



Cherie Lok

Dining out is a fairly straightforward process in Singapore, swathed, for the most part, in the certainty of a guaranteed seat.

You pick a place, punch in your details and rock up at the pre-arranged hour. Recognition glints in the host's eyes as your name surfaces in the system. The food arrives after a while. You pay, you leave. In some cases, a special reservation link is sent to your e-mail, and the cycle begins anew.

But what happens when a restaurant eschews convention for the unpredictability of a walk-in system? Suddenly, it is anyone's game. The question becomes not just what to order, but also what time to show? How long to wait? When to throw in the towel and leave?

Restaurants that do not take reservations argue that there is a method to the madness. At Scarpetta, a viral pasta bar in Amoy Street, queues start an hour before doors open. Once, the line stretched 10 units down to the food centre at the mouth of the street.

The situation is a lot neater now that the restaurant has introduced a new system. The first 28 guests are seated when doors open and everyone else is given a time to return, their names scribbled down on a tiny blackboard.

"It's much better than what we had before, with just a straight queue. Some people would wait 2½ hours in the hot and humid weather, so they would be really grumpy and hangry (hungry and angry) by the time they got in," says owner Aaron Yeunh, 32.

Service moves fast. Each seating lasts about an hour, and Scarpetta can accommodate three or four rounds of guests every night. This, Mr Yeunh says, is the only way he can sell handmade pasta in the middle of town for \$17 to \$26.

"The only way to charge these prices is with high volume. And if I need volume, I can't take reservations because that would limit my dinner seatings to two a night."

For restaurants like Mensho Tokyo Singapore at Raffles City, doing away with bookings helps to democratise the dining experience. No number of bots or connections will make the line move any faster. "This ensures that every guest has an equal opportunity to enjoy our ramen, creating a welcoming and fair experience for all," says a spokesperson for the Japanese chain.

Likewise, Mr Lim Kian Chun, 33, chief executive of Ebb & Flow Group, which runs popular Italian restaurant Casa Vostra at Raffles City, adds: "Physical queues keep things simple and accessible to customers of all ages, especially our segment of older customers who are less familiar or comfortable with digital reservation systems."

CANCELLING CANCEL CULTURE

It is a type of survival tactic too. With cancellations rising across the board – Mr Yeunh says that a 20 to 30 per cent cancellation rate, which some restaurants are experiencing, is enough to kill a business – it is sometimes easier not to section off seats in advance.

Mr Lim says: "Implementing reservations introduces the element of unpredictability with no-shows, late arrivals and variable



Mr Theeviyar Raja (left), a front-of-house staff member at Scarpetta, welcoming customers as the restaurant opens for dinner. ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO

Reservations over table bookings

A walk-in system improves efficiency for restaurants but long queues heighten diners' expectations

dining durations, which can disrupt the dining experience for others."

By eliminating the logistical scramble, staff can focus on the parts that count the most: food and service. And that extra bandwidth comes in especially handy when walk-in traffic continues unabated throughout the night.

Mr Yeunh recalls: "We were grateful that response was so overwhelming when we opened in February, but part of the issue was that we were running out of food. So, people would wait two hours, only to find that we've sold out half the menu."

The seven-person team, now fortified with two extra chefs, has since fine-tuned operations to guarantee that all guests who wait in line will be able to order whichever dishes they came to try.

Casa Vostra's team also had to adjust to the daunting task of keeping up with demand while maintaining a consistent quality of food and service. Over a year in, Mr Lim says they have got the hang of things. "We've worked very hard to

improve our daily operations and food and service standards, and have managed to reduce waiting times while continuing to serve the same volume of customers."

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The longer the queue, the higher the expectation.

"It best be worth the wait," quips chef consultant Fiona Tang, 35, who eventually snagged a seat at Scarpetta 2½ hours after arriving.

Her sentiment is echoed by fellow diner Kelly Poh, a 17-year-old student who visited Scarpetta in May. "The food does not just have to be good, but also good enough to justify wasting two hours."

However, she also relished the anticipation of waiting to try very in-demand restaurants, which "creates more excitement".

For 20-year-old undergraduate Raen Tan, a snaking queue – like the one she joined outside Casa Vostra – is a worthwhile gamble. "It suggests that the food is either good or new. As someone who's

adventurous, I'd be willing to queue to try new things that are popular or raved about."

Besides, as Ms Joey Chua, 29, a liquefied natural gas market analyst, points out: "I can do many other things, such as read, look through e-mails, reply texts or day-dream while queuing. To me, it doesn't really count as a waste of time."

In Singapore, where queueing has all but been gazetted as a national pastime, hers is far from an atypical view.

Dr Hannah H. Chang, associate professor of marketing at SMU, says it is an example of social proofing – a phenomenon in which people make decisions by following the actions of those around them – that has found special resonance here.

"Queue culture is sometimes discussed as a demonstration of kiasuism, that if you don't queue, you may miss out on a good deal, experience or product."

Mr Sai Ming Liew, a senior adviser at global research and innovation consultancy Behavioural In-

sights Team, adds that while the tipping point may come when customers feel that a queue is not moving fast enough, the sunk cost fallacy sometimes keeps them in place longer than intended.

"The longer people spend in a queue, the more they start to feel a sense of psychological ownership over the object or experience they're waiting for. Because people are naturally averse to losses, this can make them reluctant to walk away, even if it might no longer be worthwhile," he notes.

Though this fear of missing out has proved something of a boon to Scarpetta, Mr Yeunh laughs off accusations that he is creating a queue for the sake of it.

"I always tell the team that we have to deliver. Don't skimp on the hospitality. Don't skimp on the food. Be super focused. Take our food really, really seriously."

In the past, before the blackboard system freed customers from having to stand in line, staff would try to sweeten the wait by handing out free drinks. Refreshments are also distributed outside

at restaurants such as Gyukatsu Kyoto Katsugyu at Raffles City.

Nonetheless, some restaurants have caved and done away with their no-reservations policy. Spanish restaurant Esquina opened in 2012 and started accepting bookings in 2014, after it added a dining room on the second floor.

Though walk-ins are more efficient for a busy restaurant like his, chef-owner Carlos Montobbio, 38, concedes that bookings made a big difference to the guest experience.

"We care a lot about service, and having people wait outside – especially if it's a business dinner, a date or regulars coming back – just didn't feel right. Letting people book a table gave them a much more comfortable and reliable experience," he says.

Others, like local cuisine chain Great Nanyang, which gets multiple queries a week about whether it takes reservations, have found a compromise of sorts. Since April, groups of at least 10 diners can secure their seats at any of its outlets in advance.

"As our customers have different dining time periods, it is difficult to get available empty tables side-by-side to combine for larger groups. To cater to groups of this size, we need to set aside tables in advance," says founder Keith Kang, 42.

Casa Vostra's Mr Lim is also grateful that most customers understand the reasons for the restaurant's policy, and vows to go the extra mile to maintain that trust. He says: "Our team makes every effort to offer attentive service and maintain relationships with our regulars – from remembering their favourite dishes and preferences to connecting with them each time they dine."

cherielok@sph.com.sg

No reservations

MENSHO TOKYO

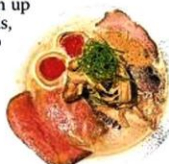
Where: 03-43 Raffles City, 252 North Bridge Road
Open: 11am to 9pm daily
Info: @menshotokyo.sg on Instagram

Mensho Tokyo, a Japanese ramen chain whose San Francisco outlet is listed in California's Michelin Guide, arrived in Singapore in July, trailed by hordes of curious diners eager for a sip of its umami-rich soup.

Its signature toripaitan (\$28++) layers A5 wagyu chashu, smoked pork chashu, duck chashu, chicken chashu, king oyster mushroom strips and ajitama eggs on wavy wheat noodles. All this is steeped in a creamy chicken broth that does not immediately knock you out in the way that pork, with its stronger flavour, sometimes does.

Other more unconventional options include the duck matcha (\$25++) and chilli crab ramen (\$28++) – a Singapore-exclusive tribute to a local classic – which have yielded mixed reactions from diners. **Tip:** Go on a Tuesday or Wednesday evening, when the restaurant tends to be quieter – you might even be able to enter without queueing. As wait times can reach up to 30 minutes on weekends, guests are encouraged to arrive early.

Mensho Tokyo Singapore is famous for its chicken soup ramen. ST PHOTO: CHERIE LOK



TONSHOU

Where: 51 Tras Street
Open: 11am to 9pm daily
Info: @tonshou_sg on Instagram

Tonshou is a Korean pork cutlet chain more than capable of going toe to toe with the top Japanese tonkatsu restaurants in Singapore. Its not-so-secret weapon? A charcoal-grilled pork cutlet that redefines what tonkatsu should look and taste like.

Instead of rectangular blocks trimmed with fat – though it has those too – Tonshou's Instagram-famous hire katsu set (\$28++) rolls in on blushing pork loin medallions. A meticulous four-stage cooking process packs the juices into the meat, ensuring the cutlet remains crispy yet succulent.

The rosu katsu set (\$28++), on the other hand, more closely resembles the version of this dish typically found at Japanese eateries, and offers much of the same textural duality, plus an added burst of fat.

These breaded slabs of gold can also be stuffed between bread. A pork cutlet sandwich costs \$21++, while a shrimp tempura sandwich goes for \$24++. **Tip:** The restaurant uses a QR-based remote queueing system, so join the waitlist before travelling to the restaurant to minimise waiting time. It is also in the process of setting up a reservation system.



Hire katsu set from Tonshou. ST PHOTO: CHERIE LOK

SCARPETTA

Where: 47 Amoy Street
Open: 11.30am to 2.30pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays), 6 to 10.30pm (Tuesdays and Wednesdays), 6 to 11pm (Thursdays), 6 to 11.30pm (Fridays and Saturdays)
Info: @scarpetta.sg on Instagram

This chic 28-seater was modelled after the pasta bars of London – think Padella, the perennially popular Borough Market institution, and the like. So, it was that ethos of casual excellence that Mr Aaron Yeunh, who lived in the English capital for over a decade, sought to recreate here: great food at fair prices, without so much as a whiff of pretentiousness.

Scarpetta's menu is lean and disciplined. It is split into four modest sections, with most prices hovering around the \$10 to \$20 range.

The cacio e pepe (\$20) is really a pasta alla gricia, with a black pepper-pecorino romano base and crispy guanciale topping. Whatever its name, it is a textural delight, perfect for anyone who prefers his or her pasta al dente and salted with pockets of fried fat.

The all'assassina (\$18) with pomodoro tomatoes and chilli is more divisive, says Mr Yeunh. Diners might be forgiven for mistaking the slightly burnt strands for a kitchen accident. But the char is intentional, and elevates the springy, spicy noodles in the same way wok hei breathes fragrance into a plate of bee hoon.

Tip: Visit during off-peak hours, such as 1.35pm on a weekday or after 8.45pm for dinner.

Scarpetta's Cacio e Pepe with Crispy Guanciale. ST PHOTO: BRIAN TEO



CASA VOSTRA

Where: 01-49/50/51 Raffles City, 252 North Bridge Road
Open: 11.30am to 10pm daily
Info: casavostra.sg

After a year at Raffles City, casual Italian joint Casa Vostra is still commanding formidable queues, even on weekday evenings.

To keep up with the hype, the restaurant refreshed its menu in April, unveiling homely fare such as the aglio e olio (\$15) inspired by the recipe of chef-owner Antonio Miscellaneo's mother. It tosses in sun-dried tomatoes for some summery pizzazz.

A smattering of new sides have wound their way onto the menu too. For example, the baked scamorza (\$6), a dangerously gooey puddle of melted cheese drizzled with honey.

Last but not least, no trip to Casa Vostra is complete without a slice of its trademark Newpolitan pizza, dressed up this time with the sweet-savoury melange of Parma ham, fig puree, rocket, Parmigiano Reggiano, candied walnuts and Fior di latte mozzarella (\$26). As always, the crust – whipped into shape by a long process of fermentation and baking – is perfectly airy and crisp.

Tip: Drop by from 2 to 5pm, the restaurant's off-peak hours.



Casa Vostra has updated its menu with new dishes. PHOTO: CASA VOSTRA