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Singaporean Luxury to Peranakan Reality: Comparing *Gourmet* and *Somebody Feed Phil*

A lot can happen in 50 years. Wars can break out and weaken global diplomacy. Waves of immigrants can alter a country's population. People can discover a tropical Southeast Asian island and its food. This is where we find the small island nation of Singapore. With a total area of just 284.1 square miles, Singapore's population has increased almost threefold in the 50 years since 1970 and 2020, from just over two million to almost six million. With a booming economy and growing population comes a blossoming cuisine, and this cuisine has captured culinary attention throughout the 50 years. Two sources of this attention are the culinary magazine *Gourmet* and the travel documentary series *Somebody Feed Phil*. Over the 30 years from 1970 to 2000 when *Gourmet* published articles about Singapore, *Gourmet* firmly kept its gaze on the country's relatively recent British past and only covered either local Chinese markets or fancy hotels. By contrast, *Somebody Feed Phil*'s "Singapore" episode, released in 2020, dives into the local Singaporean and Peranakan culture, taking the viewers to the cheap but still valuable hawker centers and advocating for their survival. This shift in representation reflects a broader change in how Western audiences engage with non-Western audiences, where an exoticized colonial lens turned into a genuine appreciation of lived experiences. In their portrayals of Singapore, *Gourmet* extensively focuses on Singapore's colonial past and high-end food, abandoning Singapore's inhabitants, while *Somebody Feed Phil* puts the Singaporean people and their authentic cuisine at the forefront and advocates for their future.

Gourmet was a culinary magazine that was published monthly from January 1941 to November 2009, its imperialist lens persisting throughout its history. In his 2019 critique, R. Alexander D. Orquiza argues that after the Vietnam War ended in 1975, *Gourmet* “fail[ed] to change its tone, tenor, and insights on Southeast Asia” (166) for decades, with its writers always maintaining an imperialist and exoticist viewpoint when discussing Singapore and Southeast Asia as a whole. *Somebody Feed Phil* is an ongoing Netflix travel documentary series that premiered in 2018 and features the creator of *Everybody Loves Raymond* Philip Rosenthal as he travels across the world enjoying local delicacies and learning about the local culture, all with a contagious smile and wholesome attitude.

Gourmet presents Singapore as it appeals to a wealthy, white traveler with only luxury hotels and restaurants while *Somebody Feed Phil* presents a more comprehensive understanding of Singapore with various influences in its cuisine, architecture, and history. This is evident in how they both discuss the Raffles Hotel. According to Rosenthal, the Raffles Hotel is the “height of colonial elegance in Singapore” (“Singapore” 00:16:01), having been built in 1887 in a British colonial architectural style. Writing for *Gourmet*, Trotta lauded the Raffles Hotel as a “place[...] where travelers could experience the best of Singaporean cuisine without ever leaving the building” (qtd. in Orquiza 172). Rosenthal, on the other hand, only visited the hotel’s Long Bar, home of the Singapore Sling, where he tried a drink and partook in the bar’s tradition of eating a bag of peanuts and throwing the shells on the floor. The Raffles Hotel served as the main attraction for Trotta’s stay in Singapore, while it was only a brief stop on Rosenthal’s journey. The *Gourmet* writers stayed in luxury while Rosenthal showed that the luxury was only a fraction of what Singapore offered. This distinction highlights the broader difference in perspective where *Gourmet* remains fixated on colonial grandeur while *Somebody Feeds Phil*

acknowledges the need to explore modern, local Singaporean cuisine. In addition, Rosenthal met with Singaporean chef and food writer Annette Tan who talked about the indigenous Peranakan cuisine and who taught him the new word “shiok” which Singaporeans use to signify approval. Rosenthal also met with two MasterChef: Singapore judges who brought him to their local hawker markets. At one hawker market, Rosenthal is eating nasi lemak, rice cooked in coconut milk and served with chili paste, with KF Seetoh, a Singaporean food critic and photographer, who knocks Rosenthal for “go[ing] for the meat” (“Singapore” 00:33:01) like a Westerner. Seetoh tells Rosenthal that the rice and the chili paste are the “main stars” of the dish and everything else served with it is just a “sideshow”. Without Seetoh present, Rosenthal would have continued eating the nasi lemak incorrectly, and Rosenthal gladly enjoyed all the kinds of nasi lemak he was served. By contrast, the *Gourmet* writers would not have dared leave their decadent hotel rooms to go to a local hawker market, let alone learn how to eat a dish correctly. By going out and learning from Singaporeans themselves, Rosenthal in *Somebody Feed Phil* gives viewers a thorough understanding of Singaporean culture, something that the *Gourmet* writers never truly tried to do for their readers. By centering Singaporean voices like Annette Tan and KF Seetoh, Rosenthal models a more ethical approach to food tourism—one that prioritizes cultural appreciation over exoticization.

Unfortunately, it must be acknowledged that both *Gourmet* and *Somebody Feed Phil* were not perfect in teaching their audiences Singaporean history. Neither discuss World War II and the Japanese occupation of Singapore nor the “importance of Lee Kuan Yew’s political mastery in making Singapore an economic powerhouse” (Orquiza 184), while both explore Singapore’s history of British colonization. However, as with the Raffles Hotel, this colonialist view completely guides the *Gourmet* writers, while Rosenthal acknowledges the history and

learns how the culture developed because of the history. It might be truly impossible to escape exoticism, but taking Rosenthal's appreciative stance toward foreign cultures allows travelers to acknowledge their privilege and meaningfully engage with the people they meet.

We have come so far in shifting our perspectives on Singapore. From *Gourmet* originally designating it a purely luxurious destination for wealthy travelers, Singaporean cuisine and culture has since taken the world by storm. It is thanks to documentaries like *Somebody Feed Phil* that audiences have left behind the imperialist, colonialist attitude when traveling to foreign destinations and now embrace enjoying all aspects of new cultures just as Rosenthal does.

Works Cited

- Orquiza, R. Alexander D. "Old tastes, old stories: Gourmet magazine's representations of Southeast Asia after the Vietnam War." *Food and Foodways* 27.3 (2019): 165-189.
- "Singapore." *Somebody Feed Phil*, season 4, episode 3, Netflix, 30 Oct. 2020. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/81144313>.