A country’s food culture – from health standards to trendy foodies or social sharing – can be seen as a litmus test to the diversity of that nation. Certainly it is food culture that has largely shaped civilisations and will no doubt continue to be a measure of both living standards and social trends for generations to come.

As a global public relations agency, Weber Shandwick considers it our mission to be at the forefront of trends that engage others, not only in the communications sector but in each industry that we work. And food trends are no different.

Our Food Forward Trends Report 2014 draws on insights from food experts across the country and from a survey of more than 750 adult Singaporean consumers representative of the country’s population. The survey was conducted by Weber Shandwick, with support from research company Qualtrics, to predict the biggest trends for the year ahead.

Both expert and consumer trends suggest Singapore’s food culture is being reshaped in 2014. Alongside the rapidly evolving restaurant scene in Singapore, preference for particular cuisines, food shopping habits and the increasingly busy lives of Singaporeans, food trends are being impacted in several different ways. The basis for our research is to provide insights that can be shared among brands, retailers and consumers and to engage our everyday thinking about Singaporean food culture.

“The findings of our study have been very interesting and back the pride and preference Singaporeans have for our local ethnic cuisine,” said Margaret Cunico, head of Weber Shandwick’s Consumer practice in Singapore. “During this year, we should expect to see our food landscape changing with the introduction and preference of more foreign foods and popularity of online shopping growing across all sectors. Supermarkets are responding with well-stocked shelves of niche foods from around the world, and similarly, the restaurant scene is all the more vibrant. Our busy lifestyles also appear to be shaping food choices and behaviours, so it will be interesting to see how this develops, and what opportunities there are for brands and organisations to engage with consumers.”
Singapore’s culinary scene faces varying challenges, but locals still prefer and believe in the value of true local, authentic food.

Being a city-state reliant on importing its foods from regional and international markets, and with a population made up of multi-ethnic locals and many different nationalities among its expatriate residents, it comes as no surprise that more and more foreign and exotic ingredients have made their way onto the shelves of supermarkets, convenience stores and specialty grocers in recent years. Consumers are divided on whether foreign food will impact local food, with 44% saying it won’t, contrasting with 43% who think foreign foods will eventually be infused into local culture.

Whilst there is already a strong presence of foreign ingredients in Singapore, some experts feel that there is still room for foreign foods to grow in influence and impact Singapore’s culinary culture. Joey Lee, food editor of PoachedMag, noted: “There are plenty of vegetables that haven’t been introduced in the Singapore market that are inexpensive and can be executed in many different ways, such as kale, brussel sprouts and even different kinds of chillies like habaneros and scotch bonnets. I expect to see in the coming year, entrepreneurs recognising the value of being creative, which will contribute to the evolution of Singapore’s food scene.”

Singaporeans aren’t exactly going out of their way to shop at specialty stores for foreigners either with only 17% of consumers saying they choose to shop at these stores. Interestingly, 34% of those who buy foreign foods, are choosing dairy and meat products, while Korean and Japanese foods are also popular, sharing 23% of that pool of shoppers.

Even with culinary diversity at their doorstep, it would seem that the majority of Singaporeans still prefer local food, with 81% of respondents most commonly eating hawker food when not at home.

“Hawker centres are here to stay, although they will continue to evolve in terms of authenticity.”

Celine Asril
Food editor for HungryGoWhere

Hawker food, usually in malls and open-air complexes lined with stalls selling inexpensive local food, has historically been a staple in the Singapore food scene and this shows no signs of slowing down. According to both experts and consumers, despite rising food prices and
Are exotic ingredients from foreign countries a fad or will they become ingrained into local culture?

- 44% Here to stay but won’t impact local food
- 43% Will eventually be infused into local culture
- 13% A fad

Do you shop at specialty supermarkets for foreigners?

- 17% YES
- 83% NO

If yes, what do you normally buy?

- 43% Other
- 34% Dairy and meat products
- 23% Japanese and Korean produce

increasing rental costs, the popularity and high-frequency patronage of hawker centres are not at risk. Celine Asril, Food Editor for HungryGoWhere said that “hawker centres are here to stay, although they will continue to evolve in terms of authenticity. Also with the government leading initiatives, such as launching new centres, hawker food isn’t going anywhere soon.”

Consumers are not too concerned either, with 86% believing that cheap and authentic food is sustainable in Singapore.
Where do you most commonly eat food when you're not at home?

- Street vendors, hawker food: 81%
- Restaurants/cafes: 67%
- Fast food outlets: 65%
- Friends' houses: 6%
- Other: 2%

Is hawker food sustainable in Singapore?

- Yes: 86%
- No: 14%
Singapore’s changing lifestyles and culinary preferences are seeing people eating out more often than in the past and at new styles of restaurants. However, lifestyle changes may not all be positive, with many Singaporeans concerned about growing rates of obesity.

A recent study showed that Singaporeans are putting in an increasing number of working hours when they get home, on top of extended work hours, due to the convenience and availability of the internet. Logging more work hours means sacrificing time elsewhere, and frequently that can mean more meals on the go.

Our consumer survey confirmed this trend, with 61% of respondents saying they ate out more frequently in the past year as compared to the two years before. The number of times people eat out in a week is also high, with 67% eating out at least once a week, and nearly a third (30%) saying they eat out three or more times a week.

In light of a propensity to eat out more frequently, Gladys Wong, Chief Dietician, Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, commented on the urgent need for Singaporeans and the food industry to focus on good dietary habits. “Work life in Singapore is hectic, and it is not about to slow down in the coming year. During the long working hours, Singaporeans prefer to eat on-the-go to save time and not lose concentration. This means that there is a strong market for fast foods, ready-to-eat meals, takeaways, and even liquid meal replacements.”

She continued: “The food industry needs to look ahead and be mindful and embrace food technology and environmental sustainability to produce tasty, yet healthy, balanced meals for this busy population.”

“Where consumers will eat out this year is likely to change, with experts agreeing that fine dining has less of a draw on Singaporeans than it used to. “There has been a definite shift away from fine dining restaurants as consumers look toward mid-range restaurants offering small dishes and sharing platters. The traditional three course meal is going out of fashion,” said Alex Linton, founder of City Nomads.

Touching on the trend of new types of restaurants opening, Jonathan Yang, owner of restaurant Muchachos, noted, “We should expect to witness record numbers of

1. http://enterpriseinnovation.net/article/technology-advancement-leads-longer-work-hours-singapore
food and beverage establishments opening [as a result of this move away from fine dining] as well as the closing of existing ones [fine dining restaurants]. I also anticipate the farm-to-table concept peaking in 2014."

This new breed of smaller, simpler, yet quirky restaurants has been spawning in Singapore over the past 12 months, and our experts say this is where the Singaporean dining experience is heading.

Bernie Utchenik, who recently opened Big Bern’s American Grill after selling the Botak Jones chain in 2013, summed it up: “Singaporeans are now less concerned about price and more about value; their level of expectation has only risen. Offering good food is no longer enough to keep a restaurant going; people now expect a certain ambiance and caring service that sets the place apart. My advice: If you don’t have something new to offer, don’t bother opening a restaurant.”

It might be deliciously convenient, but eating out of the home also comes with its challenges as healthy choices are few and far between at hawker centres and fast food restaurants. "Obesity is also a growing problem. Singaporeans are eating out more often, eating larger quantities and eating more frequently. The widespread use of unhealthier oils and products containing high fructose corn syrup also contributes to this problem,” commented Wong.

While some influencers felt that healthy living is becoming a focus for some Singaporeans, most felt that Singaporeans generally do not make healthy choices a priority when making lifestyle and food decisions.

Our survey revealed that 76% of Singaporeans agree that obesity is becoming a growing problem. However, with 67% of Singaporeans eating out more than once a week, the difficulty of controlling portions and resisting temptation for a quick, easy and often fatty option, isn’t helping the situation.
The gap between technology and food continues to shrink

Technology is expected to make waves in the culinary scene over the coming year. Whether in research and development, hardware innovation, or online, Singaporeans can expect to see significant progress in this space. Brands will do well to target men, as they are more active sharers of food experiences on social media, and the primary online food buyers.

Like in other sectors, technological advances are set to change the world of food. Our experts noted that genetic engineering of produce for extreme climate resistance, nanotechnology for quality and safety detection and 3D food printing, are new developments we can expect to see more of in the coming year. Tessa Riandini, food technologist, Republic Polytechnic said, “Growing populations, combined with climate change, are expected to cause food shortages and potential food safety issues in the future. It is expected that food evolution will be in the area of food technology.”

In one food experiment in 2013, that tests the idea of whether populations will one day be able to survive on artificially grown food, scientists succeeded in artificially growing a patty of meat in a laboratory. Although the cost to produce this on a large scale is currently too high, consumers could potentially be eating artificially grown meat in the near future. With 82% of consumers in Singapore saying they believe it is important to know where their food comes from (e.g., whether it had been ethically farmed or where it originated from), just over a quarter (26%) of Singaporeans indicated that they would be comfortable eating artificially grown meat. Interestingly, men are more likely than women to be comfortable eating meat from a laboratory (36% vs. 26%, respectively).

Chefs in restaurants have also been adopting new types of cooking methods recently, such as sous-vide cooking and air-frying. While nearly half of consumers (45%) agree that this type of technology opens new avenues for different styles of cuisine, nearly as many (41%) feel that these new methods would be too difficult to use at home. Some also feel that this food is pretentious (23%) or a gimmick (21%), while one in five (21%) see it as the future of food in Singapore.

“Growing populations, combined with climate change, are expected to cause food shortages and potential food safety issues in the future. It is expected that food evolution will be in the area of food technology.”

Tessa Riandini
Food Technologist, Republic Polytechnic

Tech-savvy consumers are driving the internet shopping market, with more than S$1.9 billion (US$1.5 billion) in online purchases in the country in 2012 1. Food is no exception, with over half of our respondents (53%) having purchased food online at least once, and 15% doing so between one and three times per month.
The growing popularity of internet food shopping is due in part to increasingly busy lifestyles and the trust consumers have in online vendors. With an estimated S$4.4 billion (US$3.5 billion) to be spent online in 2015¹, online food purchases will naturally play a part in this increase. With major supermarkets developing more sophisticated online shopping platforms, the number of online shoppers and the frequency in which they use online services is expected to increase significantly.

Men are the more active online shoppers too with 3 in ten (31%) shopping online for food or drinks once a week or more. This compared to 20% of women doing the same.

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**How important is it to you to know where your food has come from, for instance whether it has been ethically farmed or where it originated from?**

- **Very Unimportant**: 1%
- **Unimportant**: 2%
- **Moderately Important**: 39%
- **Extremely to very Important**: 43%
- **Neither Important nor Unimportant**: 14%

**Would you be comfortable eating meat grown in a laboratory?**

- **YES**: 26%
- **NO**: 74%

**Men**
- **Yes**: 36%
- **No**: 64%

**Women**
- **Yes**: 17%
- **No**: 83%

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**How do you view new cooking techniques, such as sous-vide cooking, molecular gastronomy, air-frying etc?**

- **It opens new avenues for different styles of cuisine**: 45%
- **It’s a gimmick**: 21%
- **It’s the future of food in Singapore**: 21%
- **Too complicated for home use**: 41%
- **It’s pretentious food**: 23%

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¹ http://www.asianewsnet.net/Sporeans-are-big-online-shoppers-50429.html
How often do you post about your food experiences on social media?

- Once a week or more: 20% (Women), 31% (Men)
- Once a month: 15% (Women), 10% (Men)
- Rarely: 34% (Women), 32% (Men)
- Never: 31% (Women), 27% (Men)

How often do you purchase food or drinks online?

- Once a week or more: 11% (Women), 18% (Men)
- 1-3 times a month: 15% (Women), 16% (Men)
- Several Times a Year: 17% (Women), 12% (Men)
- Once a Year or Less: 10% (Women), 7% (Men)
- Never: 47% (Women), 47% (Men)
Singaporeans are less influenced by hype and prefer to stick to their roots, unfazed by celebrity chefs or international restaurant grading systems.

The internationally renowned Michelin Guide has long been the gold standard for restaurant grading. The guide, which rates restaurants with a star system, can often make or break a restaurant by awarding or taking away stars.

Whilst the Michelin Guide does not currently include Singaporean restaurants, many anticipate its arrival, albeit not with much enthusiasm. Among the 63% of Singaporeans who do not think that the Michelin Guide should include Singaporean restaurants, common feedback was that Singaporeans have their own way of grading food, that the guide is biased towards French style cuisines and therefore irrelevant to Singapore, and that introducing the Michelin Guide to Singapore would likely increase restaurant prices.

Our experts had mixed views about the Michelin Guide, with the majority against its introduction to Singapore. The credibility of the guide and the politics around the grading of restaurants were among the reasons raised. Some influencers did note, however, that the guide would bring additional deserved international recognition to Singapore as a food destination and would put Singapore on par with other international cities graded by the Michelin Guide. Tan Hsueh Yun, Food Editor, The Straits Times said, “Any guide that puts Singapore on the world map is welcome. However, the Michelin Guide will perhaps matter more to chefs.”

Singapore has seen other high-profile endorsements, however, with an influx of celebrity chefs setting up shop in luxurious hotels and trendy areas across the island, notably in the country’s two integrated resorts, among other prime locations. However, among Singaporean consumers, only 23% say they are more likely to buy a product or visit a restaurant endorsed by a celebrity chef, compared to 46% who said they are indifferent, and 31% saying they are less likely to make a purchase based on a high profile endorsement.

When breaking down age groups, results show that younger restaurant-goers are more likely to be influenced by a celebrity chef name compared to their older peers, as the impact of celebrity culture appears to decrease with each older consumer segment.
Does Singapore need a Michelin Guide to grade its restaurants?

Are you more likely to buy a product or visit a restaurant that is endorsed by a celebrity chef?

Percentages of those more likely to buy a product or visit a restaurant that is endorsed by a celebrity chef, by age.

Final Thoughts

The Food Forward Trends report predicts exciting food trends for the year ahead. As diverse as it is, the food scene remains uniquely Singaporean, with hawker food deeply embedded into the palates of its people. Busy lifestyles, food shopping habits, and value for money - a top priority for Singaporeans - means the industry has plenty of challenges, and opportunities, to meet consumer demand. We look forward to watching Singapore’s food scene unfold over the coming year and seeing what’s whetting Singaporeans’ appetites.
Celine Asril is the food editor of HungryGoWhere. A popular online portal for restaurant and bar reviews, food news, and dining deals, HungryGoWhere is also Singapore’s go-to social platform for anyone to leave their thoughts on a restaurant.

Adibah Isa is the features and lifestyle editor for one of Singapore’s most prominent fashion and lifestyle publications. The title has gained a reputation for its up-to-date trend reports, in-depth style and beauty features, interviews with prominent movers and shakers, and fashion and beauty spreads.

Joey Lee is the food editor of Poached Mag, an online portal. Plugged in to arts, entertainment, fashion and food, Poached Mag shares the local love for food and takes its readers on a gastronomic adventure on the tiny island of Singapore.

Alex Linton is an ex-chef and one of the two founders of City Nomads, an online portal focusing on food. Over the past two years, City Nomads has fast become one of Singapore’s go-to, trusted sources of information on what’s shaking in the city, with daily reviews and listings that filter Nomad-worthy restaurants, bars, culture, fashion, lifestyle and nightlife happenings.

Tessa Riandini is the food technologist from the School of Applied Sciences, Republic Polytechnic. She teaches food science and nutrition modules and supervises food-related projects on topics such as food packaging, functional food, and healthier choice food and beverage products. She also conducts continuing education and training for working adults and workshops for food companies. Her prior experience spans several sectors within the food processing and manufacturing industry, both locally and globally.

After a failed F&B venture, Bernie founded Botak Jones in 2003 to serve American food and offer a higher quality dining experience to Singapore’s heartlanders. After growing the Botak Jones concept into a thriving business with multiple locations across Singapore, Bernie sold the chain in 2013 and opened Big Bern’s American Grill to introduce his American dishes in a more up-scale scene within a local neighbourhood setting.
Gladys Wong, the chief dietician of Khoo Teck Puat Hospital, is also an active member of the Singapore Nutrition & Dietetics Association (SNDA). Gladys has a special interest in diabetes management, disease-risk prevention education for the community and medical education for the healthcare professional.

Jonathan Yang is the owner of Muchachos, a Mexican burrito restaurant that hit the Singaporean F&B scene with a bang in June 2013. Despite its newness, Muchachos is already considered a hot-spot in and the definitive burrito haunt in Singapore.

Tan Hsueh Yun is food editor of The Straits Times, Singapore’s most highly circulated English daily broadsheet newspaper with 365,800 daily copies reaching 1.4 million readers. Responsible for the food section, Hsueh Yun covers both local and international culinary stories.
Weber Shandwick’s Food Forward Trends Report 2014 identifies the latest food trends that are predicted to shape the food culture of Singapore in the coming year. A nationwide polling of 750 adult consumers was conducted online via global research company Qualtrics. Leading food experts, including food editors, chefs, bloggers and nutritionists, were also interviewed by Weber Shandwick in December 2013.

The Food Forward 2014 Study was also conducted in Australia, China and Korea.
For more information visit: www.webershandwick.asia/foodforward

Weber Shandwick is a leading global public relations firm with offices in 81 countries. The firm’s diverse team of thinkers, strategists, analysts, producers, designers, developers and campaign activators has won the most prestigious awards in the world for innovative approaches and impactful work, including four 2013 Cannes Lions. Weber Shandwick was also named PR Week’s International Consultancy of the Year, The Holmes Report’s Best Healthcare Consultancy in the World and Asia Pacific Digital Consultancy of the Year in 2013, in addition to earning numerous best place to work accolades. The firm deploys deep expertise across sectors and specialty areas, including consumer marketing, corporate reputation, healthcare, technology, public affairs, financial services, corporate social responsibility, financial communications and crisis management, using proprietary social, digital and analytics methodologies. Weber Shandwick is part of the Interpublic Group (NYSE: IPG).

In 2013 Weber Shandwick Singapore was honoured with a Gold Stevie at the International Business Awards for pro bono work on WWF’s Earth Hour campaign; and a certificate of excellence at the PRWeek Awards Asia for Healthcare: Ethical Campaign of the Year. In 2012 Weber Shandwick was also the most awarded agency at Singapore’s bi-annual PRISM Awards.

For more information about Food Forward Trends Report 2014, please contact:
Margaret Cunico
President, Head of Consumer
+65 6825 8000
mcunico@webershandwick.com

webershandwick.asia/foodforward-5G
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