



A career in the U.S. Foreign Service



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Romantic Hawker Centers *A romantic's guide to breaking the Valentine cliché*

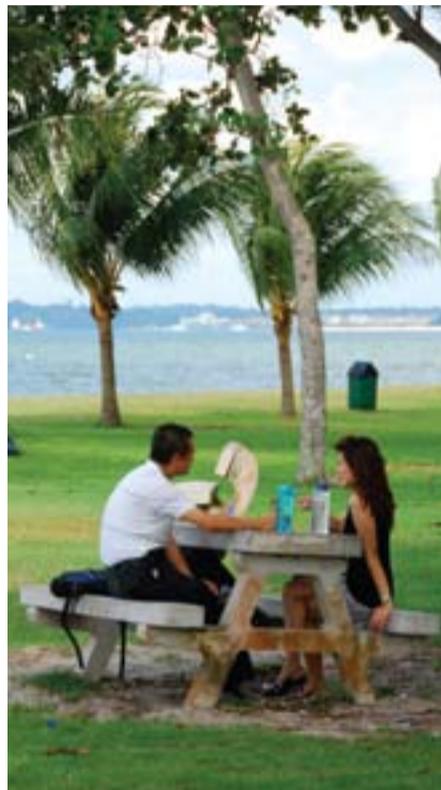
Story and photos by Kevin F. Cox



Romance can take many forms, but sometimes it's hard to see past the usual suspects - especially on Valentine's Day. That's because, on February 14th, most of us tend to think concretely: romance expressed by hearts, flowers, chocolate, and of course, the obligatory Hallmark card. It is said to be the busiest greeting card occasion of the year - when we crowd around the shelves seeking that perfect sentiment conjured up by a complete stranger to express our deepest intimate feelings to those most important in our lives. Personally, I never really got that part. Original poetry, I have always thought, is a truer path to a loved one's heart. But an even more direct route is, of course, food.

Sadly the food of Valentine's Day is often boring and predictable. **News flash:** there are few exciting culinary variations on fillet mignon with red wine reduction, prawns positioned in the shape of hearts or anything involving melted chocolate and strawberries. The world is full of restaurants with "special" Valentine's *prix fix* evenings replete with hushed, darkened rooms, candlelit tables and a single red rose.

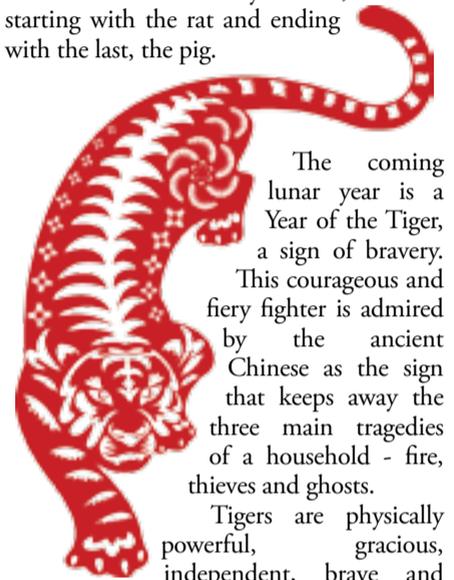
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A romantic beachfront table is just a stroll away from the hawker center at Changi Village.

The Year of the Tiger begins February 14

It is said that Buddha invited all of the animals in the world to join him for the New Year celebrations, but only 12 animals bothered to turn up. As a reward, Buddha named a year after each one of them in the order in which they arrived, starting with the rat and ending with the last, the pig.



The coming lunar year is a Year of the Tiger, a sign of bravery.

This courageous and fiery fighter is admired by the ancient Chinese as the sign that keeps away the three main tragedies of a household - fire, thieves and ghosts.

Tigers are physically powerful, gracious, independent, brave and extremely bold animals. Friendly and loving, they can also be selfish and short-tempered. Tigers seek attention and power, but live dangerously, which can lead to trouble. They are intolerant, take risks and are always searching for excitement. Tigers are quick learners, need to be challenged and often prefer to work alone.

To find out if you were born in a Year of the Tiger, see page 16.

Crouching Tigers, Hidden Talent

By Heidi Bakker Kingman,

Career Resource Center for Expatriates (CRCE) Relationship Manager



Why let hidden tigers lie (or crouch) when you are in need of talent within your organization?

It seems fitting that as we celebrate the Chinese New Year, the Year of the Tiger, we remember a gem of a movie from early in the century. In 2000 the release of the movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* was a surprise hit. A small budget and subtitles (foreign to a U.S. movie audience - literally!) seemed to give it no hope of becoming a box office smash or earning Academy Awards. But, like the proverb guised within its title, it proved to be a hidden gem, winning four Oscars.

"Proverb?" you ask... In actuality, the original idiom: "Hidden Dragon, Crouching Tiger" describes undiscovered talent. (Aha! You were wondering what a movie had to do with the CRCE! Just wait,

there's more...) "The tiger and dragon both have amazing talents, but if they are out of view, you may have not discovered them. It can be said of someone with amazing ability that keeps that ability hidden." (So says www.orientaloutpost.com, a website dedicated to defining Chinese proverbs.)

A few months ago, I asked "What's in a Title?" I talked about "trailing spouses" - the vast talent base that too often remains unrealized and undiscovered in the expat community - and renamed them "trailing talent." In further investigating titles, maybe this movie title/proverb has something to teach human resource professionals

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Romantic Hawker Centers*Continued from page 1.*

And many of those places are pretty good – assuming such menu offerings rank high on your sweetheart's favorite foods list. But what if you live in a place where people's palates exceed the monotony of such standard Valentine's Day fare? A place like, say, Singapore?

Singapore's addiction to good food raises the bar for those of us seeking to break away from the usual Valentine's Day victuals. We search for new restaurants, unfamiliar recipes and even variations on "presentation." Instead of pretending that life with your loved one is that elusive bed of roses, why not embrace the reality which is your life together – and celebrate at a hawker center. Now, I know what you're thinking: hawker centers are bustling, unadorned and certainly do not qualify as romantic venues in which to reaffirm your affections. And to that I would respond: There you go again, thinking concretely.

...why not embrace the reality which is your life together – and celebrate at a hawker center.

Come on, loosen up a little. Singapore hawker centers can make excellent venues in which to express those romantic sentiments repressed by the daily burdens of real life. Tucked in discreet corners or along the outer edges are private tables in lovely settings, where you can be alone with your loved one. Just look around – they are usually unoccupied, waiting for you to enjoy. Order a variety from different stalls and share them from the same plates. Bring a bottle of wine, a candle, even a table cloth and don't forget the napkins! People won't think you're a weirdo; they'll think you're a romantic. And isn't that the point?

To help with such heartfelt endeavors, here are a few locations to consider for expressing your undying love to that special someone. Who knows – you may just rediscover another love in your life: Singapore food! The romance lies within your creative spirit and that special someone will love you even more for it. And for goodness sake, don't forget the card – but get a blank one and write *your own* sweet nothings to the one you love.



Food, flora and flirtation at the Botanic Gardens Hawker Center.



Private riverfront dining can be yours at Zion Riverfront Hawker Center across from GWC.

Changi Village Food Center and Old Changi Beach

Head to the heartland of beautiful Changi Village and experience the vibe of a small beach town, Singapore style. Wander the large hawker center in the middle of the village and find one of oh, so many treats. Ask for "take away" and stroll the few meters to a table or pavilion at Old Changi Beach. Green grass, snow white sand, and wonderful views of Pulau Ubin and Malaysia beyond, this grassy park is uncrowded, pristine and very romantic. Dream of adventures together as you watch the boats head out and the planes take off.

Zion Waterfront Food Center

Just across the street from Great World City, this hawker center is home to several "best of the best" food stalls. Park yourselves at one of the remote tables overlooking the Singapore River. Each table sits alone, shaded by its own umbrella and flanked by palms and shady trees. Despite being part of the food center, it is separate and private.

East Coast Park Food Center

For oceanfront dining it's hard to beat East Coast Park – one of the island's truly romantic gems. Here you can embrace the quirky beauty of sand, sea and ships just offshore; strangely harmonious in a Singaporean way. Several tables set at the edge of the food center offer shaded privacy and a great water-view backdrop for those delicate professions of love. Or carry your delectable selections a few meters away to one of the picnic tables right at water's edge.

Chinatown Complex

If sharing delicate bamboo steamers of dim sum with your sweetheart appeals, then this is the place. On the second level of the Chinatown Complex, head to the side overlooking the Buddha Tooth Relic Temple. A long row of tables at the edge offer unobstructed views of the temple's spectacular rooflines and lovely courtyard below; a magical place to expose your innermost feelings of affection in an enlightened, Buddhist setting. Afterwards, go to the fourth floor of the temple and seek a blessing from the monk before a romantic stroll through the rooftop garden and a turn of the enormous prayer wheel.

Singapore Botanic Gardens

The newly refurbished food center in the Singapore Botanic garden is a wonderful spot to dine following a romantic stroll through the floral magnificence of this truly special point on this planet. Enjoy the cooling evening at one of the quiet tables in the shady submerged courtyard lined with flowers and lazy, drooping trees. Select a perfect orchid for your loved one to add a simple splash of color to a new teak table.