

# BT Living

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**SPRINGING  
TO HEALTH**  
The future of eating right  
**L2-4**

PHOTO BY RAWYAL KITCHEN

**GUEST CHEF**

Alain Passard: A messiah of greens **L6-7**

**CEOS' HAWKER CHOICES 2012**

Kway chap and pig's organ soup **L10-12**

**NO HOLDS BARRED**

It's do or die for the Lions **L17**

**CHRISTMAS**

Fair deals **L8-9**

**PERSONAL SPACE**

Strong point of view **L14-15**

**MOTORING**

Mercedes-Benz C-Class: Class leader **L20**



**EAT FRESH**

Raw food cuisine from The Rawyal Kitchen (right); Chicken Tarragon Feta Salad from Toss & Turn (main picture)



# SPRINGING TO HEALTH

BT Weekend looks at the changing appetite for healthy food in Singapore and challenges that lie ahead for health food restaurants. **By Debbie Yong**

**E**ATING healthy has never been more critical. According to statistics shared at the inaugural Worlds of Healthy Flavours Asia conference held in Singapore earlier this week, if our nation's eating habits remain unchanged, half a million people in Singapore are expected to have diabetes by 2020. Among this, 200,000 working adults – or 13 per cent of the nation's workforce – will be affected.

Pair this with the growing rate of obesity in Singapore (now at 11 per cent) and our increasing propensity to eat out (60 per cent of Singaporeans eat out four times or more weekly, up from 49 per cent in 2004), and what you get is a timely call for our nation to re-examine its food consumption patterns.

But even as the advocacy for healthier food options by governmental bodies such as the Health Promotion Board grows stronger, local food providers, it seems, are still slow to take heed.

The obstinance can stem from all segments of the food provider spectrum: from the aged hawkers who fears that incorporating brown rice into his decades-old chicken rice recipe may turn off loyal customers, to the labour-strapped restaurant loathe to hire one more kitchen hand to man an expanded salad station.

Chief among the obstacles in making a committed

switch, most food providers say, is an unyielding perception commonly held among diners that healthier food options are often less flavourful, not as filling, and more expensive.

Then there's also the marketing tightrope to tread. While most consumers innately acknowledge that they should eat healthy, overtly branding one's cuisine as health food can sometimes become a turn-off.

Notes founder of the Cedele chain of bakery-cafes and restaurants, Yeap Cheng Guat: "Food has to be delicious first and if it's also good for you, it's a bonus."

She elaborates: "When people eat out, they want to pamper themselves. They don't want to feel like they're buying rabbit food or worse, being nagged at."

## Growing hunger for health

But it's not all gloom and doom. The mid-tier independent restaurant cluster, at least, has seen a recent surge of new health-focused start-ups looking to cater to the growing pool of educated, calorie-conscious corporate executives. Salad bars, vegetarian restaurants and low-calorie smoothie counters are now becoming dime-a-dozen in the Central Business District – with many reporting positive growth rates.

Salad Stop! founder Adrien Desbaillets estimates that business has grown 15 to 30 per cent year on year since he started the business with his father in 2009. Today, Salad Stop! runs nine outlets, all in the central business dis-

trict or high-visibility malls such as Takashimaya and Fusionopolis.

Likewise, Edwin Ng of Munch Saladsmith estimates that business has increased threefold since he started three years ago. He now gets an average of 250 customers daily, and plans to add 10 more outlets to his current stable over the next three years.

Mr Ng credits, in part, the proliferation of fitness businesses such as mixed martial arts gyms and yoga studios for helping to spread the word on healthy eating: "Once trainers tell their students to cut fat and carbs from their diet, the instinctive thing is to turn to salads."

Singapore's ageing population and our society's growing affluence factor in too, reckons Adeline Tan, founder of smoothie store and online delivery business, Lins SmooDees. "More people end up becoming caregivers themselves and hence become more conscious about the prevention of illnesses," she says.

The availability of movies focused on health food such as *Food Matters*, *Food Inc*, and *Fork over Knives* help to make it a more mainstream topic, adds Veganburg's Katrina Lugartos.

The Living Cafe's Dana Heather, a natural health practitioner, has noticed a recent mindset shift among Singaporeans who are now starting to perceive good health as a preventive measure against diseases, rather than something sought only after one has taken ill.

"Even if they are not vegetarian, people are realising that adding more fresh, organic and vegetarian options





**LEARNING POINT**

Celebrity chef Emmanuel Stroobant (right) has been crafting non-processed, brown rice and vegetable-laden set meals for students at the Stamford American International School; nothing is over 250 calories on Smoothie King's menu (below)



**THINK FAST**

Veganburg (right and above), for instance, positions itself not just as a vegan burger joint, but a complete family destination, with sustainable toy swaps regularly organised for its young patrons



to their diet is beneficial to their health," says Marisa Bertocchi, co-owner of 15-year-old Original Sin, the first Western restaurant to offer vegetarian food in a smart-dining environment. While the restaurant was patronised by a handful of local and expat vegetarians in its early days, around 80 per cent of its diners today are non-vegetarians, she adds.

And it's not just individuals craving better food, their employers are plugging in too. Salad Stop's Mr Desbaillets says that he has gotten several requests from companies to help design their cafeterias and stock their pantries with his brand of salads and sandwiches. Requests for catered salads for corporate events are increasingly common too – a demand Mr Desbaillets hopes a soon-to-launch mobile food service will meet.

**Against the odds**

But why do these businesses still press on, despite naysayers harping on about the relatively niche market of healthy eaters in Singapore?

Falling into a pigeonhole is sometimes a matter within one's control, says Arianne Uebel. The Singapore-based private chef who recently launched online raw food service, The Rawyal Kitchen, acknowledges that "raw food can sometimes seem like a cult, because people – sometimes raw foodists themselves – get obsessed about looking at it as a distinct culture."

She explains: "But once people realise that all 'raw food' really means is adding a few fresh fruits and vegetables in your meal, then the labels come off and it becomes more acceptable."

Price, likewise, "is an obstacle of choice," states the Living Cafe's Mrs Heather. "I've met people who say they can't afford regular supplements or a fresh, healthy salad that can save them from costly medical bills down the road – and yet they have no problems spending on alcohol and cigarettes."

The issue of cost can also be driven down by tapping on economies of scale, adds Mr Desbaillets. "For our ingredients to stay fresh, we require a high turnover rate, which is why we've stuck to mainly high-traffic locations for now," he explains.

For others, it's about accepting leaner margins while staying focused on the bigger picture, that is, building a relationship with customers based on a shared outlook on life. Veganburg, for instance, positions itself not just as a vegan burger joint, but a complete family destination, with sustainable toy swaps regularly organised for its young patrons.

Emmanuel Stroobant of the Emmanuel Stroobant

Group of restaurants including Saint Pierre, Brussels Sprouts and Picotin, takes it one step further. Since September this year, the celebrity chef has been crafting non-processed, brown rice and vegetable-laden set meals for students at the Stamford American International School. Says the chef, himself a vegetarian: "I believe education is the key in this fight. We have to change people's eating habits starting from a young age."

**The way forward**

With the world population now doubled and food resources increasingly scarce, it is "only human to try and profit from this" says chef Stroobant, "but it takes personal mindfulness on the part of chefs to take the lead in deciding what we want for the next generation."

In other words, "if we want to keep our customers alive, we better do something about it – it's our responsibility," he states.

Other restaurant owners foresee that future challenges are not problems that pertain to health food restaurants in particular, but stumbling blocks that affects all operators in the restaurant industry, such as the current labour crunch and sky-rocketing rental rates.

Fresh+ salad bar's owner Philippe Blin cites two recent rental raises he was faced with, which hiked up his rents by more than 70 per cent. If such increases in the CBD become widespread, he surmises, "the only operational model likely to succeed is that of a suburban central kitchen that does deliveries to small points of sales in the CBD". But this model would have a significant negative impact on the freshness of the produce, he adds.

Munch Saladsmith's Mr Ng has a more positive take. Inevitable as they are, higher rentals may push entrepreneurs to sell their products at more sustainable prices, he says, and more of them may ultimately venture into food courts or HDB shops – a boon for "heartland" dwellers.

Another oft-cited fear is that the term "healthy eating" will become too trendy – or even faddish – and in turn attract profit-seeking business banking on the health food label to make a quick buck without the right intentions.

"The 'be in it to get it' attitude is going to give us a bad name," says Philip Kwek, the local master franchisee for Australian salad chain Sumo Salad. "Just offer good and delicious food, it is that simple."

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Next page: Booster shots >>>





Continued from previous page

**The Rawyal Kitchen**  
therawalkitchen.com

OTHERS have tried and failed before, but Arianna Uebel believes that Singapore is now more ready than before for a bigger dose of raw food.

After a year of coordinating regular meet-ups for a group of over 100 raw food enthusiasts in Singapore, Ms Uebel officially launched her online business, The Rawyal Kitchen, in June this year. Raw food cuisine is an eating philosophy popular in the US. It subscribes to the notion that vegetables, fruits and nuts should not be heated over 45 deg C so that enzymes in them remain active and able to aid digestion.

The 28-year-old private chef provides customised detox programmes and meal plans, catered dinners and small-group cooking classes all pivoting around raw cuisine. Classes start at \$80 for themed one-hour classes or from \$280 for three-hour introductory raw cooking classes.

Ms Uebel, who has a background in herbal medicine and worked in a clinic in the US prior to her move to Singapore, is quick to debunk the myth that raw cuisine is a costly hobby that involves expensive dehydrating appliances and hard-to-source foreign ingredients.

All you need, she says, is a simple food processor or blender. If you really want to dehydrate foods, you can use a regular oven on very low heat.

And if a plate of uncooked leaves and nuts doesn't quite appeal, Ms Uebel might just change your mind. Her gourmet dinners can stretch up to five courses, with each one meticulously plated to fine dining standards. A cheese-covered taco, for example, may be made entirely from nuts, and don't be surprised to see molecular gastronomy-esque foams and caviars on your plate – all fashioned out of all-natural ingredients such as seaweeds and vegan sunflower lecithins.

Most of her clients in Singapore don't necessarily want to go 100 per cent raw, she notes, but it is not an outlook she imposes on anyone anyway. "Raw food can simply be a salad, or a bowl of crushed nuts. I always encourage adding rather than taking away from one's diet," she explains. "I'm not saying you can't have your coffee and chicken rice, but have them – and a bowl of salad too."

**Smoothie King**  
#01-09/11 The Centrepoint  
www.facebook.com/smoothieking.sg  
Opens Dec 12

CALORIE-COUNTERS, rejoice. Popular American smoothie chain Smoothie King will open its doors at The Centrepoint in two weeks. On its menus: nothing over 250 calories.

The 39-year-old brand currently spans more than 500 stores in the US and over 100 stores in South Korea, and

**LIVE TO EAT**

Clockwise from left: Prawn & Chicken Avocado Salad from Toss & Turn; The Rawyal Kitchen offers customised detox programmes and meal plans, catered dinners and small-group cooking classes all pivoting around raw cuisine; Smoothie King Singapore will offer 27 varieties of smoothies in three categories



## Booster shots

New concepts in town to get a health fix



it plans to launch at least 30 shops in Singapore over the next three years. At least 10 new outlets will open by 2013, reveals Smoothie King's president and CEO, Wan Kim.

Mr Kim, who previously ran the brand's South Korean affiliate, took over the US-based parent company earlier this year – almost a decade after the brand was introduced in Korea in 2003.

When up and running in a fortnight, Smoothie King Singapore will offer 27 varieties of smoothies in three categories – "refreshing", "slim and lite" and "nutritious meals" – and can be customised to individual tastes. Patrons can choose to add enhances such as antioxidant, fibre, multi-vitamin or collagen boosters for an extra dollar.

Smoothies come in three sizes and prices will range from \$4.90 to \$7.90. There will also be a selection of healthy wraps, tacos and salads to complement the healthy liquids.

**Toss & Turn**  
B4-55 Ion Orchard Basement 4 Food Hall  
☎ 6922 9700 (office)  
Opens Dec 18

EATING healthy is not only about reducing one's sodium and fat intake, but about where you source your ingredients from and how fresh they are too.

This is according to Yeap Cheng Guat, 49, founder of The Bakery Depot, which today runs 26 outlets of bakery cafes and restaurants under the Cedele brand.

For its newest outlet, the 15-year-old company is crafting a brand new concept, quick-service salad bar Toss & Turn, which Ms Yeap says will continue the brand's decade-old commitment to freshness.

"We've noticed a lot of people come to our restaurants just to eat some greens and some soup, and this can be their entire lunch or dinner," she says of the inspiration for the new concept. At Toss & Turn, diners can get their basic salads paired with healthy grains such as brown rice, quinoa or cous cous, or add on grilled chick-

en or custom-prepared deli meats to make it a full meal. Top it all off with salad dressing all made from scratch in-house from healthier alternatives such as olive oils, fruit juices and vinegars, and honey instead of white sugar.

And if you must indulge, end the meal on a sweet note with a range of healthy desserts such as antioxidant-rich pandan tiramisu. "Our customers have been very loyal to us over the years because we've kept our promise to them to source all our ingredients responsibly, and use everything in moderation," adds Ms Yeap.

**Saladworks**  
#02-19 Jem Shopping Mall  
enquiries@saladworks.com.sg  
Opens April 2013

HOT on the heels of Smoothie Kings' international expansion is another American health food brand trying to break into the Singapore market.

Pennsylvania-based fresh salad chain Saladworks operates more than 100 outlets across 12 states in the US and the 26-year-old business is considered one of the country's first and largest fresh-tossed salad franchise concept.

Local franchisee Amos Lee, 32, formerly in the consumer goods industry, says that he plans to open at least 15 Saladworks outlets here in the coming years. The initial outlet will be a 40-seater, 1000 sq ft store in Jem, an upcoming shopping mall in Jurong East.

Saladworks is known for its light and innovative salads that largely weigh in under 300 calories. Each store typically carries a range of 52 toppings and 14 proprietary dressings that work in quintessentially American flavours such as Granny Smith apples and honey barbecued chicken.

Though Singapore will be its first international destination, Saladworks reportedly plans to enter 20 other new locations including the Middle East and the UK.

**By Debbie Yong**  
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