

Only the Best!

By Dr Leslie Tay

The following article is an excerpt from Dr Leslie Tay's recently released book, *Only the Best!*, a guide to Singapore's best hawker food. SMA News would like to thank Epigram Books for allowing us to republish it.

Introduction

This is a unique guide to hawker dishes in Singapore. Every dish presented here has been tasted and found to be exceptional. It is my ongoing passion to eat and write about Singapore's greatest hawkers. My merry band of *makan kakis* and I have been eating around the island since 2006. We have nitpicked our way through the good, the bad and the awful. We have savoured the fat, spit out the rest, and then I rave about it on my blog. You won't find any of the bad stuff in this guide. You won't even find the average stuff. No, in this guide, I curated the thousand-plus stalls I've eaten at and present to you only the best! Seriously, why should you want to know about an average nasi lemak, when there is a much *shioker* version just ten minutes away?

You will find that I have added little nuggets of information all over the book. These are little stories and facts I have collected over the years through my interaction with the hawkers and they represent a very important part of Singapore's culinary heritage. I hope you will have a few "Aha!" moments reading them.

Now, even though we only present you the best, there are some stalls which are "more best" than others. So, we rate them as follows (all ratings are out of 5):

- Below 4.0** Did not make it to this book. Nuff said.
- 4.0** Eat at this stall when you are in the vicinity.
- 4.25** *Shiok!* But just lacks that something to give it a 4.5.
- 4.5** Really *Shiok*. Even if you live in Pasir Ris and the stall is in Boon Lay, go try it!
- 4.6** *Shioker* than *Really Shiok*, but just shy of an epiphany.
- 4.75** Moment of epiphany when the earth stops rotating and for one moment in time, you are at peace knowing that you have found what you have been looking for.
- 4.8** I can't think of how the dish can get any better, but somewhere out there in this big big world, there might just be another



dish that can top this. I just haven't found it yet.

- 5.0** Talk to even the best hawkers who have been making the same dish for 50 years and they will tell you that there is still room for improvement. Perfection can never be reached. It is always another step away.

One final thing. For every dish, I have selected my favourite. Called "Leslie's Pick", these are the stalls that I would introduce to visitors. Most of the time, "Leslie's Pick" would be the stall with the highest rating. At times, I would choose to bring visitors to a stall with a slightly lower rating because that stall has better ambience, better service, or there is an interesting story attached to it. These are places I feel most confident recommending and they should not fail to impress.

So get ready! Armed with this guide book, you are now ready to embark on a culinary adventure to find the Holy Grail of gustatory pleasure. I am well ahead in the journey and I can tell you that it is going to be a wonderful ride. And along the way, remember what I always say: never waste your calories on yucky food!

Dr Leslie Tay

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Bak kut teh

Bak kut teh is my pick for the dish that best represents Singapore. It is a dish of heritage and ceremony. The key to an excellent *bak kut teh* is the soup. Only four ingredients are required – pork, water, garlic and pepper. The broth and the meat have to be cooked separately. For the broth, you need a good amount of pork ribs and a long slow simmering boil in order to coax all that natural pork flavour out of the meat and bones. For the meat, it is cooked in a pot of soup that boils away furiously. The trick is to get the pork to the stage where it is just cooked, so that the texture is tender and the meat reverberates when you chew on it. At this point, garlic and pepper are added and this peppery pork soup is then added to the slow cooked broth in order to produce a *bak kut teh* soup that is slightly cloudy but velvety smooth, with a satisfying pepper punch at the beginning and a natural sweetness at the end.



Leslie's Pick

SONG FA BAK KUT TEH

4.5 Second generation owner Yeo Hart Pong modified his father's Teochew-style *bak kut teh* recipe to appeal to the new generation, who prefers pork ribs with a fall-off-the-bone texture. Yeo sticks to his father's tried and tested recipe for soup, which involves using a particular garlic from China and pepper from Sarawak. I like the soup because it is not overly peppery but nicely balanced with the natural sweetness of pork bones. The modern retro ambience of both branches make them great places to be introduced to *bak kut teh*. Plus, you can enjoy Pek Sin Choon teas there too!

• 11 New Bridge Road #01-01 Singapore 059383 • 7 am to 10 pm, closed on Mondays • 6533 6128

• UE BizHub East Unit, 6 Changi Business Park Ave 1 #01-38 Singapore 486017 • 10.30 am to 9.15 pm, open everyday • 6694 8098

OUTRAM PARK YA HUA ROU GU CHAR

4.5 The soup here is very good – robust, but not overly peppery. It has a sweet, savoury taste that comes from boiling the pork bones until they are almost crumbly – that's when all the rich stuff from the marrow gets released into the soup. When I tasted the dish, the ribs were cooked until they were very tender. Frankie Gwee, the owner, is also extremely

hospitable. Great *bak kut teh* with great service to boot!

• Tanjong Pagar Complex (PSA), 7 Keppel Road #01-05/07 Singapore 089053 • 6 am to 3 pm, 6 pm to 4 am, closed on Mondays • 6222 9610

OLD TIONG BAHRU BAK KUT TEH

4.5 This *bak kut teh* soup is smooth, with a satisfying pepper punch at the beginning and a natural sweetness at the end. Here's a tip for you: get to this stall at 11 am, when the soup is sufficiently flavourful and the *you char kway* (fried dough fritter), fresh. And you will be able to get the prized *long gu*, which are the thicker, more tender pork ribs closer to the backbone.

• Block 58 Seng Poh Road #01-31 Singapore 160058 • 6.30 am to 9 pm, closed on Mondays

TIONG BEE BAH KUT TEH

4.5 Straightforward, no-nonsense *bak kut teh* that has been around for years. Auntie is over 70 years old and only cooks three pots of soup a day. The pork ribs are simmered in the pot long enough to ensure that the meat is excellently tender; with very well balanced soup that has oomph without being overly peppery. Good old *bak kut teh* at its best.

• 588F Jalan Datoh (off Balestier Road) Singapore 329899 • 7 am to 3 pm, closed on alternate Mondays

SIN HENG CLAYPOT BAK KOOT TEH

4.5/4.25 (Hokkien version/Teochew version)

At this stall, the Teochew version's soup is sweet and peppery, and a tad darker than the typical Teochew *bak kut teh*. The Hokkien version is reminiscent of Malaysian *bak kut teh*, but I found the taste of the herbs a bit too mild. The store also serves yam rice that is flavoured with dried shrimp and yam – this is really nice to eat, even on its own! A traditional pot of gong fu tea is served with your soup.

• 439 Joo Chiat Road Singapore 427652 • Tuesdays to Saturdays, 7.30 am to 4 am; Sundays, 7.30 am to 1 am; closed on Mondays

RONG CHENG BAK KUT TEH

4.25 Rong Cheng has opened a new branch, just down the road from its original Sin Ming eatery. Both locations serve very

good soup which doesn't contain soya sauce, so you taste more of the original flavour of the pork. Owner Lionel Lim, the son of the founder, has designed the new branch with tea culture in mind. Not only is every table designed to have access to a pot of boiling water and traditional tea sets for you to brew your own gong fu tea, Lionel has also worked with Pek Sin Choon, a tea merchant, to come up with a light tea, called double blossom tea. Its delicate taste

Background: Rong Cheng Bak Kut Teh

is supposed to appeal to the younger generation.

- Eng Ho Hup Coffeeshop, Block 22 Sin Ming Road Singapore 570022 • 7 am to 4 pm, open everyday
- Midview City, Block 26 Sin Ming Lane #01-114/117 S573791 • 7 am to 9 pm, open everyday • 9668 1412

LEONG KEE (KLANG) BAK KUT TEH

4.0

If it is Malaysian style *bak kut teh* you are looking for, then this is it. The soup was a bit bitter (rather than sweet) the day I tried it, and lacked the oomph you would expect in a good *bak kut teh*. The pork ribs were very tender though. The real star of Leong Kee is the *ter kah* (pig's trotters): soft, sticky, sweet and savoury, the fat and tendons simply melt-in-your-mouth – very shiok.

- 321 Beach Road (Jalan Sultan Gate and Beach Road) Singapore 199557 • 11 am to 9 pm, closed on Mondays

HENG HENG BAK KUT TEH

4.0

Fancy a \$128 *bak kut teh*? If you are an abalone aficionado or have a craving for abalone, pop over to Heng Heng to order abalone *bak kut teh*! Or, if you wish for a more affordable meal, just stick with the pork ribs: the meat is nice, with some chew. The soup here is good for those who don't like their *bak kut teh* with a peppery kick. It is sweeter, with strong hints of cinnamon and star anise.

- 107 Owen Road Singapore 218914 • 7.30 am to 2.30 pm, closed on Tuesdays

Leslie's tip

Ask the hawker to serve you the *long gu*, the rib cut nearer the backbone. Compared to the *pai gu* (the part of the rib comprising the rib cage), it is thicker, more tender, and the flavour really develops in your mouth because of the extra bit of fat.

Pek Sin Choon

Founded in 1925, Pek Sin Choon Tea Merchants currently supplies teas to 80% of *bak kut teh* stalls in Singapore. Run by fourth generation owner, Kenry Peh, Pek Sin Choon still hand wraps its teas at its Mosque Street shophouse. The original style of wrapping is still followed – there are two layers of paper: the slip of pink paper which forms the inner layer is a throwback to the post-war years when white paper was not easy to get hold of, but there was plenty of pink medicinal paper around! And, the people who hand wrap your tea include Aunties like Mdm Lim, who has spent over 50 years of her life packing tea. Amazing! Top marks to Pek Sin Choon for maintaining tradition!

Five bak kut teh teas

Here are short descriptions of the five different

types of teas usually paired with *bak kut teh*:

1. Xin Chun Shui Xian (new spring water fairy) – an oolong tea with a smooth aged flavour. The colour is very deep and the tea contains lots of tannin. This is an excellent tea to pair with soup that is more peppery.
2. Tie Luo Han (iron warrior monk) – one of the *si da ming cong*, ie, one of the four famous rock teas from the region of the Wuyi mountain. Pek Sin Choon's version is blended with aged teas to give it a more mellow flavour.
3. Tie Kuan Yin (iron goddess of mercy) – an oolong tea that tends to be a little heavy and unrefined, but it appeals to older folks as they are familiar with its taste.
4. Bu Zhi Xiang (unknown fragrance) – a premium tea which costs five times more when it was introduced in the 1960s, this tea is a blend of Wuyi oolong and Anxi tea. This is currently the most popular *bak kut teh* tea in Singapore, outselling the others ten to one. This tea is strong enough to cut through the oil, leaving the palate with a bittersweet aftertaste, which is favoured by seasoned tea drinkers.
5. Xiang Ji Ji – introduced in the late 1970s, this tea was named after Princess Xiang Ge Ge from a popular TV series at that time. This tea is stronger than Bu Zhi Xiang and has more aged teas blended in for a smoother taste. Like Xin Chun Shui Xian, it is a good tea to pair with more peppery soups, and is the most expensive of the five teas. **SMA**

Did you know?

Bak kut teh's origins are closely tied to Singapore's immigrant history – it was a dish our forefathers ate as coolies to get an energy boost as they did the backbreaking work of carrying cargo off the bumboats into the godowns.



Singapore's most talked-about food blogger is a doctor. Dr Leslie Tay won the Best Food Blog Award at the Nuffang Asia Pacific Blog Awards 2009. His first book, *The End of Char Kway Teow and Other Hawker Mysteries*, is a national bestseller and won the Best Food Literature Award for Singapore at the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards in 2011. He continues to eat his way through Singapore's cornucopia of hawker stalls. He specialises in street food photography, where all shots are taken without the use of props or studio lighting. More of his work can be found on <http://leatishootipost.sg>.