



044

# EMBRACING CLEAN AND GREEN

From the bastions of haute cuisine to casual restaurants and hawker stalls, eateries in Singapore are now offering healthier dining options

WORDS MICHELLE YEE

[www.wnd.sg](http://www.wnd.sg)

ILLUSTRATION: ISTOCK

Just a little over a decade ago, Singapore wasn't the health-loving city you see today. There weren't many cafes or eateries serving healthy fare, and if one wanted to eat clean in a restaurant, the options were often boring and limited—think monastic salads of leaves and sprouts.

Gone are those days. Walk into any mall today, and you are bound to find a handful of health-centric eateries offering healthy, tasty menus including vegetarian options that are creative and delicious, hearty whole grain alternatives and smoothie bowls packed with tons of superfoods like raw organic cacao nibs, goji berries, hemp seeds and more.

Indeed, the 'eat cleaner and greener' movement has gained momentum in our country, sparked perhaps by rising obesity among Singaporeans. According to the World Obesity Federation, the percentages of adult Singaporeans who were overweight were 31.7 per cent for men and 21.2 per cent for women in 2014, but by 2025, the numbers are expected to increase to 36.5 per cent for men and 21.7 per cent for women. Beyond our sunny island, obesity has become a global epidemic. The World Health Organisation says that obesity has more than doubled since 1980 worldwide. In 2014, more than 1.9 billion adults (18 years and older) and 41 million children (under the age of 5) were overweight or obese.

But what does it mean to eat clean? While different people may have different ideas on what constitutes as eating 'clean', the general consensus among nutritionists is that "clean eating" at its simplest, is consuming whole foods that are unprocessed or minimally processed.

"Clean eating is about taking steps toward real, wholesome, simpler, minimally-processed foods more often (not absolute or always) and away from highly processed foods," says Dr Wendy Bazilian, a registered dietitian, nutrition author and the co-owner of Bazilian's Health Clinic in San Diego, California.

So when attempting to eat clean, whole foods like fresh fruits and vegetables are an obvious choice as they retain their fiber, minerals and nutrients, unlike processed foods such as canned fruits, where all the good stuff are removed during food processing to either prevent them from turning bad or to make them taste better.

And contrary to expectations that fine food are rich food, restaurants at the top of the food chain are catering to this shift in eating habits.

## HEALTHY & HAUTE

"Sauces, which are very much part of the DNA of French cooking, used to be thickened with what we call a *roux* or *beurre manie* made of flour and butter. Now, guests want broths and consommés; something cleaner, with a zest of citrus or balanced with a dashi for example. Even the texture of the sauces has to change. You don't want to serve something too sticky anymore.

At Odette, we don't quite produce rich stocks such as veal stock. To me, they are too rich in collagen and too heavy. We tend to prepare jus with little reduction, and work on aromatics, spices and herbs to flavour it.

You'll see that we've also applied this approach to the way we present foie gras. At the restaurant, foie gras is served with a barbecued eel infused dashi, with a zest of yuzu and some fresh yuzu juice. The acidity of the citrus cuts through the richness of the foie, while the hot dashi delivers a clean intensity of flavour that is powerfully hearty even though it is so light," explains chef Julien Royer of two-Michelin-starred restaurant Odette.

Some top chefs are also turning to vegetarian options in the bid to for cleaner, healthier flavours. But while they may be seeing a renewed interest, vegetable-centric menus are hardly new. It was almost 30 years ago when multi-Michelin-starred chef Alain Ducasse first introduced a plant-based menu at Le Louis XV in Monaco. French chef Alain Passard of three-Michelin-starred Paris restaurant L'Arpege, meanwhile, made vegetarian cooking cool decades ago when he disavowed meat for vegetables. Although he serves meat and seafood in modest doses on his menu these days, Passard's signatures remain unabashedly vegetable-centric, and in spite of that, or perhaps because of it, he has now retained his stars for 20 glorious years.

Closer to home, chef Emmanuel Stroobant of one-Michelin-starred French restaurant Saint Pierre—who is vegetarian by choice—rolled out a 12-course vegan tasting menu a few years ago. It has proven to be hugely popular among vegetarians and even meat lovers. Some of his stunning creations include the quinoa sushi tempura; Jerusalem



artichoke served with raw asparagus, meyer melon and black truffle essence; and the salt crust roasted celeriac served with Brittany grown baby vegetables and micro cress salad.

Immaculately presented and chockfull of flavours, each dish offers a pleasant surprise in the form of texture or complex flavours.

“One of the main reasons to launch a vegan tasting menu is to cater to the increasing demand from diners for vegetarian menus and menus with special dietary restrictions,” says chef Stroobant. “Another reason is my personal interest to work and play with different varieties of in-season vegetables. In fact, the creation of vegetarian dishes is just as complex as meats and seafood in terms of flavour combination and textures—but that’s what makes it fun and challenging.”

Echoing similar sentiments, chef Royer says, “I believe that it is important to retain the texture and original taste of the vegetable, and to cook it just right. Overcooking it would be bad; undercooking it means that its full flavour isn’t drawn out.

“The protein, the fish or meat on the plate has to be beautiful and perfectly cooked. But the vegetables, when enhanced, can turn into more than just a garnish. They help the main ingredient shine, and provide a contrast in flavour that helps break the fat of beef, for example, or highlights the delicacy of the fish. This can transform a vegetable from a garnish into a star.”

## GOING CASUAL

Not just fine dining, diners are also spoilt for healthy choices when it comes to more

casual eateries in town. For instance, at the newly opened Sky22 at Courtyard by Marriott Singapore Novena, diners can indulge in the establishment’s main menu which includes scrumptious dishes like tiger prawn laksa lemak and pan-seared red grouper with sambal oelek, but for those craving something healthier, they can opt for the nasi ulam wild rice salad served with charred octopus. Alternatively, committed health-conscious foodies can go for the Build Your Own Bowl (BYOB) option, which allows diners to create bowls to suit their tastes and preference—they can select their own grain bases and a variety of salads, cold cuts and a choice of house dressing.

Food courts and hawker centres, too, now offer healthier options. According to the National Nutrition Survey 2010, 60 per cent of Singaporeans eat out for lunch and/or dinner at least four times a week. To make it easier for Singaporeans to adopt a healthier diet when they eat out, the Health Promotion Board (HPB) introduced the Healthier Dining Programme in June 2014. Under the programme, HPB partners the F&B industry to make lower-calorie meals—meals prepared with healthier ingredients (such as wholegrain staples)—and reduced-sugar beverages more readily available. Look out for the “Healthier Choice” labels the next time you dine out at food courts or hawker centres. The label indicates that the stall offers 500-calorie choices, and/or uses healthier ingredients such as healthier oils, and you can ask for whole grain options, less oil and/or more vegetables. Since its launch, the number of healthier meals sold island-

**Top** Chef Julien Royer of two-Michelin-starred restaurant Odette

**Opposite page** Build Your Own Bowl (BYOB) at Sky22 at Courtyard by Marriott Singapore Novena











**Opposite page, from top**

Ah Chew Yong Tau Foo at Food Republic offers healthy 500-calorie meals; Another healthy option at Food Republic: Thosai with vegetable-based dip at Saravana Bhava

**Top** Kang Kang wholegrain hokkien noodle bowl

wide at restaurants, cafes, food kiosks, food courts, and those on board the programme, has increased three-fold from 7.6 million in 2014 to 26 million at the end of March 2017.

Food court chain Food Republic, which currently runs 14 outlets island-wide, is one that offers a bevy of healthy yet delicious hawker dishes, allowing diners to indulge sans guilt. For instance, diners can pick brown rice over white rice at Ah Chew Yong Tau Foo, and they can opt for whole wheat ban mian, which has lower Glycemic Index (GI) over plain wheat ban mian. For the ultimate green meal, go for the thunder tea rice, comprising brown rice and a load of vegetables and herbs such as winged beans, long beans, basil, mint and more.

"A balanced diet is all about making smarter choices, and the pursuit of a healthy lifestyle doesn't have to be difficult. A good starting point is to be able to identify the (GI) levels in carbohydrates present in common food court dishes. GI is the ranking of carbohydrates in foods according to how they affect blood glucose. A low GI diet helps reduce the risk of diabetes, which often leads to cardiovascular diseases including high blood pressure and increased cholesterol levels," shares a spokesperson from Food Republic.

## A HEALTHIER RANGE

With consumers becoming more health-conscious, home-grown brands such as Lam Soon, Kang Kang Noodles, Sunshine Bakeries, Magnolia, and Ayam Brand, have adapted to include a healthier range of products to cater to consumers' needs, and to stay relevant in the market.

Noticing an increasing demand for whole grain and high fibre products in Singapore, Naturel, a brand under Lam Soon Group, launched a range of organic and wholegrain

foods including organic olive oil sourced from Spain, organic extra virgin coconut oil, organic brown rice from Thailand, organic pasta from Italy and organic pasta sauces.

Magnolia, on the other hand, launched the Magnolia Plus range two years ago, offering pasteurised milk with oats, while Ayam Brand's new tuna products include organic extra virgin olive oil and organic vegetable broth.

Kang Kang Noodles by TSK Foods also recently unveiled a new range of fresh wholegrain noodles. Specially formulated to contain higher wholegrains and lower sodium, the range of four variants include wholegrain hokkien noodles, wholegrain kway teow, wholegrain bee tai mak, and wholegrain ramen. The wholegrain noodles are dairy-free, preservative-free and colouring-free.

## CLEAN, GREEN AND GROWING

From superfood smoothie bowls, to 500-calorie meals and vegan degustation menus, one thing is clear in Singapore's F&B industry: Health is king.

The focus on health and wellness has been a running theme in consumer food trends for a number of years, and it is one that shows no signs of abating. In fact, food trend watchers are predicting a continued strong demand from consumers for healthier meals and healthier products.

Global food and restaurant consultancy Baum + Whiteman declared in its recent annual trend report that plant-based foods is set to be the trend of the year in 2018. The report also added that another innovation originating from the clean and green trend will be the rise of the vegetable butcher. So don't be surprised when your local butcher offers you some vegetable-based salami, plant-based charcuterie or imitation barbecue ribs at your next visit. **WD**

049