

# *A Guide to* *Singapore's Popular* *Hawker Food &* *Their Ingredients*

*(for individuals with food allergies)*

**HOLLAND V**

Singapore's bohemian enclave

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### How safe is Singapore's hawker food if you have allergies?

Welcome to Holland Village Singapore! Those of you who suffer from food allergies know how frustrating it is to try new stuff especially when you can't tell what's in the food. I too am highly sensitive to food substances and I write this guide for fellow beings who have the same concern when eating out – particularly in a place you are new to.

How are food prepared? What ingredients are used? Where are the sources of these ingredients? How do I know what goes into each meal? How safe is it for me to consume them?

In this guide, I shall discuss three things: (i) Food Handling (ii) Sources of Ingredients and (iii) Ingredients of Popular Meals.



Having lived in Singapore all my life (and having previously owned a vegetarian restaurant), I would like to share my

understanding of what goes into the 12 most popular local “hawker” meals and let you make your own judgment. Only you can decide how safe the substances are.

However, in no way is it implied that these meals are unpalatable or dangerous to the normal palate. The happy majority, foreigners included, enjoy these meals as much as the locals.

If you have no food allergies, I urge you to try some of these meals especially Prata and Laksa, if you don't mind something spicy. They are indeed special and you should not leave Singapore without experiencing them.

(A section on suggestions for vegetarians can be found at the bottom of this article)

### Cleanliness and hygiene standard

Singapore is without doubt one of the cleanest cities in the world.

But let us not exaggerate this. Its 3.5ml organic population has surged to 5.5ml over the past few years and the authorities are working doubly hard to maintain this reputation.

Notwithstanding, you need not worry about the standard of cleanliness of food establishments in Singapore. It is mandatory for all food handlers (cooks, kitchen assistants and servers) to attend a Food Handling & Personal Hygiene Course

in the NEA (National Environment Agency) classrooms at Bukit Merah.

It's safe to eat to your heart's content unless you have food allergies.

All F&B establishments, whether small stalls in food courts and coffee shops, or restaurants or hotels' F&B outlets, are graded by the NEA shortly after opening.

Thereafter, each outlet is visited monthly by NEA officers who inspect fridges, freezers, kitchen exhaust, dark corners, ovens, chopping boards, store rooms, stocks, plates & bowls, toilets (only for restaurants), preparation methods and supposedly nails (only finger nails, not toe nails) and hair of food handlers – presumably to identify non-conformity to hygiene standard.

The overall grades given are between A and D (see picture below). Grade A usually goes to hotels and fast food chains because of their modern equipment, preparation, handling methods and well-groomed personnel; while B and C usually go to restaurants and food stalls. D may be given to certain type of outlets where traditional preparation cannot be avoided. A to D are all accepted hygiene standards. Anything outside these standards will be subjected to corrective action.



The NEA responds immediately to public complaint(s) about any outlet's unhygienic practices. In fact, the NEA encourages the public with posters to forward complaints by texting to 74688 or by calling toll free 1800 2255632.

Offenders will be given warning. Repeat offenders will be fined and operation suspended until they show proof of corrective action. Those who fail to do so will have their licenses revoked. Yes, all this sound pretty scary – if you operate a food business in Singapore! But the customers have no complaints!

### Sources of local food ingredients

While cleanliness can be controlled to a large extent by the NEA and their eagle-eyed officers, control of ingredients are usually enforced through Singapore's import regulations.

Unlike the West, where imports of agricultural products are stringently controlled by tough import measures, here in Singapore the import rules for such items are much more lenient.

A food establishment operator has easy access to a wide variety of herbs, preserved products, preservatives, sauces and seasonings, which are required in many local dishes and traditional meals.

Local food ingredients (some in their raw state and some semi-prepared) come from Malaysia, Indonesia, China, India, Thailand and other neighboring countries. There is no way to

monitor these ingredients or the substances used in the preservation, processing and preparation of such ingredients.

The only guideline is that since these ingredients have been used for decades and there has been no fatal incident, we can assume that they are safe for the general public. Many such ingredients are used in local cooking tradition and culture – and without being too presumptuous, locals may be more tolerant of such ingredients than foreigners.

Therefore, if you have a serious allergic condition, you may want to be extra careful about what you eat especially from stalls in coffee shops, food courts and hawker centres (of course, this doesn't mean that things are fine with restaurants). It is pointless asking any food seller about the ingredients of the dish or to make a point about your allergies. You probably won't get the right answer.

You will need to use your judgment from the information given here (but I take no responsibility for any substance[s] which is not identified in the ingredient list that follows). In regard to "local fare" which is found in the above-mentioned outlets, my suggestion is that you go for the "popular" local meals/dishes and avoid traditional herbal soup, or meals with soup and gravy. The ingredients of these popular dishes and meals provided below can help you decide based on your own risk level.

Do note that almost all food contains MSG (monosodium glutamate). So, if you are allergic to this ingredient, DO NOT EAT OUT. Local food use a variety of sauces and all these are

laced with MSG. Additional MSG is often added in preparation and when frying.

### Popular meals and their ingredients

There are more than a dozen popular meals in Singapore but usually about a dozen or so is promoted on most tourist brochures whenever "gourmet paradise" is mentioned as an attraction of Singapore.

Here is the list, which is touted as the "best" local dish/meals:

1. Fried Kueh Teow
2. Fried Carrot Cake
3. Fried Oyster Omelette
4. Hokkien Mee
5. Prawn Noodle
6. Rojak
7. Laksa
8. Mee Goreng
9. Nasi Lemak
10. Satay
11. Nasi Bryani (or Beriani)
12. Prata

Items 1 to 7 are Chinese dish/meals; 8 to 10 are Malay's; and 11 and 12 are Indian's. Items 7 to 12 are spicy. But for many Singaporeans, items 1 to 6 are usually ordered with a request of chilli accompaniment, which is added to the meal. So, generally, most meals are eaten with chilli. Here is a list of local food ingredients of the above 12 dishes/meals:

**1. Fried Kueh Teow** (stir-fried rice noodles with clams and Chinese sausage)



The main ingredient here is a flat and white colored looking rice noodle, which is fried in a fiery wok with black soy sauce, black sweet soy sauce, light soy sauce and

fish sauce. Other ingredients include: bean sprouts, garlic, lard, cockles, fish cake, shrimps, sliced Chinese sausage, chicken eggs, bits of crispy lard. All sauces contain msg and preservatives including benzoate. The ingredients in Chinese sausages are not clear. Also, some “rice” noodles are not 100% rice but are mixed with a significant percentage of gluten to achieve “elasticity”, which is ideal for frying. The chilli paste may contain dehydrated (dried) prawns, refined sugar and salt, preservatives and vegetable oil.

**2. Fried Carrot Cake** (stir-fried rice cakes with eggs)

This meal is not what you will find in a bakery or cake shop. It is actually shredded white carrot (horseradish) mixed into a pasted with rice flour, preserved radish, pepper, salt, and sugar; and steamed. When cooled, it is cut into tiny cubes or strips and then fried with vegetable oil (or lard), garlic, eggs, black sweet sauce (optional), light soy sauce and fish sauce.

There is no guarantee that gluten flour is not added to hold the cubes together for frying. The chilli paste may contain



pounded dried shrimps, refined sugar, salt, preservatives and vegetable oil. It is garnished with fresh scallions and sometimes fresh lime before serving.

**3. Fried Oyster Omelette** (stir-fried oysters with egg)

This is nothing more than putting a handful of fresh oysters (the small variety) into a bowlful of mixture of eggs and potato starch. This is beaten and poured onto a hot frying pan containing lard or

vegetable oil until it turns brownish. Light soy sauce and fish sauce may be added in the frying for extra seasoning. It may be served with fresh lime and fresh coriander. The chilli



paste may contain pounded dried prawns, sugar, salt, preservatives and vegetable oil.

#### 4. Hokkien Mee (stir-fried noodles with shrimps and squids)

The two main ingredients are what locals called “yellow noodle” and “thick rice noodle”. The yellow noodle is made from common white flour and the “thick rice noodle” from a mixture of rice flour and gluten flour. Lard, garlic, squid, shrimps, fish cake and scallions are added to the noodles and simmer over a broth. The types of broth used differ but it is usually obtained by boiling a mixture of shrimp heads and shells, chicken bones and parts, and other seafood parts such as fish bones, shells, dried anchovies, etc. The chilli paste may contain pounded dried shrimps, sugar, salt, preservatives and vegetable oil.



#### 5. Prawn Noodle Soup (blanched noodles in shrimp broth)



You have a choice of noodles for this soup-based meal. These are “yellow noodles”, “thick rice noodle” and “thin rice noodle”. The thinner version rice noodle is also likely to be

mixed with gluten.

The noodle is boiled (immediately after you order), sieved and put into a large bowl. Some pre-blanching sprouts and green vegetables may be added. A broth is poured over it. Peeled boiled shrimps (or prawns), slices of boiled pork or pork ribs, shallots, white pepper powder are then added to the bowl before serving. The broth is obtained by boiling these ingredients: shrimp heads and shells, pork bones, dried anchovies, star anise, peppercorns, garlic, dried cloves, dark soy sauce and raw cane sugar. Preservatives may be added to the broth.

**6. Chinese Rojak** (so-called Singapore Salad; fresh vegetables mixed with fermented and pungent shrimp paste and crushed peanuts. Note that there is also Indian Rojak, which is a totally different thing.)



This is an acquired taste. If you think durian is bad, wait till you sit next to someone who is eating this. The locals called this Singapore Salad. The ingredients are freshly cut pineapple, cucumber, turnip, green apple, boiled kang kong (a kind of swamp cabbage), boiled beansprout,

deep fried Chinese croissant and deep fried soya puff. These are put into a large clay bowl and ladle-stirred (without heat) with a generous mixture of black shrimp paste, plentiful refined sugar, tamarind and some chilli paste.

The contents are then emptied onto a plate and garnished with a large sprinkling of pounded roasted peanuts. The character of this dish comes from its black shrimp paste, which has a distinctively strong bacterial smell and taste.

The paste is made from: fermented (for six months) plankton shrimp and salt. The chilli paste is usually made from dried shrimp paste, shallots, dried red chillies, cashew nuts, tamarind pulp, coconut milk, sugar and salt. It may contain preservatives.

**7. Laksa** (rice noodles in a spicy shrimp broth that is mixed with coconut milk and chilli paste)



There are several Laksa variations, which can be generalized into two types: Coconut Laksa and Assam Laksa. The latter is sour and is not as popular as the former, which is sometimes referred to as Katong Laksa. No Singaporean can live without the former, so let us talk about this.

It's a fiery soup meal which has the "thick rice noodle" as its main ingredient. The noodle is made from a mixture of rice flour and gluten flour. The other key ingredients are: fresh cockles, soya bean puff, fish cake, bean sprouts and fresh shrimps.

The gravy or the soup is extra-ordinary and is the reason why people eat this meal. It's made from coconut milk (usually out of a large Tetra Pak), dried shrimp, peanut oil, chicken stock, fish sauce, lemon grass, red chillies, galangal, ginger, shrimp paste, shallots, cloves, garlic, turmeric, refined sugar, tamarind paste, cilantro leaves and Vietnamese coriander, which gives it its unique flavour.

The home-made chilli paste, which is optional, may contain dried shrimp paste, shallots, dried red chillies, cashew nuts, tamarind pulp, coconut milk, sugar, salt and preservatives

**8. Mee Goreng** (spicy stir-fried noodle with minced mutton or minced beef)



This is probably the most popular Indian meals among Singaporeans of all backgrounds. Its main ingredients are yellow noodle, garlic, potato, green peas, onions, tofu, chye

sim (a local green leafy vegetable), tomato, green chilli, egg and minced mutton.

The noodle and main ingredients are stir fried in a wok with the following: tomato paste, light soy sauce, salt, msg, sugar and fish sauce. Fresh chilli paste is usually added into the frying. It is served with fresh cucumber slices and a home-made tomato ketchup. The tomato ketchup may contain bananas, onion, black raisins, black pepper, artificial vinegar, salt, nutmeg, cloves, tomato paste and preservatives.

**9. Nasi Lemak** (rice boiled with coconut milk and accompanied with chilli paste and anchovies)

A staple food among many in the Malay community, this fragrant meal consists of rice boiled with coconut milk (salt is added in the rice).



The rice is served on a plate with fried eggs, deep fried dried anchovies and peanuts, deep fried whole fish, fresh cucumber. Chilli paste is piled onto it.

Optional items may include otah (a paste made from fish and shrimps, wrapped in coconut leaves and barbequed over charcoal - preservatives may be included), deep fried chicken wings, fish cakes and fresh pineapple slices and other fresh

vegetables. The chilli paste, which is an intrinsic part of the meal, may contain dried shrimp paste, anchovies, shallots, garlic, dried red chillies, cashew nuts, tamarind pulp, coconut milk, sugar, salt and preservatives. Note: all deep-fried items share the same pot of oil.

**10. Satay** (barbequed, skewered pieces of meat, served with a spicy peanut sauce and “ketupat”)

A hot favorite among visitors. Its authentic version is sold by Malays. This refers to barbeque sticks which are made from the spines of coconut leaves on which seasoned



strips of mutton, beef or chicken are skewered and then barbequed over charcoal. They are served with ketupat (rice wrapped in coconut leaves and boiled), fresh onions, fresh cucumber and a spicy peanut sauce to dip the sticks in.

The meats are seasoned with a paste made from: shallots, garlic, turmeric, ginger, white peppercorn, coriander seeds, fennel seeds, cumin seeds, dried shrimp paste, sugar and preservatives. The ingredients for the sauce: onions, garlic, chilli paste, lemongrass, dried shrimp paste, candlenuts/macadamia nuts, tamarind pulp, coconut milk, roasted peanuts, peanut oil, sugar, salt and preservatives.

**11. Nasi Briyani or “Beriani”** (rice boiled with spices and served with curry meat)



This is basmati rice boiled with spices giving it an orangey look.

The rice is served on a piece of banana leaf topped with a piece of curry mutton, curry chicken or curry beef along with fresh cucumber and fresh pineapple (sometimes substituted with pickled vegetables consisting of cucumber, carrot, pineapple and sesame seeds). The curry gravy is poured over the rice (not shown in the above picture).

The ingredients used for preparing the rice and meat may include the following: onions, poppy seeds, mint leaves, cloves, garlic, cinnamon, ginger, cardamoms, yoghurt, chilli powder, almond, saffron threads, golden raisins, milk, ghee and salt.

The ingredients for the curry may include: chilli powder, shallots, turmeric, ginger, garlic, ground cumin seed, ground coriander seed, cinnamon stick, tomato puree, ghee, sugar, salt, curry leaves (Koenigii), fenugreek leaves and green chillies.

**12. Prata** (a dough served with curry)

The Indian version of pancake, which locals eat for breakfast but just as popular for lunch and dinner.

The “prata” or pancake is made from white refined flour, yeast, vegetable oil, ghee (sometimes), salt, egg, transfat (sometimes) and condensed milk.



Preparation requires the cook to swing the dough into the air to achieve its flaky texture. It is then heated on a giant size hotplate and immediately served with dhal,

mutton, fish, chicken or beef curry.

The curry may include: chilli powder, shallots, turmeric, ginger, garlic, lentil, ground cumin seed, ground coriander seed, cinnamon stick, tomato puree, ghee, sugar, salt, curry leaves (Koenigii), fenugreek leaves and green chillies.

## If you are a vegetarian....

There are many options for vegetarians but it does depend on how strict you are and what you can and can't consume, for example, are you a Vegan, Hindu, Buddhist, pro animal activist or just trying to follow your doctor's order?

Other than the Subway sandwich chain and sandwich cafes, other vegetarian options include Chinese vegetarian restaurants/stalls and Indian restaurants/stalls.



These (the latter two) serve strictly 100% vegetarian meals. However, eggs may be part of the menu for some Chinese vegetarian outlets (such as the one shown in the above picture). But you can be assured that no other animal by-products are used. These outlets distinguished themselves with clear signage that says, "vegetarian". However, a larger dosage of MSG is often used to enhance the flavour. Preservatives such as benzoate is likely to be found in ingredients.

Most of the time you are also able to request for a plate of vegetarian fried rice or noodle from a non-vegetarian Chinese or Indian restaurant or stall (such as the one on the right). But do not be surprised that the sauces used may contain anchovies or fish stock or even chicken flavoured seasoning since they do not serve regular vegetarians.



Again, MSG and benzoate are commonly found in these sauces. It is unlikely that these outlets will have separate preparation utensils and cutlery for vegetarian meals.

For strict certain Hindu sects and Buddhist vegetarians, our advice is to stick to vegetarian outlets with the clear "vegetarian" signage.

An updated version of this guide, where available, can be obtained at [www.holland-village-singapore.com](http://www.holland-village-singapore.com)

For dining etiquette, see our article on [Local Culture](#), which can be found on our website. If you have questions, please post them at our [Holland-Village-Singapore Facebook Page](#).