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# FOOD FANATICS®

**AWESOME SAUCE**  
**ODDITIES THAT REV UP DINERS**





Chili crab, left, is an iconic Singaporean dish, drawing on other cuisines.

# THE MANY ROADS TO SINGAPORE

The nation's cuisine is the ultimate Asian mashup

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## As chefs blur the lines

that separate one country's food from another, Singaporean cuisine is poised to gain ground. It's the ultimate amalgam of Asian cooking.

Singapore's history as a significant historical trade hub led British, Portuguese, Chinese, Malay, Indonesian, Indian and others to layer their traditions in Singaporean culture, which is reflected in the country's cuisine today.

"Being such a small country, the one thing that is truly Singaporean is the food," says Salil Mehta, the chef at Singapura in New York City. "Because that truly represents everything—that melange of cultures, the marriage of flavors."

Yet Singaporean cuisine can be nearly impossible to define; the ingredients and preparations are shared by so many countries. "You see some Malay ingredients, some influence from Chinese techniques, things like that," says Amy Pryke, founder of Native Noodles in New York City.

That seemingly negative aspect, however, can be positive. Asian ingredients are so ubiquitous, riffing from a native Singaporean component or classic dish is an easy way to insert excitement onto any menu.



## DEBAL CURRY

MAIN INGREDIENTS: Spam, sausage, potatoes, cabbage, chicken, chili paste, vinegar and mustard seeds

ORIGINS: Malaysia and Portugal

The Portuguese colonized Malaysia in 1511. With time, Malay chicken curry with vinegar evolved into a Portuguese version that included meats, potatoes and mustard. "The mustard part of it is not native to Singapore, but the heat part of it is," says Mehta of Debal Curry's particularly fiery element. "All these ingredients come together in one dish that's extremely Portuguese."

## BAK KUT TEH

MAIN INGREDIENTS: Pork ribs, black pepper, garlic

ORIGINS: Malaysia and Fujian, China

This pork rib soup is common in Malaysia and Singapore. In Malaysia, pork ribs are slow-simmered in a dark broth heavy with star anise, cinnamon, cloves and other Chinese seasonings. In Singapore, a white broth is heavy on the pepper and cloves. Singaporean *bak kut teh* is often served for breakfast with a pot of tea, rice, or *yau ja gwai*, fried Chinese crullers.



The smokiness from a wok makes all the difference for char kuey teow.



#### CHAR KUEY TEOW

» **MAIN INGREDIENTS:** Wide rice noodles, shrimp paste, dark soy sauce, hot chili paste  
» **ORIGINS:** Malaysia, China, Indonesia

In Malaysian char kuey teow, rice noodles are stir-fried with cockles, Chinese sausage, eggs, bean sprouts and soy sauce. In Singapore, hawkers fry the same components with *kecap manis*—a thick and sweet caramelized soy sauce from Indonesia—and plenty of shrimp paste. Fried with the Chinese wok technique, it comes together in sweet, salty, smoky satisfaction.

#### SATAY BEE HOON

» **MAIN INGREDIENTS:** Rice noodles, peanut sauce, squid, sprouts, chicken  
» **ORIGINS:** Malaysia, Java, Teochew (China)

This niche Singaporean dish is credited to various Teochew hawkers who combine fragrant satay peanut sauce, vermicelli noodles and fish. “It looks like a heap of something on your plate—it can be a little hard to relate to,” says Pryke. For her take, Pryke chose the thick egg noodles Americans often find in pan-Asian sesame noodle dishes and opted out of the fish. “You want there to be some element of accessibility,” she says of hoping customers explore from there.



#### NASIL LEMAK

» **MAIN INGREDIENTS:** Coconut rice, roasted nuts, egg, cucumbers, dried anchovies, sambal  
» **ORIGINS:** Malaysia

One of Malaysia’s national dishes, this “fatty rice” is incredibly popular across Singaporean hawker culture. In Malaysia, fragrant coconut rice, salty anchovies, egg and sometimes chicken curry or vegetables are served with spicy sambal. In Singapore, the sambal leans into both spicy and sweet. Hawkers are as likely to use basmati rice as jasmine and add anything from crispy fried chicken, sweet chili, sausage or fried fish.

### Laksa Noodles

Founder Amy Pryke  
Native Noodle, Washington Heights, New York

- 75 grams lemongrass, white part only
- 45 grams belacan shrimp paste, browned
- 36 grams sugar
- 25 grams shallots, minced
- 22 grams curry powder
- 22 grams ginger, peeled and chopped
- 22 grams galangal, peeled and chopped
- 10 dried chiles, soaked in hot water, most seeds removed
- 7 ounces dried shrimp, ground into powder
- 3 ounces fried onions
- 3 ounces candlenut or macadamia
- 2 ounces garlic cloves, chopped
- 2 teaspoons turmeric
- 5 grams kosher salt
- 8 ounces vegetable oil
- 1 tablespoon chicken bouillon, dissolved in 1 cup water
- 28 ounces coconut milk
- 14 ounces lai fun thick rice noodles
- 16 cooked shrimp
- 8 to 12 ounces bean sprouts
- 8 fried tofu puffs, quartered
- Rau ram, chopped, to garnish

Combine lemongrass, shrimp paste, sugar, shallots, curry, ginger, galangal, chiles, dried shrimp, fried onions, nuts, garlic, turmeric and salt in a food processor to create a smooth paste. Heat oil in a large saucepan and add paste, stirring until fragrant.

Add bouillon liquid and coconut milk, bring to a boil and simmer 10 minutes, adding more liquid for desired consistency. Adjust seasoning with salt.

Cook noodles per package instructions, drain. To plate, place about 6 to 8 ounces noodles in a bowl, top with 4 shrimp and tofu puffs. Ladle sauce over center so that it does not cover shrimp and garnish with bean sprouts and rau ram herb. Makes 4 servings.

#### LAKSA

» **MAIN INGREDIENTS:** coconut milk, shrimp, rice noodles, chiles, shallots, candlenut, curry paste  
» **ORIGINS:** Malaysia, India, China

Many variations of this loose, wet but mostly soup of coconut milk (Indian), rice noodles (Chinese), and spicy shrimp curry paste (Malay) are most Americans’ gateway into Singaporean cuisine. Pryke couldn’t find the particularly coconut-y and shrimp-forward Nyonya laksa she loves in New York and debuted her menu with that. “But different styles have grown in popularity in Singapore over the past few years, with businesses creating ‘dry’ versions that are stir-fried or sauce-based,” she says. Keeping up with evolution, she now offers both versions on her menu.





Hainan chili sauce adds brightening heat to poached chicken.

Hainan soy sauce brings depth to the chicken.

Poaching the chicken results in a velvety smooth texture.

The ginger garnish completes the dish.

Broth from the poached chicken can be added to the rice.



### HAINANESE CHICKEN

- › **MAIN INGREDIENTS:** Poached chicken, ginger, scallions, rice and accompaniments
- › **ORIGINS:** Hainan, China, Malaysia

Originating from southern Chinese settlers, this ginger-poached chicken and rice dish has traveled across almost every Asian country. In Hong Kong, it's served with a dipping mix of five spice, monosodium glutamate, salt and sugar. In Thailand, it's served with *tao-jiao*, a soybean sauce mixed with garlic and cilantro. In Singapore, it's served with fiery hot sauce to contrast the fragrant ginger. "Hainanese chicken would probably be the one dish that Singapore perfected," says Mehta.

## Hainanese Chicken

Chef Salil Mehta  
Singapore, New York City

- 3- to 4-pound-whole chicken
- Kosher salt, as needed
- 7 slices ginger, peeled, divided use
- 1 bunch green onion, trimmed
- 8 shallots, divided use
- 4 tablespoons toasted sesame oil
- 1-inch piece of ginger, peeled and sliced
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 cups jasmine rice, rinsed
- 5 pandan leaves
- 2 tablespoons powdered chicken bouillon
- Hainan soy sauce, recipe follows
- Hainan chili sauce, recipe follows
- Cilantro, to garnish
- Sliced cucumber, to garnish
- Minced ginger garnish, recipe follows
- Carrots, spiralized, to garnish

**Rub** chicken with salt and rinse. Season again with salt; rest 30 minutes. Bring water to boil in a pot and add 6 slices ginger, green onion and 3 shallots, halved. Add chicken, cover and cook for 20 minutes. Remove from heat and let the chicken poach for another 20 minutes. Cool in liquid, debone with skin intact. Reserve stock.

**Heat** sesame oil in a saute remaining 5 shallots, chopped, and garlic until golden. Transfer to a rice cooker and add rice, 2 cups reserved stock, pandan leaves, bouillon powder and remaining ginger slices. Cook, adjusting stock to rice cooker.

**Arrange** chicken on a platter. Serve with soy sauce, chili sauce, cilantro and sliced cucumber along with a bowl of heated broth. Mound rice and top with the ginger garnish and carrot.

**To make Hainan Soy Sauce:** Heat 2 tablespoons sesame oil to saute 2 shallots, 6 slices ginger and 4 minced cloves garlic until golden brown. Add ½ cup chicken stock, 4 tablespoons soy sauce, 2 tablespoons oyster sauce, 4 tablespoons sugar, 2 tablespoons Shaoxing wine and 2 tablespoons dark caramel soy sauce and cook for 5 minutes on medium. Strain and transfer to a bowl.

**To make Hainan Chili Sauce:** Combine 3 or 4 red chili peppers, 6 slices peeled ginger, 3 cloves minced garlic, ¼ cup sugar, 1 cup chicken stock and juice from 2 limes in a blender. Pulse until the mixture reaches a chunky consistency; add salt to taste and set aside in a small bowl.

**To make minced ginger topping:** Heat 1 tablespoon toasted sesame oil and 3 tablespoons oil until smoking hot and saute 3-inch piece peeled and minced ginger until golden. Cool and stir in 1 bunch green onion, mostly white part, minced and salt to taste.

### BEE HOON OR SINGAPORE NOODLES

- › **MAIN INGREDIENTS:** vermicelli noodles, soy sauce, vegetables, seafood
- › **ORIGINS:** China, Hong Kong

In Singapore, hawkers fry *bee hoon*, vermicelli noodles, with vegetables and fish or serve it for breakfast with Spam or sausage. But the dish has roots in China, where noodles are fried with soy sauce and vegetables. "Then someone immigrated to Hong Kong and fried it with curry powder. Others immigrated to Singapore and did it without. And immigrants from Hong Kong moved to the U.S. and started to put it on menus as Singapore Noodles," says Pryke of the curry-heavy version. "It's an example of how people have different interpretations."



#### FISH HEAD CURRY

- › **MAIN INGREDIENTS:** Grouper head and spicy coconut curry
- › **ORIGIN:** India, Malaysia, China

Most Indians in Singapore are from Tamil, a southern state known for particularly thick and fiery curries. According to Mehta, fish head curry, pictured above, came when Indian curry chefs adapted to serving Chinese clientele, who prized the fish heads they wouldn't traditionally include. The funky fish heads add a tender texture to thick coconut curry with okra and eggplant often laced with sweet tamarind, spicy ginger, turmeric and fish curry powder.

#### MEE GORENG MAMAK

- › **MAIN INGREDIENTS:** yellow noodles, cucumber and tomato sambal
- › **ORIGINS:** Malaysia, Indonesia, China, India

A vegetarian noodle dish, Indian Muslims in Singapore saute fresh yellow noodles in a sambal of ketchup, soy sauce, oyster sauce and dark caramel soy sauce. "The flavor profile is so Indian, but the execution is so Chinese," says Mehta. "That makes it very Singaporean."

#### CHILI CRAB

- › **MAIN INGREDIENTS:** Crab, chili sauce
- › **ORIGIN:** Singapore

This Singapore national dish was created in the 1950s by hawker Cher Yam Tian. The broth is sweet, spicy, and somewhat eggy—a combination of onions, garlic, tomato, chili paste and the broth from the crab as it simmers and stews. Singaporean hawkers and restaurants lean a little into the sweet side, adding a sometimes heavy hand of sugar. But the sweet-and-savory balance that slathers throughout is key. ■

### Singaporean Chili Crab

Chef Salil Mehta  
Singapura, New York City

- 2½ pounds mud crab or similar crustacean
- 8 chiles de arbol, stemmed
- 6 garlic cloves, peeled and roughly chopped
- 4 Holland chiles, stemmed and roughly chopped
- 3 small shallots, peeled and roughly chopped
- 2 tablespoons taucu, soy bean paste
- 1 (5-inch) piece ginger, peeled and roughly chopped
- ¼ cup canola oil
- 1 tablespoon belacan shrimp paste
- 8 ounces tomato puree
- ½ cup sweet chili sauce
- 1 large egg
- 3 tablespoons white vinegar
- Sugar, to taste
- Cilantro, to garnish
- Green onions, thinly sliced to garnish
- Steamed or fried buns, such as Homei brand

**Remove** the carapice from the crab; wash, scrub, and remove the lungs. Break the crab down into parts. Refrigerate until ready to use.

**Rehydrate** the chiles de arbol. Add to a food processor and puree with garlic, Holland chiles, shallots, taucu and ginger.

**Heat** oil in a wok over medium-high. Add belacan and cook, breaking it up into a paste, until fragrant and toasted. Add garlic paste and cook, 3 minutes. Add tomatoes and cook, about 4 minutes. Add crab, chili sauce and 2½ cups water and stir to combine. Reduce heat to a simmer, cover and cook about 7 to 8 minutes.

**Drop** egg in the sauce and slowly whisk in. Season with the vinegar and sugar. Transfer to a plate and garnish with the cilantro and scallions. Serve with the steamed buns. Makes 2 to 4 servings.



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