TOP MUST HAVE LOCAL DISHES

HAINANESE CHICKEN RICE

When you see succulent cooked chicken hanging neatly in a row at a food stall, you are looking at one of Singapore’s national dishes - Hainanese Chicken Rice.

A ubiquitous sight in hawker centres across the country, it is also on the menu in many major restaurants and even hotel cafes. All offer the same dish at varying prices: bite-sized chicken pieces – or a whole chicken if you’re eating as a big group - served with fragrant rice and a spicy chilli and ginger paste.

The recipe for the dish is adapted from early Chinese immigrants from Hainan Island, off the southern coast of China. Back in Hainan, locals call the dish "Wenchang chicken". They use a particular fowl that is bony and fibrous, and serve the chicken with oily rice. A ground green chilli dip rounds off the dish.
CHILLI CRAB

The crab is divine but the sauce is the star – sweet yet savoury, slightly spicy and supremely satisfying. You will get it all over your fingers as you crack open the crab shells, and it is simply impossible not to lick it all up.

And you will go back for more, dipping fried or steamed buns, called mantou, to soak up the sauce – a delightful blend of tomatoes and chilli paste, thickened with ribbons of beaten eggs.

Chilli crab is among Singapore’s greatest culinary inventions, the king of all crab dishes. It is easily available in most seafood restaurants, which typically serve it with mud crabs that have deliciously sweet and juicy flesh.
LAKSA

Laksa is inspired by the Peranakans (Straits Chinese). It has a spicy soup stock the colour of a flaming sunset, flavoured with coconut milk and dried shrimp, and topped with ingredients like cockles, prawns and fishcake.

Its defining characteristic is the noodles: thick vermicelli cut into shorter pieces that can be easily slurped up with a spoon. At some stalls, you only get a spoon to eat the laksa – no chopsticks needed.

The taste is so sought-after that Laksa has travelled beyond the east to reach every corner in Singapore, due to franchising and enterprising laksa stalls copying the flavours.
**NASI LEMAK**

This dish is a perfect mix of flavours: aromatic rice infused with coconut milk and pandan leaves, eaten with deep-fried fish or chicken wings, 'otah' (grilled fish paste), fried 'ikan bilis' (local anchovies) and peanuts, eggs, cucumber slices, and 'sambal' (spicy chilli paste).

It is a hearty meal that is adored by the Malays as well as non-Malays who have their own version of nasi lemak. The rice is the same, although some have a greenish hue owing to the pandan leaves, but it is the side dishes that set each other apart.
FRIED CARROT CAKE

Do not confuse this with the dessert carrot cake, a moist cake made with carrot and spices; covered with cream cheese frosting.

This savoury carrot cake has no carrot, at least not of the orange variety. Instead, the core ingredients of the cake are rice flour and white radish which some call white carrot. The mixture is steamed, then cut into cubes and fried with garlic, eggs and preserved radish called 'chai poh'.

Commonly referred to as 'chai tow kway' in the Teochew dialect, these smooth and soft fried rice cakes can be found in almost every hawker centre. It is served black (fried with sweet dark soya sauce) or white (original).
Fish Head Curry

The squeamish will squirm at the sight of puffy cheeks and bulging fish eyes surrounded in a sea of red gravy. Yet, for many, it is a visually appetising feast - usually eaten with rice to soak up the fragrant curry.

Fish head curry is unique to Singapore, the epitome of a cultural melting pot. It mixes the spices of a typical South Indian curry with the fish head, a delicacy among the Chinese.

Every ethnic group here has its own version of the dish, with slight variations to the curry. Some mix in tamarind paste for a tinge of sourness, others add coconut milk for a creamier texture.

The only similarity is the head of a fleshy Red Snapper swimming in a pool of spicy gravy, along with a mix of vegetables such as okra (lady fingers) and egg plant.
Hokkien Prawn Mee

Also known as Hokkien mee (noodles), this stir-fried noodle dish is steeped in aromatic stock made of pork bones and prawn heads.

This lip-smacking noodle dish – comprising yellow noodles and thick 'bee hoon' (vermicelli) – has juicy prawns, squid, pork belly strips, egg and crunchy fried pork lard (optional) that makes everything taste extra good. It is served with sambal chilli and a squeeze of lime juice for that added zing.

As its name suggests, Hokkien Prawn Mee is a dish created by Hokkiens. But its origins are a little uncertain.
Rojak

Rojak means an “eclectic mix” in colloquial Malay, and the dish sure lives up to its name. Its ingredients reflect the cultural diversity of Singapore, bringing together disparate items with strong flavours into a harmoniously tasty blend.

It is a local salad of mixed vegetables, fruits, and dough fritters that is covered in a sticky black sauce and garnished with chopped peanuts and finely-cut fragrant ginger flowers for a piquant taste.

The mark of a good rojak is its sauce, made up of fermented prawn paste, sugar, lime and chilli paste. It must be an appetising mix of sweet, sour and spicy.

The sauce is traditionally mixed in a large wooden bowl with a wooden spoon. Only when the sauce is complete are the ingredients added and thoroughly mixed.

These include blanched kang-kong and beansprout, crunchy raw cucumber and Chinese turnip, tangy-tasting fruits like sliced pineapple, young mangoes or unripe rose apples (jambu), fried dough fritters and toasted bean curd.
Kaya Toast

It is the perfect snack that goes very well with a cup of local 'kopi' (coffee) or 'teh' (tea); charcoal-grilled or toasted slices of bread enveloping slivers of cold butter and a generous spread of kaya, a traditional jam made from coconut and eggs.

Some eat this toasted sandwich for breakfast, others prefer it for tea. More often than not, it is accompanied by two soft-boiled eggs with runny yolks and translucent whites that are heavenly with a dash of dark soya and white pepper.

The savoury eggs are a good complement to the sweet kaya toast which has an appetising crispy crunch, a melt-in-your mouth layer of olive-green kaya and a generous dollop of butter.
Roti Prata

Crispy on the outside, soft on the inside, roti prata hits the spot every time. A South-Indian flat bread made by frying stretched dough flavoured with ghee (Indian clarified butter), it is usually served with fish or mutton curry.

Roti means 'bread', and prata or paratha means 'flat' in Hindi language. Some believe the dish evolved from original pancake recipes from Punjab in India, but across the causeway in Malaysia, the flat bread is called 'roti canai', which some say is a nod to its origins from Chennai.

No matter where it comes from, roti prata is a satisfying meal for any hour of the day. While the classic versions are plain or with egg, local menus now feature a variety of eccentric variations such as cheese, chocolate, ice-cream, and even durians – turning it from a main course to a dessert.