

A short excerpt from the Singapore chapter of *Around the World in 80 Dinners*:

...On our last morning, we return to the Tekka Centre in Little India. The stalls closed on Monday are now open again, including two that Makansutra recommends highly. Rong Ji Cooked Food serves us *chwee kueh*, savory steamed cakes with a gelatinous, chewy texture, like glutinous rice. Okay, but not nearly as tasty as the treats at Yan Seng Cooked Food, where the booth's only words in English are "black carrot cake." Each of us orders one of the advertised dish, a loosely formed patty of grated white radish, mushrooms, and garlicky Chinese chives bound with egg and dyed with a sweet, dark soy that leaves an appealing molasses-like undertone.

While we're eating the goodies, a young Chinese businesswoman approaches us to ask, "How do you like the cakes?"

"Wonderfully delicious," Cheryl says enthusiastically, and the lady pulls up a chair at our table to join us.

She points to the stooped, elderly woman, barely more than four-and-a-half-feet tall, who cooked our food and is now making two kinds of dumplings at the table next to us. "She is one of the rare masters left who do everything by hand. Her fans come here from all over the city. I want you to try her dumplings," she insists, going over to talk to the cook in Chinese and pay for a couple of both types.

Each contains a vegetable filling, sealed in one instance with a rice-flour wrapper tinted a traditional pink and, in the other case, with sesame-seed-coated yam paste. Handing us containers of soy sauce and chile paste, the businesswoman says, "Dip the dumplings in these."

"Lovely," Bill acknowledges after a dunk and a bite.

When the older woman sees us using the paste, she smiles and says "Chile," apparently one of the few words she knows in English. Still grinning, she passes us a small piece of banana leaf holding a bright red dessert dumpling, plump with a sweet bean purée.

"My, oh my," Cheryl says. "How can a morning get more beautiful?"

The young woman excuses herself at this point—"Got to rush to work"—leaving us feebly unable to communicate the gratitude we feel toward both ladies.

With spontaneous experiences like this, Singapore startles us more than any other place on our trip. The people, the food, and the cultures of the city overwhelm our preconceptions about the institutional negatives. By our departure, we regret our reluctance to come and the shortness of our four-night stay. Talking about this on our way out of the Tekka Centre, we stop for one more fresh-juice fix. "Maybe we should go savory for a change, with tomato or avocado perhaps," Bill says, but both of us fall back in the end on syrupy nectars, mango for Bill and passion fruit for Cheryl.

“It’s a sweet finish,” Cheryl says, “for an exceptionally sweet time.”

Find the recipe in our new book!