



keepers of the flame

➔ Singapore's oldest restaurants continue to set the pace for extraordinary food on the island's culinary scene. We've culled four of these institutions to reveal their time-tested favourites.

BY CHRISTOPHER TAN AND DAVID YIP
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SPRING COURT

"Birthdays are probably the most common celebrations here," says Mike Ho, grandson of Spring Court's founder Ho Loke Yee, adding with a smile that many loyal regular customers 'initiate' their children and grandchildren in turn into their tradition of birthday patronage. Mind you, at the grand age of 82, Spring Court itself has had its fair share of births and rebirths. As Wing Choon Yuen, it opened in 1929 in Great World Amusement Park, hosting many a wedding banquet at its tables and wedding photo on its front steps. In 1978, when the park closed, the restaurant was reborn as Spring Court in Chinatown's Oriental Theatre; it later moved to the East Coast in 1990, before settling into its current premises at Cross Street in 2004.

At Singapore's oldest family-run Chinese restaurant, signature dishes are legion. "Buddha Jumps Over the Wall is originally a Fuzhou dish and we have been serving the Singaporean version since 1929. It is a very popular dish at Spring Court, especially during birthdays and company dinners," says Ho. A deep-fried 'wafer' of deboned chicken spread with prawn paste, with crispy skin and succulent dual-layered flesh, is highly popular too.

Equally hallowed and as tricky to prepare are the crab balls: crabmeat, salted egg yolks and chicken livers, wrapped in pig's caul (chee mong yau) and fried to a golden turn. "Our branding is modern, but our quality control keeps the taste traditional," says Madam Soon, Ho's mother, who runs and keeps the restaurant shipshape. "It's all about the details," she points out. For example, those chicken livers are specially picked for smoothness; choice Thai taro is used in the yam basket, for a velvety, fragrant interior clad in lacy, crispy skin. Spring Court's chilli crab is prepared by cooking the crustaceans fresh in chilli sauce for better flavour penetration; and fake almond essence never goes near the silky almond cream, ground only from fresh kernels; and so on. All condiments, marinades and seasoning blends are made in-house.

A new favourite is Madam Soon's mother's recipe for Fujian popiah, bolster-plump with vegetable threads turned soft and mellow from four hours of braising; besides familiar garnishes such as prawns and

omelette, the popiah also contains a traditional southern Chinese seaweed known as 'hor tee'. In recent years, other dialect dishes like this one have been added to the original and mostly Cantonese menu, reflecting both the curiosity of regular diners, who have suggested some of them, as well as the family's extended heritage. "We consider ourselves a truly Singaporean Chinese restaurant," says Ho fervently. "It's not easy to keep a business running this long... the important thing is to be faithful to our customers."



BLACK AND WHITE IMAGES, BUDDHA JUMPS OVER THE WALL AND INTERIOR PHOTOS COURTESY OF SPRING COURT



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