

A Taste of Tradition – Spring Court

Spring Court, Singapore's oldest Chinese restaurant, survived three moves and ever-changing trends over a period of 90 years.

The story of Singapore's oldest restaurant, now located in Chinatown's Upper Cross Street, goes back some 90 years ago, when a humble lorry driver who was also a fervent foodie realised his dream of setting up a restaurant.

Ho Loke Yee, an immigrant from Guangdong province in China, loved experimenting in the kitchen. After perfecting many recipes, he set up his restaurant, Wing Choon Yuen (詠春園), in 1929 at age 30. In Cantonese, the name means "singing in a garden in spring".

Ho set up his restaurant next to 150 wooden shacks in Kim Seng Road. In the early 1930s, this land was developed into Great World Amusement Park, which offered entertainment such as free movies, Peking opera, wrestling and boxing matches for low-income families. However, it was only in 1958, after a major upgrading and grand opening, that the amusement park gained popularity with Singaporeans.

One of two restaurants at Great World, Wing Choon Yuen's fortunes rose with the park's. By 1960, it had expanded from a seating capacity of 600 to 1,000, including an alfresco seating area.

"Affluent families, businessmen and high society would host gatherings, birthday parties and weddings there. At the peak of its popularity in the late 1950s, Wing Choon Yuen could host up to 30 banquets a month. Some of our most famous guests include businessman and philanthropist Lee Kong Chian and the Shaw brothers," recalled Soon Puay Keow, the founder's former daughter-in-law and current managing director of the restaurant.

"This was before the time of hotel banquets. In those days, only the well-off could afford to host a wedding at Wing Choon Yuen. Sometimes we might host up to four wedding couples on the same night, separated by partitions. All four couples would stand in front of the doorway to welcome their guests," said 76-year-old Soon.

In the 1960s, with the advent of television and the opening of pasar malams (roadside night markets), Great World's popularity waned. The park closed down on 31 March 1964. During that decade, business at the restaurant began to decline as well.

"By the 1970s, many new restaurants had sprouted up, and business slowed down further. We'd still have weddings now and then, but there were no walk-ins. The restaurant was dilapidated, and since my father-in-law was already 79, he had no interest in carrying on. In 1978, the Shaw brothers informed us that the building was going to be demolished," she shared.

"I felt it was a pity to close the restaurant after almost 50 years, especially since it was once so famous. So just before the restaurant was due for demolition, my then-husband [the founder's son – one of 13 children] Ho Hun Cheong and I made the last-minute decision to take over the business."

Then in her mid-30s, Soon quit her banking job and her ex-husband left his job as a translator. With a modest capital of \$100,000, they relocated the restaurant to a small space on the second floor of Oriental Theatre along New Bridge Road (now the site of Oriental Plaza) in Chinatown.

Since many found the Cantonese name Wing Choon Yuen hard to pronounce, Soon renamed it Spring Court. From a mega-restaurant of 100 tables, they downsized it to 22 tables. This was the turning point.

“Though the new restaurant was small and the signboard was not very visible, our business in Chinatown was good from the get-go. Many old customers missed Spring Court,” she shared.

Ho Hun Cheong, who had been personally trained by his father, manned the kitchen and recreated its timeless recipes. Soon, on the other hand, took care of operations, clocking long hours – from 9.30am to 3pm and 5pm to 11pm each day.

“Although I knew nothing about running a restaurant, I quickly realised many of our staff were not well trained. They did not pay attention to the presentation of food, and did not replace dirty plates with clean ones. I trained them on new service standards, teaching them to run the restaurant as if we were hosting personal friends,” she shared.

“The restaurant business has always been tough. When we were short of staff, I had to multi-task as a telephone operator, cashier, front desk receptionist and waitress. Sometimes I’d even go to the ground floor and pretend to be a customer looking at the restaurant signboard to spark people’s curiosity so that they’d follow me upstairs.” Her tenacity paid off and business took off in Chinatown.

However, in 1990, Soon received news that Oriental Theatre would be demolished as well. She then moved the restaurant to Upper East Coast Road for 14 years. When a four-storey heritage shophouse in Upper Cross Street went on sale in 2004, she moved the restaurant back to Chinatown. This new permanent premise features VIP rooms, karaoke facilities and a seating capacity of 650.

Weathering three moves over nine decades, Spring Court has served up to four generations of guests. Though it still hosts weddings today, these tend to be more intimate affairs, in contrast to the large-scale celebrations of yesteryear. Birthday parties are, by far, its most popular events today – it hosts one almost every day. Nonagenarian birthdays are often celebrated in this restaurant because of its long history, rich heritage and fame among Singapore’s pioneer generation.

During busy periods, when the restaurant serves up to 1,000 customers daily, the kitchen would be abuzz with activity, whipping up 500 plates of delicacies nonstop throughout the day. These include its signature Braised Bird’s Nest with Chicken, Yam Ring, Suckling Pig and Deboned Chicken with Kai Lan – evergreen recipes that have not changed since Spring Court’s founding days. Regular customers would also return for its Roasted Chicken with Minced Prawn and the Spring Court Popiah, which is well known as the biggest popiah in Singapore.

“Many of our regulars ask us how we make these dishes. And I am not afraid to share our key ingredients because these dishes are not easy to replicate – they require a lot of skills,” said Soon.

Since separating from her husband in 1997, Soon has been running Spring Court with her son, Ho Chih Hao, who also owns a property business. The 49-year-old third-generation restaurateur and businessman is the brains behind the business today, and is in line to succeed Soon in time to come.

“Singapore is a multi-racial society – local Chinese cuisine has adapted over the years to reflect this rich cultural heritage. It is slightly spicy and features richer flavours as compared to Chinese food from elsewhere such as Hong Kong. I hope to share this rich culinary heritage with tourists from around the world. I also wish Singaporeans, especially the younger generation, will get to know Singapore Chinese food culture instead of always going for fusion cuisine or fast food,” said Soon.

References:

- *This story is mainly based on an interview with the managing director.*
- *Additional information on Great World Amusement Park from here: eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1046_2006-06-09.html*