

10 QUESTIONS with **KF SEETOH**

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin, Guest Editor



Mr KF Seetoh really needs no introduction as Singapore's foremost eating authority. He is the founder of *Makansutra*, the very popular food guide on Singapore street food now in its 7th edition, and host of both the *Makansutra* TV programme on Asian Food Channel and radio programme on FM 98.0. *Makansutra* has since gone on to produce food guides on Beijing, Malaysia and Indonesia.

We are indeed honoured that he has graciously agreed to grant *SMA News* this interview.

WCY: Can you describe the epiphanic moment that made you change your career from a photojournalist to food guru?

KFS: It was when I found extra energy in covering food-related stories, particularly the off-the-beaten-track ones with Margaret Chan. She also inspired me with her book, *First Stops* in the early 90s. Once, she led me on a wild *makan* treasure hunt to track down a stewed duck master in some Chinese kampong in then-ulu Yio Chu Kang in the 80s, to document him and his "ancient" stew pot. This master never changed the ingredients in the pot nor washed it, but kept stewing fresh ducks in there everyday. As a result, the sauce in the pot kept getting more potent by the day. That stall is still in Geylang today, albeit cooking the sauce in a central kitchen.



WCY: How would you rate the future of the Singapore food scene (say for the next 5 to 10 years)?

KFS: Unfortunately, a slow but steady cancer has already crept into the soul of Singapore food. I think it's the disease of affluence; food is no longer about craft and heritage. It is about branding and trends, not about comfort soul food, heritage and consistency. It is also not helped by the fact that our lawmakers are fastidious about operational efficiency. Handmade food will be replaced by machines and cooks who put things together over a stove by habit.

WCY: You are known to be more passionate about street food than highbrow fine-dining. But are there any fine-dining restaurants in Singapore that floats your boat? Can you name a few?

KFS: Garibaldi Italian Restaurant and Bar, Majestic Restaurant, True Blue Cuisine, Chef Chan's Restaurant, Pasta Brava Restaurant, Au Petit Salut, The Song of India, Sushi Kaiseki Nogawa Restaurant, and Wahiro Restaurant are some that come to mind.

WCY: Can you rank the five best Asian cities for street/hawker food?

KFS: Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and Vietnam.

WCY: Give us your list of five top hawker centres in Singapore.

KFS: Maxwell Food Centre, Old Airport Road Market and Food Centre, Chinatown Market, East Coast Lagoon Food Village and Ayer Rajah Food Centre.

WCY: In your experience, what do you think of hospital food?

KFS: I am no regular customer at hospitals, but I had a nice brush with a restructured hospital for my anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) operation some years ago. It had a food fanatic for a boss who lords over the kitchen, a very determined and trusty executive chef, and a responsible dietician. They created stuff I never knew a hospital would, as they knew food was the way to the heart, and it helped to heal patients.

WCY: What do you think of doctors as *makan kakis*? Do you have any special advice for doctors on eating?

KFS: They understand just how short and fragile life can be, so the many doctors I know are the best when it comes to *makan*. They go for the kill and in quality, not quantity. Eating is not about sustenance; they must have the best. They value the joy of food, the most pleasurable joy and sin not governed by law.

WCY: How has being Cantonese influenced the way you eat, and has that in any way contributed to you being the food guru you are today?

KFS: It was believed that it was the Cantonese who ate civet cats and introduced SARS to the world. I think I have those maverick *makan* genes in me.

WCY: When was the last time food literally brought tears to your eyes (in a positive way), and what was it?

KFS: This happened three years back in 2007, when a Teochew shark meat hawker personally called me because he had a small and rare supply of fresh shark's liver. It was just steamed and came on a bed of ice with a special ginger flakes dip – HEAVEN. I still dream of it and constantly check if he has supplies.

WCY: If it was your last meal, list the five hawker/street food dishes you would want to eat before meeting your maker.

KFS: Plain congee with *fu yu** and steamed peanuts, steamed pomfret with rice, chicken rice, *kopi-o kao* and High Street's *char kway teow*. SMA

*fermented bean curd

