



Beauty World Station (right) located at the junction of Chun Tin Road and Cheong Chin Nam Road, right in front of the row of eateries. PHOTO: JOY FANG

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NEW ADDITIONS AND THE NEW MRT STATION COULD BE A BOON FOR EATERIES NEAR BEAUTY WORLD

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Something is cooking just opposite Beauty World in Bukit Timah — literally. Eateries along Cheong Chin Nam Road and Chun Tin Road are hoping to revive the area as a popular dining enclave with a wide array of affordable eats. With the help of some new additions, and the opening of the new Beauty World MRT Station, this is something the eateries hope will draw a larger crowd.

The area is already a popular spot among students and National Servicemen because of its proximity to schools and army camps. But while the area still has its noteworthy dining stalwarts, such as Boon Tong Kee chicken rice, halal restaurant Al-Azhar and Joo Seng Teochew Porridge, it has lost its lustre of late. It has been plagued by issues of inaccessibility, lack of adequate parking, and the problem of noise and dust the past four years from the construction of the Downtown Line station, located right at its doorstep. Restaurant operators there told TODAY they are further hit by the fact that the area is surrounded by landed property, with the closest mall being the run-down Beauty World, which is also a shadow of its former self.

A quick scan of the area shows three Korean BBQ restaurants, two serving Teochew porridge and others selling Thai, Western and Chinese cuisines such as zi char, frog porridge and bak kut teh.

This place is a “makan street” that caters to residents in the west, such as Bukit Batok and Clementi, who are looking for late-night nosh, said Gabriel Chee, franchise manager and marketing manager of Tenderfresh. Its Tenderfresh Classic outlet there sells western fare such as crispy fried chicken, pasta and paella. “It’s the first place that would come to people’s mind, like how Simpang Bedok is the supper place for (those in) the East,” he noted.

The variety of cuisines here speaks for itself, he said. And despite the setbacks, the area has piqued the interest of a few restaurateurs, who have set up shop there. Stirling Bar and Grill opened in May last year, while Zac Butchery and Deli set up shop nine months ago. The newest entrant is a Korean-styled fried chicken eatery Over & Fried Chicken, which opened its doors last month.

(But it hasn’t always been easy: Bistro Bar Lobby at 9 is planning to shut down after about a year there, so diners there can expect another newcomer to take over the spot soon.)

Apart from leveraging on the street’s reputation as a late dinner-

cum-supper haunt, restaurant owners are also banking on the fact that the MRT will improve their chances of success, and are optimistic that it will bring in a fresh batch of diners who previously gave the place a miss.

The new station will also attract more residents located just a few stations away to eschew driving and take a quick ride down for a meal instead, especially when they know parking has always been a challenge, said Chee.

The sentiment was shared by Amy Yeo, co-owner of three-year-old Koon Bak Kut Teh. They chose to set up there because it was seen as a vibrant night-time foodie area, she said.

But does she feel hampered by the huge competition? Not at all, she said. "It's friendly competition. And if everyone offers good quality food, it'll attract a larger crowd. Then everyone will have more opportunities."

As the area is currently not very accessible to office workers, she hopes the new station will succeed in bringing in more lunchtime crowds. However, diners should not expect artisanal coffee joints or high-end restaurants in the area any time soon; operators say they prize the area as a place where diverse and purse-friendly eating options abound.

RISING EXPECTATIONS

The spot has already seen some signs of revival since hoarding from the construction came down in August last year, and operators say they expect business to jump even more.

"When the hoarding was up, customers couldn't see our shop and the business was losing money every

month for about two years. We were really suffering," said Yeo. Thankfully, things picked up after the hoarding was removed. The restaurateurs have since seen sales increase about 50 to 60 per cent, she added. "When the station opens, it should go up by another 20 to 30 per cent."

Another person counting on the MRT to bring in more business is Zac Butchery's manager Joseph Staehlin. He said that while sales have been a bit slow, as public transport options are still lacking, he expects business to increase threefold after the station opens, and for his establishment to break even, or even see profits, in about six months.

Staehlin had picked the location because he was hoping to leverage on the area's reputation, and had felt that his store would gain more prominence with increased footfall after the station's opening, he added.

Similarly, the owner of Over & Fried Chicken, Scott Son, is also banking on the increased accessibility from the station to boost business, as well as the fact that the area has a strong Korean community. Like Zac Butchery, business at this outlet has been slow, especially on Mondays and Tuesdays. (He has another outlet at Telok Ayer Street.)

"But when the MRT is up and running, this place should become more popular," he said, adding that he is also planning to open five to 10 more stores in other parts of the island.

Chee said sales for Tenderfresh Classic, which was set up close to two years ago, also jumped 50 per cent after boards came down; and he expects business to improve by another

20 per cent, adding that the figure was a "very conservative" estimate. In fact, his company is so confident of the area's popularity that they are even considering buying over a shop for some S\$6 million, instead of renting the space.

"If the MRT can open for 24 hours, I'll be even happier!" he quipped.

It remains to be seen if their vision will be fulfilled. Regulars TODAY spoke to seemed a tad unenthusiastic on the potential of the spot. The place used to be very bustling as a supper place, with halal eateries Al-Azhar and Al-Ameen stretching across several shops, said civil servant Daniel Neo, 26, who has been frequenting the area since he was 17.

"It's less lively now, with Al-Ameen shrinking in size and several eateries changing hands. Maybe when the MRT is up and running it will get better," he said.

Freelance writer Ben Chee, 30, who lives in the Hillview area, said he would pop by the area with his partner occasionally for supper, simply because "there was nowhere else to go" at that particular time. The MRT wouldn't increase his chances of heading there, he added, but he expects more will flock to the area because of it.

"It's not that we particularly seek out the food there. It's just a bit out of necessity and convenience," he said, adding that they would usually head straight to the two halal restaurants. "It's the most casual and we're used to it."

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From bak kut teh, Korean BBQ to Boon Tong Kee's chicken rice, there's something for everyone in the line-up of eateries along Cheong Chin Nam Road and Chun Tin Road. PHOTO: KOH MUI FONG

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