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Whenver I meet Teochew stallholders, our conversation will invariably be in Teochew, and when asked why they are so popular, the standard answer is, "Chngee (fresh) ah, everything is chngee." The Teochew fussiness about freshness is a well-worn cultural trait — Teochews live near the river in Guangdong Province, so, unlike, for example, Szechuan cuisine, where the emphasis is on spices, Teochew cuisine is quite bland in comparison, emphasising on the freshness of ingredients.

One characteristic of good bak chor mee is of course, freshness. Teochew hawkers who pride themselves in making the best bak chor mee have always told me in typical Teochew hao lian (proud) fashion that they use the freshest black prawns, the freshest pork, the freshest everything.

And it does make a difference. Despite being, at its core, just a basic dish of noodles, pork and vinegar, bak chor mee is the third most favourite dish among Singaporeans, after Hokkien mee (#1) and chicken rice (#2), according to the polls done on my blog. If we have friends from overseas coming to Singapore, how many of us would think of bringing them to eat bak chor mee? No, it is either chilli crab or chicken rice – but bak chor mee is a dish close to Singaporeans' hearts. Simple. Delicious. Underrated. And above all, chngee (fresh). Very chngee.

Today, bak chor mee is still as good as it was in the past. People are always saying how good chicken rice, char kway teow or Hokkien mee was in the past. But for bak chor mee, I haven't heard many people complain that it was so much better in the past. Apart from freshness, bak chor mee is really about the noodles. So, you need to start with a good quality egg noodle. With each mouthful, you should be able to enjoy the aroma of the noodles that has been lightly flavoured by pork lard, with the vinegar just cutting through the oil and getting the salivary glands working. I prefer my noodles QQ (al dente), with a firm bite and sufficient curl to give you that serrated feel as you slurp it up. The balance of chilli and vinegar has to be just right, and the combination of pork and sauce really shiok.

There has been much discussion on the difference between mee poh tar, Teochew kway teow mee and bak chor mee and there will be people who would stick out their necks to define 10 different subcategories of mee poh, which is also commonly called mee pok. The way I see it, Teochew mee poh tar – "tar" meaning dry – is a spectrum of different varieties. On

one end, you have mee poh tar, which strictly speaking is just blanched mee poh tossed in chilli and oil with some fishballs and maybe fish cakes thrown in. And at the other end of the spectrum, you have bak chor mee, which, strictly speaking, should only include minced pork, but the lines of demarcation have been blurred and that is why you often get freshly sliced pork, liver and fishballs in your bak chor mee. Some hawkers also add fresh prawns, keow (fried wantons), and pork ribs!

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Ask anyone where the best bak chor mee in Singapore is and invariably **Hill Street Tai Hwa Pork Noodle** will pop up. The noodles here are really QQ (al dente), the chilli shiok, the lard fresh and the black vinegar just gets your salivary glands working overtime. I really love the soup here. My usual fare is a big bowl of wanton soup with sliced pork, minced pork and pork balls.

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Seng Kee Mushroom Minced Pork Noodles has been in business for over 20 years. It was at Eunos before moving to Upper Changi Road. Mr Lee's trademark is the way he makes lots of clanging noises when he is cooking. His bak chor mee is one that you really must try. The noodles are the thin, flat type, with excellent eggy flavour. Being QQ (al dente), they have a very good bite. The ribs are stewed until the tendons become gelatinised, so you can eat the whole thing without leaving any soft bones behind. The sambal chilli is also really shiok, very flavourful and not just plain hot. Mr Lee explained that in order to create a unique sauce that goes into his bak chor mee, he slices up the mushrooms and leaves them overnight to extract the juices before combining them with his secret blend of herbs and spices. I really like the sauce!