



Top: Cooking chapati at Azmi Restaurant since 1956. Above: Mutton keema and the famed chapati Below: Cooking dal curry at Masjid Abdul Gaffoor mosque Bottom: Pots from dal cooking



Old world flavor in a food walking tour



Story and photos by Kevin F. Cox
Culinary Explorer at <http://kevincox.net>

It starts as a dream that awakens me in the middle of the night. I sit up in bed, visions of spicy, fragrant food still swirling in my head. I must have some! This happens frequently in Singapore and, like a monkey on my back, it preoccupies me until I do the only thing that keeps my gastronomic id at bay: I take a food walk.

The most recent object of my distraction was chapati. So, my quest for the perfect flat bread meant a day of exploration in one of Singapore's most colorful, exotic and culinary-rich neighborhoods: Little India. What I didn't realize was that my path would also take me back in time, to a Singapore of yesterday.

From the MRT I began my trek at Tekka Market, where I started the afternoon with roast duck with Heng Gi Goose & Duck rice (stall 01-335) which has been serving up Teochew braised goose and duck – old school style – for nearly 50 years. The braising gravy was a full-flavor study in control and balance and added a savory zing to the tender meat. Combined with fois-gras, tofu and a crunchy duck foot, it was a delicious start to my food walk.

From Tekka I passed through Little India Arcade along Campbell Road, where countless stalls and shops sell Indian and Asian tourist trinkets, clothes, sandals and textiles, mixed with the occasional restaurant or tattoo joint. This strip of old shop houses from generations past is now partially covered with awnings stretching from the storefronts to keep out the rain. Along the outside, sidewalks bulge beyond the curb with fruit, vegetables and Indian spices in a colorful blaze of color. Looking up at the second level – as with so many buildings in Little India – reveals the ornate sculptures and frescoes from old school Singapore.

Continuing down Campbell it's easiest to walk in the street, given the old, uneven pavement and store items which block the path. But, beware of car mirrors; the street is narrow and at every small intersection cars barely squeeze by each other.

I made a right on Dunlop, heading East, and reached the Masjid Abdul Gaffoor mosque, built of wood in 1859 and rebuilt to its present day brick and

yellow paint in 1907. It was a Friday during Ramadan and through the iron fence, I saw several men busy cooking lentil porridge in six enormous vats. They invited me in to show off the food, given free to followers once the Ramadan fast breaks at 7:15 pm. One guy admitted that cooking while fasting from dawn to dusk for a month was a real test of commitment. By the look and sumptuous aroma of the vats of beautiful curry, I could understand why.

I retraced my steps to Perak Road, where I made a right toward Upper Weld. My next target: Tim Sim (40 Clive Street). Purportedly the oldest remaining kopitiam in Singapore, it's tricky to find this unadorned joint. You may not recognize the wall-less, tin-roofed corner of the street as a coffee shop at all. But it's been there for nearly 100 years, according to the brewer who, by the looks of him, may very well have celebrated its grand opening. He made my kopi slowly and shuffled to my plastic table. "You try," he barked. The coffee was old-school in the strictest sense: butter-roasted, dark and robust and very, very strong. "Delicious," I grinned, and I could see - through his proud, toothless smile - that he knew I meant it.

I walked west on Upper Dickson to Serangoon, where I turned right and headed north until I reached Valli Flower Mill (174 Serangoon Road), the only remaining hand spice roasting and grinding operation in Little India. The air wafted a smoky perfume of cumin, chili, garlic, cinnamon, turmeric and other blended spices toasting slowly in a large, flat, dry roasting trough. Between running a spice rake though the raw amber powder the barefooted men still grind spices in the original, hundred-year-old mills.

The origin of my late-night craving was just a corner away and I made a beeline to it. At Azmi restaurant (corner of Norris Road and Serangoon), also known as Norris Road Chapati, their slogan: "Secret of good mood, Taste of Azmi's food" is hard to argue with. The menu is old-school Indian, ranging from mutton, goat, chicken and vegetables all cooked from scratch in the tiny kitchen out back.

And the specialty – simple, whole wheat chapatis – are cooked on a round, iron griddle by one guy. He stands barefoot on a sheet of cardboard in his plaid izaar wrap. His motions appear



...my quest for the perfect flat bread meant a day of exploration in one of Singapore's most colorful, exotic and culinary-rich neighborhoods: Little India.



instinctive, as they should; he has been making chapatis at that griddle since 1956. "I was this tall when I came from Northern India," he held his palm waist high. "The British still controlled Singapore. There have been many changes since then, but not here." He pointed to the chapati burner then gestured at his colleague delivering my mutton masala and two steaming chapatis. "We started here together!"

There is good reason to awaken in the night, craving the food at Azmi's. The mutton masala is rich and brown, with granules of savory minced meat, peas, potatoes and spices, slow-cooked into a mélange of magnificence. The deep, earthy flavors are brightened by shaved onions, crisp cucumber and a squirt of calamansi. With my right hand, I scooped goblets of minced mutton onto torn ribbons of chapati. The bread was soft and warm; thin disks of pure wheat and water, flaking apart under the dampness of the masala. I fought to restrain whimpers of jubilation with each bite.

My craving having been sated, I reflected over what I had seen and tasted that afternoon and realized that old-school Singapore is still alive in many neighborhoods. It only takes a little scratching on the surface to find it. But it won't be too long before these sumptuous flavors, smells and characters slowly pass away. Maybe that monkey on my back knows something I don't. And maybe I'd better keep listening to it.



**My Little India food walk route
???????**



Clockwise from top left: Second level shop houses; The last spice grinder in Little India; Typical repairman in Little India; Toasting spices after grinding at the Valli Flower Mill; Tim Sim coffee house - the oldest in Singapore

