

Traditional Pastry Shops

Enriched by decades of heritage, these five old-school confectioneries in Chinatown offer iconic pastries that have defied the onslaught of fast-changing food trends.

Facing stiff competition from big-chain bakeries, rising rental costs, and the challenge of finding skilled bakers in an industry heavily reliant on automation, these old-school confectioneries are a rare find today. The few that remain are true institutions. Handed down from father to son, they are run by second-, third- and fourth-generation custodians of the family business, and reflect Singapore's rich food heritage.

Tai Chong Kok

It has been offering the same traditional mooncakes since 1935, despite new food trends that introduce novelty flavours to mooncakes year after year.

Founder Tham Kai Chee perfected his recipe shortly after he migrated from Guangzhou to Singapore. Despite having no prior baking experience, his first shop in Sago Street quickly became the go-to brand for mooncakes. Even during the Japanese Occupation, when most bakeries stopped selling mooncakes, he continued to delight local communities with these symbols of family togetherness.

Tai Chong Kok mooncakes were so popular that in the 1980s, before they expanded into different outlets, snaking queues would run halfway down Sago Street. People had to wait for hours, and were only allowed to buy a maximum of five boxes at a time. Sometimes, arguments and fights broke out between customers due to the long wait time, and staff were forced to mediate.

When Tham passed away in 1970, he handed down this thriving business to his four sons, who had grown up with the brand. In fact, second-generation successor Tham Wing Thong recalls washing and soaking lotus seeds at 3am when he was in primary school. After he graduated from secondary school, he began working full-time at the shop.

Today, eight decades later, third-generation successor Ham Weng Seng helms the family business with five outlets across the island. Ham continues to use his grandfather's timeless recipe with a few minor tweaks, and source for ingredients from the same suppliers. And come the Mid-Autumn Festival, up to 30,000 mooncakes would fly off the shelves.

To keep up with rising demand, Ham integrated automation into the production process. However, to retain that taste of tradition, Tai Chong Kok continues to make preservative-free lotus paste from scratch instead of purchasing it from suppliers. Staff at the confectionery also manually place salted egg yolks into balls of lotus paste, wrapping it in dough that has been manually rolled out to achieve a consistently thin mooncake skin.

Besides mooncake, consumers may enjoy wife cakes or "lo por paeng" (老婆饼), picture cookies, piglets in basket, peanut rice nuggets and other traditional Chinese confectioneries. Among these, its rice cake or nian gao in Mandarin (年糕) is extremely popular during Chinese New Year. This auspicious sticky cake is painstakingly made over three days by soaking white

glutinous rice, grinding it, and steaming it with brown sugar and banana leaves for eight hours for that distinctive flavour that keeps bringing customers back for more.

Located at 34 Sago Street, tel: 6227-5701

Tong Heng

The modern and sleek interior of Tong Heng belies its rich history. Translated to mean “prosperity of the east”, this confectionery dates back to the 1920s, even before Singapore gained independence as a sovereign state.

With humble beginnings as a street peddler selling coffee and toast out of a pushcart stall, founder Fong Chee Heng grew his business into a shophouse in Chinatown selling pastries and desserts. Tong Heng soon became a household name, weathering historical upheavals with the community. It is said that after World War II, when there was a dire shortage of baking ingredients and food such as eggs, flour and rice, Tong Heng continued to tantalise taste buds by creating a widely popular sweet potato pastry. Richer families traded gold bars for a year’s supply of these pastries.

While Tong Heng offers a variety of confections, it is best known for its egg tarts. The bakery used to produce this in a variety of shapes: oval, round and diamond. However, third-generation owners Constance and Rebecca Fong made the shrewd decision to exclusively use diamond moulds. Hence, the iconic diamond-shaped egg tarts were born.

When the founder’s great-granddaughter, Ana Fong took over, she gave the traditional pastry shop a complete facelift in 2018 to rival the trendy cafes in the vicinity. Its pastry menu and egg tart recipe, however, remain unchanged. And each day, some 4,000 of these flaky feuilleté-like pastries filled with smooth custard-egg filling are freshly made and enjoyed by locals and tourists.

Located at 285 South Bridge Road, tel: 6223-0398

Tai Thong Cake Shop

The understated shopfront of Tai Thong Cake Shop conceals decades of rich history and artisanal know-how. The founder was a Cantonese pastry chef who fled from Hong Kong to Singapore during World War II. After the war ended, he opened Tai Thong in 1950.

In Mandarin, Tai Thong 大同 refers to a utopian world of equality, peace and prosperity. However, second-generation owner Kwok Sow Lan shares that the name also alludes to the fact that its pastries are universally loved. Ms Kwok, who now heads the business, helped her brother with the business for decades after their father passed away. She took over the reins after her brother passed on as well.

Originally founded as a teahouse, Tai Thong evolved into a cake shop selling festive food items that celebrate family harmony – Cantonese lotus paste mooncakes, mixed nuts mooncakes or “kum toy”, as well as Chinese New Year pastries such as love letters, pineapple tarts and almond cookies. Each of these items is labour-intensive and handmade by Ms Kwok and her staff to retain that taste of authenticity and heritage.

The cake shop also specialises in making wedding pastries filled with lotus seed paste, green bean paste or red bean paste. Known as “daughter’s wedding pastries” in Mandarin, they are given by families of Cantonese brides to relatives and friends before a wedding. The most intricate of them is the Dragon Phoenix Pastry, which resembles small mooncakes decorated with mythical celestial animals.

Back then, wedding pastries from Tai Thong were synonymous with tying the knot. The cake shop has even baked wedding pastries for up to three generations of brides within some families. Although such formalities are less popular today, Tai Thong continues to offer these wedding pastries. By helping to keep tradition alive, it was recognised as one of 80 food stores to receive the 2016 Heritage Heroes Awards by Slow Food (Singapore), a non-profit organisation dedicated to preserving heritage dishes, celebrating food culture and protecting diversity.

Located at 35 Mosque Street, tel: 6223-2905

Tan Hock Seng

For more than eight decades, it has been delighting the population in Chinatown with traditional Hokkien pastry. With a décor that’s dominated by cardboard boxes and plastic trays packed with traditional biscuits, this nondescript shop is unlikely to garner much attention from passers-by. Yet, over the decades, it has continued to draw a steady stream of customers over lunch hour on weekdays and especially during the Chinese New Year period.

Beh teh soh (马蹄酥), which means “horse hoof biscuit” in Mandarin, is its signature offering. On busy days, the bakery sells more than a thousand in a single day. This crispy pastry gained its quirky moniker because it looks like a horse’s hoof. Originating from the Tong’an district in Xiamen, it delights with a sticky sweet-and-salty sesame malt filling. Other all-time favourites include the phong piah, a round pastry with a similar filling as beh teh soh, and Hokkien mooncakes filled with candied winter melon paste and tangerine peel, and peanut brittle.

All items are personally made by third-generation owner Tan Boon Chai, family members and long-serving staff. In fact, since Tan took over some 30 years ago, the bakery would unfailingly open every day of the year except the first day of Chinese New Year, and foodies have come to rely on this tradition to get their pastry fix.

Unfortunately, this might soon come to an end. The 69-year-old Tan shares that he does not intend to hand Tan Hock Seng down to his sons because of rising rent and labour costs.

Located at 86 Telok Ayer Street #01-01, tel: 6533-1798

Poh Guan Cake House

A sweet buttery smell wafts towards you from the entrance of Poh Guan Cake House, where freshly baked goods are left to cool on multi-deck metal trays. Outside the shop, you will notice colourful plastic trays filled with boxes of all manner of traditional pastries and breads.

When it was first founded in 1930, this old-school bakery only sold classic Hokkien pastries such as gong tng (crushed sugar peanut) and phong piah. The founder brought these recipes with him when he migrated from Zhao’an County in Fujian, China. He handed these recipes down to his

son, Chan Kim Ho, who began his baking journey at 13, and took over the business at the tender age of 15. Each day, the teenager would work from the crack of dawn till midnight, baking and steaming hundreds of pastries, perfecting each recipe on the job.

Apprenticing under six different pastry masters, Chan expanded his repertoire to more than 30 Hokkien, Teochew, Hainanese, Cantonese and Nonya pastries. Many Singaporeans may not know that pineapple tarts used to be predominantly made by Malays. Chan picked up a famous recipe from a Malay lady and adapted it to include slightly raw pineapples for a refreshing hint of acidity, as well as a melt-in-your-mouth crust. This has been one of Poh Guan's signature items since the 1950s. Some 60 jars of tarts are sold each day during the Chinese New Year period.

Another popular fix, especially during Chinese New Year, is the Teochew chi kak kueh (鼠麴糰). This dark green mung bean kueh gets its colour from cudweed. Few confectioneries make chi kak kueh with this detoxifying herb because it is hard to come by in Singapore. Poh Guan Cake House gets it from Chan's elder sister, who painstakingly harvests, cleanses, cooks and sun-dries the peppery herb.

When second-generation owner Chan passed away, the historical cake house was passed to his 48-year-old son, Chan Kian Boon, who continues to hand-make pastries with veteran staff in small batches at the shop. These culinary gems with their rich flaky goodness help preserve a piece of Singapore's diverse cultural heritage.

Located at 531 Upper Cross Street, #01-57 Hong Lim Complex, tel: 6534-0136

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