

# NEW BLOOD NEEDED

## IT'S STILL AN UPHILL STRUGGLE FOR ASPIRING HAWKERS, SAY OBSERVERS

JOY FANG  
joyfangz@mediacorp.com.sg



Everybody in Singapore loves it. Renowned chefs such as Ferran Adria and Gordon Ramsay have raved about it. There is no doubt hawker grub is quintessential Singapore, and any Singaporean worth his or her salt would know where to tuck into the best char kway teow, chicken rice or laksa.

But despite the renewed interest, the street food culture here is in danger of fading into the sunset. Why? Because older hawkers are retiring or passing away, and there is not enough new blood to take their place, said industry observers.

With the Government building 20 new hawker centres over the next 12 years — the first, co-located with Ci Yuan Community Club at Hougang Avenue 9, opened in August after a hiatus in 1985 — it is now more essential than ever to revitalise this tradition and attract a larger number of hawkers to run the stalls.

But, what is holding aspiring hawkers back from entering the trade?

While some may say entering the hawker business seems relatively simple with little capital cost, those in the know say it's not as easy as it seems.

The biggest hindrance stems from a lack of opportunities for aspiring hawkers to learn how to cook and enter the business. There are no comprehensive and sustained efforts to ensure these continue for the long haul, said Makansutra founder KF Seetoh. "There is not enough information, not enough opportunities or support to ignite the continuation of this heritage food culture for tomorrow," he noted.

Many younger hawkers also prefer to whip up what they feel is more interesting fare, such as fusion or Western cuisine, and few know how to cook authentic dishes such as bak chor mee and char kway teow, he said.

And even if some aspiring hawkers do manage to learn some techniques, nobody teaches them how to market their food or which events to participate in, locally or regionally, to get more exposure, he added.

"Ideally, the Government should just take an old school and convert it into a street food academy," he said.

Executive director of social en-



**For new hawker Peter Mok, whose stall Noodle Evolution opened at Lau Pa Sat last December, finding an available location at government-owned hawker centres was the biggest challenge.**

PHOTOS: CHUA HONG YIN

terprise Project Dignity Koh Seng Choon agreed. "Many people now want to have more experience before they jump in," he noted. "So you must have a structured learning process to train them. That's what's missing at the moment."

In 2013, a collaboration between Knight Frank, Business Times, YMCA, National Environment Agency (NEA) and Singapore Workforce Development Agency initiated the hawker master pilot training programme to train aspiring hawkers. It had "master hawkers" such as Thian Boon Hua of Boon Tong Kee Chicken Rice and Sulaiman Abu of D'Authentic Nasi Lemak impart their skills to trainees. While it was launched with much fanfare, the second round never took off in a big way because of a lack of sponsors. Due to the small budget, they are currently running the course for only four people, said Koh.

### IT'S ABOUT SPACE AND PERCEPTION

Another problem, said industry players, is the lack of sufficient spots for aspiring hawkers to set up a stall. This was cast in the spotlight after Douglas Ng, 24, who runs a fishball noodle stall at Golden Mile Food Centre, complained about the selection process of upcoming hawker centre at Bukit Panjang. Ng said the shortlisting method adopted by NTUC Foodfare, which operates the hawker centre, was unfair and lacked transparency.

Foodfare clarified later that they had purposefully introduced a new set of criteria that would not award the stalls based on the highest rental bids. The new evaluation criteria is based on a scorecard with only 40 per cent weightage for tendered rent, while the remaining 60 per cent consists of quality, variety, selling price, operat-

ing hours, experience and concept.

For new hawker Peter Mok, who opened his stall Noodle Evolution last December, finding an available location at Government-owned hawker centres was his biggest challenge. With few stalls available for bidding, he had to bid for a stall at Kopitiam's Lau Pa Sat instead, where rents are higher. Add maintenance and washing fees, and wages for workers; and it comes up to quite a large sum, he added.

Foodfare said the Bukit Panjang Hawker Centre had received more than 300 bids for six kiosks and 26 cooked-food stalls. An NEA spokesman also said that their cooked-food stalls "are generally well taken up", with a vacancy rate of 2 per cent. NEA currently manages and regulates 107 markets and hawker centres.

But, observers say this is not reflective of interest from young hawkers. For instance, Seetoh pointed out that the number of bids also includes bids from existing players looking to expand their business. As for existing hawker centres, they are not vacant because many old hawkers refuse to let go of their stalls as they are paying old rental rates, he noted.

The stigma surrounding the hawker culture is another factor inhibiting the industry's growth. Despite growing interest in hawker fare, fewer young people are interested because it is still seen as "unfashionable", said Seetoh.

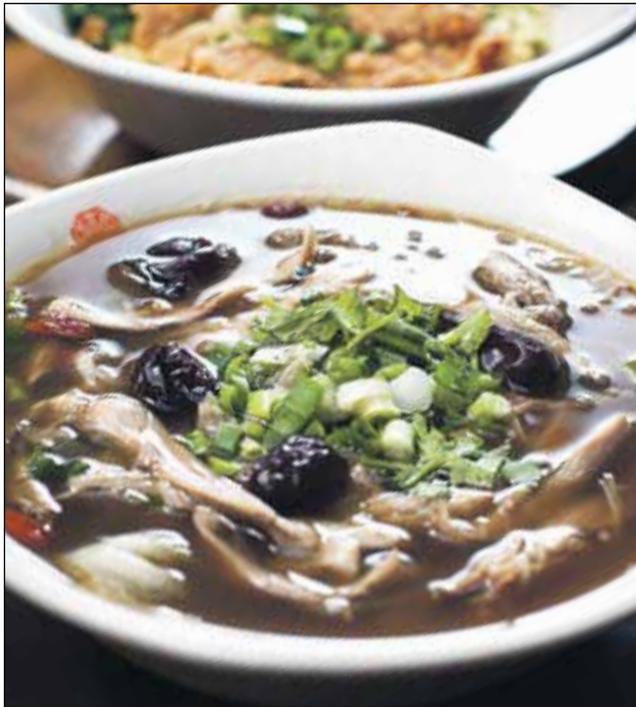
"The bulk of a newer generation still likes to eat what's trending online, such as pop-ups, food trucks, or artisanal farmer's market type of food ... If given a choice, street food isn't up on their list."

Many old hawkers also do not want their children to take over the reins, and so many types of "authentic food" may disappear, he said, citing Mitzi's Cantonese Restaurant as an example.

"The youngsters will not work in this kind of environment," added Mok. "Nobody wants to work so hard because there are other opportunities available. (Old-style) hawkers are dinosaurs, society will evolve and they will no longer be found. The hawker culture will change with the changing tastes of the newer generation."

### A SUBSTANTIAL SUM NEEDED

Then there are the financial risks of setting up a hawker stall. While these may be less daunting compared to a



restaurant or cafe, it can still be considerable; and many face the problem of having enough seed money.

Starting a stall at an old public hawker centre — including equipment, utilities and ingredients — could set a hawker back by some S\$18,000 to S\$20,000, said Seetoh. At private food courts, that could go up to S\$50,000.

The challenge could be in having enough money to set up, as well as to sustain for at least three months, said Mok. “When you first start, your customer base is not established, so you may not be able to break-even, or make a profit, until three months later.

“This is one of the barriers to setting up — the basic finance,” Mok said.

Whether one can earn money from the business also depends on several factors, such as stall location, the number of operating hours, cost per bowl and the quality of the food.

“All these have to be factored in before one opens a stall,” said Seetoh.

This is important as take-home profits for a hawker can range between S\$2,000 to S\$3,000 a month and a five-figure sum “for really good ones”, he noted; while Mok opined that hawkers can earn an average of between S\$50 and S\$1,000 a day.

NEA said several of their recent policy changes have lowered barriers of entry to the hawker trade. For ex-

ample, it removed the concept of reserve rent for tendered stalls in 2012, which resulted in some cooked-food stalls getting awarded for as low as S\$1 rent per month.

“This has allowed aspiring hawkers to enter the hawker trade without having to pay high rentals,” said the spokesman.

Still, a glaring loophole remains: Hawkers do not come under any ministry, neither does it have any central body that could guide hawkers,

pointed out Victor Thyia, the Singapore Marine Parade Merchants & Hawkers Association’s honorary secretary. Hawkers are usually members of loosely formed associations within their individual hawker centres, and the amount of help and guidance differs. A large part of their discussions are about logistics, such as which cleaning services to employ.

It would be nice if hawkers could have consultants provide advice and

transfer skills, said Thyia. “We ... survive on our own.”

While hawkers need to be licensed by NEA, they don’t require company registration. Without that and CPF contributions, it is difficult to access Government grants, said Koh.

With an estimate of more than 20,000 hawkers in Singapore, it is strange that this group is not taken care of, he added. “This is like a lost baby that nobody wants to look after. Hawkers have no parents.”

While hawkers need to be licensed by NEA, they don’t require company registration. Without that and CPF contributions, it is difficult to access Government grants, said Koh.

With an estimate of more than 20,000 hawkers in Singapore, it is strange that this group is not taken care of, he added. “This is like a lost baby that nobody wants to look after. Hawkers have no parents.”

It would be nice if hawkers could have consultants provide advice and



**22 will be selected for "The King and I".** Only children who have gone through this Kids Boot Camp will get the opportunity to go through auditions conducted by VizPro.

**REGISTER NOW!**

[MediaAcademy.sg](http://MediaAcademy.sg)

[Ask@MediaAcademy.sg](mailto:Ask@MediaAcademy.sg)

+65 6435 6000



Singapore Media Academy  
CPE Registration No.: 200515963R  
Period of Registration: 26-04-2013 to 25-04-2017

**MEDIA CORP**  
ENGAGE · ENTERTAIN · ENRICH

**SINGAPORE  
MEDIA ACADEMY**



**Click to eat**

For more delish deals and news on what's hot on the scene, download the 8 Days Eat App at

<http://www16.mediacorp.sg/8days/8daysapp2.html>