Fresh ingredients for new hawker centres?

GET FOREIGNERS
Let us hire foreign assistants, say hawkers

GET COOL
Install air-conditioners, suggests a blogger

GET ON TV SHOWS
Push publicity for new entrants, others urge

“While some stalls situated in less favourable locations may not be as popular with potential tenderers, and may sometimes not attract any bids, on average, these stalls do stay vacant for more than three months,” said NEA.

Several hawkers said that, to fill the hundreds of new stalls coming up, more needs to be done to attract the younger generation to the trade, especially as many veterans are likely to retire in the next decade.

Mr Sulaiman Abu, who is in his 50s, is one of them. The owner of the D’Authentic Nasi Lemak stall in Marine Parade Food Centre said he plans to retire soon and have his children take over. They now help out at the stall.

“But it’s very hard to tell if other young people will want to become hawkers. It’s long hours and hard work. I wake up by 4am every day and work at least 12 to 14 hours every day,” he said.

Mr Sulaiman is one of several master hawkers under the Hawker Master Trainer Pilot Programme that started in 2013.

This is a collaboration between NEA, the Workforce Development Agency (WDA), property firm Knight Frank and The Business Times.

The programme helps to train people to become hawkers and aims to preserve Singapore’s much-loved hawker heritage.

The WDA said 46 trainees have completed their foundational training under the pilot, and some are in the midst of on-the-job training with the master hawkers or have just completed it.

Of those who have completed both components, 17 have opened their own stalls or are working with their trainers.

Mr Sulaiman said that the Government could help further by allowing hawkers to hire foreigners as stall assistants.

Currently, they can hire only Singaporeans and permanent residents, but many want to take up the job, he said.

Dr Lee Ka Tat, a food blogger and author who runs the website itasteatblogspot.sg, said air-conditioning of hawker centres and larger stalls might attract young hawkers.

“Air-conditioning is becoming a real necessity. The younger generation have higher expectations and the authorities need to look at how to meet their needs,” he said.

Others suggested raising the profiles of young entrants to the trade, such as through publicity campaigns or a television show.

“This industry needs heroes that the world recognises. We need to build a culture that encourages a new breed of street-food stars and entrepreneurs,” said Mr K. F. Seetoh, founder of food firm Makansutra.

Several Singaporeans out of the 20 polled by The Straits Times suggested setting aside a few stalls in each hawker centre for more exotic cuisines, like Japanese or Korean food, to attract customers and boost business in general.

A few said they are willing to pay slightly higher prices for hawker fare if it helped the hawkers earn a decent living. They drew the line at $5, but others wanted the prices maintained or lowered.

Freelance property agent Shafiq Zaky, 45, said: “In terms of food quality and standards, our hawker centres are quite good already. They are also much cleaner compared with about 15 years ago.”

By FENG ZENGKUN
ENVIRONMENT CORRESPONDENT
and CAROLYN KHEW

SINGAPORE’S hawker scene has been doing roaring trade in the past five years, with cooked food stalls almost fully occupied and few staying vacant for more than three months.

But with more than 800 stalls coming on board in the next five years, food experts and hawkers say that more needs to be done to attract new blood.

Among their suggestions:
Let hawkers hire foreigners, who cost less, as assistants;
air-condition some of the new centres; and showcase young hawkers more, such as through a television show.

Earlier this month, the Government announced that it will build 10 new hawker centres by 2022. This is on top of the 10 centres that had pledged in 2011 to build.

The first two new centres will open in Bukit Panjang and Hougang this year, and others will be built in underserved areas such as Choa Chu Kang, Bukit Batok and Sengkang.

Altogether, the 20 centres will add more than 800 cooked food stalls to the existing 6,046 managed by the National Environment Agency (NEA) as of January, about a 13 per cent rise in supply.

There are also a few hawker centres that are privately owned and managed, such as Lau Pa Sat in the Central Business District.

The NEA told The Straits Times that, as of January, more than 98 per cent of its stalls were occupied, which is consistent with the rates in the past five years.

Vacant stalls are up for tender every month, and only Singaporeans and permanent residents can bid for them.

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