



Food blogger Leslie Tay's new book is a distillation of his blog posts and photographs and also comes with a list of his top picks for each hawker dish. ST PHOTO: NURIA LING

Hawker food glam

Food blogger Leslie Tay wants to glamorise char kway teow and other local dishes

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Ever wondered why chwee kueh is called that? After steaming, the rice cake develops a dimple on its surface in which water collects, hence its name, which literally means water cake in Teochew. It is then topped with chye poh (preserved radish).

And did you know that bak kut teh (pork rib soup) originated as nutritious food for coolies in the Clarke Quay area? Two dialect groups, the Teochews and the Hokkiens, have their own versions of this soup.

If anecdotal evidence from hawkers is to be believed, "black" carrot cake, which is coated with sweet black sauce and fried with eggs and chye poh, came before "white" carrot cake.

Such origin stories, as well as a potted history of Singaporean hawker delights, can be found in food blogger Leslie Tay's new book, *The End Of Char Kway Teow And Other Mysteries*.

Published by Epigram, the 416-page book is distilled from his blog posts and photographs on ieatishootipost.sg. Each chapter ends with a list of Dr Tay's top picks for each hawker dish.

Proceeds from the first 2,000 books that have been pre-sold will be used to build schools in Sandakan in Sabah, Malaysia, for children with no

access to education.

Of the book title, the 41-year-old general practitioner says: "Char kway teow is not a very sexy dish. It is also the poster boy for unhealthy food. Yet, it is a dish that requires a lot of skill and passion to cook. If nothing is done, char kway teow will die out."

His concern for the survival of hawker fare was heightened recently when he spoke of Teochew porridge to 50 members of the Nanyang Technological University's Culinary Club.

Only a few members raised their hands when he asked if they ate the porridge, which, unlike Cantonese congee with its sticky consistency, is more watery. He says: "I was shocked at the response. I felt that Generation Y was losing touch with its roots."

Comparing Singapore's hawker food to the Japanese food culture of ramen and the Italian culture of making traditional wood-fired pizza, he says: "We need to cultivate the same pride that the Japanese and Italians have with their cuisine. To do so, Singaporeans need to know the history of our food, so that when overseas friends visit, we can help instill a deeper appreciation of our local cuisine."

With this book as a platform, he hopes to work on a film on hawker food as his next project to "romanticise" hawker food.

"My hope is that with the glamorisation of hawker food in this book, future generations can develop a greater sense of pride in our very own hawker heritage," he adds.

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The End Of Char Kway Teow And Other Mysteries will be out at major bookstores by Christmas at \$28.