

Ann Ang, Daryl Lim, and Tse Hao Guang eds., *Food Republic: A Singapore Literary Banquet*. Singapore: Landmark Books, 2020. 216 pp. ISBN: 9811458561, 9789811458569.

Reviewed by Angus Whitehead
National Institute of Education, Singapore

Over past decades, Singapore has generated anthologies on most topics under the tropical sun. So, to have one on a rare legitimate local communal pleasure, food and drink, seems long overdue. This collection is a cornucopia of authors as well as food, There is quantity as much as quality with 89 pieces from 59 authors in 216 pages. As readers, we are beckoned in Singaporean parlance to “come, eat”. Singapore’s food culture is surely a joyous, almost sexual, and necessary comfort zone in and of itself; but, as this anthology’s blurb reminds us, “when people write about food, they often aren’t just talking about food but usually about something else”. Thus, the writings included explore shopping for, getting, doing without, as well as love, hate, and/or meh attitudes towards food, as well as the advertising and selling of food.

Lim An-ling’s cover design is striking and as surreal as much of the contents. It features a kebayaed Malay woman sitting side-saddle on a red hot chilli and a semi-naked but Covid-masked, goggled ancient Indian man bearing a fantastical beast that is both fish and fowl. both rampantly flanking floating/rising mooncake, lady’s finger, and kueh lapis et al. The design makes for a picturesque local parody of old time western heraldry, reminding me of young knights presenting their meaning-pregnant shields to good king Simonides of Pentapolis in William Shakespeare and George Wilkins’ *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*: “*Qui me alit me extinguit*”. Elsewhere in Shakespeare, glutton, gourmand, and wit Falstaff replies to Sir Hugh, “good worts? Good cabbage!” Indeed beyond Lim’s cover is not just good food but good writing — reading and writing about food are doubtless equally a pleasure. The book itself is printed on Landmark’s characteristic cartridge paper, making reading a joyous, enduring experience in

itself. Five sections, presumably named after encountered hawker stall legends, like “Come (that word again) Daily Chicken Rice” or “Dr M Selvaraj’s Mock Meat Deli” make for a free but resonant curatorial frame for such an exhaustive, often unpindownable topic.

Daryl Lim’s introduction underlines the theatrics of food: “Food was never simply sustenance” (19). It also underlines what will be a worryingly recurrent theme: traditionally rich and flavourful Singapore food is, like the island’s wider cultural air, almost visibly haemorrhaging by the egg-timer-minute, losing or forgetting it’s truer flavour. As one persona opines, “The bakery is still there, although I can’t smell the same kind of baking” (51). And where can you find roti jala on this small island in 2022? Food is linked to nostalgia yet constantly evolving, accepting the flavours of new cultures, and generating long queues for slightly different dishes. In addition, all aspects of local food, sugee cake included, seemingly remain a safe, depoliticised space for discourse. Lim asserts “[Singapore] Food courts are quite deplorable” (18). I wonder if that’s quite true for every Singaporean?

The anthology itself is so wide and rich I could never presume to even try to cover or do justice to its rich breadth and depth. It begins with Arthur Yap’s “the correctness of flavour”, one of several works in which locations for eating seem as charming as the food: “the glass of the shop amber-tinted”, “a tall window” in an “ice-cream cafe” (15). Similarly, Margaret Leong’s phrase, “mushroom encampment of tables along the five-foot way”, makes for one of the most colourfully evocative descriptions of place in the collection (‘Night’ 40). These more vintage familiar pieces compare nicely with newer arrivals such as Anna Onni’s evocations of “colouring pages for restless restaurant patrons” (38; this is also the title of the piece) as part of the energy and rich suggestive language of her gloriously unpunctuated snapshot of family tables at an iPhone-ridden eatery – her knowing gushing lyricism an oasis. Meanwhile, Tong Jia Han Chloe’s ‘A People and a Pie’ expresses vividly local food thoughts in “real gritty coffee

shop Singlish” (128). There are also welcome if fleeting moments of humour: “Microwave is very good for vegetable” (Leong Liew Geok, ‘Microwave Cooking Class’, 19). Food seems even more vivid in the vernacular, even when uttered in London, as in the following line from Chloe Tong’s contribution: “Pomfretah. Means you like the Teochewstylela. Walaochwastemycod” (128).

We also encounter Joshua Ip’s lovely, strangely moving paean to soft boiled eggs juxtaposed with cereal prawns as a choice of wiser female restraint (“first date at jumbo seaweed”). Food is seemingly necessarily defamiliarized through writers’ lenses/ tastebuds: buns are like female breasts in Alvin Pang’s damp-cosy Singapore happy-ending of a poem (‘What to Write About in Cold Storage, Circa 2000 AD’). Food it seems is a site of anxieties, fears, rebellion (Jinny Koh, ‘My Mother’s Mini Moat’, 24). Are we like sugar cane? “If only we could sing of the machines that crushed us/ knowing at the end it would all be good.” (Jack Xi, ‘SUGAR/ KANE’, 70). And yet, throughout, we recall an also comfortingly familiar world comprising RKG ghee, Panasonic rice cookers, Ruchi pickles, love letters, pineapple tarts, kole chai, kueh bangkit in old tin biscuit tins, popiah, birds’ nest drink, candlenuts, turmeric, cardamom, kai lan, even if there is no ketumbar.

There is also welcome and varied engagement with my beloved durian, the pariah of public transport, but no Singapore writer has as yet captured in words anything approaching a good durian’s glorious mouth-watering smell and taste: “The smell of the fruit filled the house; it invaded her nostrils and made her salivate with desire” (Catherine Lim, ‘Durian’, 53). Maybe the taste and smell of durian is so exquisitely elusive that the phantasmagoric surreal strategies of Jack Xi are needed: “soft batter that does not run [...] amok” (‘ARE YOU A DURIAN DREAMING THAT IT IS A POEM, OR ARE YOU’, 108). I for one would certainly prefer to smell durian than many a fellow MRT or bus commuter. Onni imagines the unthinkable. In

“The Extinction of Durians”, 70 years hence, Singapore en masse has relocated to the heights of an avocado-ridden Tibet as waters rise and rise; durians cannot grow here and woe betide anyone who tries.

Toh Hsien Min still seems the Singapore master of reliving and capturing the rich experience of eating food—we would be fortunate to read more from him on the subject. I’d love to read his translation of a 4,000 year old hymn to Ninkasi, goddess of brewing. His deft merging of ancient and modern over a woman and a man’s slightly boozy conversation are a triumph of local Muldoonery (‘Aubergines’). Brandon Chew’s “Brunch at Berseh” similarly relishes language as much as food.

Alfian Sa’at’s “Fasting in Ramadan” cleanses palate and soul, reminding us with pertinent timeliness that consuming or refraining from food contains a profoundly spiritual aspect. It seems a work of art in itself for the editors to have juxtaposed Wong May’s “The Queue” and Shirley Geok-Lin Lim’s “Brinjal”. Indeed, there is a sense of the editors deftly placing pieces: for instance Theophilus Kwek’s piece on grandma’s food, ‘As If They’s Been Waiting’, echoing Boey’s, ‘Hungry Ghost’ and Wahid Al Mamun’s “gulab jamun” following Madeline Lee’s “five spice”.

Wong May’s engagement with food and social justice in “Sleeping with Tomatoes” has Dover soul. Elsewhere, Wong’s exploration of delicious wild strawberries (‘Wild Strawberries’, 110) seems an unlikely Singapore scenario, but in doing so much with so few words, hers is surely a masterclass for us all.

Food generated across the generations is a conduit for more than nostalgia, possibly even a gateway to the essence of our very roots as we find in Anitha Devi Pillai’s piece, “How do you want your dumplings?” Can food be to Singaporeans as daffodils were to Wordsworth? We have paeans to Cold Storage and Sheng Siong, poignant sadness in Anna

Onni's "superstar cereals", and the very welcome surreal riskiness of Kucinta Setia's "Ode to Exotic Vegetables", as the following lines suggest:

Brightness is gushing on grace of fantasy
the old banana shofar trumpets David's triumph (183).

For subtler cerebral tastes, there is the humour of Daryl' Lim's 'A Phenomenological Cookbook, and Arthur Yap's grammatical flirtations with desirable cannibalism, 'the correctness of flavour (15). In Ng Yi-Sheng's "mock meat," there is a real rare sense of a genuine appreciator of food.

The collection ends appropriately with Ann Ang's "Makan Again," a timely but already becoming historical account of food delivery in a time of Covid quarantine:

And as soon as there is a rustle of plastic from the corridor, I am at my door, feral and intent, all semblance of civilisation boiled down to the courtesy of waiting for that little knock, and for the porter to depart (205).