

## NEWS

# Food, glorious food: How will we eat in 2020?

by **Melody Bay** / January 17, 2020



As you wipe off the last crumbs of mince pie or log cake and take your last sniff of a dying Christmas tree now emitting wafts of rancid pine, thoughts turn to — what else? — food. Or at this time of the year, a look back at what you ate in 2019, and what restaurateurs have in store for you in 2020.

Will there be another food trend so equally embraced and vilified as brown sugar bubble milk tea? Will our burgers be filled not with hand-chopped wagyu but “bleeding” Impossible patties? Will we be inundated with more celebrity chef-backed restaurants or welcome more independent Singaporean chef-run eateries like the runaway success Mustard Seed? And is sustainability a pipe dream or are we

all going to eat that way?

## Pseudo Meat

Plant-based meats like Impossible and Beyond burgers and other pseudo chicken or seafood are here to stay, not as a trend but an industry disrupter, reckons Loh Lik Peng of the Unlisted Collection group.

“We’ll continue to see more innovative products coming from plants. (What we see now) are essentially first-generation products and they are far from perfect right now, but in a few years’ time, the average Joe will not be able to tell the difference between real and fake meat, from taste, texture, looks and smell.”

The same goes for lab-grown meat, “because the technology exists and commercial scale is just a few years away”, adds Loh.



*Christine Kaelbel-Sheares, vice-president of F&B at Marina Bay Sands.*

Already, restaurants are paving the way for plant-based meat, adds Christine Kaelbel-Sheares, Marina Bay Sands’ vice-president of food and beverage. “One of the highlights for us was the collaboration with Impossible Foods, for some of our restaurants to be the first in Singapore to launch plant-based meat dishes – namely, Adrift, Bread Street Kitchen and Cut.”

# Sustainability

It's official: sustainability is going to be a dominating force going forward.

“Currently, it is viewed as a ‘dining trend’ but the goal should be to evolve it into an expected standard in the industry,” says Malcolm Wood, managing director and culinary director of Maximal Concepts, which is bringing the much anticipated, eco-friendly Chinese restaurant Mott 32 to Marina Bay Sands in the latter part of January.

“People are starting to be more conscious of how the things they consume (restaurants included) and the businesses they run have an impact on the environment. The hope is that sustainable and zero-waste practices become the industry norm.”

MBS is on the same page too, says Kaelbel-Sheares. “We are on track to delivering our promise of having 50 per cent of all our seafood by volume sourced responsibly by 2020.”



*Wee Teng Wen of Lo&Behold Group.*

“There’s a strong hunger for F&B innovation – from plant breeding and science to plant-based alternatives” says Lo & Behold Group’s Wee Teng Wen. “We’re always looking to

based alternatives,” says Lo & Berold Group’s wee Teng wen. “We’re always looking to explore sustainable alternatives. For example, at The Black Swan, head chef Alysia Chan’s menu reflects a minimal waste philosophy and introduces diners to unconventional cuts of meat and produce.” A prime source of inspiration for him would have to be “Blue Hill at Stone Barns, New York, where I sat in chef Dan Barber’s kitchen and could taste unadulterated flavours right off each plate”. It was, he says, one of the best meals he had in 2019.

## Discerning diners

Had the feeling that you’ve seen too many restaurants doing fundamentally the same thing? “I think conceptually the industry is going through a little crisis,” observes Ivan Brehm, chef-owner of Nouri. “Food has never been better, that is true, and the average quality is now quite high, but I feel a certain creative drain in the kind of restaurants opening this year. The market is slower, and the recession is felt across the board, but concepts with discerning quality such as Cloudstreet and Mustard Seed were able to stand out in 2019.”

He notices that while Instagram and bragging rights are some of the reasons diners eat out at fancy restaurants instead of what’s actually being served, he’s seeing more consumers interested in the message behind the food, especially at Nouri. “It’s no longer enough to serve good quality, we need a ‘why’ for consuming. Diners and chefs alike are bombarded with products and ideas, so the one with the better story is going to stand out.”

As for chef-restaurateur Bjorn Shen, he’s just glad that “a lot of annoying food trends from the years before seemed to have died out”. The veteran owner of Artichoke adds with characteristic candour: “There’s less multi-coloured rubbish pretending to be food, less truffle oil and salted egg on everything, less over-the-top milkshakes with half a supermarket confectionery aisle piled on top, etc.”

He cites a return to more “wholesome” themes such as “minimal waste, a return to locavorism/sustainability, plant-based eating, sourdough baking, private dining, probiotics and more”.

As always, the same challenges still plague the industry from manpower shortage to market oversaturation. “But on the upside, it was impressive to see many young chefs leaving the relative comfort of their fancy workplaces (usually European

cuisines) and breathing fresh life into local food such as Indigo Blue Kitchen and Gubak Kia (which opened their doors in 2019)."

## Young chefs

This was the year for local talent too. "After Magic Square started in 2018, we've noticed more opportunities for young chefs," says Tan Ken Loon of The Naked Finn who founded the pop-up as a platform for fresh talent to run their own restaurant under his guidance. "Kausmo is one example, and Mustard Seed is doing really well. We also saw a lot more private dining chefs cooking at their own homes."

It's still an uphill climb for local chefs, for sure. "They still have to work hard but (what we've found is that) there's more support from within the industry and also from diners. We only hope that Magic Square #2 can do more for the industry."

While opportunities are there, raising the level of creativity is another thing, muses Shen. "The levels of risk-taking in Singapore are very low, especially among local chefs. It's hard because creativity comes from travel and eating out, and this profession doesn't pay well enough for them to do so. So what happens is that their world view remains narrow; they only benchmark locally. Hence you see the same ideas flogged to death – a "truffle oil and sous vide egg upgrades everything" mentality. On top of that is the price-sensitivity of Singapore diners – so if we want chefs to step up, it requires a full ecosystem of diners who can appreciate the outcome and pay the slight premium."

## How will we eat?

Despite the proliferation of food delivery, people will still dine out, believes Unlisted Collection's Loh. "It's a social thing," he says. "I do plenty of Grab and Deliveroo myself but if I want to have fun with friends and family, we still go out. Having it at home is not the same as gathering in a social place like a restaurant or bar, but these places will have to up their game in the future to make it worthwhile for guests to continue going out to dine and drink. This means more immersive and dynamic experiences that make it more compelling to lure diners away from dining at home or having food delivered."

Written by Jaime Ee for [The Business Times](#).

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