

Cultural Food Practices: SINGAPORE



Produced in partnership with the American Overseas Dietetic Association

Traditional foods and dishes

Singapore is made up of several ethnic groups, the main being the Chinese, Malay, Indians and Eurasians. Ethnic groups follow traditional cooking methods of their ancestors who originally migrated to Singapore. Chinese food originates from different regions of China, while Singaporean Indians are mostly from southern India and enjoy spicy food. Rice is a staple food, often accompanied by meat and/or vegetable dishes cooked in their specific ethnic style.

The integration of ethnic groups has created fusion foods unique to Singapore, such as the Peranakan cuisine which originated from Chinese-Malay marriages in previous generations. Peranakan cuisine is rich in Malay spices and often features pork, which Malay Muslims refrain from.

Here is a comparison of the different ethnic foods:



	Chinese	Malay	Indian	Peranakan
Flavorings and ingredients	Soy sauce, garlic, oyster sauce, sesame oil	Turmeric, galangal, tamarind, chili, <i>belacan</i> (spicy dried shrimp paste), coconut milk, <i>pandan</i> (screwpine) leaves	Chili and curry powder, cumin, coriander, cardamom, yogurt/coconut milk	Malay spices
Ways of cooking	Stir-frying, steaming, slow-cooking	Stir-/deep frying, stewing	Stir-frying, steaming, deep-frying	Stir-/deep frying
Examples	<p><i>Bak Kut Teh</i> (Pork ribs in herbal soup)</p> <p>Hainanese chicken rice (poached chicken with flavorful, oily rice)</p> <p>Fried <i>Kway Teow</i> (stir-fried rice noodles often with lard and dark sweet sauce)</p>	<p><i>Assam Pedas</i> (spicy tamarind) fish</p> <p><i>Nasi Lemak</i> (rice cooked with coconut milk, paired with meat/vegetables)</p> <p><i>Beef rendang</i> (beef slow-cooked in coconut milk and spices for several hours)</p>	<p><i>Thosai</i>, <i>Chappati</i>, <i>Naan</i> (Indian style pancakes)</p> <p>Fish Head Curry</p> <p><i>Tandoori</i> chicken (marinated in yogurt and chili powder before baking in a clay oven)</p> <p><i>Briyani</i> (rice with meat, fish, eggs or vegetables and spices)</p>	<p><i>Otah</i> (fish paste mixed with coconut milk & chili, wrapped in banana leaf and grilled)</p> <p><i>Nyonya kueh</i> (sweet cakes made from rice or tapioca flour flavored with coconut and palm sugar)</p>

Traditional meal patterns

Singaporeans usually eat three main meals a day and occasionally a late-night supper. A popular breakfast is toast with *kaya* (a sweet coconut egg jam), soft boiled eggs, and coffee with condensed milk. Another breakfast dish is *Roti Prata*, an Indian fluffy pancake rich in fat, eaten with curry. Lunch and dinner are similar, usually consisting of rice or noodles accompanied by stir-fried meat or vegetables. Many Singaporeans have their meals at hawker centers, which are collections of stalls selling simple, local, economical food. Supper is eaten around midnight and is a popular affair in Singapore, especially on weekends. People flock to late-night eateries selling a variety of foods ranging from curries to stir-fried noodles to hot sweet dessert soups.

Festive foods and religious food practices

Some Chinese Buddhists refrain from eating beef and may be vegetarian or practice vegetarianism on the first and fifteenth day of the lunar month. The Lunar New Year is the main Chinese festival, and guests are served cookies and *ba kwa* (barbecued pork jerky). They exchange mandarin oranges in pairs as a symbol of prosperity and good luck. Other festive foods include glutinous rice dumplings wrapped in bamboo leaves during the Dragon Boat festival, and Mooncakes (pastries filled with sweet bean paste and occasionally with a salted duck egg yolk) during the mid-autumn festival.

Malay Muslims adhere to Islamic dietary laws and refrain from eating pork or pork derivatives. During Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, Muslims fast from dawn until dusk. They then celebrate the end of their fasting month with sweet treats like jelly, cookies and steamed cakes. Other festive foods include *lontong* and *ketupat* (sticky rice cakes), or *rendang* (spicy meat curry).

Indian Hindus refrain from beef and may be vegetarian or practice vegetarianism on certain days of the week. Indians have a tradition of exchanging sweets homemade from flour, ground almonds, sugar and milk during Deepavali (festival of lights) and Pongal (harvest festival). *Muruku* (crispy fried flour snack) and *vadai* (flour fritters) are commonly eaten savory snacks.

Traditional health beliefs

Singaporeans, especially the older generation, believe in the concept of food being either “heaty” or “cooling.” Having too much of one type of food imbalances body systems and affects one’s health. Traditional Chinese Medicine’s (TCM) concept of food as medicine is popular for treating minor illness. For example, fried food is considered “heaty” and may cause sore-throats. Drinking “cooling” teas made from certain herbs can counter some of the “heat.” Also, the body is considered to be in a “cool” and weak state immediately after delivering a child, so women follow a “confinement diet” for a month post-partum. “Cold” foods such as lettuce or pineapple are disallowed as they supposedly cause body aches. “Heaty” foods such as red dates and ginger are widely used to restore the balance. Traditional Malay (*Jamu*) and Indian (*Ayurveda*) medicine have similar beliefs about hot and cold food and also follow a confinement diet, albeit with different foods.

Current food practices

With globalization and the influx of people from all over the world, the food scene has become increasingly international and eclectic, while the consumption of local food has decreased. More restaurants are offering exotic cultural foods, or incorporating local cuisine with international ones. Fast-food chains have also grown, offering fast but often less healthy meal options.

Related organizations

Singapore Nutrition & Dietetics Association (SNDA) www.snda.org.sg

The SNDA is a professional organization made up of dietitians and nutritionists from various industries including hospitals, foodservice, research and education. The organization aims to ensure the provision of qualified nutrition and dietetic services through collaborations with other organizations such as the Osteoporosis Society Singapore, Diabetic Society of Singapore, Singapore Heart Foundation, and the International Life Sciences Institutes Southeast Asia region, enriching members through talks and meetings, and promoting health to the public through seminars and events.

Health Promotion Board (HPB) www.hpb.gov.sg

HPB, a statutory board, is the main driver for the national health promotion and disease prevention programs in Singapore. HPB collaborates with local and international agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO). HPB's multi-tier efforts aim to increase the quality and years of healthy life and prevent illness, disability, and premature death. Some programs include accreditation of healthier eateries and food products, healthy eating programs in childcare centers, healthy eating in school programs, and workplace health promotion programs.

Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore (AVA) www.ava.gov.sg

Ministry of Health, Singapore www.moh.gov.sg

Singapore Tourism Board (STB) www.stb.gov.sg

The STB helps to promote restaurants or eateries that serve local ethnic food by awarding titles for best hawker fare, promoting and preserving popular eateries, and showcasing Singapore as a “food paradise” in marketing campaigns. STB also organizes the Annual Singapore Food Festival around July every year, enticing food lovers to visit our multicultural nation.

American Overseas Dietetic Association

www.eatrightoverseas.org

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