

Rising Rent, Worker Shortage Threaten Rich Asia Food Culture

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Reuters, 28 April 2014

SINGAPORE/HONG KONG (Reuters) - The Hong Kong Jin Tian Eating House in Singapore has stopped selling the savory roast duck and pork ribs that drew crowds for a generation, the latest to close down due to escalating rents and difficulty in finding workers.

The eatery run by Yip Chan Yuk Ying, a Hong Kong-born Singapore citizen, shut its doors on Monday after its landlord jacked up its monthly rent by 46 percent to S\$12,000 (\$9,600) from S\$8,200.

"There doesn't seem to be any control in the rise of rent and local workers are very hard to get," said Yip, 56, who has been in the food business for more than 20 years. "I don't really have any plans on what to do next."

Singapore has been tightening restrictions, such as by increasing government levies and minimum wages, on hiring foreign workers after a backlash from voters concerned about overcrowding and competition for jobs.

The restrictions, coupled with runaway rents, have hit food proprietors like Yip hard as many locals, particularly younger workers, prefer white-collar jobs with more stable pay.

Monthly rentals for shophouses in the Tiong Bahru area in central Singapore, where Yip's eatery was located, have more than doubled to S\$8.09 (\$6.43) per square foot since the first quarter of 2011, according to property consultancy Knight Frank.

The sharp increase is likely driven by the influx of modern cafes and shops, said Alice Tan, head of research for Knight Frank in Singapore. "In view of the high asking rentals in Tiong Bahru, a growing number of independent shop owners have been observed to be venturing out of this area," she said.

In Hong Kong, about 300 people queued at a popular beef stew shop on its last day of business last month, local media reported. The owner of the eight-year-old stall, Tong Kin-yip, was quoted as citing rising labor and food costs for the reason to close down.

Customers lament the disappearance of such stalls as a potential erosion of local culture and decades-long culinary traditions, with some recalling fond childhood memories.

"When I was growing up, at that time you could see 10 or 20 hawkers in the street and there was a variety of snacks and food you can choose. For the 30 to 40-year-olds it's a memory of the golden life," said Eric Pang, a banker eating dumplings on a stick from a street stall in Hong Kong.

"Without food stalls, Hong Kong would be just like a metropolitan city. There would be just McDonald's, Starbucks, but no really traditional Hong Kong food."

Some sociologists say changes in the food landscape are also a reflection of how local culture has evolved.

"If we see culture as unchanging, then certainly some things are lost when they disappear from the landscape," said Tan Ern Ser, associate professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore.

"However, if we view culture as always evolving, then the spread of food we observe is a reflection of our changing population profile and cultural mix."

(\$1 = 1.2585 Singapore Dollars)

(Editing by Rachel Armstrong and Ron Popeski)