

## Seeking soya sauce chicken

*Originally from China and Hong Kong, the darker, more flavourful Singapore iteration can be savoured at several shops in Chinatown.*

If you're a foodie craving Singapore's culinary delights, chances are you would have heard of soya sauce chicken. It is, after all, the world's cheapest Michelin-starred dish, sought after by hungry diners who typically have to queue for hours at a famous food stall in Chinatown Complex Food Centre.

But while soya sauce chicken remains hugely popular in Singapore, it was not regarded as a local speciality until about 2016, when Liao Fan Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice & Noodle received the acclaimed Michelin star. Soya sauce chicken or *si yau gai* (酱油鸡) is a Cantonese delicacy originating from Guangdong province in China. The dish was first brought over to Singapore by immigrants from China and Hong Kong – many of whom were cooks in their native lands – from the early to mid 20th century.

The Singapore iteration differs from versions found in Hong Kong or Guangzhou, however, in that the chicken is usually darker in colour and the taste more flavourful and complex. Poached chicken is slow braised with dark soya sauce, spices, aromatics, Chinese rose rice wine and rock sugar. When perfectly cooked, the chicken meat remains juicy and tender while the caramelised skin takes on a smooth, brown hue. Soya sauce chicken is usually served with white rice or egg noodles, drizzled over with a dark, spice-infused braising sauce.

The number of eateries in Singapore serving this speciality has been growing, yet many locals will tell you that Chinatown is home to some of the best soya sauce chicken in the country. And not just from the Michelin-starred Liao Fan Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice & Noodle – you'll find more than 10 other prominent soya sauce chicken stalls and eateries, all of which have their own ardent fans and loyal customers.

Malaysian-born Chan Hon Meng, better known as Hawker Chan, opened his Liao Fan Hong Kong Soya Sauce Chicken Rice & Noodle stall at Chinatown Complex Food Centre in 2008. It now has outlets all over the world, from Australia to Thailand. He shot to fame after the Michelin Guide first awarded the stall a Michelin star in 2016.

But while Hawker Chan gets all the limelight, it is his reported mentor, Madam Maria Siew, who owns one of the oldest soya sauce chicken recipes in Singapore and runs a soya sauce chicken stall at the same Chinatown Complex called Ma Li Ya Virgin Chicken. In fact, newspaper articles have reported that Hawker Chan worked for Madam Siew at her stall before starting his own business.

Madam Siew's version is based on a secret family recipe. Her father owned the well-known New Lam Thong Tea House that opened in 1926 in Cross Street and was said to be one of the pioneers of soya sauce chicken in Singapore. After her father's restaurant closed, Madam Siew set up a stall at Chinatown Complex in 1989.

Her intriguing stall name takes after her sworn sister, the legendary Hong Kong singer Maria Cordero.

Ma Li Ya Virgin Chicken offers a slightly sweeter soya sauce chicken dish, topped with old-school fried soya beans and sesame oil. It is served with the same rice as Hainanese chicken rice, which is cooked in chicken stock.

Also at Chinatown Complex is Fatty Ox Hong Kong Kitchen, an authentic Cantonese stall set up in 2011 by Hong Kong-born chef Cheung Sun Kwai. He moved to Singapore in the 1980s and once sold roast meats at a Pagoda Street coffee shop and later in Murray Terrace. His version offers lighter, more balanced flavours, and is served with heaps of spring onion garnish and house-made sambal chilli.

Right next door is Fragrant Soya Sauce Chicken, which also serves Cantonese delicacies. The owner, Randy Tse, is a hawker from Hong Kong who moved to Singapore in 1996 and first set up shop in Queen Street before moving to Chinatown Complex in 2013. He has tweaked his recipe to better suit local taste buds for a darker-coloured, more robust-flavoured chicken.

Equally as popular are two related soya sauce chicken eateries a short walk away from Chinatown Complex, in Upper Cross Street. No one will blame you if you do a double take when you find out their names: Chew Kee Eating House and Chiew Kee Chicken Noodle House. They are similar because both stem from a single family.

More than 70 years ago, Chew Kee coffee shop opened on that same street, offering both soya sauce chicken noodles and rice. The cook had picked up the soya sauce chicken recipe in Guangzhou. In its heyday, it was the most famous soya sauce chicken stall in Singapore, and so popular that several imitators moved in on their business, triggering a soya sauce chicken rivalry in the area.

When the Chew siblings went their separate ways, one kept the name and shop space. The other took up space in a shophouse just 80m away and named his eatery Chiew Kee Chicken Noodle House. The only difference between the two versions is said to be in the sauces – Chew Kee's is more savoury while Chiew Kee's is sweeter.

The histories behind the different soya sauce chicken stalls in Singapore may be different, but one thing is the same: This Cantonese dish remains one of Singapore's best-loved cheap eats.

Note: Chinatown Complex will be closed for renovation from 1 March to 31 May 2019.

- ❖ **LIAO FAN HONG KONG SOYA SAUCE CHICKEN RICE & NOODLE**  
Block 335 Smith Street, #02-126 Chinatown Complex Food Centre, Singapore 050335
- ❖ **MA LI YA VIRGIN CHICKEN**  
Block 335 Smith Street, #02-176 Chinatown Complex Food Centre, Singapore 050335
- ❖ **FATTY OX HONG KONG KITCHEN**  
Block 335 Smith Street, #02-84 Chinatown Complex Food Centre, Singapore 050335
- ❖ **FRAGRANT SOYA SAUCE CHICKEN**  
Block 335 Smith Street, #02-85 Chinatown Complex Food Centre, Singapore 050335
- ❖ **CHEW KEE EATING HOUSE**  
8 Upper Cross Street, Singapore 058327
- ❖ **CHIEW KEE CHICKEN NOODLE HOUSE**  
32 Upper Cross Street, Singapore 058339

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