

Get ready for a flavour hit

# Rice power

28

Singapore's national culinary treasure is a humble bowl of meat, broth and rice. Ready, set, slurp

WORDS NICOLE BITTAR

**T**he origins of Singapore's national dish are ancient, and undeniable. But it took American celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain to put Hainanese chicken rice (HCR) on the international foodie map.

When he sampled this age-old comfort food of poached, sliced chicken, rice cooked in chicken

fat and aromatic oil, with chicken broth and ginger and chilli sauces at Tian Tian in Singapore's hawker-style Maxwell Centre, he proclaimed the fragrant rice "good enough to eat on its own".

Although the *No Reservations* host derided the all-important chicken broth as bland, his praise for the rice rang true: it packs a flavour hit in every aromatic mouthful.

With recipes dating back more than 400 years, every Singaporean household worth its salt swears to know a secret or two about chicken rice.

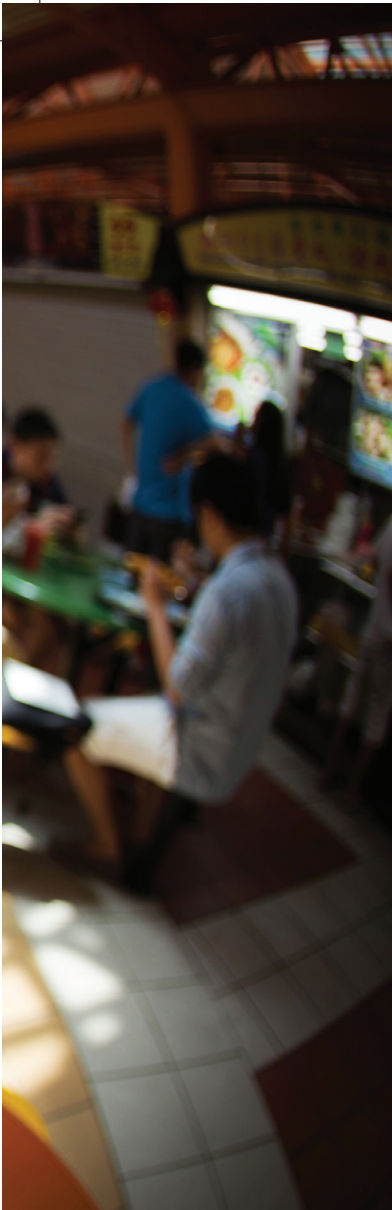
HCR originated in Wenchang, north-east of Hainan Island, where the nutrient-rich seedlings of banyan trees were used to fatten chickens. According to a Qing Dynasty cookbook (circa 1636 AD-1911 AD), the



key to creating delicious Wenchang chicken depended on cutting out a rooster's kidney and transplanting it into a hen's abdomen.

It reads: "The roosters will no longer crow in the morning, while the hens will no longer lay

PHOTOGRAPHY SINGAPORE TOURISM BOARD



## Where to eat

### CHIN CHIN EATING HOUSE

This place is buzzing with atmosphere. A generous serve of shiny-skinned chicken, garnished with coriander strands, is deliciously tender and served with a zesty combo of chilli and ginger.

**19 Purvis Street**

### BOON TONG KEE

One of several franchises, this site trumps the others for pleasant surrounds and vibrant atmosphere. It's also well known for silky, gelatinous-skinned chicken rice, which can be ordered with a meaty drumstick. The fragrant rice is moist and moreish, and chilli sauce has the kapow factor.

**Shop 399,  
401 Balestier Road  
boontongkee.com.sg**

### HAINAN CHICKEN RICE BALL

Behind an unprepossessing shopfront, dark soy sauce is drizzled over tender chicken and delicious braised eggs that add bite and flavour. But firm-skinned rice balls, cooked in ground sea salt, garlic and ginger, are the standout.

**Shin Boon Hwa Food Centre, 43 Jalan Besar (Dickson Road)**

### CHATTERBOX

Seeking a rarefied setting and price to match after all that food stall schlepping? The chicken rice – a generous portion of juicy, tender poultry, is around SG\$28 at this Meritus Mandarin restaurant and is as elegantly presented as the surrounds.

**Level 5, Mandarin Orchard Hotel, 333 Orchard Road  
meritushotels.com/  
mandarin-orchard-singapore**

to boil, then simmered.

The reserved chicken fat is then fried in a pan with oil, chopped garlic and ginger. Once caramelised, shredded pandan leaf and then jasmine rice are added to toast in the aromatic oil. The broth from the cooked chicken is then added and the rice is steamed until tender.

Green sauce (made with grated chilli, spring onion, salt and heated oil) and garlic-chilli sauce are served as condiments. Include a taste of each component for maximum enjoyment.

Of course there are countless variations of the dish, which is also served in Malaysia (often barbecued and accompanied by golf-ball-sized rice balls, or in a honey-soy version with sweet kecap manis) and Thailand (where its name *khao man kai* literally means “oiled rice with chicken”, and it's served with a sauce made from yellow soybean paste).

eggs; their feathers will wither and die. But the meat is exceptionally fat and tender! As this method has been tried in various places, but only succeeded here, it's earned the name Wenchang chicken.”

Once the excess fat from inside a chicken is removed and reserved, the chicken is gutted, stuffed with aromatics including ginger, garlic, spring onion, salt, light soy, rice wine and sesame oil, sealed with a metal skewer, placed in a large pot of water and brought

But Singapore is the undoubted chicken rice capital: whole streets are associated with its trader history and evolution.

If you visit Newton Circus, Lau Pa Sat or Maxwell Centre and spy a stall with plump chickens hanging in the window, attached to a snaking queue, hop in line. ✈

## Travel info

Jetstar has great low fares to Singapore from Melbourne.

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