



THE WAY OF KUEH

SAVOURING & SAVING
SINGAPORE'S HERITAGE DESSERTS



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E
EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE • LONDON

Contents



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Published in Singapore by Epigram Books.
www.epigrambooks.sg

Supported by



National Library Board,
Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Name: Tan, Christopher.
Title: The way of kueh : savouring & saving Singapore's heritage desserts / Christopher Tan.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, [2019]. Includes index.
Identifiers: OCN 1112656400
ISBN 978-981-48-4537-3 (hardcover) / ISBN 978-981-48-4537-3 (ebook)
Subjects: LCSH: Desserts—Singapore | Desserts—Singapore—History.
(Snack foods—Singapore) | Snack foods—Singapore—History.
Classification: DDC 641.595957—dc23

First edition, January 2020

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Introduction

What is kueh?

The word 'kueh', loosely meaning 'cake', most probably comes from Zhangzhou, a Southern Min dialect from Fujian Province. Zhangzhou-speaking peoples were among the first Chinese to journey to and settle in Maritime Southeast Asia. Linguists theorise that as the Chinese diaspora in the region grew, local languages absorbed many Southern Min loanwords, including 'kueh', which came to refer to a diverse variety of sweet and savoury foods and snacks, mostly made with grains, tubers, fruits and nuts.

The word has been phoneticised in many ways across places, sources and times: koe, kwe, kwee, kweh, kwey, kuay, kuey, kway, koay, kuwe and kuweh can all be found in historical texts. Formally, Bahasa Indonesia now spells it 'kue', and Bahasa Melayu, 'kuhi'. Its associated Mandarin character, '糕', 'gāo', has also been rendered 'koh', also spelt as kou, gou, goh and go.

Throughout this book, I have used the spelling 'kueh', which was commonly used by local newspapers and many heritage cookbooks to refer to kuehs from all of Singapore's communities, for most of the 20th century.

Where I have quoted the proper names of kuehs from other countries, I have used the spellings accepted in those places—for example 'kue' for Indonesian items, and 'kuhi' for Malaysian ones.

The reason for this book

My fervent hope is to encourage more of us to make kueh, that kueh traditions might not only be preserved, but revived and revitalised, to flourish into future longevity.

So many of my childhood memories centre on kueh: patting and pinching kueh tart and kueh bangkit with my grandmother for Chinese New Year, fidgeting in feverish anticipation of eating them later. Chomping on a slightly stale but very fragrant kueh bahulu while staring at the family

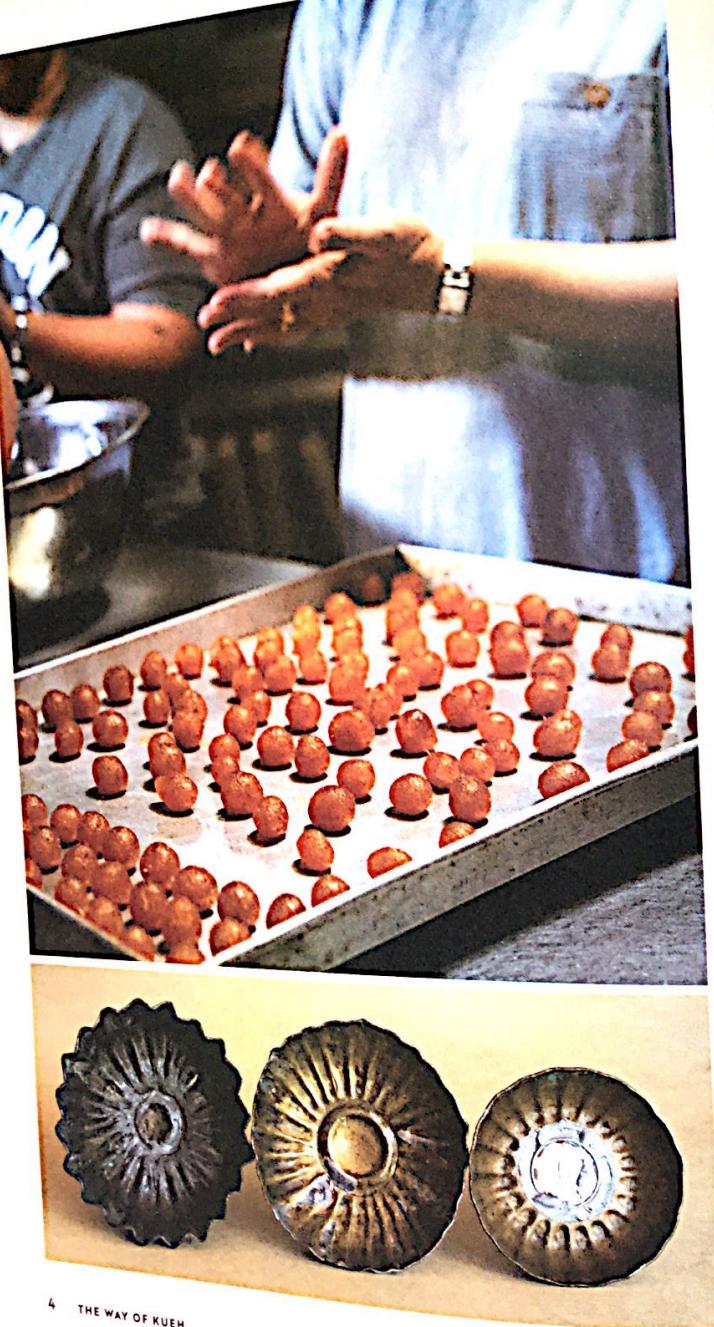
friend—the first Buddhist nun and bald lady I'd ever seen—who'd handed it to me; excitedly circling the steam-billowing trays of mangkok kueh a wandering hawker would bring to my block. I remember my mum layering kueh sarlat and my dad rolling logs of putgal. Kuehs, literally and figuratively, gave texture to my life.

I have been a food writer for a score of years and a culinary instructor for a dozen. Over this time, I have seen heritage food slowly occupy more of the national conversation, for which I am immensely thankful. I have seen more and more column inches devoted to heritage cuisine in the media and in cookbooks: I have even written some of those inches myself. However, in our public discourse, heritage food debates often focus on the death and/or revival of hawker food. This is rightly a vital topic of great concern. What is often overlooked is that hawker food, like all food, was once home food. To me, an even more pressing topic of enormous concern is the dwindling practice of home cooking, whose prognosis is uncertain and which is not receiving the triage it needs.

Compare the frenzied reaction to the rolling out of branded restaurant guides with the buzz (or more likely, subliminal hum) sparked by local cookbook releases, and you may deduce the relative importance to Singaporeans of eating out versus cooking in. From my perch as a culinary teacher, I do see people wanting to learn new recipes, but often it is the convenient, the trendy, the quick, the easy, and the novel things that they seek. The traditional, the painstaking, the local and unfamiliar—as opposed to the foreign and unfamiliar—have less pull, are less cool. The home cooking we do undertake now seems to be influenced more by restaurant trends, 'wellness' diktats, and cable TV than by our own family and community heritage.

And who could blame anyone for any of this? Singaporeans are famously cosmopolitan. The world is an exciting place, and we should indeed explore it. However, what worries me is that today's





cooks and consumers may spend more time curating food encounters, perpetually ticking off an infinitely trend-extended bucket list, instead of cultivating a food perspective. By the latter, I mean a coherent worldview grown from your cultural and family heritage and personal experience. A food perspective is an outlook and posture which steers your understanding of food and of your identity as a cook and an eater. It is a yearning for romance, not one-night stands.

Please take a breath, go back and re-read that last paragraph. Thank you. Do you see what I mean?

If heritage food is to survive and thrive, we must be more than curators of trends that are handed to us: we must recognise that we are all ourselves culture-makers, and responsible for the future shape of our heritage. What we recognise today as our heritage food and our 'national cuisine' was born in the homes of our forebears. What inheritance now brews in our homes for our descendants to savour?

Your taste preferences, eating habits and attitudes towards food are all shaped in the home, during the first few years of your life. You are, in a non-trivial and profound sense, what you ate. Many of the people I spoke to for this book emphasised the importance of parents consciously initiating their children into local food culture, both at the table and in the kitchen. In past eras, this was a given, out of necessity or custom. These days, more affluent and more time-pressed Singaporeans are less likely to invest time in such activities, I am told, finding it easier to capitulate to a child's immediate wants than to help them taste the bigger picture.

Says Nyonya Lee Geok Boi, cookbook author and veteran journalist: "People are quite well-to-do these days, unlike our mothers, who had to watch their dollars and cents but still wanted to give us a treat, so they took the trouble to make it themselves. For me, it's not the savings or end product, it's the doing." Lee made it a point to masak-masak [cook playfully] with her daughters in their youth, and hence "to this day, they both

enjoy cooking, because of the happy memories. If you're very tidak apa [apathetic] about it, kids will never learn, will never see it as an enjoyable activity, which is what it must be."

To expand on a maxim of the Slow Food movement, we must not only 'eat it to save it', we must 'cook it to save it'. Food selfies and hashtags are nice, but not enough on their own to sustain food culture.

Kueh sera sera

In decades past, Singaporean families came together to make kueh on a regular basis. More than just cooking, those times were chances for relatives to catch up, affirm bonds and enjoy the delicious results of their co-labouring: no seasoning is sweeter (or healthier for you) than community.

However, as nuclear and extended families shrink, or disperse between far-flung households, communal kueh-making is becoming ever rarer. People are choosing to buy kuehs instead, delighting more in purchased variety than homemade quality.

Daniel Chia, food and wine educator and former convivium leader of Slow Food Singapore, thinks that heritage foods bought outside the home will assume a new luxury status, and in fact have already begun to. He elaborates: "There has been, for a very long time, a market segment that has wanted to enjoy traditional goodies in environments more comfortable and luxurious than hawker centres and kopitiams. So they will [survive] in more gentrified, expensive places, like hotels and upscale restaurants, as they become more uncommon at the hawker and small family business level." The latter rarity will arise from labour/rental/ingredient costs inevitably pushing prices past consumers' comfort zones and perceptions of what local food in heartland settings 'should' cost.

Azimin Saini, food journalist and founder of handmade tempeh business Tempeh Culture, agrees. "More brands are putting up elevated

versions of humble kueh and customers have been willing to pay for them. So far, these have been for very limited kueh types—often the crowd-pleasers—but I hope it will extend across the board.” Lee Geok Boi likens it to the ‘artisanal bread’ movement happening in the US. “People will go out of their way to buy a loaf of bread...I think this will happen with kueh, it will become a niche thing.”

Chia remembers that “as far back as 1988, the Hyatt was already buying kueh from Bengawan Solo for VIP guests, including royalty from neighbouring countries. Kuehs also featured in some of their buffets and banquets. Throughout the 1990s, many hotel buffets served kueh and other traditional dishes, but these began to disappear as the buffets went more upmarket in order to drive up revenues, featuring more Western, Japanese and seafood items.” The current resurfacing of heritage food on many hotel menus is “a natural progression”, he remarks.

Progression it may be, but is it progress? Can businesses with bottom lines and sales targets truly replicate the personality and soul of kuehs made with grandma magic and auntie power? I have my doubts, and I’m not alone. Baba Louis Chan (pg 199) and others I spoke to underlined the point that ready-made kuehs, even decent ones, were once understood by all as necessarily simplified versions of homemade kuehs, a trade-off of convenience for fidelity. Now, though, as we lose the finer points of the last generation who knew and practised them, commercial kuehs automatically get bumped up to the perceived apex standard by consumers who simply, literally, do not know any better.

There is hope. Online sales platforms, social media and regulations friendly to small-scale, home-based businesses are helping kueh makers to find and work the sweet spot between hawker and hotel/hipster brackets. Without the worry of rental or advertising overheads, they can focus on offering homemade quality and broadcasting their heritage and mission. This may also help remind all

of us that kueh really should not be saddled with that woefully oxymoronic status, ‘cheap and good’. Truly excellent kueh requires no less and often more effort and attention than fancy patisserie, so “we need to raise the value of heritage food in our own eyes and thus be willing to pay more for better quality. There’s no greater tragedy than seeing a customer happily pay \$4.50 for a mediocre cupcake but gripe at paying \$2 for three onde-onde,” says Saini.

One for all, all for one

The word ‘authentic’ is often bandied about in food writing, but seldom qualified. It cannot be used in isolation or in an absolute sense. A food can only ever be ‘authentic’ to a specific context: a place, a time, a community, a family, a kitchen, a brain. The implication, at once both scary and liberating, is that cooks need not feel shackled by the authenticity of another place and time, especially if they cannot hew to it because of ingredients and equipment that cannot be duplicated or resurrected.

On the other side of the equation, we need the solidity of heritage to anchor and guide our efforts to determine what is authentic for each of us in our own time and space. Traditional recipes have endured because they distill the knowledge and craft of centuries of cooks. Without these polestars, meaning becomes arbitrary, connections garbled, satisfaction uncertain. Innovation that provokes the intellect has its place, but the soul and heart need nourishing more than the mind.

Louis Chan (pg 199) thinks: “Personally I’m not in favour of a person creating modern flavours without them even knowing what the traditional flavour was. As long as you know what it was, that will form the basis, then you can extrapolate.”

Veteran domestic science teacher Madam Nancy Soh Seok Kaeng learned a dazzling variety of recipes from an Indonesian kueh expert in the 1970s. She recalls “sweet or savoury batters cooked



Vintage apom and kueh bahulu pans at Moh Teng Pheow Nyonya Koay in Penang



Devotees making yi bua (pg 144) with sweet potato skins at the Hainanese Twee Boey Teng Niang temple, on the eve of Chop Coh Mei (Spring Lantern Festival)

in clay moulds, banana leaf cases or small cups... batters made into wrappers, folded into small packages with delicious fillings." Back then, "people were resourceful, frugal, and were challenged to be creative [with] fresh-grown or foraged ingredients... for example, using different leaves to flavour, colour, shape, wrap and roll mixtures," she articulates. "Nowadays, we do not have to think or stretch our imagination—we just Google things. The challenge now is to be competitive [by] introducing flavours in the most absurd way—nasi lemak mooncake or sambal hay bee macaron?"

Kueh is special. Its virtue lies not in leaps of logic, but in the cheer of company. Its traditional techniques—grinding rice, frying fillings, kneading dough—are not meant for solo cooks. They require the arms of a family, the hands of a village, the strength of the young and the wise counsel of the elderly. This is why, once upon a time, the best and most intricate kuehs were reserved for festivals and rare occasions—not just because they took precious time to make, but because the effort itself represented precious bonds—in Malay, 'gotong royong', or kampung spirit.

Nyonya author Josephine Chia, whose autobiographical books chronicle a childhood shaped by gotong royong, says of her mother: "Even though we were very poor, she made kuehs for the neighbours, as they reciprocated during Chinese New Year, Hari Raya and Deepavali. When the dulang [tray] of goodies came to us, we would put in some sweets or sugar to say thank you and wish them a prosperous life. All our sharing generated wonderful kampung spirit." Every heritage cuisine grows out of community, diversity and shared emotion. Different palates, perspectives, senses and sensibilities are the soil, fertiliser and weather which bring a gastronomy to full maturity.

So you see, the wonderful thing about kueh is that it belongs to each of us and also to all of us. You believe that your grandma's kueh bangket was the best ever? I'll give you an amen! I believe the same of my grandma's kueh bangket, and we are

both right—because both bangkets were baked with those ineluctably unique ingredients, love and family, which invalidate neither claim but elevate both kuehs, sui generis. With kueh, every 'best' is a personal best.

The recipes in this book are my interpretations of what I understand to be classic Singaporean kuehs. (My only concession to modern tastes has been to heighten flavours and lessen sweetness and stodge.) I do not present them as prescriptions to be gingerly complied with, or as puzzles to pit yourself against. Rather, I offer them as a box of conceptual crayons, as the joyful colours of our national food life, to help you create your own authentic takes on the kuehs that you cherish. For kuehs cannot live on a page: they can only breathe in your hands, in your eyes, on your tastebuds.

Because the story of kueh is forged and told in community, I met and spoke with local kueh makers from all walks of life. I also travelled to Penang to learn from exponents of kueh techniques once common in Singapore but now rare or extinct. The thoughts, memories and opinions of all these artisans pin these pages together as surely as a coconut lidi. Many of them did or do make their livings from kueh: some have walked a long road, some are taking their first steps. Some are nationally famous, some are legends in their own kitchens. All of them make, eat and think about kueh because they cannot imagine not doing so. May their sharings edify and encourage you as much as they have inspired me.