

Gourmet meal in a car park

JUST one degree above the equator, Singapore — the Lion City, as it is called — roars to life after sunset. One of Asia's healthiest and wealthiest metropolises, Singapore is also wise in not going early to bed.

Local residents like to point out to foreigners that, because of the proximity to the Equator, shadows are not seen at high noon.

By Jack Goldfarb

Shadows at night are diminishing, too.

The crime rate in the last decade has gone down impressively, with such offences as armed robbery being reduced by a third.

Perhaps the streets are safe after dark because so many people are in them, or maybe it is the other way around.

Nevertheless, the Singaporeans are out in droves, shopping at night bazaars, watching street operas or open-air theatres, visiting the Botanic Gardens and Aquarium, which stay open until late, or simply strolling about.

Most of all, however, the Singaporeans are eating . . .

The best of all culinary worlds was bound to have been concocted when Chinese, Malays, Indians, Frenchmen, Italians, Indonesians, Swiss and Japanese went into the restaurant business in this hungry little city-island-republic.

The ubiquitous dining places have taken up so much room on the Singapore scene that some of them have had to set up shop on the surrounding waters.

Luxurious floating restaurants, often stocking their menus with finny neighbours who swim too close, and offer a discotheque, a night club and a cruise with your meal.

Instant cafes

From the palatial theatre restaurants and dining rooms of the luxury hotels through the gastronomical gamut of Oriental, Continental, and pot-pourri eating establishments — some with 150 dishes on the bill of fare — hard-working chefs love to pamper the appetites of cuisine-conscious Singaporeans and foreign visitors.

But the Singapore man-in-the-street literally eats in the street. The simplest style of dining — but by no means the simplest food — is indulged in at the

The stalls are supposed to have started by providing hearty bowls of noodles to drivers on their long night hauls down the Malay Peninsula with the farm produce of Johore and Malacca.

The largest and most popular congregation of stalls materialises at dusk in a parking lot opposite a fashionable supermarket on the busy Orchard Rd.

During the day, the tidy car park, decorated with flower boxes and a palm tree, gives no hint of the massive feeding operation that takes place on the site from twilight to midnight 363 nights a year (closed on Chinese New Year's and Prayer Day for deceased ancestors).

Known as "Glutton Square," the lot is divided into 200 "pitches," offering at least nine different styles of Chinese regional cooking, Malay-Indonesian specialties, Indian delicacies, and two newly added exotic titbits — American hot dogs and hamburgers.

Smorgasbord is nowhere in sight but, inexplicably, a billboard on a nearby wall advertises, "Eat Danish, Eat Well!"

At 5 pm, when the last car has left the parking lot, the public health inspector arrives to check sanitary conditions, licences and the city-supplied water and electrical facilities.

The portable stalls and their owners have already begun gathering in the side streets. Containers of food, cooking utensils, firewood, tables, stools, dishes and cutlery, all neatly stacked together with the stalls and laden on carts, await the opening hour of 6 pm.

Usually family affairs, the stalls are managed by papa as cook, mama as helper, and the young sons as waiters and general assistants. Almost everyone works at another job during the day.

Carts roll

As the time draws near to advance into Glutton



the orders, often given by the diners as detailed recipes listing ingredients and amounts.

Troops of young waiters from nearby stalls stop by to offer their specialties.

The leisurely diner with plenty of time chooses one of the more lengthily prepared delicacies — adhering to the Chinese proverb that "work may be hastened, but not food" — bird's nest soup, lizard stew, drunken chicken marinated in wine, turtle soup spiced with strips of fresh ginger, and thousand-year-old eggs.

Any table

Blackened and pickled, these eggs actually acquire their fusty scent and soury taste in four short months.

With the stalls squeezed so near each other, it matters little at whose table the customer sits, as long as he orders at least one dish from the table's owner.

The breezy waiters, some of them scarcely teenaged, flit incessantly back and forth, bantering with the diners and each other.

The playfulness, noisy chatter, and mounds of food piled on to the wooden tables give this lively "fare-ground" a festive picnic atmosphere.

But it is mainly the piquant, delicious odours that seduce the newly arrived diners, even before they have looked over the displays of decorative bouquets of green vegetables, eye-high pyramids of snowy eggs or strings of succulent dressed ducks awaiting

the Singaporeans are eating about.

Most of all, however, the Singaporeans are eating about.

The best of all culinary worlds was bound to have been concocted when Chinese, Malays, Indians, Frenchmen, Swiss and Japanese went into the restaurant business in this city.

The ubiquitous dining places have taken up so much room on the Singapore scene that some of them have had to set up shop on the surrounding waters.

Luxurious floating restaurants, often stocking their menus with finny neighbours who swim too close, and offer a discolleque, a night club and a cruise with your meal.

Instant cafes

From the palatial theatre restaurants and dining rooms of the luxury hotels through the gastronomic gamut of Oriental, Continental, and pot-pourri eating establishments — some with 150 dishes on the bill of fare — hard-working chefs love to pamper the appetites of Singaporeans and foreign visitors.

But the Singapore man in the street. The simplest style of dining — but by no means the simplest food — is indulged in at the outdoor stalls — thousands of "instant restaurants" which sometimes consist of no more than a cook, a waiter, and a table for two.

Although the stalls flourish in many neighbourhoods by day, at night fall they spring up in appetising clusters everywhere — on sidewalks, busy roadways, on vacant lots, outside transport terminals.

Just as many Americans believe that truck drivers are connoisseurs of good roadside eating places so, too, Singapore and Malay-Asian truckers have led the way in patronising food stalls.

car part, decorated with flower boxes and a palm tree, gives no hint of the massive feeding operation that takes place on the site from twilight to midnight 363 nights a year (closed on Chinese New Year's and Prayer Day for deceased ancestors).

Known as "Glutton Square," the lot is divided into 200 "pitches," offering at least nine different styles of Chinese regional cooking, Malay-Indonesian specialties, Indian delicacies, and the newly added exotic items — American hot dogs and hamburgers.

Smorgasbord is nowhere in sight but, inexplicably, a billboard on a nearby wall advertises, "Eat Danish, Eat Well!"

At 5 pm, when the last car has left the parking lot, the public health inspector arrives to check the public health of the side streets. Containers of food, cooking utensils, firewood, tables, stools, dishes and cutlery, all neatly stacked together with the stalls and laden on carts, await the opening hour of 6 pm.

Usually family affairs, the stalls are managed by papa as cook, mama as helper, and the young sons as waiters and general assistants. Almost every-one works at another job during the day.

Carts roll

As the time draws near to advance into Glutton Square, cooking fires are lit and spurred on by hand fans, ice is chopped and additional food supplies are brought up.

Finally, the carts roll forward, and in a burst of competitive energy the stalls are quickly assembled and signs hung up to proclaim the specialty of the house (but seldom the proprietor's name).

Customers perch on low stools at well-scrubbed tables and youngsters take

Any table

Blackened and pickled, these eggs actually acquire their fusty scent and sour taste in four short months.

With the stalls squeezed so near each other, it matters little at whose table the customer sits, as long as he orders at least one dish from the table's owner.

The breezy waiters, some of them scarcely teenaged, flit incessantly back and forth, bantering with the diners and each other.

The playfulness, noisy chatter, and mounds of food piled on to the wooden tables give this lively "fare-ground" a festive atmosphere.

But it is mainly the piquant, delicious odours that seduce the newly arrived diners, even before they have looked over the displays of decorative bouquets of green vegetables, eye-high pyramids of snowy eggs or strings of succulent dressed ducks awaiting their turn in the cauldron.

The jacket-and-tie set often come down to Glutton Square to sample the real thing.

Thin noodles

It has become very fashionable to give a banquet in the converted car park for visiting businessmen and friends from abroad.

These affairs, with all the informal non trimmings, are catered by the combined efforts of Chinese, Malay and Indian stall owners in the best tradition of Singapore's democratic culinary brotherhood.

The nightly regulars who throng Glutton Square for the mouth-watering thrill of watching the food being cooked before their eyes, and who consume such vast quantities because it is so inexpensive — aren't they risking their waistlines?

The stall gourmets have an answer to that one. They say you get thin by eating thin noodles.