

## **Chinatown Complex Food Centre**

*With a long history and an array of famous food stalls, Chinatown Complex Food Centre is one of the most iconic hawker centres in Singapore.*

Not many local diners are aware that the site of the popular Chinatown Complex Food Centre had a darker past. During World War II, it was used by the Japanese military police. And, in the 1960s, after the Japanese occupation, it became the site of 'death houses' and brothels. Over the next 50 years, it underwent a remarkable transformation into one of the most bustling centres for communal dining in Singapore.

### **A Culinary Icon Is Born**

In the early 1960s, there were thousands of illegal itinerant street hawkers in Chinatown, and their presence led to obstructed roads, and other systemic issues like clogged drains and pest-infested conditions.

In the 1970s, the government earmarked the site of Chinatown Market and Food Centre to resettle these illegal street hawkers. Construction work for this S\$18 million complex began in 1975. When it was completed in 1981, it was named Kreta Ayer Complex. It was only in 1984 that it was renamed Chinatown Complex Market and Food Centre.

During the first phase of resettlement, 300 street hawkers from Smith, Trengganu, Pagoda and Temple Streets moved into the complex, allowing the government to begin its clean-up works.

### **Preserving Chinatown's Heritage**

These street hawkers, however, had been part of the Chinatown identity for a long time, and many residents were concerned that the resettlement would erode decades of heritage and tradition. Hence, every effort was made to ensure that the design of this complex reflected Chinatown's culture and heritage. Chinese elements such as pavilions, columns, motifs, arches, clay-tiles and pitch roofs were used throughout the complex.

The five-storey complex features a wet market at its basement, sundry shops on the ground floor, a food centre on the second floor, and a car park on the fourth and fifth floor. The wet market is one of the few remaining ones which have survived competition from modern supermarkets in Singapore.

Known for its fresh produce, this wet market sells vegetables grown locally at farms in Kranji or imported from Malaysia. It also offers many Chinese herbs and spices, as well as live crabs, lobsters, and more exotic meats such as frogs and turtles, which are not available at most wet markets or supermarkets.

Over the next few decades, a series of upgrading initiatives were introduced to spruce up the interior and improve sanitation. This included a S\$20.9 million project from 2006 to 2008. Today, the food centre has 700 stalls. Of these, 226 are cooked food stalls, making it the largest food centre in Singapore. In March 2019, another three-month-long upgrading project was initiated to enhance amenities and sanitisation.

### **Heritage And Michelin Stalls**

It has been estimated that by 2016, as many as 20 per cent of the original cooked food hawkers remained in the complex despite its numerous facelifts. Many of these stalls are also recommended on the prestigious Michelin guide.

The most famous among them is Liao Fan Soya Sauce Chicken Rice & Noodles (香港油雞飯·面) at #02-126, which opened in 2009. Ipoh-born chef Chan Hon Meng perfected his signature soya sauce chicken dish over more than three decades. Marinated with soya sauce and 10 different types of herbs, and braised to perfection, this chicken rice is the cheapest Michelin meal in the world at S\$2 per plate.

Since winning the prestigious award, the stall has branched out to four outlets in Singapore, as well as in Melbourne, Perth, Ipoh, the Philippines, Jakarta, Taipei, Bangkok and even Kazakhstan. Chef Chan is rarely seen at the original stall, which is now helmed by his wife Irene Quek.

Not far from this culinary icon is Chao Ji Roast Meat (超记烧腊) at #02-165. Founded in the 1980s, it offers delicious roast duck served with meat drippings and a savoury sauce. The stall's *char siew* (barbequed pork) roasted in low fire has also just the right touch of char.

Lian He Ben Ji Claypot (联合本记煲饭) at #02-197/198/199, was featured in the 2018 Michelin Bib Gourmand list. First founded in 1979 at Kreta Ayer, this stall moved to Chinatown Complex Food Centre in 1983. The claypot rice combines long-grained rice with chicken in bone, duck liver sausages, Chinese sausage, pork belly and salted fish simmered over charcoal fire.

Another island-famous stall that had its humble origins in Chinatown is Ming Fa Fishball (明发鱼圆). Starting as a pushcart in 1946, it gained a reputation for its fresh fishballs made entirely of fish. The brand now has 12 stalls across the island, one of which is at #02-49 Chinatown Complex Food Centre.

This food centre is also home to two heritage tze char stalls, Hokkien for 'cooking frying' (煮炒). Dating back to the 1950s, An Ji (安記) at #02-193/194 is one of Singapore's first fish head *bee hoon* (rice vermicelli) stalls. Its founder started selling it from the streets of Chinatown more than 60 years ago. Today, her 55-year-old grandson continues the tradition, offering her signature fish head *bee hoon*, *hor fun* (flat rice noodles) and *sang mee* (crispy noodles).

Yuet Loy Cooked Food (悦来熟食) at #02-151 is another popular Cantonese tze char stall, where home-style dishes are prepared with a less heavy hand. With a history of more than 50 years, it is best known for its golden coin tofu and beef *hor fun*.

Ann Chin Popiah (安珍) at #02-112, listed on the Singapore Michelin Guide, offers a lighter snack with its vegetable spring rolls. Founded by Lim Kam Chwee from Fujian, China in the 1940s, it is known for its popiah (spring roll) filled with turnip, eggs, lettuce, bean sprouts and peanuts. Everything is made from scratch here for freshness and flavour.

For a flavourful snack, Jia Ji Mei Shi (佳记美食) at #02-166 is a top pick among Chinatown insiders. Though it mainly serves breakfast food, queues can be seen even at dinner-time. This stall is best known for its *chee cheong fun* (豬腸粉), which means 'pig intestines' in Cantonese. These rice flour sheets resemble pig intestines and are flavoured with sweet-salty hoisin sauce, chilli sauce and sesame seeds. The stall also serves up *orh kueh* (芋粿, yam cake), porridge, fried *bee hoon*, noodles and rice dumplings.

Heng Wah Traditional Coffee Stall (慶華傳統咖啡茶室) at #02-76, is run by the grandson of the iconic Tong Ah Coffee Shop (東亞) founded in 1939. After working as a coffee boy at this iconic shop on Keong Saik Road, he started his own coffee stall offering traditional Nanyang kopi and kaya and butter toast for a taste of nostalgia.

Another recommended coffee haunt is the Michelin-listed 1950's Coffee (五十年代咖啡) at #02-48. Founded in 1935, it is currently run by third generation owners Faye and Jack Sai. Previously a part-time barista, Faye decided to return to her Asian roots, offering traditional Nanyang kopi featuring beans roasted with sugar and margarine, and brewed with a sock to start or end a meal on the perfect note.

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