Let's makan!: Savoring Singapore's culinary heritage in hotel restaurants

Eunice Tan*, Kaye Chon

School of Hotel and Tourism Management, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University,
17 Science Museum Road TST East, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Abstract

Culinaria and gastronomy can be significant features of a destination, allowing tourists to experience local cultures, heritage and lifestyles. Street (hawker) food in Singapore offers visitors a unique opportunity to sample local dishes conveniently and economically, whilst experiencing a vibrant colloquial taste of life. Many hotels in Singapore also commonly feature local signature dishes in their menu. This study investigates the role of Asian street food and traditional cuisines served in international chain hotels as a tourism and cultural resource; specifically from a hotel and destination branding perspective within the Asian hospitality context, with Singapore as a destination.

Keywords: Street food; Asian cuisine; hotel restaurants; food heritage; brand identity

1. Introduction

Around Singapore it is not uncommon to hear the expression *"Let's Makan!",* particularly around dining tables or social gatherings. *Makan* (Malay word meaning eat) is commonly used in *Singlish* (the local colloquial form of English), as are many other local slang and phrases that can both intrigue and confound visitors or the uninitiated. Nonetheless, it is used freely, widely and perhaps even proudly by many of its residents. While not recognized as a formal language internationally, Singlish is an interesting and unique representation of Singapore's multicultural identity and Asian heritage which blends its collective ethnology of Chinese, Malay, Indian and minority communities such as the Eurasian and Peranakan (Singapore Tourism Board, 2013b; Yuen, 2005). Likewise, Singapore's culinary culture is equally amalgamated, reflecting its unique multi-ethnic roots.

Eating is a national past-time in Singapore and cuisine is a prominent theme in its tourism promotions strategy. For example, the Singapore Tourism Board (2013a) uses the caption "A world of flavors" to showcase its rich multicultural food heritage and unique flavors that visitors can savor. In terms of street food (referred to as hawker food), hawker centers and coffee shops (small neighborhood eateries) in Singapore offer a unique opportunity for visitors to not only sample popular local dishes conveniently and economically, but also get a vibrant taste of the colloquial way of life through eating and socializing with the locals (Choi, Lee & Ok, 2013; Henderson, Ong, Poon & Xu, 2012). Many hotels in Singapore also commonly feature signature local dishes in their menu. There have also been numerous food related events like the annual Singapore Food Festival and inaugural World Street Food Congress held in May 2013 to celebrate the sumptuous and colorful street food cultures from around the world (Singapore Tourism Board, 2013a). As shared by local food maven K.F. Seetoh (Founder of Makansutra), "(it was) the most meaningful thing we can do for society using Singapore's favorite sin – makan" (Agarwal & Asril, 2013). The Singapore Tourism Board and industry stakeholders have recently gone a step further, dishing out Singapore

---

* Corresponding author: Eunice Tan. *E-mail address:* eunice.tan@connect.polyu.hk

flavors to audiences overseas with their Singapore Street Food Festival events – like the one showcased in Scandinavia in August 2013 (Singapore Tourism Board 2013c).

In recent years, culinaria (a region's or country's cuisine, dishes and preparation styles) and gastronomy (the art of cooking and culture of eating) have become prominent and thriving components in tourism and hospitality (Kim, Eves & Scarles, 2009; Kim, Kim & Goh, 2011; Kivela & Crotts, 2006). Food is often considered a central ingredient in a destination's local heritage, cultural practices and traditions. It can shape social relationships, cultural and national identities (Camarena, Sanjuan & Philippidis, 2011; Cwiertka, 2002); particularly in many Asian societies, where food habits, mealtimes and cuisine served revolve strongly around social and symbolic gestures attached to Asian family hospitality. Kivela and Crotts (2009) explored tourists' narratives of travel experiences, where gastronomic encounters articulated were symbolized through mythological and connotative representations. Notwithstanding, tourists on holiday would still have to fulfill basic human needs and eat whilst away from home. Beyond nutrition, food and beverage can offer tourists the opportunity to experience local cultures, heritage and lifestyles (Henderson et al., 2012). As stated by Mitchell and Hall (2003), food and eating fulfill more than just functional roles and has become "highly experiential…sensuous and sensual, symbolic and ritualistic (taking on) new significance and meaning" (p.62). When dining out during vacations, food consumption can be seen as a pleasurable sensory experience (Kim et al., 2009; Kivela & Crotts, 2006), in which the gastronomic experience is pivotal in shaping and forming attitudes, perceptions and future behaviors. As highlighted by Mak, Lumbers, Eves and Chang (2012), food consumption and dining habits is a complex phenomenon encompassing factors involving the 1) customer – e.g., cultural and religious background, socio-demographic status, past experiences, 2) cuisine – e.g., sensory attributes, ingredients, cooking preparation, perceived value and quality, and 3) environment – e.g., destination gastronomic identity, marketing promotions, servicescape and social context.

Through the literature reviewed, it was observed that while there are some (though limited) studies on the role of street food and local cuisine in characterizing destinations, there has yet to be any significant research where street food served in hotel restaurants is evaluated as a means of cultural representation and tourism resource; particularly from a perspective of Asian street (hawker) food and traditional local cuisine served in international brand name hotels. Therefore, the objectives of this study are to:

1. Discuss key features that affect diners' satisfaction with the overall gastronomic experience when consuming Asian street food and local cuisine in hotel restaurants;
2. Examine elements of the dining experience that affect perceptions of "Asianess", authenticity and cultural representation.
3. Explore the role of local cuisine and street food in forming or reinforcing a destination's / hotel's brand and cultural identity;
4. Suggest strategies for hotels to successfully utilize local foods, culture and heritage to package and present their collection of culinary delights.

2. Literature review

2.1. Savoring cultures: Food, heritage and tourism

Horng and Tsai (2010) suggested that cuisine was integral to a community's social heritage and food culture; ultimately forming the origins of its traditions, rituals, celebrations and collective narratives. Particularly within the Asian hospitality paradigm, where cultural, religious and social influences can, and often do, guide food consumption behaviors, "human foodways" and "flavor principles" which determine food choices, consumption habits and sensory flavors considered acceptable or unacceptable (Mak et al., 2012, p.929). Additionally, the interplay of environment, traditions and nostalgia can drive impulses to seek out cuisines and dining experiences of bygone eras, or contrast from the everyday (Boniface, 2003). Destinations and communities typically encompass a *genius loci* or spirit of place, which amalgamates its tangible and intangible resources that characterizes it; and travel dining is no exception (Howie, 2010; Scarpato & Daniele; 2003; Yuen, 2005). Today, many destinations (including Singapore) use food as a tourism resource and attraction to enhance their destination image and identity. Linking food characteristics to a given place not only provides a cognitive cue for brand-relevant information and associations, the unique cuisines of a community or region can also be a powerful conduit through which visitors

experience the local culture and traditions (Kivela & Crotts, 2009; Lin, Pearson & Cai, 2009; Okumus, Okumus & McKercher, 2007). Within the context of travel dining, the centrality of sensory and hedonistic characteristics in leisure culinary pursuits suggests that symbolic meanings, enjoyable interactions and sense of authenticity within the dining experience are important. As described by Long (2004), travel dining "thrives on providing food experiences – of new and exotic foods, of foods authentic to a particular culture, of foods familiar and safe to a traveler. Food is central to traveling…a vivid entryway into another culture" (p.1).

Chang, Kivela and Mak (2011) similarly observed that dining during vacations is often considered peak touristic experiences, rather than merely a supporting function. They posited that tourists' enjoyment and partaking of local cuisines allow engaging learning experiences and insights into local heritage and culture; and eventually enhancing their own personal cultural capital (Chang et al., 2011). Cohen and Avieli (2004) however cautioned that while local food can be a considerable attraction, it can also be an impediment. They discussed the "two faces of food" (p.757) wherein tourists may face the dilemma between a simultaneous attraction of novel culinary situations and repulsion towards unfamiliar foods. Notwithstanding, food consumption and choice selection cannot occur extraneous to the culturally significant spaces, practices and social semiotics within which dining experiences occur (Parasecoli, 2011). As articulated by Cwiertka (2002), food is more than just nourishment – it is also a symbolic construct of imaginative geographies in which diners, visitors and tourists are able to experience multiple worlds and destinations represented by "historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe" (p. 11). However, it should also be noted that most of tourism consumption today is characterized by "conspicuous inconspicuousness", in which tourists on holiday in an unfamiliar foreign environment may reduce the fear of the unknown, perceived risks or excessive multiculturalism by seeking out familiar chain hotel brands, franchised fast food restaurants or tourist-oriented establishments; where the distinctiveness and sense of place is "only an applied and superficial tweak" (Boniface, 2002, p. 10), commodified to suit tourist palates and needs.

2.2. Edible experiences: Habits, meaning and identities

Kim et al. (2009) found that motivations influencing tourist food consumption habits and consequently evaluations of overall experience were framed by a myriad of factors (Figure 1), broadly clustered into motivational, demographic and physiological factors.
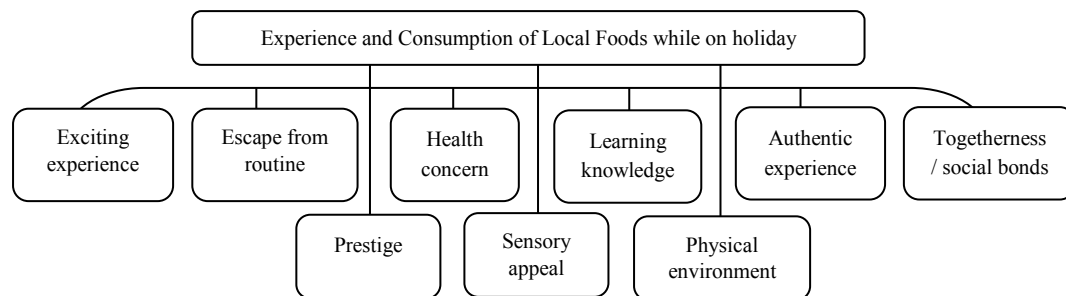

Fig. 1. Factors influencing tourists' experience and food consumption of local food (Adapted from: Kim, Eves & Scarles, 2009)

The idea of strangeness and familiarity, tradition and novelty, or risk tendencies in eating habits have also been discussed by numerous authors within the dimensions of neophobic and neophiliac touristic propensities to describe food-related personality traits (Camarena et al., 2011; Cohen & Avieli, 2004; Fischler, 1988; Kim, Suh & Eves, 2010; Mak et al., 2012; Pliner & Hobden, 1992). Neophobia refers to a reluctance to try, or avoidance of unfamiliar foods, while neophilia is an inclination for novel flavors and exotic food experiences by highly food-involved individuals. As with any personality or tourist typology, it is implicit that while some individuals may exhibit characteristics at the two extreme poles of the scale, the majority would oscillate somewhere in the middle within the "omnivore's paradox" (Mak et al., 2012, p.932), displaying both prudence and variety-seeking traits. Within the context of travel dining, the majority of tourists may seek novelty and unusual experiences, but simultaneously find comfort in the safe and familiar to truly enjoy their experience (Kivela & Crotts, 2009). Therefore, many may search for environment bubbles to balance the dichotomy of the strange and the familiar when savoring the local delicacies

and culinary delights. As highlighted by Okumus et al. (2007, p.254), visitors desire to "experience the exotic, but only to the extent that it is non-threatening", and it is important to provide a dining atmosphere that provides "safe exoticism" featuring distinctive high-quality local cuisines as a point of differentiation.

2.3. Asian food: Global, local or glocal?

Culture, heritage and place (or community) identities can be important features of differentiation in an increasingly homogenized and global world (Yuen, 2005). Over the years, international trade, globalization and migration flows have influenced and changed the way that food is produced, sold, prepared and consumed (Cwiertka, 2002). In many societal contexts, food today is no longer a mere means of subsistence, but instead has become ritualized, attached to traditions and socio-cultural conventions (Boniface, 2003; Parasecoli, 2011). Often, these culinary praxis and conventions can be a manifestation of both global and local hybridization. National, regional and local cuisines are not only geographically representative of places and cultures, but also have symbolic meanings (experientially and emotively) on a deeper level, which can communicate powerful images and destination-related messages (Horng & Tsai, 2010; Long, 2004). Scarpato and Daniele (2003) posits that the relationship linking food, places and cultural identity in contemporary tourism has evolved as a result of the diffusion of a new global food culture into the mainstream dining-out sector; where new cuisines, styles of cooking, ingredients and service philosophies from around the world are being embraced and melted by a new generation of global cooks. This marriage of global and local characteristics has given birth to a transnational imaginary and culinary landscape, where a new form of localism or glocalization of culinary hybridity is occurring (Gabaccia, 2012; Scarpato & Daniele, 2003).

Within the context of local food and cuisine, the term "local" is defined based on perception – interpretation recognized by consumers (e.g., close geographically proximity or culturally similar); and can change over time and context (Boniface, 2003). For example, what is considered local today may have been exotic or foreign a generation ago and vice versa. Due to its rich melting pot of distinctive and diverse food cultures, cuisine and gastronomy has become a major tourism resource, brand identity and attraction in many Asian cities (Horng & Tsai, 2012; Lin et al., 2009). Furthermore, with the close cultural distance and ethnic similarities, differentiating South East Asian cuisine based solely on locale is not recommended as it can create interpretation that is overly narrow. This is particularly so in the case of Singapore, where the character and diversity of its cuisine originated from its ethnic diversity, rather than its local produce or ingredients. After all, with its small size and limited countryside areas for agriculture, Singapore imports almost all of its food. Hence, the emphasis is instead on making the best use of available resources and food choices that aptly reflect the country's composite societal and cultural dynamics (Horng & Tsai, 2012; Scarpato & Daniele, 2003).

3. Methodology

This exploratory study aims to investigate the role of Asian street (hawker) food and traditional local cuisine as a tourism resource; particularly from a hotel and destination branding perspective within the Asian hospitality paradigm. Qualitative research was adopted to study pertinent issues interpreted from consumers' perspectives and opinions (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011), and explore the individuality of their experiences, thoughts and responses (Maxwell, 2013). Three hotel restaurants in Singapore were purposefully selected since the outlets needed to be particularly suitable to the study objectives - i.e., restaurants in international brand / chain hotels that predominantly served a buffet comprising of hawker fare or local cuisine exclusively (as opposed to an international buffet, which is commonly offered). The three hotel restaurants were: 1) Straits Kitchen at the Grand Hyatt Singapore, 2) Spices Cafe at the Concord Hotel Singapore, and 3) Feast@East Buffet Restaurant at the Grand Mercure Roxy Singapore. While it is acknowledged that many hotels in Singapore served traditional cuisines and local hawker fare, most of these were offered in restaurants as part of an international buffet or ala carte menu, rather than specializing in it.

Data collection was undertaken primarily through web content analysis and *netnography*, which enabled an ethnographic study of customer insights from online communities (Kozinets, 2002). Online customer reviews posted on *Tripadvisor* (Tripadvisor, 2013) and *Hungrygowhere* (SingTel Digital Media, 2013) were evaluated to gather

consumer opinions about their dining experiences at the three hotel restaurants selected for the study. Tripadvisor was selected because it is the world's leading online travel community where users share and seek information, and rate service experiences at properties around the world (Jeacle & Carter, 2011); while Hungrygowhere is Singapore's premier one-stop online and mobile platform for entertainment, events, food and shopping, with comprehensive news coverage, special deals and customer reviews (SingTel Digital Media, 2013). For the purpose of this study, the 10 most recent customer reviews posted (where available) on both online platforms about each of the three hotel restaurants were analyzed (51 reviews in total from both local and overseas diners, between 2013 and 2009). Additionally, to triangulate data from the online reviews, information from the hotels' corporate websites, Singapore Tourism Board, local culinary and entertainment news were reviewed as well.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Dining experience and satisfaction

From the literature discussed, it is apparent that just focusing on the act of eating itself is insufficient when reviewing the role of food in tourism. Tourists and diners must have a satisfying and memorable overall dining experience (Horng & Tsai, 2012). This can be enhanced by providing information, stories and knowledge about the cuisine's cooking methods, preparation process and cultural significance. As highlighted by Parasecoli (2011), the cultural character of food can be highly symbolic, and subject to interpretation, discourse and individual predispositions. Additionally, Kim et al. (2011) utilized the theory of reasoned action to suggest that consumers' attitudes and satisfaction with a dining experience were a synthesis of 1) cognitive features – e.g., perceived value, 2) affective features – e.g., pleasant experience, and 3) conative features – e.g., future revisit intentions. This was similarly narrated in customer reviews analyzed. Customers who gave positive reviews quoted expressions such as: *"Sumptuous Asian flavors and foods at affordable prices!"* (Tripadvisor, June 30, 2013), *"Great place to sample a variety of local food"* (Hungrygowhere, June 15, 2012), *"Local food with a hotel twist"* (Hungrygowhere, January 26, 2011), and *"Dining here brings you back to the olden days"* (Hungrygowhere, July 10, 2010).

Cohen and Avieli (2004) and Choi et al. (2013) highlighted that while tourists may seek out novel and unique food experiences when traveling, they will usually not forego health, safety and comfort in their quest to taste the local flavors. For instance, it was observed that tourists faced with unfamiliar culinary situations would usually not eat strange foods unless they had more information about the ingredients, preparation and cooking methods. Additionally, most would be concerned with sanitation and hygiene standards of the local establishment above other factors such as taste or price. Thus, it is critical to balance perceived benefits and risks; and understand consumers' attitudes, behavioral intentions and reactions to the dimensionalities of gratification versus hazards of consuming unfamiliar local foods. For example, a customer of the Straits Kitchen had shared: *"This is the best place to bring visitors to Singapore, as it serves all sorts of local food you can possibly think of and most importantly it has aircon (sic)!"* (Hungrygowhere, August, 12, 2012); while customer another said: *"Most hawkers do the food way better than the spread here (however) the Straits Kitchen has its halal certificate…not many places in Singapore have this and serving a passable buffet spread. If you are hosting some foreign guests with dietary concerns, this would be the place."* (Tripadvisor, July 13, 2013).

As suggested by Chang, Kivela and Mak (2010) and Kim et al. (2010), the level of tourists' neophobia or neophilia, food-involvement and other food-related personality traits can affect the level of satisfaction with the overall culinary experience, as well as influence their willingness to consume unfamiliar foods. Therefore, destination, tourism and hospitality managers are relentlessly faced with the challenge of packaging and promoting local street food and ethnic cuisines as an attraction, whilst at the same time mitigating perceived risks apparent as an impediment (Chang et al., 2010). Horng and Tsai (2010) had reviewed the efforts by the Singapore Tourism Board and local foodservice industry stakeholders to improve the culinary quality of its cuisine, and found that the provision of online restaurant search functions and reviews (e.g., Hungrygowhere), publication of restaurant/dining guides (e.g., YourSingapore Dining Guide), and restaurant certification schemes (e.g., Makansutra – Singapore's famed culinary evaluation organization) help visitors and diners to discover high quality local food and beverages they can enjoy. For example, an overseas customer at the Straits Kitchen said: *"We booked this restaurant based on*

its Tripadvisor rating. It certainly lived up to expectations" (Tripadvisor, August 24, 2013). A local customer from the Spices Café who patronized its Singapore flavors buffet lunch said: *"I wanted to immerse (my overseas visitors) into my Baba and Nonya culture. The food served is not intimidating and more suited to people new to Straits Chinese (Peranakan) food"* (Tripadvisor, May 31, 2013).

Chang et al. (2011) had proposed a framework summarizing 15 attributes affecting customers' evaluation of travel dining experiences, clustered into six categories consisting of 1) tourists' own food culture, 2) context of dining experience, 3) variety of food and diversity of flavors, 4) destination image and perception, 5) service encounter, and 6) tour guide performance. Through the literature reviewed and narratives observed in this study, this was the case for Singapore's culinary scene as well. An overseas customer at the Straits Kitchen shared: *"Go to the buffet to experience great tastes of Asia. If you are not familiar with local cuisine, this is a splendid place to get started. Everything is excellent!"* (Tripadvisor, August 24, 2013). An overseas customer from the Spices Café had highlighted the importance of not only good food quality, but also the rage of food offered and staff service: *"If you are not sure or not used to the local dishes, ask the service staff for advice…they are only too happy to share their knowledge of local cuisine with foreigners and convert you to a local-foodie!"* (Tripadvisor, June 30, 2013). However, it should also be highlighted that establishments must not forget the basic principle of perceived value-for-money from the discerning customer as well. As shared by a customer from the Straits Kitchen who cited *"Not value for money"* despite a positive rating: *"The food is of good quality and cooked fresh….while the food is good and the service and ambience is good, it is not value for money",* and further recommended that if one cannot eat a lot *"For $55 you could easily feed your whole family at a hawker stall and eat more than one plate"* (Hungrygowhere, July 19, 2013). A customer from Feast@East also posted: *"Nothing to rave about"* in the review and *"expected more for the price I paid"* (Hungrygowhere, January 11, 2011).

4.2. Authenticity and cultural representation

Despite its pervasive coverage in tourism and hospitality literature, the notion of authenticity remains an elusive and fuzzy concept without a definitive standard or clearly recognized measurement criterion (Timothy & Prideaux, 2004). Its contextual and highly subjective nature means that perceptions of authenticity can vary vastly from person to person, place to place and within different situational contexts. Boniface (2003) had explored the cultural perspective of food and cuisines, highlighting that there should be a "distinctiveness of authenticity to show identity…be unique and avoid superfluity; but also openness to bring…dynamism and creativity to see possibilities and progress in fusion and hybridization" (p.6). Often, a country's favorite street food and ubiquitous local cuisines can become national icons or tourism attractions, representing a traditional and authentic cultural experience (Choi et al., 2013; Long, 2004).

Tourism and hospitality providers can harness these cultural and culinary assets in their branding and positioning to create differentiation and competitive advantage. With international brand name hotel properties becoming increasingly homogenized, such cultural attributes and heritage can create interesting brand identities and unique hospitality servicescapes. Particularly in the case of chain hotels in cosmopolitan Asian cities like Singapore, such features can be harnessed to reinforce and showcase its Asian virtues and flavors. A region's or neighborhood's cultural identity and physiognomy is shaped through the character of its residents, the richness of its history, the architectural symbolism of its buildings and social activities of its community (Yuen, 2005). Properly utilized, these features can provide ingredients that contribute to its uniqueness, spirit of place, color and vitality. While the three restaurants in this study utilized Singapore's multicultural roots to characterize their culinary offerings, Feast@East had adopted this feature exclusively in its buffet restaurant and other aspects of its property. Being located away from the usual tourist belt in downtown Singapore, the Grand Mercure Roxy had aptly taken advantage of its locality in Singapore's East Coast district as a unique selling point. The surrounding neighborhood (of Katong and Joo Chiat) is regarded as the heritage heart of Singapore's Peranakan and Eurasian communities and cultures. Therefore, the property had infused this in their buffet restaurant, emphasizing the heritage, nostalgia and warm memories of the past in their culinary feast. As marketed in its website, Feast@East is the quintessential "Heritage Feast in the East" where diners can expect "classic Singaporean and delightful Peranakan food that shall delight (customers') nostalgic taste buds and take (them) to fond memories of the past" (Grand Mercure Roxy, 2013). A customer who dined at Feast@East supported this, saying that the restaurant *"celebrates the best of traditional Peranakan cuisine*

by serving up a mouthwatering spread that changes daily amid old-school, traditional setting", and felt it was *"a good move, because there are much better buffets with an international offering, but few that specialize in Peranakan cuisine"* (Hungrygowhere, May 25, 2013).

Cohen and Avieli (2004) and Henderson et al. (2012) further recommended the need to bridge the communication gap to encourage visitors' patronage of local establishments and sample local ethnic cuisines. Tourists unfamiliar with the local culture or language might find it difficult to choose an eating place or order dishes from a menu they cannot understand. Hence, for tourism-oriented culinary establishments, some form of commodification or transformation is needed to make the local cuisine suitable for tourist consumption. Just like other tourism attractions and products, food and beverage developed for tourists can be developed into "sui generis cultural products" (Cohen & Avieli, 2004, p. 767) which balance the traditional with the modern, or the foreign with the familiar. As suggested by Timothy and Prideaux (2004), tourists often consume tourism products and experiences in a form of relative authenticity, wherein their past experience, socio-demographical and cultural backgrounds will impact the way they view the activity or attraction. Concurrently, adequate information and descriptions of dishes and ingredients should also be provided so that meanings are not lost in translation. For example, most tourists or visitors new to the destination, local culture or way of life may not be able to withstand the unfamiliar conditions, sensory atmosphere or even make sense of what is around them if they were to experience a truly uncommodified and authentic locale (e.g., a neighborhood wet market or local coffee shop in the heartlands) due to communication barriers. Hence, heritage (including food and culinary) attractions and tourist-oriented establishments need to be transformed to make it suitable for tourism consumption. As expressed by an overseas customer to the Straits Kitchen:

"It is higher priced than going to the hawker stalls, but a nice way to experience it if you are not up for that. Recommended for those visiting Singapore for the first time, as it is an easy way to be introduced to the wide range of cuisines found in Singapore" (Tripadvisor, July 9, 2013).

Another overseas customer to the restaurant had also shared: *"If you are visiting Singapore, this would be a great place to go and try a little bit of everything to get a taste of the various Asian cuisine...we prefer the variety of Straits Kitchen"* (Tripadvisor, July 20, 2013).

4.3. Local cuisine in marketing and brand identity

Food and cuisine styles may represent the unique features of a destination or place, and also offer unique opportunities for branding, marketing and competitive advantage (Boniface, 2003; Horng & Tsai, 2012). Its distinctive cuisine and gastronomic options can eventually become iconic as an international brand, playing a major role in its destination marketing – as observed in the case of foodie meccas like Singapore and other countries in the region (Horng & Tsai, 2010; Singapore Tourism Board, 2013a). With its unique multicultural heritage, South East Asian street food and traditional ethnic cuisines can offer distinctive advantage and untapped potential for development as an attraction and tourism resource (Choi et al., 2013; Henderson et al., 2012). As highlighted by R. Sundramoorthy (STB's Director for Attractions, Dining and Retail): "Street food is an important part of Singapore's identity, intrinsically entwined with our multi-cultural heritage and daily life…this is an opportunity to (showcase) our local chefs…to keep Singapore associated with good food" (Singapore Tourism Board, 2013c). By emphasizing the distinctive Asian heritage of a destination's or hotel's culinary delights as a branding strategy and place identity, local street food and traditional cuisines can be used as a positive appeal to attract potential customers. A local customer at the Spices Café has shared: *"This is a place for those who enjoy Peranakan cuisine or the adventurous for those who have yet to try it"* (Tripadvisor, May 9, 2013). Another customer at the restaurant had cited an appreciation of the décor and *"historical items such as the plates and utensils used by the Peranakans",* and *"chefs who were friendly and (who) started chatting with us"* (Hungrygowhere, September 18, 2010).

Okumus et al. (2007) however cautioned that while food imagery and promotions can be effectively used as a marketing strategy, such images and promotional material must be appropriately constructed and of good quality to "convey a total emotional (dining) experience at both the overt and subliminal levels" (p.255). Howie (2010) similarly expressed that leisure and holiday choices are powerful lifestyle indicators. Consumers often spend their hard earned time and money on choices with high emotion appeal, are conversationally interesting and have some degree of notoriety. Cohen and Avieli (2004) also suggested that perceptions of authenticity in the dining experience

is a unique recipe of balancing elements such as 1) palatable local cuisine, 2) ethnic origins of the producer, 3) method of cooking and preparation, 4) approach to food display, presentation and plating, 5) familiarity and understanding of culinary terms, 6) role of culinary mediators – e.g., waiters or local hosts, 7) style of eating and service, and 8) the servicescape of the dining establishment – e.g., spatial layout, decor, or entertainment. This was similarly articulated in a number of customer reviews about their overall dining experience. A customer who patronized Feast@East said that the experience brought them back to the days of old:

> *"Stepping into this restaurant…brings you back to the good olden days (sic) through the time capsule! The restaurant has put up vintage and nostalgic decoration and…will let you find back your sweet childhood memories. With the oldies songs being played…it adds to (the) feelings of traveling back in time."* (Hungrygowhere, July 10, 2010).

5. Conclusion and implications

Satisfaction with the overall dining experience is a precursor to the likelihood of revisit intentions, higher spending, as well as loyalty and continuity of relationship (Kim et al., 2010). The notions of customer relationship management, guest satisfaction and differentiation for competitive advantage are not new concepts in hospitality and tourism management. Similarly, Horng and Tsai (2012) and Kivela and Crotts (2006) suggest that destinations and hospitality organizations refine, harness and develop their unique culinary delights to create a niche gastronomic strategy that provides a strong point of differentiation and competitive advantage, and enhances its image. Correspondingly, they should be clear about their unique culinary assets that can be harnessed to build a strong cuisine culture and brand image. This can include featuring multi-ethnic cuisines, creative cooking presentations or unusual culinary heritage. In South East Asia, multi-ethnic cuisines and place-specific foods of the region can convey deep-rooted meanings and intangible impressions to express and symbolize the unique "Asianess" of destinations and hospitality providers (Lin et al., 2009). In terms of visual appeal and imagery, local foods and culinary choices offered should be well displayed, attractively presented and cooking performances showcased to attract and appeal to the sensory gratification of diners and visitors (Kim et al., 2009).

This study was undertaken to explore the role of local street food and traditional cuisines in international brand or chain hotels within the context of Asian hospitality. From observations derived in the literature and narratives articulated in this study, it is suggested that effective integration of local cuisine into a hotel's culinary offerings can reinforce the "Asianess" quality and provide a distinct competitive advantage. The authors would like to make the following suggestions to help hotels or tourist-oriented foodservice establishments successfully incorporate, package and present local foods, culture and heritage into their collection of culinary delights: A destination's or hotel's culinary features require 1) a clear vision and understanding of what culinary assets or cultural attributes are unique to the place, 2) the identification of specific types of food or dishes that best captures an authentic dining experience, 3) the integration of culture- and food-related information to ensure a meaningful link between the diner, the dining destination and what is eaten, and 4) the provision of a unique dining environment (e.g., through the restaurant's decor and servicescape) to make a positive impression and memorable experience. Of course, the above recommendations cannot be effective if basic cognitive, affective and conative attributes were neglected. Hence, fundamental factors such as 1) taste and quality, 2) price and value, and 3) comfort and hygiene should also be carefully planned and managed. If appropriately packaged and implemented, local street food and traditional ethnic cuisines can become a valuable and distinctive part of a tourism or hospitality provider's pièce de résistance to be dished out and savored. So, as we say in Singapore, Let's Makan! Bon appétit.

References

Agarwal, P. C., & Asril, C. (2013, January 18). Singapore to host first World Street Food Congress. *SingTel Digital Media.* Retrieved from http://www.hungrygowhere.com/dining-guide/hawker/Singapore-to-host-the-first-world-street-food-congress.

Boniface, P. (2003). *Tasting tourism: Traveling for food and drink.* Aldershot, HA: Ashgate.

Camarena, D. M., Sanjuan, A. I., & Philippidis, G. (2011). Influence of ethnocentrism and neo-phobia on ethnic food consumption in Spain. *Appetite, 57,* 121 – 130.

Chang, R. C. Y., Kivela, J., & Mak, A. H. N. (2010). Food preferences of Chinese tourists. *Annals of Tourism Research, 37*(4), 989 – 1011.

Chang, R. C. Y., Kivela, J., & Mak, A. H. N. (2011). Attributes that influence the evaluation of travel dining experience: When east meets west. *Tourism Management, 32,* 307 – 316.

Choi, J., Lee, A., & Ok, C. (2013). The effects of consumers' perceived risk and benefit on attitude and behavioral intention: A study of street food. *Journal of Travel and Tourism Marketing, 30*(3), 222 – 237.

Cohen, E., & Avieli, N. (2004). Food in tourism: Attraction and impediment. *Annals of Tourism research, 31*(4), 755 – 778.

Cwiertka, K. J. (Ed.). (2002). *Asian food: The global and the local.* Richmond, SE: Curzon Press.

Fischler, C. (1988). Food, self and identity. *Social Science Information, 27,* 275 – 292.

Gabaccia, D. R. (2012). Food, mobility, and world history. In J. Pilcher (Ed.). *The Oxford handbook of food history* (pp. 305 – 323). New York, NY: Oxford.

Grand Mercure Roxy (2013). *Feast@East: The Buffet Restaurant.* Retrieved from Feast@East website: http://www.feastateast.com.sg/

Henderson, J. C., Ong, S. Y., Poon, P., & Xu, B. (2012). Hawker centers as tourist attractions: The case of Singapore. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 31,* 849 – 855.

Hennink, M., Hutter, I., & Bailey, A. (2011). *Qualitative research method.* Singapore: SAGE

Horng, J., & Tsai, C. (2010). Government websites for promoting East Asian culinary tourism: A cross-national analysis. *Tourism Management, 31,* 74 – 85.

Horng, J., & Tsai, C. (2012). Exploring marketing strategies for culinary tourism in Hong Kong and Singapore. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research, 17*(3), 277 – 300.

Howie, F. (2010). *Managing the tourist destination.* Andover, HA: Cengage Learning.

Jeacle, I., & Carter, C. (2011). In Tripadvisor we trust: Rankings, calculative regimes and abstract systems. *Journal of Accounting, Organizations and Society, 36,* 293 – 309.

Kim, Y. G., Eves, A., & Scarles, C. (2009). Building a model of local food consumption on trips and holidays: A grounded theory approach. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 28,* 423 – 431.

Kim, Y. H., Kim, M., & Goh, B. K. (2011). An examination of food tourist's behavior: Using the modified theory of reasoned action. *Tourism Management, 32,* 1159 – 1165.

Kim, Y. G., Suh, B. W., & Eves, A. (2010). The relationship between food-related personality traits, satisfaction, and loyalty among visitors attending food events and festivals. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 29,* 216 – 226.

Kivela, J., & Crotts, J. C. (2006). Tourism and Gastronomy: Gastronomy's influence on how tourists experience a destination. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research, 30,* 354 – 377.

Kivela, J., & Crotts, J. C. (2009). Understanding travelers' experiences of gastronomy through etymology and narration. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research, 33,* 161 – 192.

Kozinets, R. V. (2002). The field behind the screen: Using netnography for marketing research in online communities. *Journal of Marketing Research, 39,* 61 – 72.

Lin, Y., Pearson, T. E., & Cai, L. A. (2009). Food as a form of destination identity: A tourism destination brand perspective. *Tourism and Hospitality Research, 11*(1), 30 – 48.

Long, L. M. (Ed.). (2004). *Culinary tourism.* Lexingon, KN: University of Kentucky.

Mak, A. H. N., Lumbers, M., Eves, A., & Chang, R. C. Y. (2012). Factors influencing tourist food consumption. *International Journal of Hospitality Management, 31,* 928 – 936.

Maxwell, J.A. (2013). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach* (3rd ed.). Singapore: SAGE.

Mitchell, R., & Hall, C. M. (2003). Counsuming tourists: Food tourism consumer behavior. In C. M. Hall, L. Sharples, R. Mitchell, N. Macionis & B. Cambourne (Eds.). *Food tourism around the world: Development, management and markets* (pp. 60 - 80). Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Okumus, B., Okumus, F., & McKercher, B. (2007). Incorporating local and international cuisines in the marketing of tourism destinations: The cases of Hong Kong and Turkey. *Tourism Management, 28,* 253 – 261.

Parasecoli, F. (2011). Savoring semiotics: Food in intercultural communication. *Social Semiotics, 21*(5), 645 – 663.

Pliner, P., & Hobden, K. (1992). Development of a scale to measure the trait of food neophobia in humans. *Appetite, 19,* 105 – 120.

Scarpato, R., & Daniele, R. (2003). New global cuisine: Tourism, authenticity and sense of place in postmodern gastronomy. In C. M. Hall, L. Sharples, R. Mitchell, N. Macionis & B. Cambourne (Eds.). *Food tourism around the world: Development, management and markets* (pp. 296 – 313). Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Singapore Tourism Board (2013a). *Singapore dining: A world of flavors.* Retrieved from YourSingapore website: http://www.yoursingapore.com/content/traveller/en/dining/cuisines-of-singapore.html.

Singapore Tourism Board (2013b). *Singlish guide: A guide to understanding our local slang.* Retrieved from YourSingapore website: http://www.yoursingapore.com/content/traveller/en/plan-your -trip/travel-essentials/singlish-guide.html.

Singapore Tourism Board (2013c, 15 August). *Singapore chefs dish out traditional favorites and modern interpretations of local street food at Copenhagen Cooking 2013* [Press release]. Retrieved from https://app.stb.gov.sg/asp/new/new03a.asp?id=13863.

SingTel Digital Media (2013). *Latest Singapore restaurant, hawker and food reviews.* Retrieved from http://www.hungrygowhere.com/reviews.

Timothy, D. J., & Prideaux, B. (2004). Issues in heritage and culture in the Asia Pacific region. *Asia Pacific Journal of Tourism Research, 9*(3), 213 – 223.

Yuen, B. (2005). Searching for place identity in Singapore. *Habitat International, 29,* 197 – 214.