

# Wet Market Wanderings

Story and photos by Kevin F. Cox, Culinary Explorer

The wet markets of Singapore; how do I begin to describe them to one who has never been? Do I simply explain that they are open air food stands contained under a common roof and offering fresh food to buy? I could write a tome listing the endless array of fruit, vegetables, meat, seafood, poultry and a host of things that I don't exactly know how to classify but nevertheless look great. Or do I describe them as a gathering of different vendors in every neighborhood in Singapore selling meat, produce and dry goods specific to the predominant ethnicity of that area? That could become an even bigger tome.

As I learn the specialization in some of these markets I can often choose which one to venture into depending on the category of my peckish sentiment at the time. If, for example, I want lamb or mutton, along with ghee in which to cook it and banana leaves on which to serve it, I head to Tekka market in Little India. If pork tickles my palate, I avoid Tekka (the Muslims don't carry much of that!) and head to Tiong Bahru where one can buy the entire swine's skull or - for the more particular - just the ears or tails or trotters, not to mention all (and I mean all) parts in between.

If, alternatively, my menu calls for fully intact chickens or ducks; whole pigs; live frogs; squirming eels; lotus root packed in mud; any variety of live crabs; preserved duck eggs (which, by their blackened, straggly feathers and overall semi-decomposed appearance, may very possibly be the ultimate misnomer); nearly any variety of dried sea flora or fauna or piles of tender, soft noodles, it's off to Chinatown's market. The list of options available at the many Singapore wet markets goes on and on.

But every now and then something shows up that intrigues even the most well-seasoned marketer and is worthy of special note. Recently, I walked into Tekka market in search of lemon grass for a refreshing "tea" that cuts through the tropical heat simmering within my core after a crowded morning slogging through the fish-scaly puddles and fleshy air of a wet market, when I happened upon a shark! Not a shark like the smaller ones in every fish stall - black tip reefers or the ubiquitous dogfish used to make an affordable interpretation of shark's fin soup - but a rather biggish shark, stretching nearly two meters. In other words, big enough to cause your average expat holiday snorkeler to unexpectedly contaminate the clear waters of a coral reef. Its pinpoint

eyes, piercing even in death, caught my attention first, following which I scanned its length, estimating the height of its dorsal fin and, inevitably, the diameter of its wide mouth. I stood there, admiring the catch of the day, with its tawny sandpaper skin, intricate leopard spots and creamy underbelly. I touched it.

"You wan buy?" the Chinese fishmonger barked at me from across the crabs and squid. I could sense from his dubious expression that he already knew the answer. But I played along.

"How much?"  
"Seven per kilo." No doubt, a "special price" for the sweaty ang moh with the Nikon standing before him. "But must buy whole fish."  
"How heavy?" I replied, eyeballing the beast as if sizing it up for my wok at home.  
"Fifty five k-g. Very nice!"

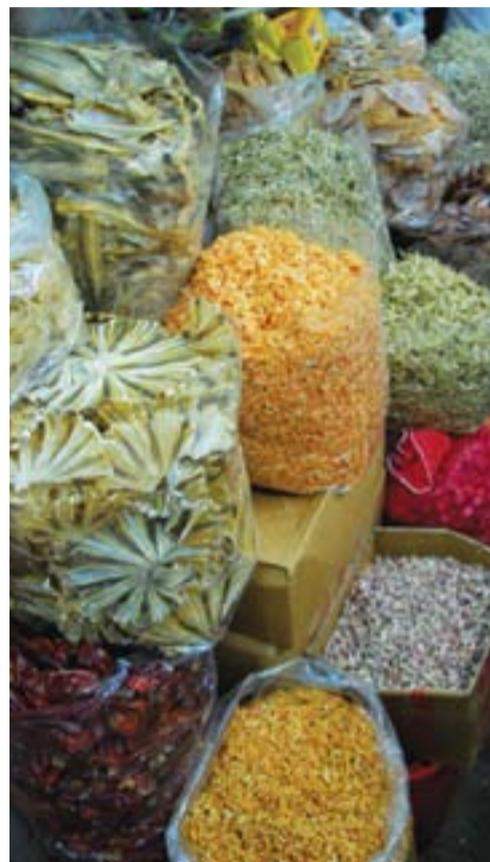
I did the math and wondered if in Princeton, New Jersey one could buy a fresh, 120 pound shark for \$260. That's about \$2.15/pound. Not bad, I thought, trying to picture our maid's expression when I slapped that bad boy down on the kitchen counter so she could get to work.

But apparently I was not the only one with such grand ideas, because before I knew it a more ambitious Singaporean stepped forward and, speaking rapidly to the vendor in short, sharp words, pointed to the fish. I glanced at him, my face demonstrating disappointment at his attempt to usurp my family's dinner.

My competitive spirit flared and I nearly leaned in to begin the bidding war. But he had the advantage - Mandarin - and the negotiation went fast and furious, until he handed over what appeared to be a much smaller amount of currency than previously required, and sealed the deal. "Xie xie," my fishmonger friend nodded at my victor before dropping the money into a tin and turning away to address an enormous grouper in need of filleting.

And so ended my shark tale at Tekka. But that's okay, because tomorrow is another day in the wet markets of Singapore and I'm going back for goat...

*Kevin moved to Singapore from the U.S. with his family in June 2009 and has taken to expat life like a fish to water. He is a culinary explorer and loves nothing more than discovering the "real" Singapore and uncovering hidden food gems on the island.*



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*Clockwise from top:*

**You never know what surprises await in a Singapore wet market.**

**Dried chilies, shrimp and other treasures of sea and land.**

**Just a sampling (really!) of the vast and exotic selection of fresh seafood in the local wet markets.**

**My favorite Muslim mutton man, Tekka Market.**

**A typical vegetable aisle.**



## Curry On!

### Asian comfort food brought to life

Review and photos by Kevin F. Cox, Culinary Explorer



Family affair - Mom (Helen Riard) with daughter, Kiren Kaur, and niece Nikki.

opening of Curry On! at the 7th Mile Coffee Shop in Bukit Timah. To say that they have recreated only the very best of their childhood tastes in this tidy hawker center is no exaggeration; there are just three main dishes on the menu. And it's not just the recipes that make mom's dishes so good; chef Helen (mom herself) has been right there with them since the recent September opening. "We could not have done this without mother at the range." Kiren's eyes sparkled as she shrugged. "There are no written recipes; it's all in her head. She measures nothing but it's always just right."

She's not kidding. After 60 years of practice, Helen, in her quiet confidence, needs no recipe to cook such well-prepared food. "It's a good combination," Kiren explained in a soft, melodic voice. "Mom and her food are the reason we are here. I'm just the 'operations' person and Anil, who is here in the evenings, is the 'business' guy. But really, we are just a family fulfilling our dream to carry on the wonderful dishes we grew up with. It's just that simple."

Indeed, the feeling when dining at Curry On! is one of simplicity, proving the point that there is beauty in simplicity and no more so than when it comes to food. The stall is spotless, the menu focused and the food carefully presented in matching white stoneware dishes at the immaculately-renovated food center. And because they are following their dreams, the attentive service by this family trio, along with cousin Nikki, is warm and friendly - just like home.

But aside from family pride, just what is it about Helen's food that made her children take the ultimate leap of faith in opening Curry On!? I needed to find out for myself. So I ordered the two main attractions: Mutton Rib Dalcha and Curry Mutton Chop.

*"There are no written recipes; it's all in her head. She measures nothing but it's always just right."*

At first glance they looked surprisingly similar, but simple appearances deceived. The Mutton Rib Dalcha consisted of glistening ribs in a bright ochre-colored broth. A coriander garnish stood out, green and gorgeous, against the glowing elixir. But it was Mom's broth that was the star of this show: a gentle sweet/hot and elegantly refined mixture which I would more likely expect in a gourmet restaurant than a modest food stall, the result of cooking the mutton with dal before incorporating coconut cream, tamarind and such spices as star anise, cardamom, coriander and, of course, chilies.

The final dish was soft chunks of mutton, firm but not tough, contrasted against perfectly al dente potatoes amidst a silky, almost creamy broth, rich and complex, with layers of flavors still unfolding even after swallowing. The spices were delicate yet pronounced, finished by a hint of cardamom with an exotic, earthy sweetness. One taste and I, too, was immediately transported to that special place where I felt safe and innocent.

The Curry Mutton Chop presented a similar colored, if not more robust option in the home cooking lineup. With a higher heat rating and thinner, coconut-free broth, the meat was tender and evenly infused with rich flavor, thanks to mom's trick of marinating it in yogurt, ginger and garlic before its slow evolution in the savory curry. A more traditional Indian flavor experience than the dalcha - bold and spicy,

rather than smooth and refined - its deep richness and perfectly cooked components still achieved that desired escape granted only by comfort food cooked with love.

Even the biryani rice accompaniment had Mom's flair. Intended to be mild, the rice, which is never fried in masala before cooking, is a delicate patchwork of orange, yellow and white grains, and serves as the canvas on which Mom's remarkable dishes are presented. "But also have some French loaf," Kiren insisted. "Because when the bowl is empty you can still soak up the rest." Once you taste Mom's dishes you will understand why. So even though the meaty bones are easy to manage with utensils, bring extra wet wipes, because you will surely want to use your fingers to ensure you get every last morsel.



Clockwise from top: Curry Mutton Chop, biryani rice with pickled vegetable, Mutton Rib Dalcha

Comfort food. We all have our own definition for that emotionally healing recipe - usually made by Mom - which transports us from reality to a kinder, gentler time, when we were young and all was well in the world. If only we could bottle that special something that Mom makes, or sell it on the street, crowds would beat a path to our door. But alas, most of those magical recipes remain hidden to the world, only to be one day hauntingly recalled in expressions like "remember how Mom used to make that..." But what if you actually did bottle or sell it?

Enter Anil Riard and Kiren Kaur, a brother and sister team who have brought that fantasy to life with their recent

## Curry On!

7th Mile Coffee Shop, Blk 18  
Toh Yi Drive in Bukit Timah  
9271-4000

Open: 11:30 am - 9 pm  
(or whenever they sell out)

Closed: alternate Mondays  
parking nearby

In addition to the mutton specialties, Mom also makes a mild chicken curry, full-flavored yet gentle enough for youthful or less adventurous comfort food cravers.

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