes I think it is ironic that restaurateurs pay thousands of dollars to put up an ad in mainstream media which might not achieve what blog reviews might do for the restaurant. Those places that I give good reviews to can sometimes see their business double or triple. A lot of potential advertisers still do not recognise the value of blog advertising just yet.

HLY: How do you reconcile the fact that people might pay you money to blog about their food?

LT: I have yet to be paid (by restaurant/stall owners) to blog about food. That’s one of the



Mee Siam, rating: 4.6/5

Hooked on Heads
Tower 2, #01-01/02,
Sin Ming Plaza
6 Sin Ming Road
Singapore 575585

things I have tried not to do as it might cause people to lose confidence in my review. If you want me to review something else around food, maybe a product, then yes. I have been invited to restaurants to taste their food but that is different – they don't pay me, and they don't vet the review, so I retain total control of what I want to say. I find it difficult to write about something I'm not passionate about so it is hard to review mediocre food, even if I was paid.

HLY: If we look at all the hawker food that you've eaten, what would you recommend?

LT: What I would recommend would depend on what you want to eat. There's a lot of good *cze char* around – the last few that I reviewed are all worth going for. There is this particular eatery that makes its own egg noodles on the premises, which is quite special as it is seldom seen in Singapore.

HLY: Just go look at your blog and try all the 4.75s?

LT: *Ya lah!* If a new person comes to the blog, just go to the "Really Must Try" list. Those are really

exceptional. With more than 800 posts on the blog, there are only around 50 or so "Really Must Try" places, so it is quite an exclusive list. After you finish the "Really Must Try" list, then go on to the "Must Try" list.

The rating is really important. Some people have told me, "Hey, we just look at the picture and then we look at the number, and that's it."

Even though I have appeared on TV a couple of times as well as the newspapers, the blog is still relatively unknown to the general public so it is not quite a household name just yet.

HLY: It's a matter of patience! I see a lot of your blog's stickers on stalls nowadays.

LT: Well, I have no big plans; I just leave everything to God and continue to do what I have been doing. If the extra money does come in, I can plough it back into other things, which will be great. We'll see what this year will bring. Last year was interesting because when I started the forum, suddenly I had an influx of new *makan kakis*. It's a big group now and still growing. Sometimes I think that it's almost like a church. These people join, there's no membership, and they can leave anytime they want. I guess if you don't "preach" the right thing, some people will say it's boring and after a while they will move to something else. We'll see how it goes.

HLY: Thanks for granting us this interview, Dr Tay! ■

IEATISHOOTIPOST RATING GUIDE



- 5: I have found the Holy Grail!
- 4.75: Makan again tomorrow!
- 4.5: Makan again very soon
- 4.25: Very very good, but not quite there
- 4: Good enough to recommend
- 3.5: Can eat lah
- 3: Get fat for nothing
- 2.5: Better if you did not know