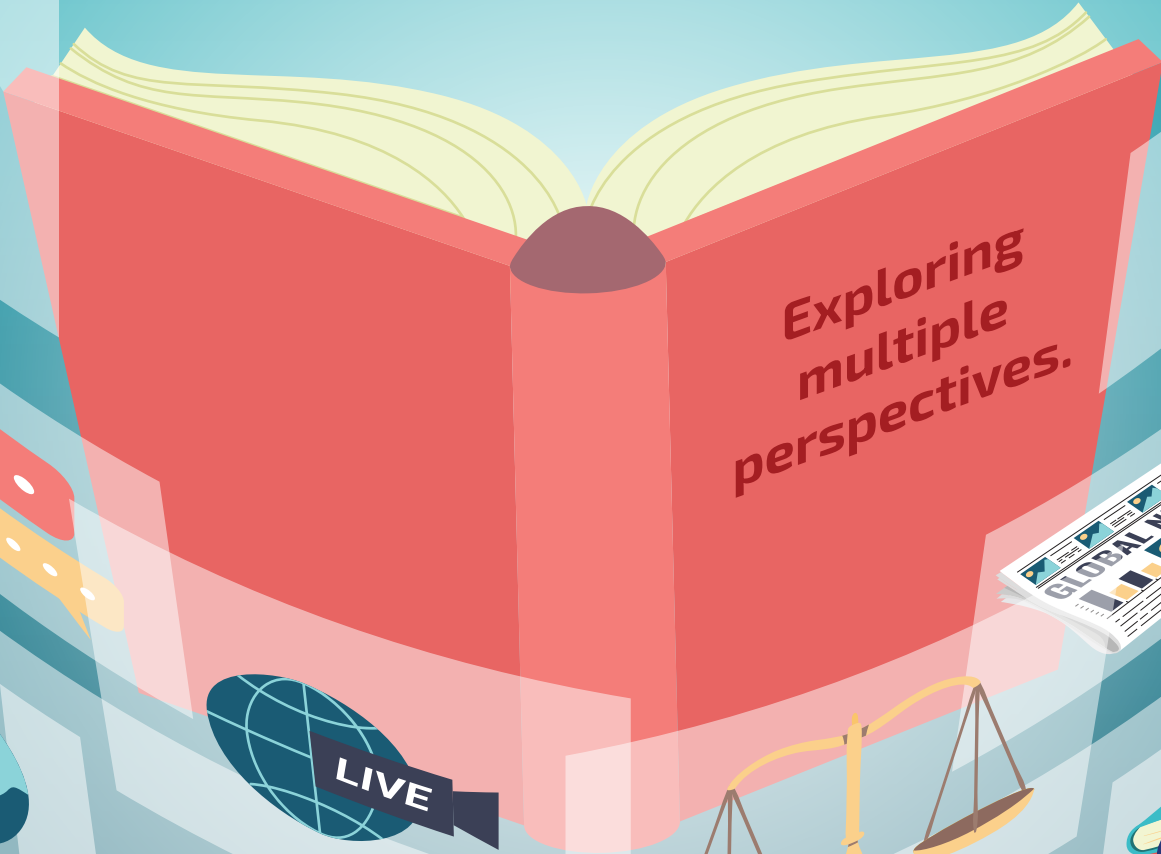


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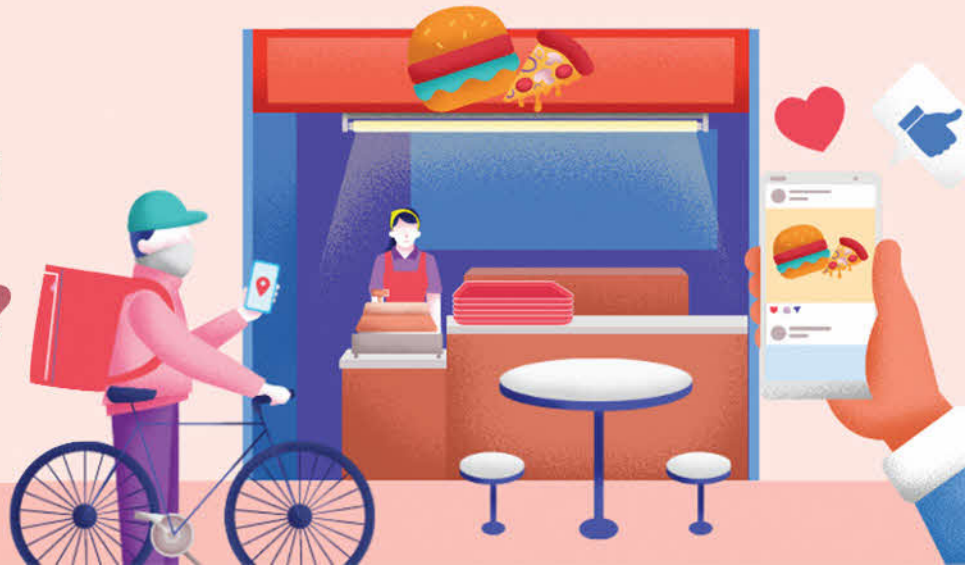
# HAWKER CULTURE



*All information and weblinks  
are valid as of March 2025.*



# How Essential is Change for Our Hawker Culture?



## Hawker Culture

Hawker culture in Singapore is more than just food; it reflects the nation's multicultural identity and way of life. Serving as 'community dining rooms', hawker centres create a vibrant atmosphere where people from all walks of life gather to enjoy a wide variety of affordable meals. At the same time, these beloved institutions attract tourists eager to savour authentic local fare.

The roots of hawker culture trace back to the 1800s when migrants peddled food on the streets, adapting dishes from their homelands using local ingredients. In the 1960s and 1970s, hawker centres were established to resettle itinerant hawkers who had operated in unhygienic conditions. Today, hawker centres boast modern facilities and amenities, with many offering Wi-Fi.

With globalisation, the variety of hawker foods has expanded to include international cuisines. This evolution has attracted more educated hawkers who use social media platforms to promote their trade. Even the Michelin Guide has taken notice, putting some humble hawker stalls on the culinary map.

However, hawker culture now faces several challenges. Rising ingredient costs and increased expenses for manpower, rent, and utilities make it challenging for hawkers to maintain affordable prices. There is also a declining interest among younger Singaporeans in entering the hawker trade due its demanding nature. With the median age of hawkers around 60, the prospect of older hawkers retiring without successors is concerning.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified competition from other dining options by accelerating the adoption of digital tools and food delivery platforms, allowing customers to order online from a wide array of eateries. Hawkers who do not adapt to these changes may find it difficult to thrive in an evolving market.

Despite these challenges, hawker culture in Singapore achieved a significant milestone with its inscription on the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020. This recognition highlights the crucial role of hawker culture in fostering community connections and preserving culinary traditions.

Given these challenges and modern developments, what is the future of hawker culture? Let's hear what people have to say:



## So, how essential is change for our hawker culture?

### Hawker culture must evolve to thrive.

#### Hawker culture must adapt to modern trends.

Hawker culture is evolving and facing significant changes as it responds to modern demands. As society matures, the hawker industry must transform to meet new challenges and expectations. Hawkers are adopting various strategies to ensure sustainability and growth. Some are expanding into chains or partnering with larger companies to enhance their standing in the culinary scene.

By commercialising and scaling their businesses, hawkers can benefit from economies of scale and grow their heritage brands. This allows them to serve premium ingredients such as black Angus beef while still offering affordable prices. Others are innovating by introducing new dishes or international cuisines to attract more customers.

While the Michelin Guide has elevated the status of hawker food, it has also led to increased demand and longer queues. Michelin recognition enhances a stall's reputation but requires maintaining consistent quality to meet customer expectations.

#### Economic pressures and succession challenges.

Hawker culture faces significant challenges that threaten its preservation, with economic pressures and succession issues being among the most pressing.

Hawkers are struggling to maintain affordable prices due to rising ingredient costs, increasing utility and manpower expenses, and other high overheads. Despite these pressures, many hawkers hesitate to raise prices too much for fear of losing customers.

### Preserving the essence of hawker culture.

#### Hawker culture in Singapore remains strong.

Hawker culture, in its current form, is vibrant and ingrained in the nation's identity. Its status in Singapore is buttressed by support from locals and the government, and even international recognition.

Hawker centres are a cherished institution in Singapore, holding historical, cultural, and socio-economic significance. They serve as gathering places where communities enjoy authentic cuisine and foster social bonds. Positive reviews from the Michelin Guide and the recognition from UNESCO as an intangible cultural heritage underscore their esteemed status.

The National Environment Agency (NEA) survey highlights the essential role of hawker centres in Singapore's identity. 72.4 per cent of respondents visit hawker centres weekly, with 93.5 per cent expressing satisfaction. Nearly 97 per cent take pride in hawker culture.

The government has announced plans to build 20 new hawker centres to provide accessible food choices for the community. The Hawker Centres Transformation Programme also aims to make hawker centres cleaner and more sustainable.

#### Efforts to make hawker culture sustainable.

NEA offers various programmes and grants to support hawkers and preserve Singapore's rich culinary heritage, including the Hawkers' Productivity Grant. One initiative is the Hawkers Succession Scheme, which helps aspiring hawkers learn traditional recipes from veteran hawkers. The Vibrant Hawker Culture Programme encourages community-led initiatives to enhance vibrancy in hawker centres.

## So, how essential is change for our hawker culture?

### Hawker culture must evolve to thrive.

Another major concern is the lack of successors. Many hawkers are getting older, and fewer young people are entering the trade due to the demanding hours and nature of work. This trend poses a threat to the preservation of valuable culinary traditions and recipes, putting them at risk of being lost to future generations.

Addressing economic pressures and succession challenges through government support, community engagement and adaptation to changing consumer habits is crucial to ensuring the long-term viability of this important cultural institution.

### Embracing digitalisation in the hawker trade.

Digitalisation is transforming businesses, and the hawker industry must embrace this shift, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. To thrive, hawkers could adopt e-payments, leverage digital tools, and explore new business models such as delivery platforms.

Expanding their presence into the digital space is increasingly crucial. Many hawkers have begun using social media to promote their offerings. For example, Facebook group Hawkers United — Dabao 2020 allows hawkers to market their dishes, while food bloggers and content creators help enhance the visibility of hawker fare. One creator with 20,000 Instagram followers recognises the benefits of online reviews in promoting Singapore's diverse food culture.

With over 60% of Singaporeans using food delivery services, online food consumption is on the rise. This trend underscores the importance of digitalisation for hawkers. The government has supported this transition by promoting contactless payment options and SGQR, which utilises QR codes for processing payments. By going digital, hawkers can improve their operations and better meet the evolving needs of customers.

### Preserving the essence of hawker culture.

The government is also taking efforts to safeguard the long-term sustainability of the trade. The tender system has been adjusted in November 2024 to discourage overly high bids. Starting January 2025, hawkers can also hire long-term visit pass holders as stall assistants, giving them more hiring options to address rising manpower costs.

While Singaporeans desire affordable food at hawker centres, many also recognise the challenges that hawkers face and are willing to pay reasonable prices for quality dishes. By supporting hawkers and sustaining the vibrancy of our community dining rooms, we can help preserve this integral part of Singapore's culture.

### Preserving the traditions of hawker culture.

The traditions that have defined hawker culture for generations must be preserved. At the heart of Singapore's hawker culture are personal interactions and community bonding over food. Time-honoured practices — such as face-to-face interactions between hawkers and customers, along with cooking methods and recipes passed down through generations — are integral to the authentic hawker experience.

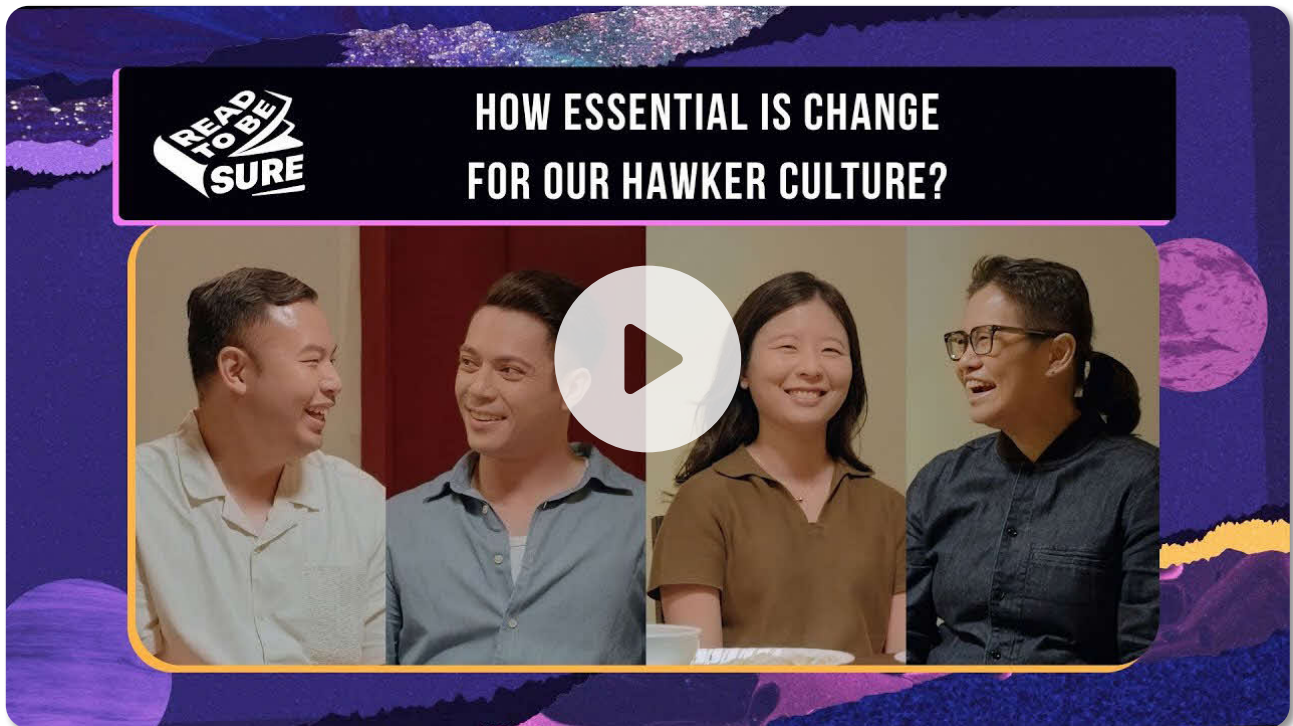
Many older hawkers continue to value these traditional approaches. Their personal touch in serving customers builds relationships that are central to the hawker culture. However, this attachment to tradition has led to uneven adoption of digital tools, particularly among older hawkers.

Moreover, ordering food through delivery platforms may affect both the cost and quality of meals, especially compared to the experience of enjoying food at hawker centres, where the atmosphere and the freshly prepared dishes add to the charm.

### Should we preserve hawker culture while embracing modern developments?

The survival of hawker culture in Singapore hinges on adapting to modern developments and challenges while preserving its rich traditions. What we now consider 'traditional' in hawker culture has evolved over time, transforming from itinerant hawkers selling on the streets to the beloved hawker centres we know today. Embracing digitalisation and current business practices is crucial, but community support and appreciation for hawkers' craft are equally important. By finding a balance between tradition and progress, we can help ensure that hawker culture remains a vital part of Singapore's identity.

Let's hear our guest speakers weigh in on this issue:



## Recommended Resources

Explore the resources below to find out more about hawker culture.

### Video

CNA Insider, "Young Hawkers Fight & Innovate to Keep Singapore Food Culture Alive", YouTube, March 1, 2024, video, 46:25.



UNESCO, "Hawker Culture in Singapore", YouTube, December 16, 2020, video, 10:02.



### Websites

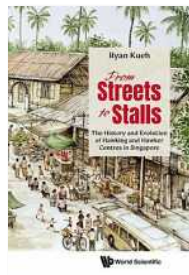
Wong Wei Chen. "Will We Still Get to Enjoy Hawker Fare 10 Years Down the Line?" Institute of Real Estate & Urban Studies (NUS), 30 October 2023.

Kenneth Tan Zhe Kai and Khor Jia Wei. "Cooking or Cooked: The Future of Singapore's Hawker Culture". *Global-Is-Asian (LKYSPP)*, 7 October 2024.

### Podcast

"If We Want to Preserve Singapore's Hawker Culture, We Need to be Willing to Pay for it". Pamela Chia — *The Singapore Noodles Podcast*, March 27, 2023. Podcast, 8:00.

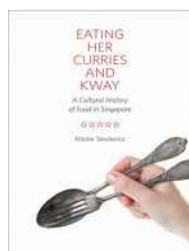
### NLB eBooks



#### From Streets to Stalls: The History and Evolution of Hawking and Hawker Centres in Singapore

Ryan Kueh. *From Streets to Stalls: The History and Evolution of Hawking and Hawker Centres in Singapore*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Company, 2024.

Retrieved from OverDrive. (myLibrary ID is required to access the eBook).



#### Eating Her Curries and Kway: A Cultural History of Food in Singapore

Nicole Tarulevicz. *Eating Her Curries and Kway: A Cultural History of Food in Singapore*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014.

Retrieved from OverDrive. (myLibrary ID is required to access the eBook).



#### Eating Together: Food, Space, and Identity in Malaysia and Singapore

Jean Duruz and Gaik Cheng Khoo. *Eating Together: Food, Space, and Identity in Malaysia and Singapore*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

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