2011

Food stories: culinary links of an island state and a continent

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Publication Details
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Abstract
Foodways has increasingly become an important lens for the analysis of historical, social and cultural studies. Anthropologists and historians in particular view food consumption as ways of understanding cultural adaptation and social grouping. The food practices of a social grouping reveal rich dimensions of people’s lives, indicating their sense of identity and their place within the wider community. As well, food is one of the most visible aspects of a community’s cultural tradition. It is through food too that a social grouping “borrows” food practices and appropriate food items from other cultures to make them its own. This chapter intends to examine the ways in which cross-cultural links are fostered between nations through the food practices of their people.

Keywords
food, culinary, continent, state, island, links, stories

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details
‘Food Stories: culinary links of an island state and a continent’, in Ian Austin (ed.) Australia-Singapore Relations: Successful Bilateral Relations in a Historical and Contemporary Context, Select Books, Singapore & Edith Cowan University, 2011.

‘For cooking is part of culture which remains closest to people and matters most; more than music and painting and clothing, more than language and sometimes even more than religion. For some generations of some peoples it may be all that is left, long after everything else has been lost; for it is that which makes people and comfortable’ (Roden 1993:67)

Foodways has increasingly become an important lens for the analysis of historical, social and cultural studies. Anthropologists and historians in particular view food consumption as ways of understanding of cultural adaptation and social grouping. The food practices of a social grouping reveal rich dimensions of people’s lives, indicating their sense of identity and their place within the wider community. As well, food is one of the most visible aspects of a community’s cultural tradition. It is through food too that a social grouping ‘borrow’ food practices and appropriate food items from other cultures to make them their own. This chapter intends to examine the ways in which cross cultural links are fostered between nations through food practices of their people.

In discussing the convergence of the culinary exchange between Australia and Singapore this chapter focuses mainly on the food practices of Singaporeans in Australia and of Australian consumption of Singaporean food. The two nations share a history of British colonialism, the effects of travel, immigration and globalization, thereby contributing towards the familiarity and sharing of each other’s cuisine. Specifically I look at what the Singaporean family cooks at home in Australia and of the omnipresence of Singaporean food items in restaurants and in the supermarket. While it would be interesting to discuss the influence of contemporary Australian chefs manning the Singaporean high-end restaurants, this chapter instead sets its task to narrow its focus on the food practices of everyday life. It is through observing everyday life practices that reveal intricacies and complexities surrounding food habits. I draw on Jean Duruz’ work on ‘home’ as a moveable feast and ‘home’ in new countries, across oceans. (Duruz 2009:47). Duruz refers to Linda McDowell’s
premise that all identities are ‘a fluid amalgam of memories of places and origins’, and the landscape of the ‘in-between’ of hybridity (McDowell 1999:215) Duruz notes that ‘home’ no longer ‘becomes a story of migration and settlement, diaspora and dispersal. It is a story of everyday life itself.’ (Duruz 2009: 47-48)

The two culinary cultures of Australia and Singapore are essentially different, the food practices of the former being European-based while the latter takes its staples from Asia. The globalization of food cultures in recent decades, however, have blurred the lines of distinction, not so much as the often-vaunted fusion of foods but the availability of ‘new’ foods and ingredients in the two countries have rendered the unfamiliar to the recognizable. While Singaporeans acknowledge their national obsession with food, Australians have been endowed with an abundance of high quality fresh food produce. Citizens of the two countries boast of these two ‘phenomena’; with Singaporeans saying that ‘we live to eat’ and Australians claiming that ‘we have the best fresh produce in the world’. Both statements essentially contain elements of truth, hyperbole and national pride. Underlying these assertions however is a serious message that do yield social and economic benefits, most tangibly in tourism and in food exports. Interestingly, as these notions are food-based both have been used variously by both countries for marketing, in tourism and food exports (Germann Molz 2004: 53-75).

Australia’s meat exports into Singapore occurred in 1892 when live Australian cattle was imported into the colony (Tregonning 1967: 1). In 1903 Singapore Cold Storage Co. Ltd. was registered in Singapore with Australian interests and expertise. The establishment of Cold Storage in 1905 along Orchard Road, Singapore’s first Western-style shop sold frozen beef, mutton, lamb, game, dairy produce, fruit and other Australian food supplies for the colonial community. Cold Storage together with other Australian companies have been importing Australian food and drink products into Singapore ever since, supplying to supermarkets and other outlets. At the turn of the twentieth century population figures for Australians in Singapore and Singaporeans in Australia were miniscule. For example, at the time when Australians were mustering cattle from ship to shore in Singapore there were only thirty-nine Singaporeans resident in the state of Victoria in 1901.
It was only the end of the White Australia Policy (originating from the 1850s) in the 1970s that saw Asians migrating to Australia (Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australian Government, http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/08abolition.htm, 15 August 2010). By 2001 there were 7661 Singapore-born Victorians (Museum Victoria). Singaporeans studying in Australia dated back to the establishment of the Colombo Plan in the 1950s. In 2008 there were 8848 Singaporean students in Australia (The International Students Guide, Studies in Australia 31 July 2010). Perth has the largest number of Singaporeans residing outside Singapore and is known to some as ‘Singapeth’ (The Sunday Times 28 September 2003: 35).

Australia and Singapore share a British colonial past but there were culinary differences even in the colonial diet of the two colonies. In 1838 the diet of British colonials in Australia ate similar foods to those of the people in Britain although the former consumed more meat and fat (Atkinson and Aveling 1987: 168). In describing everyday colonial life, Atkinson and Aveling noted that

‘Australian eating habits differed from one region or social group to another. Food in the bush was simple: mutton, damper and the occasional kangaroo or possum. Convicts' and sailors' rations were plentiful, if rather dreary and monotonous. People ate better in towns. Mutton and beef were generally abundant and although they were sometimes too expensive for the poor, Australians may well have been among the biggest meat eaters in the world. Pork and veal were roughly twice the price of mutton and were eaten much less often. Fowl and imported hams added variety for those who could afford them. Cheese, milk and eggs formed part of everybody's staple diet. Most everyday food was produced locally. Meat usually came from farms near towns and villages, as did most dairy products. Market gardens abounded close to centres of population’ (Atkinson and Aveling 1987: 171-172).

In colonial Singapore however the fundamentally hybrid character of the colonial cuisine was influenced variously by the food practices of the Britons as well as the food traditions of the local people, particularly the domestic servants. In nineteenth century Singapore, Europeans ate a mixture of British meals and Anglo-Indian curries in the European-style hotels (Knipp 2003: 214). In private homes, British colonials consumed ‘[B]eef-steaks and mutton-chops, one or two well-made curries and rice, eggs and bacon, cold ham, boiled eggs, salads, vegetables and plenty of fresh fruit.’ Lunch or tiffin consisted of curry and rice’ (Cameron 1965: 297). For dinner there
were soup, fish, roast beef or mutton, turkey or capon, curry and rice, tongue, poultry and vegetables (Cameron 1965: 300-302).

Today the cuisines of the two nations are distinctly different but where foodways merge and converge is the mutually welcoming common ground of sampling each other’s meals, either in the home or in the restaurant. However, the British did leave the two ex-colonies a legacy of a motley lot of drinks and dishes that are still enjoyed by the postcolonial communities in Asia. Gaik Cheng Khoo’s study on food and cross-cultural interactions in Malaysia can equally be applicable to Singapore. Khoo states that

‘Malaysian multiculturalism and hybridity is a legacy of British colonialism and the drinks in a typical traditional coffee shop reflect adaptation and integration of the Chinese to colonial Malayan influences: Ceylon tea and coffee served with sweetened condensed milk rather than Chinese tea; Milo or Ovaltine, malt drinks found throughout the British Empire; boiled barley which the Chinese drink as a herbal remedy and beer (drunk with ice!). in addition, toast (charcoal-grilled bread) spread with butter/margarine and kaya or coconut egg jam and sometimes boiled eggs is served for breakfast. If food is cooked and sold by the Hainanese owners themselves, this may be a pork/chicken chop (a colonial inheritance but prepared Chinese-style), or chicken rice and other Hainanese specialities. The presence of Western food existing alongside more Asian rice and noodle-based dishes testifies to the Malaysian and Singaporean experience of British colonialism which has been adapted and hybridised to suit the local palate (Khoo 2009: 92-93).

One can certainly add curry as an important British colonial culinary heritage. It is the single most famous dish that was popularised in the colonial era and has gained prominence not only among the post-colonial societies of Australia and Singapore but universally. Curry defined the culinary history of British imperialism in her colonies and is easily the most identifiable dish that has been associated with India and other colonies. The diverse range of curries, the type of meal it represented – such as the Sunday curry tiffin in Malaya and Singapore that became a colonial institution – and the commercialising of curry powders have made this unique dish a stubborn relic of the British Empire (Leong-Salobir 2011: forthcoming).

**Home cooking**

The kitchen can be seen as the site of performance of customary social values and behaviour. A cursory examination of the average Singaporean kitchen in Australia yields insights of food practices and social behaviour of the occupants. In the pantry
or refrigerator, pasta and Parmesan cheese, left-over pizza sit side by side with
sambals, rice and pad thai noodles. Similarly, utensils, even crockery and cutlery, and
other equipment in the Singaporean Australian kitchen point to the variety of foods
consumed by Singaporeans in Singapore. The omnipresent wok, the main cooking
utensil, hangs prominently in the kitchen as does the electric rice cooker. No less
utilised is the saucepan that cooks the pasta. Chopsticks and fork and knives find
equal space in the cutlery drawer.

No matter how eclectic the Singaporean-Australian pantry contents are, interviews
with Singaporeans reveal that on a day to day basis, the bulk of meals or at least, half
of them eaten at home are similar to those home cooked meals in Singapore. As in
Singapore, rice is the staple supplemented by one or two other dishes of chicken, beef,
pork, fish and vegetables. This forms the daily food consumption experience and are
a part of daily routines and habits. (Quan and Wang 2003: 301). There is the story of a
Malaysian student in Australia, when on finishing a steak dinner at a restaurant, went
home to cook rice and ate it just to feel ‘more complete’.

Although Quan and Wang’s study focus on the tourist experience in relation to food
consumption their approach can by extension apply to food consumption patterns of
Singaporean Australians in this chapter. They state that there are generally two kinds
of ‘variety-seeking behaviours in food consumption’. The first is the routine rotation
of various ingredients over a period of time. For example, the Singaporean family in
Australia may eat Singaporean type meals on most days of the week but also cook
Italian, Thai or Mexican meals one or two times a week. Quan and Wang call this
‘routine variety-seeking’ behaviour and note that even in daily life, ‘variety and
change are necessary complements to routines and habits (Quan and Wang 2003: 301)
They give an example of the majority of Chinese consumers from South China where
rice is the ‘core’ food ingredients in their daily meals. They point out that potato, on
the other had, is one of the ‘peripheral’ ingredients that these Chinese consume for
variety and change. The Chinese may from time to time, consume potato rather than
rice as the main ingredient in their meals but will still continue to eat rice at most
meals (Quan and Wang: 301-302).
Much of the scholarship on the popularising of national food cultures to other countries focus on diasporic communities that adhere to food consumption where, emigrants continue their food habits from their homeland, later, establishing restaurants and grocery stores that cater to their cuisine (Allen and Sakamoto, Asian Currents 2010:11). Asian restaurants in Britain were first established by immigrant workers and targeted at providing for the host nation, filling a niche in post-war Britain. In Australia however, Asian restaurants sprang up directly from the effects of migration. They catered for both the ethnic communities as well as the wider public (Goody 1998: 163). The study of migrant cuisine frequently encompass the waves of the millions people of free workers, refugees and indentured labourers who settled in the Americas and Australasia, dating from the aftermath of World War I. Less analysed is the cuisine of the cohort of professionals who migrate to countries for both economic advancement and social benefits in recent decades. There is evidence to suggest that these migrants are global citizens who are well travelled and consider themselves as having a sophisticated palate. This group, unlike the nineteenth and twentieth century proletarian migrants, is less inclined to form ‘extensive social networks [with people from their homeland] to compensate for the disorientation of being uprooted from their homelands’ (Pilcher 2006: 79).

Margery Wong and her family have been resident in Australia for twenty-five years and say that the bulk of their home-cooked meals are Singapore type or Asian-based with rice as the staple. Wong concedes that she cooks Western types meals about twice a week, usually a pasta dish or steaks. It is tempting to suggest that a Singaporean family who has lived in Australia for two and a half decades continues to follow an Asian diet because of familiarity with, and therefore ease of preparation of these meals. However in Wong’s view, cooking Western-style is ‘easier and faster’ and adds Asian ingredients to these dishes, such as oyster sauce to marinate steak before grilling. Here we have a Singaporean family adapting themselves to Australian society through cuisine, by adding elements of known and familiar ingredients to the quintessential steak. Cherry Ripe (Ripe 1993: 8-9) commented on ‘the extent to which Asian flavours, Asian techniques and Asian ingredients have been incorporated into individual dishes in Western or European restaurants, brasseries and bistros – not just on the same menu, but on the same plate, within the same dish’ (Ripe 1993: 8-9). Ripe asserts that although ‘this last is the most recent of the three, it is occurring with
increasing rapidity. This fusing of Asian and Western flavours is more widespread in Australia than in any other Western country’ (Ripe 1993: 9). Perhaps, but I suggest that, anecdotally, the Chinese diaspora has frequently made use of Chinese condiments to add more ‘flavour’ to Western dishes, as in seasoning roast lamb, turkey, chicken with soya sauce or five-spice powder. Other scholars have also discussed the departure of food authenticity as ‘innovatory’ and ‘modish’ trends in food culture. Known as ‘food creolization’, it is ‘a form of cultural blending in which a mix of ingredients, styles and influences come together in a single meal’ (Ashley 2004: 88).

John Thomas of Tamil descent, who migrated with his wife and son to Perth from Singapore maintain that they consume about sixty-five per cent Asian meals at home. Thomas notes that their breakfasts are Western style and they have sandwiches for lunch. Dinner is usually but not always Asian-based. The Thomas family does not participate in immigrant-oriented activities (such as ethnic food festivals). This does not mean that celebrating with fellow Asians with Asian meals is not important to the family as it makes frequent trips back to Singapore where eating out is enthusiastically looked forward to. It is perhaps evidence of the changing eating habits of Australians and the availability of quality food products that has made dining in or out interesting and ever-changing. Indeed, the Thomases fit into the category of Australians that Ripe assert as having ‘gustatory literacy’, that is, ‘familiarity with, and acceptance of disparate cuisines’ (Ripe 1993: 11) Mintz takes the view that food preferences, once established, are usually deeply resistant to change; and adds that it is far more common to add new foods to one’s diet than to give up old and familiar ones. This certainly helps explain the practice of colonizers holding on to their roast beef and puddings or saddles of mutton alongside curry and rice, chutnies and sago pudding (Mintz 1996: 24).

Maisie Lo and her husband came to Australia from Singapore with toddler sons more than twenty years ago. Lo claims that her family eats about half Asian meals and half Western meals in a week (pasta, steak or Mexican). She notes that her adult sons enjoy pasta as much as rice. Lo is at pains to insist that theirs is not only an Asian diet. Although Lo does not articulate it, she alludes to the idea that her family’s eating habits are cosmopolitan and that the family has adjusted well in Australian
society. As Colin Campbell and Bob Ashley, *et al* assert, ‘culinary variety itself’ can become a vehicle for achieving social distinction. … the consumption of exotic or ethnic foods arguably belongs to a more widespread trend within contemporary society towards the “aestheticization of everyday life”’ (Campbell and Ashley, 2004: 98). Further, there is another aspect to this, as Fernandez-Armesto states, that ‘an unaided power of culture which is capable of transmitting taste: what might be called cultural magnetism, in cases where communities ape the foodways of cultures of superior prestige’ (Fernandez-Armesto 2002: 138-139). However, in his work on Singaporeans eating at McDonald’s, Chua cautions ‘against any simplistic equation of product consumption with imaginary consumption of a culturally desired Other’ (Chua 2000: 198).

Narratives from the three Singaporean migrant families in Perth establish that while they consume more Singaporean/Asian type food then non Singaporean/Asian food at home, they also add variety to their meals, borrowing ingredients and dishes from other cultures. This pattern of food consumption is also replicated in other areas among many migrant/settler communities. For example, Chinese immigrants to America have adapted themselves to American society by retaining some elements of their home cultures, they have also abandoned others and still changed others (Liu 2009: 2). The blending of Asian and Western cuisines is often tagged by the term ‘hybridity’, particularly in its popular usage of the Australian (and North American) ‘fusion cuisine’ for the East-meets-West phenomenon (Lo 2000: 152). Jacqueline Lo states, ‘Hybridity in this sense serves a stabilising function to settle cultural differences and contestations. It is associated with globalisation and the deterritorialisation of cultural and political boundaries in the “developed world”. Cultural barriers become increasingly permeable in an age of transnationalism’ (Lo 2000: 152).

Although there has been much research on comfort food and ‘nostalgic foods’ the daily food consumption pattern meals from the homeland of the diasporic communities is not just unique to Singaporeans. Historian Donna R. Gabaccia refers to comfort food as that food which provides ‘comfort, security, and love of childhood’ and asserts that people turn to comfort foods when they must cope with stress. Gabaccia 2000: 179) As Jean Duruz in her study of food and nostalgia, notes that
‘when traditional meanings of “home” seem most under threat, it is not unusual to resort to comfort foods as embodiments of “homely” meanings’ (Duruz 2004: 57). While Singaporeans continue to consume Singapore-type foods at home it would be incorrect to assume they do so as a coping mechanism. I suggest that familiarity of ingredients and cooking styles, being accustomed to tastes of home and a sense of continuity have more to do with this than clinging on foods from home as emotional crutch. Siumi Maria Tam points out that eating familiar food can be seen as the ‘safe haven’ that provides the ‘comfort of continuity in a social-cultural milieu of discontinuity in diaspora’ (Tam 2002: 134) Another reason may be a conscious effort by Singaporean parents to serve Asian type meals to their children as a measure to retain at least part of their cultural heritage as a form of ‘resistance’ against being Westernized too quickly and too soon. Duruz calls this ever present ‘spectral presence of the west’ (Duruz 2007: 185) as something that can shape culinary behaviour of a group. It is outside the scope of this chapter to explore how much the ‘authenticity’ of Singaporean dishes has diminished or changed through the hands of the Singaporean home cook in Australia over the years.

In any case, comfort food or ‘nostalgic’ foods usually refer to the longing for a particular dish or meal remembered from one’s childhood, such as congee (rice porridge) for a Singaporean. I also argue that from time to time, an Australian living in Australia does crave for comfort food from earlier years, such as a particular stew or dessert made by a grandparent. As C. Locher et al, state, nostalgic foods are those identified with a particular time and place in one's history. They argue that ‘nostalgic longing and consumption of particular food items sustain one's sense of cultural, familial, and self-identity’ (Locher 2005: 280). They state that ‘when we are physically disconnected from a community, a family, or any primary group that defines who we are, our sense of self may become fractured. In these instances, consuming food items intimately linked with one’s past may repair such fractures by maintaining a continuity of the self in unfamiliar surroundings (Locher 2005: 280). When Singaporean Australians consume non-Singaporean type meals at least once a week they do so in cooking a new dish from a recipe book, a television cooking show or from friends. There are also other opportunities in trying out ‘exotic’ dishes when dining out in restaurants, cafes or food courts. Quan and Wang (Quan and Wang: 301) note that the other type of variety-seeking behaviour, of ‘novelty-seeking’ – in
which people may eat foods that they have never consumed before. They note that the
other type of variety-seeking behaviour, of ‘novelty-seeking’ – in which people may
eat foods that they have never consumed before. Generally Singaporeans indulge in
‘novelty-seeking’ experiences when dining out, ordering dishes they do not or cannot
cook at home. Ian Ang asserts that only in realising that all cultures are not absolutely
pure and that all cultural boundaries are indistinct in an increasingly ‘globalized,
interconnected and interdependent’ world can we co-exist harmoniously by
embracing all the complexities and ‘not in terms of the apartheid of insurmountable
differences’ (Ang, 2001:194).

Dining out
Explaining the omnipresence of ‘Singaporean’ food or dishes in public eating places
and in supermarkets in Australia becomes problematic when confronted with the
query of what constitutes Singaporean cuisine. The island city-state is dwarfed by its
nearest neighbour, Peninsular Malaysia both in landmass and population figures but is
forever linked with similarities in social and cultural mores and most palpably in
similar foodways. For all intents and purposes the two societies were and are socially
and culturally similar. Two factors contribute to the shared lingering culinary bonds
of the two British ex-colonies. One is the ethnic make-up of the two nations’
population, predominantly the Chinese, Indians and Malays. The other is the
historical setting in which Malaysia and Singapore became separate colonies or
protectorates during British rule and gaining independence as a federation of states
and only to become two separate nations some years later.

The Chinese, Malays and Indians present a bewilderingly smorgasbord of distinct
dishes of each community. Singapore’s mix of racial and ethnic diversity has resulted
in a cross-cultural culinary pluralism. Chinese food in Singapore divided according to
main dialect groups, Fujian, Cantonese, Teochew, Hainanese. Malay food, – as its
culture, is a mixture from China, India, Arab and Europe – this blend of cultures bear
strong similar culinary ties with Indonesian food practices (The Borneo Post, 2009).
Rice as in many Asian cultures, is the Malay staple, and is supplemented by many
coconut-based dishes, chillies and other spices. Indian dishes are derived from
influences from north and south India. Finally there are also the Eurasian and
Peranakan cuisines, the former of European and Asian heritage and the latter of
Chinese and Malay origins. Further, there are crossovers of cuisines from these different cultures. Chua Beng Huat and Ananda Rajah (Chua and Rajah 1996:2) in their work on hybridity, ethnicity and food in Singapore, assert that ‘Chinese, Malay and Indian food co-exist harmoniously, while retaining ‘distinct, separated culinary and thus “racial” or ethnic identities’ They further note that in ‘both official and popular conceptions and representations, food is a register for ethnicity in Singapore’ (Chua and Rajah 1996:2).

The average traveller to Singapore and Malaysia will be hard pressed to distinguish what dish is Singaporean and which one is Malaysian. Nevertheless, the Singaporean or Malaysian foodie (that means nearly everyone there) will attest to the subtle and not so subtle differences of the two cuisines. There are two peculiarly Singaporean dishes that Singaporeans view as distinctly their own. These are frequently featured in restaurants, cafes and hawker centres in Singapore. Rochor mee, a noodle specialty of the Hokkiens from south China is replicated in the Perth suburb of Willeton. It is believed that this dish was created by the post-war Hokkien sailors working in noodle factories. The sailors would congregate around the Rochor Road area, frying the excess noodles from the noodle factories over charcoal fires (Lee 2007: 124).

Variously known as lochor mee this noodle dish is an example of how a loved dish has travelled from Then there is the distinctly Singaporean dessert, ‘tseng terng’, made of white fungus, lotus seeds and longans in an iced syrup (Hutton 2007: 191).

The culinary landscape in Australia (apart from Indigenous Australian food which the colonials rejected) prior to the mid-twentieth century was largely drawn from of Anglo-Celtic influences. Michael Symons quotes Edmond Marin La Meslee, writing in 1883, that ‘no other country on earth offers more of everything needed to make a good meal, or offers it more cheaply, than Australia: but there is no other country either where the cuisine is more elementary, not to say abominable’ (Symons 1982: 254). With the aftermath of World War II when Italian, Greek and Lebanese migrants arrived, the Australian cuisine became more diverse. It was the later waves of Asian migration and the arrival of large numbers of students that continue to contribute to more food choices. In the mid-1970s, years before the advent of fusion foods in California, Malaysian-born Chinese chef Cheong Liew made popular East-Meets-West cuisine in his Adelaide restaurant Neddy’s. (Pilcher 2006:115-116) Of course,
Asian home cooks in the Australian kitchen had been mixing and matching Asian and Australian foods all along. Just as is happening in other countries, Australia today embrace cuisines from all over the world, particularly in the major cities but also in the regional towns.

There are different schools of thought on how much influence migrants contributed to the present-day diverse Australian cuisine. Michael Symons’ view is that the ‘Asianisation’ of Australian cooking was not a result of immigration. Rather, he claims that Australians’ penchant for travel and on returning to Australia they want to taste again the foreign dishes from abroad (Symons 1982: 52-53). He is supported by Ripe who maintains that the baby boomer travellers of the 1970s ‘exposed Australians to Asian foods other than Chinese, and developed a culinary literacy which was not discarded on the return home’ (Ripe 1993: 13). I am inclined to agree with Duruz’ suggestion however that ‘a complex intersection of meanings, figures, chains of events that demonstrate how migration and travel “elsewhere”, as well as “travel to new places” while at “home”, actually work together and feed off each other’ (Duruz 2007: 193).

Such complexity is borne out, for instance by the ‘visa category’ factor of immigration to Australia. Many Singaporeans migrate to Australia under the business owner category where migrants are given temporary visas of four years to prove success of their business, after which they can claim permanent residence. Over the years many Singaporeans have migrated as small business owners and have opted to go into the restaurant business. This is seen as the ‘easiest way’ according to migrant May Lee who took over a South Asian restaurant in the late 1990s. Although Lee had no previous restaurant experience she achieved her goal of gaining permanence within a few years. Although Lee’s fine dining restaurant served mainly North Indian food she also catered to Singaporean students who requested for specialties such prata, fish head curry and even teh tarikh (a sweet ‘pulled’ tea of Indian origin).

Ian Chin, co-owner of Chi Restaurant in Victoria Park, Perth, state that half of his customers are Asians (Hong Kong Chinese, Malaysians and Singaporeans) with the other half being Caucasian Australians. His Asian customers normally order dishes comprising special ingredients or complex sauces that his Chinese-trained chefs turn
out and for which the home cook is unable to cook at home. The Chinese commercial kitchen is equipped with fierce flames that power the woks imparting a special flavour known as the ‘breath of a wok’ or *wok hay* (Young and Richardson 2004: 60). This flavour is difficult to create in the home kitchen and the well-loved noodle dish, char kwai teow is one such dish that the restaurant kitchen can produce with such a flavour. Chin observes that Singaporeans and other Asians are also inclined to order specific dishes or try new ones for special occasions. Some of these dishes include eight-treasure duck, lobster and other seafood. The consuming of familiar foods, especially away from home has been known to help alleviate anxiety and discomfort. Chin also state that mainstream Australians tend to purchase balanced meals, ordering chicken stir fries with vegetables, avoiding what he calls those ‘with heads and tails attached’. His Australian customers eat out once or twice a week as well as for special occasions.

A Singaporean PhD student in Perth, Lee Kwok Ping lists chicken rice, chilli crab, *laksa*, *roti prata* and Hokkien *mee* as foods he misses from home. These dishes are also in the list of ten dishes that *Where* magazine has compiled that Singaporeans crave for when away from Singapore. These are: with *Bak Kut The*, carrot cake, *char kway teow*, chilli crab, fish head curry, Hainanese chicken rice, *laksa*, *rojak*, *roti prata*, and *satay*. (*Where* magazine July 2009). Lee also states that he misses the great variety of foods in Singapore and also his mother’s home cooking, particularly grilled stingray. Jean Duruz observes that ‘nostalgia for the food of one’s childhood and, in the case of migrants, for the food of one’s original “home” is not unusual’, and are part of the ‘complex refractions of food, memory, longing and place-making’. (Duruz 2007: 186) Duruz also talks about the ‘homesick migrant who uses the tastes, smells and textures of food to assist with home-building in Australia…. There is the role of memory and imagination … with hints of boundary fluidity….’ (Duruz 2009: 115).

Philosopher Roland Barthes in discussing of French foodways observes that

‘food permits a person to partake each day of the national past. In this case, the historical quality is obviously linked to food techniques (preparation and cooking). These have long roots, reaching back to the depth of the French past. They are, we are told, the repository of a whole experience, of the accumulated wisdom of our ancestors. …food frequently carries notions of representing the flavorful survival of an old, rural society that is itself highly idealized. In this manner, food brings the memory of the soil into our very
contemporary life … French cooking abroad strengthens this “nostalgic” value of food considerably; but since the French themselves actively participate in this myth, it is fair to say that through his food the Frenchman experiences a certain national continuity. By way of a thousand detours, food permits him to insert himself daily into his own past and to believe in a certain culinary “being” of France’ (Barthes 1979: 170).

In Perth, as are in other Australian cities, there are also other venues where Singaporeans go to get their ‘fix’, for a taste of home. There are the burgeoning church groups where community lunches are served. Singaporean and Malaysian meals are also laid out in the various community gatherings, many for fundraising for charities and the like. For example, the thosai club meets once a month, selling Singaporean and Malaysian food at the Kardinya Community Centre. Proceeds go to a temple fund. Another group catering for similar events is in Bateman.

While other cultural practices such as music or art from Asia have been slow to develop in Australia, Asian cuisines have enjoyed a long history of indigenisation. (Thomas 2000: 205) Menus in Asian restaurants generally feature at least a Singaporean noodle dish or a Singaporean fried rice and, or, a seafood dish such as Singaporean sizzling fried prawns. The supermarket aisle that display instant noodles will inevitably stock brands featuring ‘Singaporean’ noodles. The brand of ‘Singapore’ as a selling point is not just limited to food. Part of its genesis originated from the highly successful advertisement of ‘Singapore Girl’ from Singapore Airlines. (Ian Batey of Batey Ads, a Briton, who later moved to Sydney, was responsible for the advertisement). From my interviews of Singaporeans here on eating out, it is interesting to note that they do not generally order Singaporean noodles or other Singaporean named dish. These Singapore-named dishes may have an intrinsic connection with the island state and restaurateurs are enthusiastically pushing their marketing potential, thereby creating imagined authenticity for these dishes. They are banking on the newly-arrived migrants or students to Australia to order these dishes when they feel the foreignness of the environment and a longing for home. As Quan and Wang note, ‘food consumption can be merely the extension of food habits formed at home …’ (Quan and Wang 2003: 302) For the most part, these ‘Singaporean’ dishes in restaurants and retail outlets are for Australian consumption and this marketing strategy is successful enough for it to be used all the time. A Singaporean noodle dish for example could be a Singaporean kwai teow, a hokkien
noodle or bee hoon. These dishes to an Australian could just as well be of the Malaysian version. Author of an Asian noodle cookbook claims that Singapore noodles did not originate from Singapore but is popular around the world and she often encounters it on restaurant menus on her travels (Lee 2007: 43). So why has the restaurateur or chef outside Singapore thrown in the descriptor ‘Singaporean’? The connotation of ‘Singapore’ in the Australian imagination can be seen as something exotic or ‘oriental’, ideas of Australian familiarity with its near neighbour. In particular, Singapore was the first port of call for baby boomers in their backpacking travel enroute from Australia to Europe in the 1970s. Universally, tourism in the twentieth century has been attributed to effecting the large scale changes of taste. (Fernandez-Armesto 2002: 138).

**Conclusion**

The culinary links discussed in this chapter include exporting food produce from one country to another and re-creating dishes from one’s homeland in the new adopted country. These links resonate with ideas of social and cultural behaviour and food appropriation. The culinary exchanges also inform of the way in which food travels, from the home cook to the chef in the commercial kitchen. It is within the home and kitchen where food is cooked and consumed on almost a daily basis that reinforce ideas of a sense of belonging and identity. The foodways of a community reflect their values, habits and a sense of belonging central to their lives. Food is after all not just a range of products to be used for statistical or nutritional studies; indeed it is ‘a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations and behaviour.’ according to Barthes (Barthes 1979: 167).

The proliferation of Singaporean processed food products in Australian supermarkets, the distinctly Singaporean-named dishes on restaurant and café menus, and the importation of fresh food products to Singapore have all contributed the easy recognisability of each other’s food products and food practices. Singaporean food influences to the Australian diet has helped to contribute to the hybridisation of the Australian culinary identity, giving the nation a global dimension. The Singaporean migrant and student population in Australia, through their daily re-creating of food items from home continue to foster cross cultural links between the two nations. The daily re-affirming of a past through foodways is all the remarkable in spite of the
onslaught of David Y.H.Wu’s assertion that ‘changing tastes, diets, eating habits, cooking methods, and public eating places are closely associated with socio-economic development. They are also part of the globalization of the international culture of consumerism that affects food and cuisine’. (Wu 2002: 86) The study of foodways is an important way of viewing world history and while globalization is a factor in changing food taste it is indisputable that people habitually fall back on traditional sources of sustenance.

Persons interviewed for this chapter are based in the West Australian capital of Perth in 2010. Real names have not been cited here to preserve confidentiality. Details of the interviews are kept by the author.

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