



MEET THE NEXT ITERATION OF MOD-SIN CUISINE

Since its conceptualisation nearly two decades ago, mod-Sin cuisine has evolved to reach delicious new heights. Meet the next generation of mod-Sin chefs, whose creative takes on local cuisine are keeping Singapore firmly on the global culinary map.

WORDS ARISTA KWEK **PHOTOS** JIAK KIM HOUSE, QUENINO BY VICTOR LIONG, RESTAURANT LABYRINTH

What is Singaporean cuisine? It's a tough question to answer. After all, many cultures make up this young nation that gained independence only in 1965. This colourful mix has left the shape of a core national identity, and hence a characteristic cuisine style, still largely fuzzy.

In recent decades however, many local chefs have started defining Singaporean cuisine in their own way. This includes

prolific Singaporean chef Willin Low, who coined the term "mod-Sin" (short for "modern-Singaporean") in 2005 to describe his European-inflected take on recognisable local flavours, which saw the creation of gems like laksa-infused pesto linguine.

Since Low, many other local chefs have risen to present their unique takes on mod-Sin cuisine. Beyond just coming up with a clever amalgamation of flavours, these young chefs are also taking diners through storied narratives of Singapore's colourful culinary

heritage, while pioneering breakthroughs with their creative reimaginings of classics.

The original question remains a complicated one. And through their deliciously diverse takes, these young talents are showing that the question might have more than one simple answer.

The tropical-chic interiors of Quenino by Victor Liong, a modern Asian restaurant at the newly opened Artyzen Hotel Singapore.



(From top) Beef Tongue-To-Tail, the playful take on beef rendang at Jiak Kim House; Rainbow Yusheng, a beloved mainstay on the Restaurant Labyrinth menu.



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(Clockwise from top left) Restaurant Labyrinth's Ice Kacang is made with homemade syrups and ice shaved tableside; the iconic Bak Chor Mee; chef Han Li Guang; bak kut teh (pork rib soup)-infused chawanmushi (steamed egg custard).





RESTAURANT LABYRINTH

One of the best ways to experience Singapore cuisine is by visiting its hawker centres. Yet, “you can’t taste everything visiting a hawker centre alone. But at Labyrinth, you can,” chef Han Li Guang jokes.

Through its three-hour fine dining experience, Restaurant Labyrinth takes diners through classic Singapore dishes, all served up in uniquely inventive ways. For the past 10 years, the restaurant has consistently wowed diners with creations that have become icons in the local — and even global — dining scene. For example, there’s Han’s Bak Chor Mee, a tongue-in-cheek take on the local minced pork noodle dish. While looking and tasting like the original dish, Han’s interpretation sees him using ribbons of squid for noodles, with scallops gussied up to look like the usual fishcakes.

That doesn’t mean Han’s food is all smoke and mirrors. Underlying each avant garde dish is a deep respect for tradition. Every flavour component is made the old-school way — from scratch, sans shortcuts — while completely honouring heritage recipes.

Han’s out-of-the-box, yet locally on-point dishes have seen his restaurant garner a slew of accolades. These include maintaining its one Michelin star for the seventh year in a row; being recognised as the Sustainable Restaurant of the Year by Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants in 2021; and clinching the 97th spot on the World’s 50 Best

Restaurants 2023 list while achieving the 11th spot on Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants list that same year.

One of Singapore’s few fully independent fine dining restaurants, Restaurant Labyrinth boasts accomplishments (which include lasting a decade in the very competitive local dining scene) that are doubtless due to Han’s palpable passion for celebrating all things local. Beyond showcasing Singaporean flavours, Han is also a proud champion of locally-grown produce — once a completely unthinkable idea for a country with barely any agricultural land.

On Han’s menu, you’ll find seafood from local fishery Ah Hua Kelong, and herbs and vegetables from local urban farm Edible Garden City. Despite the financial and logistical challenges of procuring from local farmers, Han is dedicated to this cause. “It’s the only way we can make a difference,” he states.

There’s certainly no stopping Han when it comes to shaking up the local dining scene. His next concept will see his team delving deeper into Singapore’s iconic dishes to explore how they’ve evolved. Forgotten flavours and techniques will be rediscovered and reinterpreted in the restaurant’s signature playful style.

“[With all the diversity present], there’s an endless source of inspiration in Singapore’s local cuisine,” Han shares. “I’m excited to see a new generation of chefs show us their own interpretation of what our cuisine can mean.”

The restaurant is decked out in locally crafted furniture.



(Clockwise from top) You'll find storied takes on Singaporean dishes at Jiak Kim House; chef-partner Seow Tzi Qin; Tingkat of Memories offers a quartet of appetising bites that showcase Singapore-inspired flavours to wonderful effect.



JIAK KIM HOUSE

Come for the food, stay for the stories.

Once a warehouse dating back to the 1920s, this distinctive building used to house one of Singapore's most iconic nightclubs, and today continues the next chapter of its journey through Singaporean heritage by playing host to a restaurant that is currently making its name for its highly creative take on local cuisine — Jiak Kim House.

Headed by the affable chef-partner Seow Tzi Qin (or chef TQ, as he's fondly known), Jiak Kim House is a journey through Seow's experience of everyday life in Singapore as a born-and-bred Singaporean. With the restaurant, Seow aims to "make people happy with my food, and surprise them with twists here and there," he shares. Yet, Seow's humble ambitions belie the deft finesse that go into his creations.

For example, there's the Mushroom Herbal Tea "Macchiato". Inspired by Seow's love for the foam-capped beverage and *bak kut teh* (a pork rib soup served with dough fritters), this playful creation sees an incredibly moreish white and black pepper-mushroom consommé topped with green peppercorn foam, served with dough fritters for dipping. Even without any local context, this comforting, multi-dimensional dish is delicious in its own right, and promises to be one you'll think about long after your meal is over.

There's also the heart-warming Madam Lee's Rice and Ayam Taliwang. "I was inspired by a local hawker couple who combined their love for each other, and for *nasi lemak* (a coconut milk rice dish) and *ayam taliwang* (an Indonesian grilled chicken dish) respectively to create a brand-new dish: Nasi Lemak Ayam Taliwang. My take fuses my mum's recipe for cabbage-pork belly rice, and pairs it with a French-style turmeric chicken," Seow shares. The result is a brand-new dish that adds another charming layer — narratively and creatively — to the original dish.

"Singapore cuisine is a melting pot of influences," Seow notes. That's why you'll also find wider Asian influences sprinkled throughout Seow's food, from Korean to Vietnamese, like the Hay-Smoked Wagyu Hamburg, which is a nod to the Vietnamese *bò lá lốt* (grilled beef wrapped in betel leaves).

With the building's history as a warehouse for goods from around the globe, the restaurant's multicultural cuisine couldn't be a more perfect match for its location.

Musing about the future of mod-Sin cuisine, Seow shares, "My food is just one story about Singapore. With more mod-Sin chefs emerging, diners can look forward to many other points of view about what Singaporean food can mean."

(From top) The piquant Laksa Fettucine; Madam Lee's Rice and Ayam Taliwang is a dish with heart-warming origins; the private dining room in Jiak Kim House seats up to 40 people.



(Clockwise from top left) The Dry-Aged Lacquered Duck combines Indian, Chinese, and Malay influences; House-made Flat Bread with Squid and Lentil Butter; the refreshing Raw Spencer Gulf Kingfish with White Soy and Burnt Garlic White Oil; chef de cuisine Sujatha Asokan.

QUENINO BY VICTOR LIONG

For Sujatha Asokan, chef de cuisine at Quenino by Victor Liong, a modern Asian restaurant at the newly opened Artyzen Hotel, Singaporean food is all about a beautiful mix of ingredients and techniques, and is a cuisine where everyone has a seat at the table.

Growing up in Singapore with a Malaysian-Chinese mother and a Singaporean-Indian father, Asokan is no stranger to the multi-dimensional nature of Singaporean cuisine. Watching her aunts and mother meld their different cultures when cooking together taught Asokan that “the dining table [is] a place where cultures come together and you can play with flavours”. When she became a chef, she naturally found herself thinking about how a Chinese, or even Spanish, dish could be enhanced by Indian or Malay spices.

It is this delicate understanding of cross-cultural cuisine that makes Asokan the perfect match for Quenino by Victor Liong. At this 72-seater fine dining restaurant, diners are taken on a culinary tour through the Strait of Malacca via elegant tasting menus. The unforgettable, flavour-packed dishes here deliciously

amalgamate the diverse culinary traditions of the Strait, of which Singapore is a part, and present them with contemporary flair.

Take the Dry-Aged Lacquered Duck for instance. Combining core elements of key cuisines you’ll find in Singapore, this dish sees Cantonese-style roasted duck paired with *sambal hijau* (a Malay-style green chilli paste) and *thosai* (Indian fermented rice pancakes). Diners are then invited to build the dish, just as they would with traditional Peking duck.

There’s also the Charred Spanish Mackerel, a snack inspired by *ikan bakar* (a charcoal grilled fish popular in Malaysian and Indonesian cuisine). Shio kombu-cured mackerel is glazed with a sweet-savoury gula Melaka soy sauce, then torched and served with seaweed tapenade.

“[To me], the beauty of mod-Sin cuisine is that it has the ability to soak up many different influences, yet still stay very much Singaporean at heart,” Asokan opines. “It’s not an easy cuisine,” she candidly shares. “There are culinary traditions [you should uphold], and a lot of strong flavours present. But making them sing harmoniously on the plate — that’s our goal.” ■