

To what extent is traditional food still relevant in your society?

By Ooi Wen Ting (16A15)

“The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” This was often impressed upon young women of marriageable age in the past, when women were expected to take on the role of homemaker. One of their duties was to ensure that the meals of the family were taken care of. Despite the seemingly archaic mindset that this statement perpetuates, the statement is still applicable today with a slight twist; not only does good food capture a man’s heart, it captures everyone’s as well. In a food paradise like Singapore which is increasingly integrated into the global community, Singaporeans are faced with more and more diverse food choices. Thus, some may say that food that holds cultural value has become a thing of the past. Yet, there are still instances where traditional food is still important in Singapore. It is not only a distinguishing factor that draws tourism, but also symbolic of our country’s multi-racial and multi religious social fabric. For the young and old, traditional food is a token of remembrance of one’s roots. Therefore, it would be erroneous and parochial to deem traditional food as irrelevant, given that it is still applicable in many ways.

Some may posit that in the face of Westernization and globalization, the influx of luxury foreign foodstuffs has rendered traditional food obsolete. This may be true for youths and young adults. The quest for exotic Western food has materialized in the form of numerous food bloggers who often visit cafes and upload their social media posts on non-traditional food, like “eggs benedict pancakes” and pasta. Youths who follow the social media pages of these bloggers are often influenced by Western Ideals and what is considered “cool” and “hipster”. Even the renowned bakery, Tiong Bahru Bakery which is supposedly famous for its traditional pastries has changed its menu to cater to the tastebuds of consumers by introducing a wide range of Western and non-traditional pastries like croissants, tarts and danishes. The obsession with non-local, non-traditional food may be due to the popular notion that compared to Western food, local food is “boring” and “uncool”. Non local delicacies like sushi and burritos from Japan and Mexico respectively are much more appealing to the younger generation, and this change in tastes and preferences is not only seen in the consumption patterns of youths, but also in the proliferation of stores selling non-local and non-traditional food. Franchises like Stuff’d, Nando’s, Sushi Express and Mad Jack are now the to-go dining places for youths, a far cry from the traditional bowl of “bak chor mee” or “mee goreng” that the older generation prefer. Thus, the shift in food preferences seems to suggest that traditional food is being replaced and has become archaic.

However, it cannot be denied that for most Singaporeans, traditional food still remains as a source of familiarity and creates a sense of rootedness. As food is highly emotive due to its engagement with the senses, consuming traditional food allows people to remember and connect with their heritage. During special occasions like the Mid-Autumn Festival and the Dragon Boat Festival, mooncakes and rice dumplings are eaten to commemorate important events in history. Rice dumplings are traditionally eaten to commemorate the death of poet Qu Yuan, who would rather commit suicide than divulge the secrets of his country. For the old, the consumption of these food as a yearly affair probably evokes strong feelings of nostalgia of times bygone, when their parents told them the stories behind these festivals and why certain food was eaten during these occasions. For the young, it is a much needed reminder of the rich culture and heritage that they are part of. Traditional food is not only restricted to the Chinese. Even in everyday life, the traditional way of eating for members of the Indian community is to scoop rice into their hands, mix it with gravy to shape into sizeable balls. The unique eating style creates a homely atmosphere, a sense of belonging, and shapes one’s identity. Similarly, many Chinese in Singapore swear by the traditional breakfast of toasted bread with kaya and butter, accompanied with half boiled eggs. The comeback of traditional food is evident in the marketing of Yakun and

Breadtalk's Old School Ice Cream Sandwich. It is thus obvious that facing the waves of globalization and diluting nationalism, traditional food can act as an anchor for Singaporeans as it provides the sense of home that Singaporeans need and crave for. The ubiquity of traditional food, relevant not only during special occasions but also in our daily lives, is testament of the fact that it is still relevant in Singapore today.

Additionally, the appreciation of different types of traditional food showcases Singapore's multicultural and multi-religious social fabric, enforcing the need for social harmony amidst growing global instability. In recent years, Singapore's society has become increasingly diverse, providing a breeding ground for tensions primarily along racial and religious lines. One notable example is the conflict between a Mainland Chinese family and a local Indian family over curry. While curry is more often fragrant and aromatic to the noses of local people, the Chinese family had complained that it was "smelly" and adversely affected their lives. Netizens, in response to the accident, came up with the "Cook-A-Pot-Of-Curry-Day" in appreciation of the traditional Indian delicacy and to show that such racial intolerance in Singapore is not welcomed. Similarly, some stalls in Singapore have modified the traditional "bak chor mee", replacing minced pork with minced chicken so as to cater to the dietary requirements of the Malay Muslim community. These instances show a sensitivity to the needs and practices of different races and religions, especially crucial in Singapore, a melting pot of different cultures and religions. Given the growing trend of intolerance and Islamophobia internationally, Singapore is indeed blessed with the wide variety of traditional food that can bridge the gap among people of different races and religions. Thus, traditional food with its diverse cultural origins has become a potent and valuable binding force, ensuring peace and stability in these tumultuous times.

Finally, the unique nature of traditional food makes it a lucrative source of revenue for Singapore's tourism sector. While young Singaporeans may view local dishes without much enthusiasm as they are used to seeing them daily, traditional cuisine is often beguiling and exciting for foreigners as it is different from what they are used to seeing. In a survey conducted by Singapore Business Review, more than half of the tourists surveyed said that they were willing to spend more than \$50 on a traditional food tour in Singapore. For food lovers around the world, Singapore is definitely a to-go spot to try out local delicacies and immerse in the traditional old school charm of food in Singapore. Singapore also gained global recognition when world renowned chef Gordon Ramsay specially flew in to find contestants among hawkers for his television programme. Even Bengawan Solo, a traditional nonya 'kueh' shop, is internationally famous for its light and fully Pandan Cake, which tourists deem a must-buy when they visit Singapore. The cake, a commonplace food item, is often given to friends and family back home for a taste of Singapore. Given that tourism contributes almost 10% of Singapore GDP, and that food is such a significant factor drawing tourists to Singapore, it is undeniable that food, especially traditional and unique ones, are crucial in contributing to Singapore's tourism sector. The novelty and exotic nature of our traditional food to foreigners entice them to fly to Singapore. Hence, to deem traditional food irrelevant would be erroneous for it is a distinguishing factor that gives Singapore a competitive edge in tourism.

In conclusion, while some may see traditional food as a thing of the bygone era, it is in truth, anything but that. In an increasingly globalized, competitive and diverse world, traditional food plays a pivotal role in cementing a sense of rootedness, acting as a potent force to bind the social fabric, and contributing to tourism. Perhaps those who do not see the allure of traditional food need to look more closely around them, for if they do, they will see for themselves the tremendous worth of traditional food which Singapore offers.

Comments:

Generally very well written with just a few minor issues. You have included many illustrations of traditional food in your society but you could have focused more on their importance and relevance today. Consider the hassle of preparation especially in a modern society as well as the adaptation of such food to the lifestyle of today.

