From Natural History to National Kitchen: Food in the Museums of Singapore, 2006-2017

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Abstract

Taking museum exhibitions, publications, and restaurants as a focus, this essay explores how food is used and represented in museums in Singapore, revealing a wider story about nationalism and identity. It traces the transition of food from an element of exhibitions, to a focus of exhibitions, to its current position as an appendage to exhibition. The National Museum is a key site for national meaning-making and we examine the colonial natural history drawings of William Farquhar in several iterations; how food shortages during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore during World War II have been used for nation-building; and hawker food as iconography and focus of culinary design objects. Issues of national identity within a multi-ethnic society are then highlighted in the context of the National Kitchen restaurant at the National Gallery of Singapore.

Key Words: Singapore, museums, hawker food, memory, nation building

Introduction

From Berlin’s Deutsches Currywurst Museum to Seoul’s Museum Kimchikan (formerly Kimchi Museum), food is increasingly taking center-stage in museums. Food also makes regular appearances in conventional museums and galleries, be that the Julia Child exhibition at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D. C., or an exhibition on food cravings at London’s Science Museum. New Zealand’s giant kiwifruit is just one of very many giant tributes intended to attract tourists. The Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore is well known as a foodie destination and it should come as no surprise that there has been a growing interest, in the last decade, in including food and foodways as content in Singapore’s cultural institutions. Singapore is a complex site of culinary tourism, where people engage in what Lucy Long describes as “the intentional, exploratory
participation in the foodways of others” (2010:21).

In this sense, we too have been culinary tourists in Singapore over our many years of researching, visiting, and eating in this diverse place. While we have both written elsewhere about museums in Singapore (Hudd 2015, Tarulevicz 2013), our combined interest in this essay is in the construction of cultural knowledge about Singapore. The exhibitions and texts we discuss here sit on the cusp of work and leisure, and are ones we have visited, sometimes just once, sometimes repeatedly. For us, these museum exhibitions and culinary experiences have a lot in common: they allow a visitor to experience both the museum and a meal, and thus a “taste” of another place, time, and/or culture.

Taking Singapore’s exhibitions, museum publications, and restaurants as our focus in this essay, we trace the transition of food from an element of exhibitions, to a focus of exhibitions, to its current position as an appendage to exhibition. We begin by looking at (1) the natural history drawings of Singapore’s first British Resident and Commandant, William Farquhar—and the ways in which they have been exhibited—on their own, in food-focused exhibitions, and with various non-food-focused exhibitions. Next, we move to (2) the 2009 National Museum of Singapore (NMS) publication, Wartime Kitchen: Food and Eating in Singapore 1942-1950, which illustrates an important chapter in Singapore’s national culinary narrative and the cultural production of knowledge by the museum that is not limited to time-period exhibitions. Moving on to the Food Gallery (3), part of a now defunct Living Gallery permanent exhibition at the NMS, we highlight tensions in creating exhibitions for both local and international visitors. Then, we consider (4) a community museum exhibition of hawker centers that connects directly to the local. We next visit (5) a short design-focused exhibition from 2013, “Makan Time! Tuck In To Good Design,” one of the last food-focused exhibitions at NMS that serves as a transition point and suggests a move away from food as content in exhibitions. Finally, we look at (6) the National Kitchen by Violet Oon restaurant at the new art museum, the National Gallery of Singapore, which shows a new direction in the relationship between food and cultural institutions.

Singapore is geographically small at just 719 square kilometers. With a population of a little more than five and a half million, its Chinese majority (76 percent) coexists with Malays (15 percent), Indians (8 percent) and, in the words of the state, “Other” minority communities (1 percent), forming a
diversely ethnic and culinary national community. Because of its limited land and access to water, Singapore relies heavily on imported food, yet has made eating an important source of identity-making (Tarulevicz 2013). Despite early attempts at agriculture in tropical equatorial conditions, Singapore’s reliance on its port for comestibles has been a reality for more than a century. Singapore’s colonial history as a free port for the British East India Company—where trade items were exempt from customs duty—helped the colony emerge rapidly as a center of vibrant exchange in goods and cultures. That colonial inheritance is celebrated in many of Singapore’s cultural institutions and is comfortably expressed in culinary terms. Singapore’s expulsion from a brief marriage to Malaysia (1963-1965) and consequent abrupt transition to independent nation was accompanied by a sustained raft of nation-building activities, which include the use of food as a form of “non-political” nationalism. Hainanese chicken rice, for example, is upheld as a dish which symbolizes ethnic harmony—it is Chinese in origin (coming with Hainanese immigrants) but infused with local influences, such as the chili sauce which accompanies it. Food and foodways have provided a popular metaphor for cultural diversity.

While there is no one food that is as clearly Singaporean as balut is Filipino (see Magat 2002), food is central to Singaporean identity. *Rojak*, for example—a mixed salad of cucumber, pineapple, jicama, and onions, with a sweet and sour dressing, topped with chopped peanuts—is often used as a metaphor for the nation. Like the salad, Singapore is a mixture of different ethnic groups all in the same bowl but separate, brought together by the “dressing” of a common nation, simultaneously diverse and united. At the Asian Civilisations Museum in Singapore, the metaphor has been widened to describe Singapore’s place within the region: a projected digital image of a woman explained that “the major foreign cultures [in Singapore] are like the rojak sauce, seasoning the local cultures, but in the end each culture keeps its unique identity” (Levitt 2015:106). Culinary tourism can happen within a nation too, and as Bill Ellis’s (2009) example of late nineteenth and early twentieth century American ice cream parlors reminds us, there can be liminal food spaces which are zones of interaction, allowing for culinary tourism at home. While international tourists may be the most profitable visitors, locals also come to partake in the culture of other ethnicities and to taste the culture of the past.
The National Museum of Singapore

The National Museum of Singapore opened in December 2006, but its institutional origins and some of its holdings can be traced to the 1887 Raffles Library and Museum. Under various names, including the Singapore History Museum, it displayed Singaporean history to both local and international audiences. It has been joined by a raft of other cultural institutions—the Asian Civilisations Museum, the Peranakan Museum, and the National Gallery of Singapore—to name just a few that are presently drawing attention to Singapore’s gustatory history.

Architecturally, the NMS, like much of Singapore itself, juxtaposes the colonial with the ultra-modern. When built in the 1880s, it symbolically stamped Empire on the colony, both in its domed and pillared neo-Palladian style reminiscent of the British Museum in London and in its emphasis on collecting, classifying, and displaying objects. Such museums in Empire were both a form of symbolic conquest (Hooper-Greenhill 1992:18) and a means of shaping the way the colonial center imagined its dominion (Anderson 1983). After Singapore’s independence in 1965, the NMS played an integral role in imagining and shaping the new nation with its deliberate emphasis on public education, science, and industry specifically to “stimulate patriotism, public-spiritedness and the importance of increased productivity” (Tan 2010:125). Like all national museums it played a role as a site in which “symbolic and narrative imaginings of territorial nation states are produced and expressed” (Thompson 2012:55).

This historical evolution of the National Museum of Singapore reminds us that all museums do ideological work. As historian Randolph Starn noted, “. . . museums are not neutral. While they collect and conserve, classify and display, research and educate, they also deliver messages and make arguments” (Starn 2005: 70-71). They provide a physical space that art historian Carol Duncan has described as “a stage setting that prompts visitors to enact a performance”—the museum’s sequenced spaces and the way exhibits are arranged and displayed, the lighting and architecture “provide both the stage set and the script” (Duncan 1995:1-2, 12). In this way, the placement of objects and even the descriptive labels are significant, since vision is socially constructed and the words we put next to images affect how we understand that image (Berger 1972). Displayed objects are made meaningful by the interpretive frameworks of the display as well as the historical and cultural position of the curator and visitor. Museums
become custodians and creators of heritage and, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998:150) reminds us, “heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. It is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past.”

**Natural History Drawings**

Botanical prints and drawings commissioned from unnamed Chinese artists by William Farquhar, the first British Resident and Commandant of Singapore (1819–1823), were some of the first food-related images to appear in Singapore’s museums. The drawings have been used in stand-alone exhibitions, including the Singapore History Museum (see Tarulevicz 2004), they have been repurposed and used in a range of displays (see discussion of the Living Gallery to follow), and they are the focus of a key NMS publication, *Natural History Drawings: The Complete William Farquhar Collection, Malay Peninsula, 1803-1818* (2010). The book brings together, for the first time in print, all 477 drawings of flora and fauna commissioned by Farquhar. It describes Farquhar’s interest in the natural world around him—an enthusiasm shared by many British colonial officials who collected exotic material for museums “back home.” The collection and classification of fauna and flora of the colonies, particularly those with potential economic value, was a symbolic stamping of British authority on the colonies; in fact the first exhibition of the complete drawings at the museum in 2007 was called “The Empire of Nature” (Lim and Ong 2016:35). Farquhar is widely connected with the colonial era in Singapore, being associated with Stamford Raffles and the founding of Singapore as a British East India trading post in 1819. The drawings are now displayed as if they were quintessentially Singaporean, but they were in fact commissioned and collected by Farquhar in Malacca before he came to Singapore. He sent them to the Royal Asiatic Society in London in 1827, where they languished until being put up for auction in 1993. They were purchased for $3,000,000, Singaporean by Singaporean philanthropist Goh Geok Khim, who donated them to the museum (Cheah 2016). There is a sense of the paintings having “come home” from exile, of a former colony reclaiming what was rightfully its own.

The drawings in the book sit between a chapter on Farquhar as colonial figure and, significantly, a chapter that acknowledges and explores the techniques of the unnamed Chinese artists who painted the images. Such
artists have often been absent from histories. Just as colonialism by its very nature appropriated and “owned” the resources of others, so too have the natural history drawings been “colonized,” becoming wholly “Farquhar’s drawings.” The typical museum visitor viewing the drawings may remain unaware that they were actually drawn by Chinese painters. Farquhar’s artists were probably painters from Guangzhou in southern China, and the chapter discusses their skills as well as the challenges they faced in adapting the classic style of Chinese painting to the Western preference for naturalism and the unfamiliar technique of linear perspective (Dozier 2010:321-324). We can see these Chinese and naturalism qualities in the drawing (see Photo 1) of a dark-handed gibbon in a mangosteen tree, where the fruit, typically smaller than an apple, is drawn larger than the animal’s head.


Farquhar did not record the names of the artists, a common erasure practiced on many talented artisans in the colonies, but the chapter represents an attempt to highlight and reclaim their place in history. While still entwined with the colonial West, the commissioned Chinese artists made their own contributions to the history of the region.

The book divides the drawings into plants, birds, mammals, reptiles and invertebrates, and fish. Food is not a specific categorization. Among the plants, however, are a range of edibles such as pineapple and ginger, and
spices like nutmeg, cloves, and peppercorns. As well, there are several drawings of fruits still unfamiliar today outside Southeast Asia: such as durian, jackfruit, rambutan, and soursop. In the other categories, there are food sources such as ducks, partridges, spiny lobsters and, presumably in a nod to the centrality of India in the empire, the curiously named Bombay duck (*harpadon nehereus*), which is not a duck at all, but a fish.

In an ambitious, technologically-driven 2016-2017 reuse, “Story of the Forest” animates (“brings to life”) and re-colors 69 Farquhar drawings within the NMS’s glass rotunda. Visitors descend a spiral walkway, past a constantly changing panorama (see Photo 2).


First, various colored flowers move through space, gliding and falling. When the visitor enters the forest, animals, birds, and fish appear, moving and disappearing. Finally in the lower rotunda, a visitor may lie on the floor and view the falling flowers above and the trees and animals around. In this “magical” world, a tranquil and beautiful landscape more Garden of Eden than forest, most of the trees are fruit trees, colorful birds fly by and roost in the branches, the fish swim lazily, and the animals, including some Bambi-like deer, appear and slowly wander through. Just as colonial botanical gardens acted to turn unfamiliar and hostile landscapes into the familiar, here the original jungle seems colonized and “westernized,” conquered and tamed into a less-threatening and peaceful forest glade. There is no tropical heat and humidity, no scavenging for food, no hunting and death. A Pokémon GO style app, which visitors are encouraged to use, makes any hunting clean and virtual:

Enhance your visit at *Story of the Forest* by going on “hunts” to “capture” the different flora and fauna that call the Glass Rotunda home. Upon successfully “capturing” these animals with your phone’s camera function, you will be rewarded with valuable insight into the illustrations from the William Farquhar collection which inspired the creation of these digital animations, providing you with both an immersive and educational experience.

(http://nationalmuseum.sg/our-exhibitions/exhibition-list/story-of-the-forest?sc_lang=en)
In contrast, a separate but related exhibition, “Desire and Danger,” continues the repurposing of the Farquhar Collection to explore “the complex and sometimes uneasy relationship between man and nature.” It features “creatures that arouse appetites and instill fear, and exotic plants sought for their ability to induce pleasure or pain.” A wall panel explains that:

Plants with pretty flowers and leaves may contain deadly toxins. Seeds that harbour poisons may make delicious meals when properly cooked. Reptiles and marine creatures that bite and sting may contain biochemistry that can kill us—or cure our maladies.

This exhibition has a distinctive colonial feel, with a selection of the natural history drawings on the walls, wooden display cabinets and cases, stuffed animal and bird specimens, blowpipes and spears. Dinner plates and cutlery sit between a wooden fish and the skulls of birds and a bear; there is an ornate silver betel holder for storing the mix of betel leaves and areca nut or tobacco that were chewed as a stimulant; and funnel-shaped medical-looking devices allow the visitor to pull a lever and smell a fragrance such as galangal (see Photo 3).

This is not the first time that smell has been employed in Singapore’s museums. In fact, food smells, complemented with Farquhar illustrations, were a feature of the Food Gallery exhibition discussed next. In the “Desire and Danger” exhibition, smell is used to make the jungle seem closer, and the dangers to the colonial settler real.

**Remembering the Wartime Pantry**

Food, danger, and desire are familiar themes not limited to the museum proper. In 2009 the NMS published *Wartime Kitchen: Food and Eating in Singapore 1942-1950*, covering the three years of the Japanese Occupation of Singapore during World War II and the post-war recovery. This period of major disruption, of violence, death, and trauma for Singapore’s population, was also a time that still stands in stark contrast to Singapore’s more usual role of a trading port with ready access to a wide range of food products. For the first time the doors to the global pantry were closed, a potential disaster for a small island with limited food production. Despite the introduction of rationing and price control, food supplies dwindled quickly, prices escalated, and a black market for food sprang up. In response, the Japanese administration implemented the “Grow More Food Campaign” to encourage self-sufficiency. Seeds were distributed, model market gardens were established, and school children and office workers tended vegetable plots. Yet this population had limited experience in growing food, the soil was poor, and fertilizers were not available. Tapioca grew where other crops failed, and could be made into flour as well as cooked in a variety of ways, but it contained little protein and had to be carefully prepared to avoid poisoning from the naturally occurring cyanide in its tubers. People were inventive, often subsisting on a diet of broken rice grains with sweet potato or tapioca and perhaps some salted fish added to the mix, but meals were monotonous and lacked protein.

As detailed in the National Archives of Singapore’s *Syonan Years 1942-1945: Living beneath the Rising Sun* (2009), the daily struggle for survival sapped energy and was compounded by the constant fear of harassment, arrest, or torture. Reminiscing about previous meals and imagining food feasts sometimes provided a temporary escape from ongoing hunger during the Occupation. *Wartime Kitchen* noted the use of the imagination in the internment camps, which largely housed Europeans and Eurasians, when recipes were discussed and sometimes written down in hand-made recipe
books. P.C.B. Newington, a prisoner in Changi Prison and the Sime Road Camp, started a Gourmet’s Club called “Good Food” which met weekly to
discuss a menu—ingredients, cooking method, servings—and everyone
“dined sumptuously in imagination” (Wong 2009:95). He compiled the
recipes into a cookbook, as did Ethel Mulvany, who was “interned” as a
Canadian civilian. She and other women in the prison met and imagined
that they were setting their tables at home and serving their favorite dishes.
They discussed recipes that they remembered and these were then
handwritten and compiled in two old ledgers.

After the war, Mulvany compiled 400 or so of the recipes as the Prisoners of
War Cookbook: This is a Collection of Recipes Made by Starving Prisoners
of War When They Were Interned in Changi Jail, Singapore (E.R.M. 1946).
The title, particularly its emphatic “made by starving prisoners of war,”
situates these recipes at a bleaker end of the intersection of food and
memory: unlike the fonder memories of a mother’s recipe collection (Tye
2010), these are clearly “hunger memories” (Sutton 2001:166-168). Jewish
prisoners in the Terezin concentration camp in Czechoslovakia during the
World War II era also recalled and discussed favorite recipes as a way of
managing hunger in what they described as “cooking with the mouth,” and
what culinary historian Cara De Silva has argued was also “an act of
psychological resistance” (1996: xxiv, xxvi). Military historian Suzanne
Evans has suggested that Mulvany and her fellow prisoners, in a similar
way, used their “culinary imagination” as a survival tool, as the time they
spent together discussing food enabled them to escape to a make-believe
world where food was plentiful and life was normal. She noted Mulvany’s
comment that, after the “tea parties,” “many of us slept with the feeling of
having had a meal” (Evans 2015:43).

Several of the prisoners’ recipes are included in Wartime Kitchen and we
can see that, already by the mid-1940s, recipes were being modified from
their English roots to reflect the Southeast Asian ingredients and food
practices. In this way, “Mrs Redfearn’s Tomato Chutney” includes chili and
ginger, while “Foogartti” can be made with slices of boiled cabbage or cubed
Chinese radish or snake gourd, revealing Malay and South Indian
influences. Evans notes that other recipes in the original book had more
direct linkages to Britain, with many referring to British royalty, such as
“King George Cutlets” and “Palace Chocolate Cake.” Patriotic gestures by the
prisoners were banned in the jail and Evans suggests that the women
surreptitiously expressed their loyalty to Britain through the inclusion of

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these recipes in a way that would not be noticed by the guards (Evans 2015:47). In effect, a simple cake recipe could become a political statement of resistance and survival.

The 2015 NMS museum exhibition, “Singapura: 700 Years,” included designer smells created by Saine Gong, founder of Je t’aime Perfumery (Today Online, April 12, 2015). The Japanese Occupation section included a scent called “Fear,” whereas she had initially experimented with the smells of death and torture. Visitors could sniff an exhibit and experience the smell of fear, which was described as having notes of ammonia, ketones, and plant-based musk. They could also experience the smell of the “8-cent meal,” with notes of passion fruit, coconut milk, and vanilla beans, representing the types of meals provided by the Social Welfare Department during the post-war years, although most were meals such as chicken curry and rice, with long beans and spinach, served with tea. Smell was used in the exhibition not in the normally comforting sense of evoking delicious food, but rather to reinforce the message of hardship and deprivation.

The focus on food shortages during the Japanese Occupation was continued in the six-part documentary DVD series, Eat to Live: Wartime Recipes (Zehnder and Zehnder 2013). Each episode, approximately twenty minutes long, was comprised of newsreel footage, interviews with survivors, and commentary from a Singaporean sociologist Vineeta Sinha. Each also featured a chef re-creating and updating a dish from the time. The food, in effect, acted as a bridge between the past and present, reminding viewers of what was eaten then, but making the past seem relevant to their own lives today by suggesting they too could re-create the meal themselves.

Remembering the food shortages of the Occupation serves a broad nation-building purpose. The first episode in the series concluded by asking, “What is it like to ache and long for food? Today we simply don’t know what hunger is.” The food scarcity of the war years contrasts with the consumption of Singaporeans today: in the successful and affluent nation today, food is again plentiful, Singaporeans love to eat out and to discuss food, and shopping has been described by sociologist Chua Beng Huat as a national pastime (Chua 2003). The segment reminds Singaporeans that life was not always so good—and thus of the competence of the Peoples’ Action Party which has governed since Independence. The last episode in the series reinforces the need for citizens to be disciplined and to safeguard their success: it concludes with the words “it takes more than food to survive in
adverse times. From the war survivors we learn that it is blind hope and sheer willpower that sustained them.” This message reinforces the narrative of the vulnerability of Singapore because of its small physical size and its sub-text that survival is dependent on the “soft authoritarianism”—the willpower—of the government (Tarulevicz 2009). Although the different ethnic groups—Chinese, Malay, Indian, and European-Eurasian—were treated differently by the Japanese, the videos and the book further the cause of nation-building by portraying a narrative of common suffering, a time when all ethnic groups were united against a common enemy.

The War Kitchen theme was updated at the National Museum of Singapore in its 2017-2018 exhibition, “Witness to War: Remembering 1942.” As part of the wider exhibition, visitors could watch cooking demonstrations of wartime meals, order dishes such as pork and pineapple curry with rice or gula melaka blanc mange from a “Witness to War” set menu at one of the museum restaurants, and buy “Peacetime kitchen: War recipes restored,” a set of 12 recipe cards. These developments highlight the continuing significance of the war years to constructions of Singapore’s national history and to what C. Kurt Dewhurst, in his 2011 presidential address to the American Folklore Society, described as the role of museums “as places where public memory is made more visible, and especially for realms of memory dealing with difficult histories and issues” (Dewhurst 2014:251).

Street Food

From 2006 to 2014, the NMS housed a permanent exhibition consisting of four Living Galleries—Food, Fashion, Photography, and Film. The Food Gallery focused on Singapore’s street food from the 1950s to the 1970s. The Food Gallery section was described by the NMS as a “playful and hands-on experience for visitors striving to learn more about the island’s cuisine,” targeting visitors who do not know about the island’s cuisine, most likely tourists (Lenzi 2007:96). Hawker food, local street food, dominated the Food Gallery, as it does the food culture of Singapore. The street was not actually present in the exhibition, but street and iconography of street peddlers dominated. In addition to information about specific dishes, the exhibition provided a brief social history of hawkers and hawker food, touching on issues of class and race.

Local food, hawker food, street food—these terms are synonyms for a
cuisine, a style of eating and specific dishes that have come to stand for Singapore’s national cuisine. Brand Singapore relies heavily on food, specifically hawker food (Tarulevicz 2013). Hawker centers function differently for different audiences. For tourists, they are simultaneously a “distinctive attraction,” and a safe, clean, and cheap avenue for the consumption of local culture. For Singaporeans living abroad, hawker centers are a “locus of memories,” a by-word for home, both as space and lifestyle. American journalist and food writer Calvin Trillin’s characterization of Singaporeans as “culinarily among the most homesick people I have ever met” encapsulates this sense (Trillin 2011).

Hawkers once walked the streets of Singapore—they were largely itinerant and would bring food to the door of homes or place it in a pulley basket. Despite being popular with residents, hawking was unpopular with officials. Some streets spontaneously became night markets where itinerant hawkers would congregate and sell food and beverages. But hawkers were also sources of disease: from contaminated water came water-borne diseases; from refuse came flies and rodents. These real public health concerns were compounded by tropical conditions. Itinerancy intensified the potential for spreading disease and tropical conditions heightened the problems.

The post-Independence government won the war against itinerant hawking in 1968 by launching a nationwide registration process for hawkers, issuing temporary licenses and relocating hawkers away from the street and into newly constructed hawker centers. The process continued over a few years and for the majority of Singaporeans who are born after Independence, street food on the street is more imagined than remembered. The centers had amenities such as sewers, drainage, water, electricity for lighting, and overhead coverage. Attention was given to locations in both urban and residential sites, so they were still easy to access. Hawker centers have become the locus of memories and meaning-making around hawker food, yet it is the historical street-ness of the food on display in the Food Gallery that was striking. A peddler’s tricycle, trollies, and other icons of mobile food all formed part of the exhibition, almost making it seem like this kind of street food was still available.

In a different kind of temporal blurring, at the end of the Food Gallery exhibition, reproductions of botanical prints and drawings from the William Farquhar Collection were displayed in a modified form—printed onto jars. In contrast to the rest of the food exhibition, the jar section was not about
meals and specific dishes but was about ingredients, something tourists are in fact less likely to encounter. The tensions between which past, and nostalgia for what, reflect the multiple audiences for the exhibition. Singaporean visitors might be nostalgic and see the exhibition as doing nation-building work; international visitors might see it as selling a version of the nation they are consuming as tourists.

Reflecting the continuing interest in hawker food, Our Museum at TJ (a community-style museum in Taman Jurong) curated an exhibition in January 2017 called “Eat at TJ: Our Hawker Centres and Food Heritage.” Taman Jurong was an early industrial estate developed post-Independence to drive economic sustainability and was the site of the first state-sponsored, purposely-built hawker center—which signaled the transformation of street food into a description of cuisine not location. In preparation for the museum exhibition, oral histories were recorded from local residents and hawkers, and photographs were taken of various hawker stalls. In tracking the evolution of the local hawker centers over time, it aimed to “explore areas such as the hawker culture prior to the establishment of hawker centres, hawker centres as a social space for the local community, and food as a form of cultural identity that defines Singaporeans” (National Heritage Board and People’s Association 2016).

Eating at hawker centers is promoted as an activity for tourists (Henderson, Ong, Poon, and Xu 2012), but also as an activity that defines what it means to be Singaporean. The focus of the exhibition was on the Jurong hawker centers as an integral and important part of the local community—important not only for the food itself, but as a social space for the community where residents can meet and feel connected.

Many hawker stalls are family businesses and the exhibition explored the issue of generational change. One younger hawker shared his experience of taking over his father’s minced meat noodles stall in 2004, when the regulars, who had previously come specially for his father’s cooking, did not want to try his noodles. “It took me 10 years of hard work for the old customers to accept me,” he claimed. In a different twist, the son of another hawker couple running a fish soup and congee (rice porridge) business was helping with the stall, but had also set up his own stall selling muffins. Bakery goods such as muffins have not traditionally been sold in hawker centers and represent new entrepreneurial responses to café culture among young people—now the hawker center can potentially offer both traditional and “hip” foods. Thus, the exhibition included jars of smells for laksa leaf, curry, pandan leaf—and muffin.

The Hawker Centre 3.0 Committee recently presented a report (2017) to the government on how hawker centers might evolve and be supported in the future, given that the median age of hawkers is 59 years. As an article noted in the Straits Times newspaper, the attitude of many young people is “why slave in a cramped and hot hawker stall when you can make pronouncements on the five best Hokkien mee stalls in Singapore on a laptop?” (Straits Times, February 4, 2017). Committee recommendations included more “incubation” stalls where young people can try out hawker life, and the encouragement of more non-traditional food. The young hawkers at the Amoy Street Food Centre, for example, have re-imagined the traditional kaya toast as a black sesame, key lime crème, and matcha coconut toast, available with taro milk coffee or tea.

Makan Time

In January 2013, the design collective “Little Thoughts Group” staged a local food-inspired exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore entitled “Makan Time! Tuck In To Good Design.” Running for just two weeks, the
exhibition was concurrent with the permanent Street Food exhibition already discussed, and it did some of the same work in defining national food and linking food to national identity. “Makan” is a Malay word meaning “to eat,” thus “Makan time” is thus literally “time to eat.” Culturally this phrase, widely used by restaurants, foodie websites, and in popular culture, is thick with meaning. It evokes eating local food, although not exclusively Malay food, and speaks to the casual way in which the food is eaten. An article published in the local magazine *Her World* in 2011, for example, used the phrase in its title, “Singapore recipes: It’s makan time,” telling readers they could “learn to whip up a feast of local favourites” and, to clarify exactly what that meant, “we share six such Singapore dishes” (*Her World* 2011). As an exhibition title then, “Makan Time” resonated, and its paired phrase “Tuck In to Good Design” connected design objects to literal consumption.

Alongside the design objects of culinary vessels, equipment, and repurposings, three large photo-boards contextualized food practices. The first, at the start of the exhibition, included the title and the broad themes of the exhibition. With four images, the most dominant is a man casually dressed in shorts, singlet (tank top), wearing slippers (slip on sandals), while he sits at a wooden table on a stool, slurping from a bowl with one barefooted leg on the stool next to him. This “every man” takes up half of the display board. A fruit stand, a chicken–rice stall, and two men sitting at another table sharing drinks and a meal make up the other images—symbolizing the sale and consumption of local food. The second photo-board’s eight images again connect the sale of food to its consumption but also add in the theme of waste. Hawkers and vegetable vendors cohabit with consumers, packets of glutinous rice, empty cups, a table of dirty dishes, and a sweetened condensed milk can repurposed as an ashtray. The leavings of consumption connect directly to the content of the exhibition, which includes recycled items, repurposing, and intentional waste reduction. Singapore’s geographic limitations—size and resources—mean that waste products need to be taken seriously. The final photo-board is also a collage of eight images, dominated by cooked-food vendors, roast pork, soups, and so forth, but also including edible Chinese medicinal herbs being sold. These colorful large boards provide a living context for the design objects, which, with some exceptions, are monocolored and slightly austere, in the way an empty bowl, even a beautiful one, may tell a less interesting story than one filled with tasty broth, silky noodles, and redolent vegetables.
Empty vessels are in fact the focus of the first installation, “Embers: Kopitiam’s Ashtray,” which took a series of empty metal cans repurposed as ashtrays in kopitiams (local coffeeshops) as its focus. With these dented, twisted items that have holes in their lids, designer Anthony Chin conveys the “after life” of the cans, showing how an item of packaging has become “an integral part of our food culture” (Chin 2013). Cigarettes, new and used, are tucked into the cans to make their reuse explicit. Designer Ng Pei Kang expresses his concern for waste prevention in his piece “Aunty, ta-pao no plastic” as an alternative to a plastic bag, and conveys to vendors the message of take-away food with no plastic (Ng 2013). Kang’s alternative is made of recyclable corrugated cardboard, designed so food vessel and handle are one and the triangular design can carry multiple items. Chopsticks can be poked through the handle and small bags of chili sauce tied on as well. The packaging is displayed with fake food but its use is also imagined in more embodied form with some photographs.

As we saw in the Street Food exhibition, there is a collection of dishes that have come to represent local Singaporean cuisine, such as Hainanese Chicken Rice and Hainanese breakfast. These two dishes are celebrated in the exhibition, but in quite different ways. At the core of Hainanese Chicken Rice is a master stock, used to poach the chicken, cook the rice, and serve as a soup. Slices of chicken are anointed with oil and stock, cucumbers and coriander leaves (cilantro), and served with condiments, including chili sauce. The chicken of the titular dish is the focus of Cassey Chen’s pendants, which come in silver and porcelain to represent the poached chicken (Chen 2013). In porcelain, the whiteness of the poached chicken’s skin is emphasized, the most distinctive feature of the dish, the one visitors to Singapore tend to find less familiar—flaccid pale skin rather than browned and crispy. As a piece of art and jewelry it makes a statement, drawing attention to the culturally distinctive, celebrating an iconographic Singaporean food.

The Hainanese breakfast of kopi (coffee) or teh (tea), served with kaya toast (toasted bread with butter and coconut jam) and two half-boiled eggs, with soy sauce and black pepper, is also iconic. As Lai Eng argues in her analysis of kopitiams, Hainanese coffeeshops may be “credited with introducing to the public Hainanese, Western and hybridised Hainanese-Western foods, many of which have now become iconic or favourite Singapore foods” (Lai 2016). Lee Leong Chye has created a tray to honor this hybridized breakfast, entitled “Our Humble Breakfast.” A key component of the design is the
elevation of the toast on wooden fins which keep it from “becoming soft and soggy.” Indentations on a wooden board provide spaces for the eggs, cup and saucer, soy sauce, and pepper. Wood used as a substitute for the ubiquitous plastic tray provides a more traditional aesthetic, echoed by the reproduction heritage cups and saucers. The saucers are deep and provide a shallow bowl for the eggs, the cups are heavy, stable, and the cups and saucers are for sale in the Museum gift shop. Visitors are instructed how to use the tray: “So go ahead . . . crack the eggs in the saucer, add the sauce and pepper, then dip the crisp kaya toast and enjoy. When you’re done, everything just goes back on the tray” (Lee 2013).


Erene Teo’s “KooCook: the Perfect Breakfast Helper,” is focused on taking the Hainanese breakfast experience out of the kopitiam and into the home. The hybridity here is not between Western and Hainanese culinary traditions but between contemporary design practice and traditional utensils, what she calls “a whimsical design approach to traditional utensils” (Teo 2013). She notes that while the half-boiled eggs are very common, they are much harder to make than customers assume. She has designed a tool to allow half-boiled eggs to be made at home if one does not have a “kopitiam uncle” (a colloquial term for a male employee in an old-style coffeeshop) on hand. With multiple steps (add room temperature eggs into the vessel, pour boiling water over them, set the timer, lift inner bowl out, roll eggs into bowl) the KooCook is both a tool and a celebration of the labor of the kopitiam uncles—making clear how a seemingly simple task is more than it appears.

Taking a different approach, Celia Law’s “Soup Instinct” is a soup pot designed explicitly to encourage home cooking, something that is increasingly only a special occasion affair for many (Sinha 2016). She states that her purpose in designing the soup pot “is to allow people to learn and know more about the benefits of herbal soup,” and she envisions the target audience as “young couples” who are interested in increasing their skills and
can “enjoy home cooked food with minimal effort after a long day at work” (Law 2013). There are multiple components to the installation: the external cast iron pot, the porcelain inner, a bamboo steamer, a lid that doubles as a bowl, a separate miniature chest of drawers for herbs. Law uses design complexity to make the task simple, whereas Teo’s breakfast helper uses design to emphasize complexity.

In contrast to the majority of the exhibition, Jason Goh’s “Moyee,” the last installation (see Photo 6), is the most whimsical (Goh 2013). Drawing on his childhood imaginings of a rogue fish ball, inspired by a story Grandmother intended to stop him playing with his food (你再玩，鱼丸就变成大毛丸来吃你! “If you keep playing, the fish balls will turn into a big hairy monster and eat you up!”), Goh brings the fish ball to life as a rolling chair. The chair thus provides comfort, with its furry exterior, fun through the roly-poly design, and amusement with the giant tongue. The furry chair is mediated by a story-board accompaniment whose six frames tell the story of a boy using his chopsticks to stab his fish ball, then being scolded by his grandmother.

while the fish ball transforms from injured and pained food item to hairy and angry giant fish ball that seeks vengeance by consuming the author of its transformation. The irreverence of this piece is perhaps no coincidence. In some ways, the “Makan Time! Tuck In To Good Design” exhibition signaled a broader shift in how food was seen in Singapore’s museum spaces—food was retreating out of exhibitions and into gift shops and restaurants.

National Kitchen

The “National Kitchen by Violet Oon” at the new National Gallery of Singapore epitomizes exhibitions transitioning toward interactive educational experiences. As Irina D. Mihalache argues, the museum restaurant is “an interdisciplinary space of informal learning, where the menu and the food are multisensorial ‘lessons’ in history and culture” (Mihalache 2016). The National Kitchen restaurant is not explicitly connected to exhibition content beyond its status within the national gallery, rather it is designed to represent “Singapore’s history as the crossroads of the world” (Oon website 2017). Violet Oon, restaurateur and former food critic, is of Peranakan ethnic heritage—descendants of early Chinese immigrants who came to the Malay archipelago and Singapore, intermarried with Malays and Indonesians, and maintained their Chinese names and some cultural practices while speaking Malay and often dressing in Malay styles. The women were known as “Nonyas” and thus Peranakan cuisine is often known as Nonya cuisine (Ong 2016), a fusion of Peranakan Chinese and Malay cuisines, generally emphasizing the application of Chinese culinary techniques to Malay flavors. In Nonya cuisine, a dish like Bak Chang, while similar to Chinese glutinous rice packages, can be made with peaflower and Southeast Asian flavorings such as pandan leaves.

The restaurant reflects this Peranakan heritage, aesthetically and in the menu. The space is decorated with distinctive Peranakan tiles and ceramics, as well as old photographs of family members. The traditional marble-topped tables, rattan overhead fans, waitstaff in black and white formal uniforms, and a bar with a barman shaking cocktails add to this sense of a nostalgic earlier colonial time. Historically, Peranakans were an elite group in Singapore, often working as clerks or overseers in British firms, and this background is reflected in the inclusion of several British colonial dishes. The classic Singapore Sling, a drink concocted for European women in the

famous colonial Raffles Hotel, is on the menu, as is an interpretation of
Coronation Chicken. There are also Eurasian dishes such as Chicken and
Prawn Bostador (minced chicken and prawns in a spicy sauce with green
chiles) that represent the distinctive mix of European and Asian culinary
traditions that emerged from those of European and Asian heritage (see
Braga-Blake 2017). Most dishes, however, are classic Peranakan, such as
Buah Keluak Ayam (spicy stew of chicken and buah keluak nut), Nonya
Achar (mixed vegetable pickle), and Kueh Beng Kah (tapioca cake topped
with gula melaka syrup and coconut milk).

The name of the restaurant suggests that the visitor will experience a
national cuisine, one that includes dishes from all ethnicities in Singapore.
Culturally, Peranakan food, despite its mix of Chinese and Malay, is read as
Chinese. As Chua Beng Huat and Ananda Rajah note, for non-Peranakans,
the cuisine “resonates on the register of Chinese cuisine, as a marker of
Chinese ethnicity, in spite of the hybridization.” The key reason they suggest
is that although there are Malay flavors, there are Chinese ingredients, most
notably pork, a product not permissible for the majority of Malays who are
Muslim. The cuisine thus “remains a ‘Chinese’ cuisine because of the
presence of pork” (Chua and Rajah 2003:95). Nonetheless, while Peranakan
cuisine exists as a marker of Chinese culture for Singaporeans, it also
occupies a place as a marker of creolization—an early fusion culture, a kind
of acceptable mingling that codifies ethnic categories in a palatable manner.

The power of this cuisine lies in its metaphorical value, reflecting both the
cultural mix of Singapore’s peoples as well as the “cultural legacies of the
Straits Chinese communities” in the region (Lee 2001:2). The name of the
restaurant, “National Kitchen,” needs to be understood in this ideological
context. While criticized for using traditional Perankan ingredients in
unconventional ways, such as serving buah keluak as a sauce for
spaghetti—which purists argue is a foreign, introduced ingredient out of
place in Peranakan cuisine—others counter that Peranakan cooking, as a
mix of Malay and Chinese, has always borrowed from other cultures (Lam
2017).

Conclusion

In a nation where the diversity and quality of food is central to national
identity and the marketing of the nation, food’s representation in major
museums is a revealing site of meaning-making. The ways in which food is displayed in Singapore’s museums tell wider stories about the nation, ones in which food is strategically employed to appeal to multiple audiences, not only of value in and of itself but also as a lens through which tensions and strengths play out. Farquhar’s natural history drawings are inherently colonial but have also been reinvented using contemporary digital technology, juxtaposing the colonial and the modern—just as Singapore itself strives to retain and reinvent aspects of its colonial past in a constantly changing globalized city-state. The deprivations of World War II are now long past but strategically remembered as a time when the port was effectively closed for food importation, a period of food deprivation now used in the service of nation-building and remembered as a time when the populace suffered and overcame together. As the new nation developed, itinerant food hawkers were regulated and gathered into centers, reflecting an ordering of society that continues today. Hawker food, a source of national obsession, has made regular appearances in the museum, variously explained and celebrated for local and international audiences, taking both starring and supporting roles in different exhibitions. In the “Makan Time” exhibition, artists sought to elevate the lived everyday material culture of hawker food, or in some instances subvert it. Tensions between the everyday and the celebratory, the traditional and the creole, were also evident in our final example of the National Kitchen, a museum restaurant, which reflected a move away from the exhibition of food, to food as an extra educational re-enactment and embodiment.

Writing about the life of the Philippines food writer Doreen G. Fernandez, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2003:60) notes that she wrote to “create sensory reverberations in the reader that would trigger memories and spark historical insights” through ethnography with food producers, vendors, and cooks, as “living archives of culinary knowledge.” In Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s words, “foodways were her living archeology of sedimented practices,” that is Fernandez, like the museums of Singapore, was interested in shared history and culinary cultures. Fernandez may have been interested in “culinary cultures that make history edible,” and the museums in culinary culture that make history visible, but for Singapore’s museums today, food is both mainstay and extra. While we have charted a series of transitions in Singapore’s exhibition content and style over the past decade, food is likely to continue to find a regular home in Singapore’s national institutions—given the centrality of food to Singapore itself.
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