

In A Bite with Charlotte Mei

Hawker food - it doesn't have to be unhealthy!

Full Transcript

CHARLOTTE: Hello and welcome back to another episode of In A Bite! If you're new here or are simply interested in food and nutrition, don't forget to follow the channel, and click on the bell icon to be notified each time a new episode is released.

Now, one thing I love about podcasting is that it can be done pretty much anywhere, at any time and I can look however the way I want... very different to being on camera. And I don't need to be at a particular studio. As long as I have my trusty microphone, in a well cushioned environment, I'm good to go. And to give you an idea, I'm in my room right now with my microphone at the edge of my bed, surrounded by my pillows to absorb any echoes. No fancy set up, but hey it works! And all this to say that with travels opening up, I will soon be travelling to visit family (finally!) and be on work trips, but no matter where in the world I am, the show will still go on.

Until then, I am currently recording in sunny singapore...on my bed.

And speaking of Singapore, what I love about it is that despite being one of the most expensive cities in the world to live in, one can still find a hearty and filling meal no more than \$5. Just for context, this is about 3.50 in US Dollars. For those listening in from Singapore and Malaysia, you'd know exactly what I'm talking about... It's our beloved hawker food.

So, great! We have access to affordable great-tasting food. But aside from these perks, I commonly hear people express how many of the dishes are heavy on carbs... they're unbalanced... and hence are 'unhealthy'. And so it isn't seen as an ideal option for a nutritious meal here in Singapore. These thoughts aren't unfounded, but as a Singaporean, and as a nutritionist, I definitely believe there are ways around it.

What doesn't help is that most of the information out there in the media on food and nutrition tends to point towards western foods, and many of us struggle to use the information in an asian context. In this episode, I'll be breaking down the fundamentals of balanced nutrition, and sharing tips around hawker food so you can have your laksa and eat it too.

Before delving into the nutrition side of things, here's a brief history lesson on hawker food and how it came to be!

Pre 1950s, we used to have hawkers going around on wheels or foot, selling street food. They each had their own schedules, and their movements structured the routines of social life amongst their customers. Say, if I was working in a little alley along Bukit Timah Road, I

know I'll be having lunch at 2.30PM because that's when the noodle guy comes. That's just an example.

And they worked hard. During this time, the food items were wholly produced by the hawkers themselves, and often in their own kitchens at home. No suppliers. And back then, the cost of hawker food would vary according to the time of day it was sold. Breakfast being the cheapest as it contained no meat, and lunch being slightly costlier. There were also some hawkers selling late evening desserts like bird's nest and these were considered a luxury. Most of the time though, the dishes never exceeded 50 cents.

Then, a reorganisation happened in the 60s to clear the streets in order to improve traffic flow, and improve public hygiene. For context, the hawkers at the time didn't have easy access to water, so utensils weren't always clean, and contamination happened pretty frequently.

Hawkers and street food vendors were moved into one of 2 things: what was referred to as 'cooked food centres' within public housing estates, or standalone 'hawker centres'. And this ended the era of hawkers travelling to consumers. And so began the culture of us, consumers, doing the travelling to hawker centres to have an affordable meal. And not forgetting, hunting out for the hawkers that cook up the 'best' version of a particular dish.

Fast forward to 2020, what used to be a generic everyday means to fill one's tummy, has been elevated to heritage status; and Singapore's hawker culture is now part of the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Imagine sharing this with hawkers of the past! I think it's pretty impressive.

So despite hawker dishes not being the healthiest you'll see out there, they hold so much history, and very strongly represent the culinary soul of Singapore. I, for one, would never want it being taken away.

If you're interested in more of Singapore's food history, I highly recommend the book titled 'Food, Foodways and Foodscapes'. It speaks about food culture in post-colonial Singapore and I really enjoy it. It's slightly geek with all the information in there but a lot of it is anecdotal. It's really easy to read and you'll end up with lots of interesting food facts about Singapore. I've added more details on it in the show notes if you're keen to find out more.

Okay so back to the nutrition agenda. How can we make hawker food part of a balanced lifestyle?

Here is a framework to begin with, and let's start with the basics: what do we need at each meal, and how much of it do we need?

There are 3 main components to make sure you have on your plate and each meal of the day – Carbohydrates, protein and vegetables or fruit.

So here's a quick 101 on nutrition to explain why we need these 3 main components.

In a nutshell, carbohydrates provide energy, and depending on the form of carbohydrate, it can be a great source of fibre which is good for gut and heart health.

Proteins build and repair muscles.

Vegetables and fruits are full of fibre, vitamins, and minerals. And because they're high in fibre, they provide volume and take longer to digest. This keeps you full for longer, without needing to ingest a lot of calories.

Protein also has this effect of keeping us fuller for longer. I received a question on IG asking for the best hawker dishes that promote fullness without containing too many calories, and right here's your answer. Look for a dish that has enough protein and fibre! We also need fats in our diet, and preferably unsaturated fats over saturated or trans fats.

Just a quick one to share examples of foods that you can find at the hawker centres that fall under these categories. For carbohydrates, pretty straight forward. It will be your rice, noodles, bread, roti prata, chapati, lontong, the steamed portion of chwee kueh, and youtiao - which are those fried dough fritters. And there's absolutely nothing wrong with eating white rice, I just want to put it out there right now. But wholegrain options of what I've just listed are better for you as they contain more nutrients, as well as fibre which we now know keeps us fuller for longer. The presence of fibre also means they don't digest as quickly, so it's less likely you'll experience a blood sugar spike.

And now protein. We can break it down to animal and plant protein. So animal protein would be any meat, poultry, fish, seafood and eggs. Plant protein would be things like tofu, tempeh, lentils, red beans. And we definitely want to have a good balance of both plant and animal protein.

Vegetables... Fruits... Very straightforward.

And lastly for fat, when speaking in the context of the hawker centre, most sources of fat are saturated, unfortunately. Unless we start seeing our hawkers cooking with olive oil and serving avocados, nuts and seeds with their dishes. But that being said, asian food sources of unsaturated fats do exist at the hawker centre. You just have to look out for them. Examples would be mackerel, sardines, and soy based products like tofu and tempeh. So as you can tell, sources of unsaturated fat are mainly protein sources.

So we now know the components, now how much of each do we need?

For the average person, there is really no need to get caught up with counting macros or calories. And I'm definitely not a fan of that. We have enough on our minds, and the last

thing we need to obsess about is the food that we eat. It's such a joyous component of our lives, so let's not take that away from ourselves.

Instead, let's simplify it all and think of each component in ratios.

Visualise a plate in your mind, and split it into half, one quarter, and another quarter.

And all you have to make sure at each meal is that half of your plate is filled with vegetables - get that as colourful as possible! Then the next two quarters would be carbohydrates and protein respectively. So, half... quarter... quarter. Vegetables... carbohydrates... protein.

My favourite dish to use as an example in this instance is *nasi padang* or *cai png*, otherwise known as economy rice. Because essentially you are building your own plate. You choose the components you want, and it's the easiest way to achieve the half-quarter-quarter ideal. My go-to for this is asking for less rice, because they usually give you a ton of it. And then along with that, I get 2 vegetable dishes and a meat dish. Quite often, I would go full on vegetarian, but I will make sure I get a lot of plant proteins in there like tofu, tempeh, taupok...taukwa... any form of soy product... and I add an egg in there as well, or an egg-based dish.

But the thing is, not all dishes are customizable like that. Take the average dish you get at the hawker centre and think about the ratio of vegetables, carbohydrates and protein. And that's if you get any vegetables at all! You most often get more carbohydrates than anything. And this is why people are not wrong when they say that hawker dishes tend to be carb heavy. But this doesn't mean that we have no way around it and that it's a zero sum game. This is where I say you can have your cake and eat it too.

Most of the time, we tend to focus on what we cannot eat, and then we end up thinking well then what does that leave me with! That breeds resentment around food, and takes away any joy around it.

How about thinking this way instead - look this dish doesn't have the components I require, so let's add that in. What can I ask more of that can make my dish more nutritious, and more balanced? Most of the time, vegetables is one of them.

You can also ask for more protein if there isn't enough on your plate. So for example, I order char siew rice from a stall nearby my home about once every 2-3 weeks. It's tasty and I really like char siew rice. And if it's not char siew, I sometimes switch it up with soy sauce chicken. Now most of the time, I get 5-6 slices of meat, 3-4 slivers of cucumber, and rice that fills up about half my plate, which I often can't finish.

So this is what I do - there isn't enough protein for me in 5-6 slices of meat, so I request to add a braised egg - because they are absolutely delicious. Then I ask for some leafy greens,

and less rice. Sometimes I specify 'half' the rice and not just less rice, because sometimes when i ask for 'less', they don't really know how much less. So, be more specific.

I'm really lucky cause this guy that I get my char siew rice from obliges me when I ask for more vegetables, and he always happens to have leafy greens so that's great. However, I do know that this isn't the case all the time. And some hawkers may even charge half a dollar just to get a piece of lettuce or several sprigs of bean sprouts. Not ideal!

If this is the case and you really don't manage to consume as much vegetables or protein as you'd like, that's absolutely fine. Just keep it in mind and have more of these foods in your next meal.

So again, think of what you can eat more of, rather than focusing on what you shouldn't be eating.

Another one is sodium levels. And you know, this doesn't just apply to hawker food. It concerns food consumed outside homes in general. Especially in the asian context. Because our dishes rely on quite a lot of sauces, and that adds up to quite a fair bit of sodium and sugar. And sometimes, one such dish can contain a whole day's worth of sodium.

There's a little bit of an irony here, because most dishes that are soup-based are generally healthier because they tend to be lower in saturated fats and sugar. That said, most of them are relatively high in sodium due to the soup. So it almost feels like a lose-lose situation here.

A way around this is to not finish all the soup. But I'd hate to tell you not to finish something while you're eating it because it's such a conscious effort to make while you're enjoying something. And just to share, I'm a liquid guzzler so half the time I get carried away drinking the soup just because it's there. So I get it. What I do in this instance is to ask for half the soup while ordering my food. So I shape my environment beforehand. And you know what it turns out to be a win-win situation because it means that I won't be fighting with a piping hot soup as I dig into my food, and the food tastes just as good, without all the sodium that you actually don't need.

All that being said, once again, I want to repeat this - if you happen to have a meal that didn't have enough vegetables, or had too much sodium or saturated fats, there's no need to beat yourself up.

Here's a reminder to look at your diet across a week, rather than in isolation. If you haven't had enough vegetables today, just make sure to have a little more tomorrow!

Also, remember to eat a variety of foods as no single food can provide all the nutrients your body needs. One simple way to do that is to make sure your plate has a variation of colours.

So to summarise, here are the 3 things to remember.

Firstly, the main components to have on your plate: carbohydrates, protein and vegetables.

Secondly, the ratios: half-quarter-quarter.

And thirdly, think first of what you can add to your plate to make it more balanced and more nutritious.

Okay so enough of the theoretical stuff. We don't talk about hawker food without mentioning our favourites and fighting over where you'd find the 'best ofs'!

My absolute favourites, in no order of preference, are popiah, nasi padang, thunder tea rice, char siew rice, and carrot cake.

And for my listeners that haven't been to Singapore, I see you! And I know that some of these may not mean anything to you. So if you're curious, I've included links in the episode description so you have an idea of what these dishes are like! And hopefully it will whet your appetite to come to Singapore too.

Now at this point, I want to know what your favourite hawker dishes are. Quick fire - say you walk into a hawker centre, what is a must-have for you if you spot a stall selling it? I'm compiling answers, so drop me a DM on Instagram @thecharlottemei with your answer! Better still, let me know what your favourite hawker spots are for these dishes.

If you liked this episode and what you've been hearing on In A Bite so far, don't forget to rate the show so more people get to know about it too! And if you have any questions about what I shared in this Hawker Food episode, drop me a message on Instagram, or write in to hello@thecharlottemei.com and I'll answer them in the next one!

Thank you for listening to this episode of In A Bite! If you found it useful, share the link to this episode through text to a friend, or on your Instagram page!

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