

XLX Modern Tze Char

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Childhood pals Ting Boon Kai and Keng Pei Sieh have brought their well-loved white bee hoon to the north.

Say white bee hoon and it's likely a pale, slightly wet wok-fried version comes to mind. That's not the white bee hoon at Xin Long Xing (#01-28), a tze char stall at the Yishun Park Hawker Centre.

"Ours is soupier, cooked in a flavourful pork bone and chicken stock that's been stewed for more than 10 hours," says Ting Boon Kai, 40, co-proprietor of Xin Long Xing. "It's not too oily and thus popular with ladies and health-conscious diners."

Xin Long Xing is the brainchild of Boon Kai and his childhood friend, Keng Pei Sieh, 40. Originally from Changkat Kruing, Sitiawan, Perak, the two set up the first Xin Long Xing three years ago. Now, counting the stall at the hawker centre, they have four outlets; the other three are at the East Coast Lagoon Food Village, Hoe Chiang Road and Jalan Sultan.

Besides white bee hoon, which comes in variations with seafood (an assortment of prawns, squid and lala clams), sea prawns, lala, crayfish or lobster, the stall offers a menu of 40 tze char items, including their own-developed recipes.

One original creation is chilli crabmeat seafood hor fun. "We have combined two dishes that Singaporeans love, but lightened up the chilli crab sauce so that it is not too rich," says Boon Kai.

Another unique dish is lala in Chinese yellow rice wine. Boon Kai says that this clam soup dish, which has a sweet and herbal flavour, is a favourite for supper. "It is a great choice if you want something that satisfies your hunger pangs but is still light," he says.

At 13, Boon Kai arrived in Singapore and began working in kitchens. The days were long and the training was tough, and he was forced to grow up quickly.

"The old chefs were very strict. You wouldn't be able to cook without at least five years of the basics – chopping, slicing and knowing by heart the ingredients for every dish," he says. "You would have to get up to speed really fast or suffer knocks on your head for being wrong or simply too slow."

He was made a cook at a tze char place at 18, responsible for vegetable stir-fries as well as rice and noodle dishes. "I was staying all day in the kitchen, and I didn't like that. I wanted to see what was going on outside," he says. "But I knew that I had a passion for food. I knew how to run a kitchen and what I wanted from my cooks."

So he opened a tze char stall at a coffeeshop in Bukit Batok at the ripe old age of 19. His journey in the school of hard knocks continued, and he learnt by trial and error how to control his costs, manage people and deal with customer feedback.

Some years ago, he reconnected with Pei Sieh on Facebook. They discovered that they were still pals, just like in the early years when they rode bicycles along the kampung lanes, swam in the rivers and went fishing in the longkangs.

Pei Sieh has lived and worked in Singapore since she was 16. By the time she got in touch with Boon Kai again, she had raised a family, her oldest now a teenager. She was ready to build a career in food. When she was growing up, her mother worked as a banquet and catering cook, and she would help out with the prep and observe how her mother cooked.



XLX Modern Tze Char

Tze Char

#01-28, #01-29

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Opening Hours

Monday to Sunday | 11am to

9.30pm

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Boon Kai handles the business aspects, food quality and recipe development, while Pei Sieh takes care of the customer experience. "We are easy-going people who are willing to give and take when we work together," Pei Sieh says of the reason for their successful partnership. "Boon Kai is a friendly and approachable boss."

Boon Kai says that their hospitality is what keeps their customers coming back. "It's hard to cultivate regular customers who will always think of you when they think of, say, white bee hoon, who come and eat at your stall at least twice a week," he says.

"No matter how pretty your decor is, or how delicious your food tastes, if you don't treat your customers well, they won't go to you again because there are just too many dining choices in Singapore."

Many of Boon Kai's diners have patronised his eateries for over a decade. "I won't say that they're my customers," he says. "They've become my friends."



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