

## The savoury side of Geylang

By Maureen Koh The New Paper  
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The unsavoury reputation of Geylang did not put restaurateur Sally Packire off. She feels it is a goldmine.

"There is good human traffic and while there are many coffee shops selling Indian fare, we did our homework and found there was no restaurant offering Indian cuisine," says Ms Packire, 41.



So, six months ago, she and a close friend, who wanted to be known only as Mr Guruu, poured in \$150,000 to open their second Buhari Restaurant in Geylang, near Lorong 42.

Their first outlet had opened a month earlier in Ang Mo Kio.

Ms Packire says she is pleased with the steady flow of regular customers to the Geylang outlet.

"Most of our customers are Caucasians - the expatriates who just love fish head curry. We also have lots of local Chinese and they are the ones who come from all over Singapore," she says. Indeed, Geylang to many may be a den of vices. But go beyond the sin tag, and it is a food haven.

People from all over the island - and around the world - flock to this nearly 2km-stretch for the variety of famous dishes from crab bee-hoon to claypot rice and delicacies such as frog porridge and fermented tofu.

Mr Chew Kok Wah, who was a tour guide for 10 years before he turned cabby, says Geylang was No. 1 on the list of must-visit spots when he led the groups.

"It's the place to go to for the best selection of food, and prices are not all cut-throat since it isn't really the 'official' tourist spot," he says.

Other cabbies also tell The New Paper on Sunday that Geylang tops their list of recommendations to tourists.

Mr Lim Ah Hien, 50, says he has no qualms about taking passengers through the winding lorongs to give them an idea of the sleaze before dropping them off at a restaurant.

"(Some) people like to complain that Singapore is boring," he says in a mix of Hokkien and English, "but I tell them, I give you sideshow first, then take you to good food."

And a good pick for him is Sin Huat Seafood Restaurant near Lorong 35, which has been featured on Discovery Channel and in The New York Times.

Chef Danny Lee's famous stir-fried crab bee-hoon earned rave reviews from US chef and TV personality Anthony Bourdain.

Another famous stall that had Bourdain waxing lyrical is Geylang Clay Pot Rice at Lorong 37.

Reservation is recommended to avoid the 30-minute wait on weekdays or an hour on weekends for a taste of the charcoal-fired rice that comes with a generous helping of fragrant waxed meat, tender chicken, hidden slivers of salted fish and, to complete the dish, crunchy burnt bits.

Manager Lau Yee Sang, 44, who has been working at the stall since 1990, says: "We have office executives who come here for lunch on weekdays and then return over the weekend with their family and friends."

Customers and food operators say the food landscape in Geylang has been changing, particularly in the past five years.

Other than coffee shops and stalls that offer a pick of local Chinese favourites such as Teochew porridge, zhi char, old-style beancurd dessert and dim sum, there are also Vietnamese and Thai restaurants.

Dotted along both sides of the road are the more than 60 restaurants that offer cuisine from different parts of China.

Like Jing Wu Ya Bo, near Lorong 27. Customers love the Wuhan duck's neck - a popular street snack that originates from the capital of Hubei in central China - for its peppery and spicy flavour.

Ms Shen Yuhui, 40, a language teacher, says: "The real pleasure comes from gnawing and nipping at the scant meat that is attached to the bones of the duck's neck."

Another famous delicacy is "smelly tofu" from Hong Kong.

The story goes that the boss of Mini Star Fermented Beancurd, Mr Steven Ong, started selling the beancurd at a stall in the Kreta Ayer Food Court in December 1997.

But some hawkers could not stand the smell, which has been compared to that of a rubbish dump, and signed a petition to get rid of him.

When his stall was vandalised a month later, Mr Ong decided to move to Geylang, near Lorong 41, and has remained there since.

Mr Tony Seh, 50, a lawyer, says the pungent smell is a real turn-on. He and his wife, who is from Hong Kong, make it a point to have the dish once a month.

And if fermented beancurd is not quite your idea of delicacy, the popular Eminent Frog Porridge at Lorong 19 is ideal for a light supper.

The piping hot porridge that is cooked to a perfect consistency is served with fresh and well-marinated frogs cooked in a different flavours.

"The meat is so tender and juicy that I can eat up to six frogs cooked in two different sauces at one go," declares businessman Roger Moh, 60.



## Bringing ritzy into the sleazy

By Zul Othman *The New Paper*  
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Hip yuppies sit at fashionable tables, tapping on their iPads while sipping artisanal coffee.

They are in a designer interior that is minimal and uncluttered.



The atmosphere at seven-month-old Brawn & Brains, a quaint cafe tucked in a corner of the Old Singapore Badminton Hall at Guillemard Road, is definitely a world away from the streetwalkers plying their trade at the opposite side of the road at Geylang Lorong 20.

Also operating along the Guillemard stretch are two-month-old Char, a casual Chinese zi char restaurant specialising in roast meats, and The Tuckshop, a watering hole increasingly famous for its wide range of craft beers.

Already, all three establishments are becoming a hit with those craving for something different in an area known for its after-dark pursuits.

Ms Gwen Peh, 31, who runs Brawn & Brains with her husband Xavier Teo, 37, tells *The New Paper* on Sunday they were attracted to the Old Singapore Badminton Hall because it was away from the hustle and bustle of town.

"We are also attracted to the fact that the building has been able to retain the original old, classic structure and character," she says.

Mr Bu Shukun, co-owner of The Tuckshop, says he and his partners saw a viable demand for a food and beverage establishment that sits at this "unique Geylang fringe location".

"This Geylang location sits precisely on a precarious zone where the red-light district ends and the expatriate residential community starts," says the 33-year-old, a designer and founder of interior design firm Architology.

Cheaper rent is also another attraction. With rental of up to \$15,000 for a 1,600 sq ft space, rent here is less costly compared to shopping malls. The lower rent in turn allows owners to offer more attractive prices.

At Brawn & Brains, for example, an iced latte costs \$3.80 and an iced mocha, \$4.

Char offers shredded duck noodle soup for \$10, chicken and salt and chilli pepper spare ribs for \$16, with a range of craft beers, ciders and ales from Britain.

But do they have problems attracting customers to the area because of the seedy reputation?

British expatriate Anthony Ung says: "As more businesses come into the area, a new atmosphere is emerging. I believe the area is on the cusp of change, with new residential projects coming up which would attract young families and professionals.

"Two months ago, the 41-year-old, formerly the country manager for JobStreet Singapore, roped in his elder brother Alvin, 51, previously a chef in Britain, to run Char's kitchen. Mr Ung says they spent "roughly \$200,000".

"I would like to think we are bringing something more laid-back and casual that the local residents have been missing for a long time, run by people who are passionate about their products and who care about what they do.

"Marketing manager Kelvin Liu, 30, who lives in nearby Cassia Crescent, says he is excited by the foodie enclave sprouting in the Guillemard area.

"Not only is it exciting, but it's about time this place is known for more than just the sleaze."