

## Three Chopsticks.(Short story)

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When I think back on the conversations that took place after I told people that I was going to Singapore to eat, I'm reminded of the scene in "Little Red Riding Hood" when the title character first encounters the big bad wolf. I play the wolf:

"Singapore!" Little Red Riding Hood says, in an improbable New York accent. "But Singapore is supposed to be the least exotic place in Asia. There's nothing to see there, unless you're a connoisseur of skyscrapers or container ports or obsessive street-cleaning."

"All the better for guilt-free eating, my dear. Your meals can't be spoiled by remorse over not having conducted a thorough inspection of the second-most-important cathedral."

"And isn't Singapore the place where you can get fined for chewing gum?"

"But, my dear, you can't chew gum while you're eating anyway."

From those conversations, I have concluded that the governmental ban on chewing gum, promulgated in 1992, remains the fact most strongly associated by Americans with Singapore. If Singapore tested a nuclear device tomorrow, the stories in American newspapers would mention the gum ban by the second paragraph. (Three years ago, the government relented a bit, in order to satisfy the requirements of a free-trade agreement: you can now buy nicotine gum by prescription.) There is a collateral awareness of the penalties that Singapore imposes for such malefactions as dropping a candy wrapper on the sidewalk. According to what's listed on a widely sold souvenir T-shirt emblazoned "Singapore--A Fine City," the acts that can bring you a serious fine include not only gum-chewing and littering and smoking and spitting but also carrying a durian on a public conveyance. A durian is an astonishingly odoriferous melon, much prized in Southeast Asia. Having smelled a durian, I must say that the prohibition against carrying one on a public conveyance (for which there is actually no specific fine) strikes me as a very solid piece of legislation. In American terms, it's the equivalent of a law against carrying a cattle feedlot on a public conveyance.

I'd always thought that I wouldn't go much further than that in supporting Singapore's efforts to treat tidiness as the nearly Athenian ideal of government. Still, had I known that it was happening I would have backed the government's scheme in the seventies to bring food vendors, called hawkers, off the streets and into centers that have proper sanitation and refrigeration and running water--a scheme that was inspired by a desire for tidy streets, along with public-health considerations and the needs of traffic control and, presumably, the relentless modernization that seems to have a momentum of its own in Singapore. My support would have been based on enlightened self-interest, one of the cornerstones of democracy. For years, as I've walked past food stands in foreign lands, I've struggled to keep in mind that for an American visitor the operational translation for signs that ostensibly say something like "bhel puri" or "tacos de nopales" is "Delivery System for Unfamiliar Bugs That You Will Bitterly Regret Having Ingested." The temptation to throw caution to the wind has been excruciating, since I may love street food above all other types of food. I have never figured out just why, although I've considered the possibility that, through some rare genetic oddity, my sense of taste is at full strength only when I'm standing up. (The fact that I particularly enjoy whatever I eat while standing in front of the refrigerator could be considered supporting evidence.) For a while, I thought about testing the standup hypothesis at some fancy Manhattan restaurant by springing to my feet halfway through the main course and trying to gauge whether that makes the roasted organic chicken with fricassee of spring vegetables and chanterelle polenta taste as good as those sausage sandwiches you get at Italian street fairs.

Gathering food vendors into hawker centers, under the purview of public-health inspectors, meant that a Western visitor not only can have a safe shot at a variety of Singaporean delicacies but can do so in a setting so convenient that his energy is reserved for eating. All over Singapore, there are open-air pavilions where an island of tables and chairs is ringed by eighty or a hundred hawker stands--many of them selling only one item, like just satay or just fish-ball noodles. The government has established hawker centers in the central business district and hawker centers at the beach and hawker centers attached to the high-rise public-housing projects where the vast majority of Singaporeans live. In some of the fancy skyscrapers and department stores, private operators run air-conditioned, upmarket versions of hawker centers called food courts--a term presumably

selected by someone who had never tasted what's passed off as food at an American shopping-mall food court. In Singapore, even the establishments called coffee shops are essentially mini hawker centers. They might have started as places that served coffee and the pastries that the British Empire, for reasons of its own, inflicted on unsuspecting colonials throughout the world, but these days the proprietor is likely to operate the drink concession himself and rent out two or three stalls to specialists in, say, fish-head curry or Hainanese chicken rice. It has become possible to eat in Singapore for days at a time without ever entering a conventional restaurant. Since I have never been much taken with the concept of courses--my eating habits are more on the order of a bit of this, a bit of that, and, now that I think of it, a bit of something else--it almost seems as if the Singapore government of forty years ago had arranged its hawker policy with me in mind.

I don't mean that I would check the flights to Heathrow if I heard that some entrepreneur in East Anglia had created a logistically flawless collection of food stands that allowed a diner to switch with ease from, say, bangers and mash to mushy peas to bubble and squeak. Convenience isn't everything. Singapore, though, has always been noted for the quality and variety of its street food and, not coincidentally, for having a citizenry whose interest in eating borders on the obsessive. The population combines migrants from several parts of China with minorities of Indians and Malays and people who look Chinese but are known as Peranakans--a separate ethnic group, long prominent in the government and business life of Singapore, which traces its origins to early Chinese traders who absorbed some of the culture and the genes of the local Malays. The evidence indicates that every one of these groups arrived hungry.

Soon, Hainanese were cooking Peranakan specialties and Indians were frying noodles in the Chinese manner. Old dishes were transmogrified. New dishes were invented. Eventually, Singaporeans were lining up at hawker stands to eat any number of dishes available only in Singapore. Even in New York, a famously polyglot city that has, for example, three restaurants specializing in the food of the Uighur people of the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region, a yearning for Singapore hawker food is surprisingly difficult to satisfy. (Singapore mei fun, a noodle dish often found in Chinatown restaurants, is, it almost goes without saying, unknown in Singapore.) You can find the Malaysian version of some Singaporean dishes--asam laksa, a terrific soup with an unlikely sour-fish taste, has some similarity to the Peranakan version of laksa served in hawker centers, for instance--and some dishes in Chinatown restaurants are similar to the dishes brought to Singapore from, say, Fujian or Hainan. There are, of course, some upmarket pan-Asian places in Manhattan that do versions of street food, including Singaporean hawker food. Apparently, though, a dish that is reminiscent of what's found in Singapore serves only to make overseas Singaporeans long for the real article. Culinarily, they are among the most homesick people I have ever met.

I commiserated with a number of them this spring, when the Prime Minister's office organized a Singapore Day in Central Park. Singapore Day was supposed to be for expatriate Singaporeans and their guests, but I was among some New York feeders who wormed our way in when we heard that the festivities would include Singaporean dishes prepared by a dozen hawkers flown in for the occasion. Six thousand people stood patiently in line for a go at some food from home--completely ignoring the government exhibitions and the requisite rock band. As they waited, they spoke of the stands they head for when they can manage the eleven-thousand-mile trip to Singapore--the coffee shop in their old neighborhood that has the best kaya (a sort of coconut custard, served on toast), the fried-prawn-noodle stand in Marine Parade they always visit the first day back, the place with the best halal version of chicken rice. Nobody I spoke to mentioned any restaurants. Even though the hawkers complained that they couldn't get all of the proper ingredients in New York, the tastes I had of roti prata (a sort of Indian crepe with dipping sauce) and chwee kueh (rice cakes topped with bits of fried preserved radish) and char kway teow (a dense fried rice-noodle dish that includes, among other ingredients, eggs and Chinese sausages and cockles and chives and fried lard) and laksa confirmed the wisdom of my plan to go to Singapore to eat.

The hawkers who came to New York had been handpicked by K. F. Seetoh, a Singaporean of Cantonese descent, whose connection to hawker food is similar, on a smaller scale, to the connection the France family has had with stock-car racing: that is, he managed to recognize a lot of scattered, unexalted activity as a cultural force and figured out how to merchandise it. An energetic, self-assured man in his mid-forties, with a hint of blond in his hair, Seetoh, as he's known to everybody, began his career as a photographer. But his avocation--which is eating, since he is a lifelong resident of Singapore--eventually became his profession. He started in 1998 by putting together a hawker-food guide called "Makansutra," makan being the Malay word for "eat" or "food." The guide lists what Seetoh considers the best stands for about a hundred and forty traditional hawker dishes--the best being all that any book would have room for, since Singapore has what Seetoh estimates to be about twelve thousand stands in the government hawker centers alone. The ratings are on a chopstick scale, with the most distinguished stands receiving three pairs of chopsticks. Seetoh's business card now identifies him as the chief executive and "makan guru" of a company that is also called Makansutra. He puts out other Southeast

Asian food guides, appears on television, and does consultancies. He even presides over a small collection of hawker stands in the slick marina area that's part of Singapore's modernistic performing-arts center--a building that, because of its shape (though not, presumably, its smell), is sometimes referred to by the locals as the Durian. Seetoh is helped in these endeavors by his wife, Patricia. Although Patricia says that before meeting her husband she ate mostly sandwiches and French fries, she comes from a Peranakan family that had good food as a priority. According to the Seetohs, when Patricia's father was on his deathbed he whispered something that made his family gather closer, thinking that he had some final instructions or blessings to impart. What he was saying turned out to be "laksa." They brought him a bowl of it.

Seetoh and I had become acquainted when he was in New York for Singapore Day. The next evening, at one of the sophisticated Southeast Asian places that he'd wanted to try, the Seetohs and I sampled some of the Singaporean dishes on the menu and he responded more or less the way you'd expect a barbecue nut from Tennessee to respond to what was advertised as a pulled-pork-shoulder sandwich in, say, Helsinki or Leeds. He was moved to describe the authentic Singaporean nasi lemak and the authentic Singaporean chili crab I'd eat when I got to Singapore. Given the fact that I wouldn't have thrown rocks at what we'd just eaten, I could hardly wait to sample the three-chopstick versions. I told Seetoh that I'd be in Singapore as soon as I could arrange it.

In Singapore, it was clear from the moment Seetoh picked me up at my hotel that, as interested as he was in authenticity and quality, pure capacity would also be an issue. He is an enthusiast. For Seetoh, there's always another noodle dish around the corner. He's quite willing to admit that there is plenty of mediocre hawker food in Singapore, but superior hawker fare renders him rhapsodic. The icon chart in "Makansutra" translates two and a half pairs of chopsticks--one notch below the top--as "Divine." Three pairs of chopsticks means "Die, Die Must Try!," which has become a sort of motto for Seetoh and his enterprises. It's a direct translation, he says, of a Cantonese phrase that means, more or less, "to die for." In addition to Cantonese and Mandarin and Malay and Hokkien, Seetoh speaks idiomatic English plus Singlish, a slangy local patois that is spoken only idiomatically. He speaks all of these languages rapidly.

Working mainly from my samplings at Singapore Day and from dishes that had been labelled "Popular Local Favorite" in the 2007 edition of "Makansutra," I'd come up with a preliminary list of dishes that I considered, well, must try. There were nine: chwee kueh (the rice cakes with radish), grilled stingray, roti prata, curry puffs (which Seetoh describes as, more or less, a Chinese improvement on an Indian samosa), chili crab (and its cousin, pepper crab), laksa, fish-head curry, carrot cake (which would startle someone who'd meant to order the dessert you might get in the sort of restaurant whose waitresses slouch around in sandals: it's fried white radish and flour cake, with garlic and eggs and scallions and other vegetables), and charkway teow. Seetoh looked disappointed.

"Wrong list?" I asked.

Not wrong. Insufficient. I had left out Hokkien fried-prawn noodles. I had left out otah--fish paste, mixed with chilies, folded into a coconut leaf, and grilled. I had left out rojak--a sort of salad that's held together with a sauce the color and consistency of Mexican mole, unless you get the Indian rather than the Chinese version, which is totally different and, of course, a must-try item. I hadn't mentioned mee siam, a Thai-sounding noodle dish that is not available in Thailand. I hadn't mentioned fish-ball noodles--which is odd, since I am devoted to fish balls. I hadn't even mentioned bak kut teh, a simple pork-ribs soup that is, improbably, considered a breakfast treat. (Eventually, Seetoh and I had some bak kut teh for breakfast--in a place next to the port that is said to be the busiest in the world--and I can say unequivocally that it beats Cheerios by a mile.) I had left out popiah, a Hokkien-style spring roll that includes stewed turnips. By the time we reached the Maxwell Road Hawker Centre--near where Makansutra has an office, in a row of colonial-era three-story buildings known as shop-houses--my list had about twenty items, and for the next few days every hawker center seemed to remind Seetoh of a dish I had to try before I went home. "You can't leave without having it," Seetoh would say, when he instructed me to add another dish to my list. "It'll knock your socks off."

Sampling what Seetoh considers the very best rendition of each dish required some travelling around town--a remarkable chicken rice here, an amazing chwee kueh there, a mind-blowing laksa somewhere else. At one center, though--the modestly named Old Airport Road Temporary Food Centre, which was serving a public-housing project during some construction that's part of an ambitious, ten-year hawker-center upgrading program that the government launched in 2001--we were in the presence of three vendors who had been designated by Seetoh as hawker masters. There, without descending into the realm of the merely divine, you can start with rojak, then tear into some chili crab, and then decide whether you might want to end the evening with Hokkien fried-prawn noodles or have the chili-crab specialist do a pepper crab as a change of pace before

you end the evening with Hokkien fried-prawn noodles. I had no doubt that I was indeed eating the food of masters. In fact, while eating at the Old Airport Road Temporary Food Centre I realized that it was incorrect to think that my taste buds operated at full strength only when I was standing: we were eating this food while sitting at a table, after all, and it was knocking my socks off. One of the principles of scientific inquiry is that even an elegant hypothesis has to be abandoned if irrefutable evidence to the contrary is encountered.

Seetoh seemed quite confident about his selection of the very best stand for each hawker dish, but, as I had learned from the people I'd met at Singapore Day--people whom Seetoh had described as "deprived and depraved"--a Singaporean devotee of hawker food doesn't have to be the author of a food guide to be absolutely certain that he knows where to find the best version of just about anything. One evening, while we were eating some fish-head curry--a dish that in Singapore includes an entire snapper head staring up through the curry sauce--a friend of Seetoh's named Daniel Wang shook his head sadly when he heard where Seetoh had taken me for char kway teow. Wang, who retired in 2004 as Singapore's director general of public health, happened to be the Ministry of the Environment engineer put in charge of building the original hawker centers, in the seventies. At his retirement, he had just presided over a \$2.5-million upgrading of a beach venue called the East Coast Lagoon Hawker Centre, which was turned into something so reminiscent of a tropical resort that Seetoh refers to it as "Daniel's Club Med." Wang's contribution to hawker centers can be seen as a monument to enlightened selfinterest: given his line of work, he's quite conscious of hygiene, but he happens to be crazy about hawker food, particularly char kway teow. As a schoolboy, Wang regularly observed the cooking technique of a particular char kway teow hawker, and he remains loyal to that hawker's son--a vender who had learned well from his father, Wang explained, how to cook the noodles in lard to keep them from sticking and how to make his stock from prawns and squid and precisely when to sprinkle on white pepper. Dismissing the suggestion that childhood nostalgia might be making him a less than objective judge, Wang went on to extoll the popiah produced by a hawker who had not been among the five popiah hawkers listed in "Makansutra."

Wang was so enthusiastic about the snubbed popiah that there was nothing to do but go to the Newton Food Centre and give it a try, as soon as we had polished off the fish-head curry. At the Newton Centre, Seetoh was barely polite about the popiah and Wang did not pursue the matter, having become caught up in a discussion of a sort of oyster omelette that we'd picked up from a nearby stall. I assumed that the popiah discussion was at an end. The next evening, though, while the Seetohs and I were on the way to the East Coast Lagoon Hawker Centre to have some salted vegetable and duck soup (a dish that has replaced French fries in Patricia Seetoh's pantheon), Seetoh pulled up in front of a shopping mall called the Shaw Centre. While we waited in the car, Patricia ducked in to get some popiah, so that I could understand what a divine--or maybe even a die-die-must-try--popiah is like. In Singapore, I should have realized, a discussion about the relative merits of various popiah stands is never at an end.

The more we ate, the longer my list got. We couldn't seem to stay even. On my last evening, while we consumed some mee siam and the Indian version of rojak with Daniel Wang and a couple of his friends, Seetoh was still lamenting the dishes I hadn't had--steamboat (a sort of hot pot) and a Malay noodle dish called mee rebus and lontong (an Indonesian dish of rice cakes with tofu and vegetables simmered in a coconut curry) and nasi briyani (a dish of Middle Eastern origin) and a Hakka tofu dish called yong tau foo and Indian mee goreng. One of Wang's guests said that when she gets back to Singapore on the flight that arrives around dawn she stops for kueh chap before she even goes home--kueh chap being a bowl of broth with sheets of rice-flour noodles served with pig intestines, or what Wang calls "spare parts." Seetoh said, almost apologetically, that he hadn't taken me to a kueh chap stand, and I said, "My mother used to say that it's always good to save something for the next trip."

I was, indeed, thinking about the next trip as I studied my list on the plane home. I deeply regretted having had char kway teow only once, for instance, and I didn't see how I was going to repair that deficit without returning to Singapore. I was also thinking of how convenient it would be if other cities--New York, for instance--had hawker centers serving the local specialties. New York's current mayor does not disdain tidiness, after all, and New York mayors have thought of street vendors as congestion at least since the reign of Fiorello LaGuardia, who gathered some of them in places like the Essex Street Market.

A hawker center could be set up by the next time the Seetohs visited New York. I could imagine us at a place that looks a bit like the East Coast Lagoon Hawker Centre, Daniel's Club Med, although it would overlook the Hudson rather than the Strait of Singapore. There's a stand selling Italian-sausage sandwiches, of course, and a stand selling Vietnamese banh mi sandwiches. The Mayor has persuaded the dosa man of Washington Square to come into the operation and leave the Washington Square cart in the hands of a trusted cousin. There are stands run by the vendors from the Red Hook ball fields--one selling pupusas and one selling ceviche and one selling Honduran tacos. A couple of Belgian French-fry vendors are there, with fries good enough to make

Patricia Seetoh consider reverting to her former eating habits. The Mayor's people have persuaded the legendary Arepa Lady of Jackson Heights to give up the chancy weather of Roosevelt Avenue for the Hudson River Hawker Center. There's a jerk-chicken stand and two competing falafel stands. I've been in nearly constant movement between our table and the venders all evening, bringing back, say, bocconcini or two kinds of fish balls--the plain ones and the ones with meat at the center, familiar from Eldridge Street noodle-soup restaurants like Sheng Wang and the exquisitely named Young City Fish Balls. Seetoh is saying that he's getting a bit full, and reminds me that he and Patricia have to get up early for the long flight back to Singapore. "But you haven't had a calzone yet," I say. "You haven't had a zeppole. We still haven't gotten you a classic New York pastrami sandwich, not to speak of a knish. I'm not talking about one of those nasty commercial knishes that look like vinyl coin purses. I'm talking about an authentic New York potato knish. You can't go home without eating a knish. It'll knock your socks off."