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Hock Lai took him to the G.H. Cafe at nearby Battery Road. There were no hints anywhere what G.H. abbreviated stood for... The restaurant was air-conditioned, had plush upholstered chairs, white tablecloths, occasionally stained, and a fat Indian woman at the piano, singing old Broadway hits. Cole Porter, Oscar Hammerstein and Richard Rogers ghosted the large, comfortably darkened dining room, while young business executives and lawyers and doctors ate from plates with knife and fork and spoon. Silver cutlery a little worn from use. Cutlery, however, embossed with the letterings "G.H.". Kwang Meng understood from Hock Lai that this same restaurant would be transformed into a bar, with girls and all, in the night. During the day, it only catered to the lunch throng.¹

In 1972, Singaporean poet and novelist Goh Poh Seng published *If We Dream Too Long*, a book that has been described as the first true local novel. References to a G.H. Cafe on Battery Road appear periodically in the book, illustrating how a character in the story – because he now dines at the cafe – has risen up the social ranks.

A Sweet Treat

G.H. Cafe was not a figment of Goh's imagination. It was a real cafe that was located on Battery Road. In its heyday, this was where the well-heeled had tea, businessmen hobnobbed and lawyers dined.

G.H. Cafe began life as G.H. Sweet Shop, located at 31 Kling Street (present-day Chulia Street), and started advertising its delectable offerings in *The Straits Times* in October 1920.² There has been much speculation about what the initials "G" and "H" stood for. While some believe they were short for "Grand Hotel", others have attributed it to businessman G.H. Kiat.³ However, in all likelihood, they were the initials of the eatery's European founder, Mrs Gertrude Howe.⁴

According to a *Straits Times* report on 13 October 1920, the sweets on display at G.H. Sweet Shop were "sold under the chop 'G.H.' which conceals the identity of a lady who evidently has nothing to learn in the art of sweet making".⁵ Advertisements promoted the shop's "new delicious sweets made fresh daily in Singapore". These could be purchased from various outlets around

town, including hotels, or directly from the shop itself. G.H. Sweet Shop soon became the go-to place for wedding and Christmas cakes, ice lollies and sweets.⁶ Such was its reputation that someone even bought a G.H. Sweet Shop cake for the Sultan of Johor's birthday in September 1922.⁷

By then, the shop had moved to larger premises at 6 Battery Road, and later to 7 Battery Road next door. The ground floor comprised a cake and tiffin room while the second floor had tea rooms and another tiffin room.⁸ Part of the shop space was rented out for exhibitions of art works. In 1924, G.H. Sweet Shop opened the Tea Kiosk overlooking the lake at the Botanic Gardens.⁹

G.H. Sweet Shop also supplied confectionery to places such as Hong Kong and Rangoon (present-day Yangon) "carefully packed in tins". In Singapore, the G.H. brand gained patronage of the well-heeled of society. The establishment catered food for events at the Yacht Club and guests at horse races, and also ice-cream for balls held at Government House (today's Istana).¹⁰

Changes Afoot

Around 1926, G.H. Sweet Shop was put up for sale for unknown reasons. It was eventually purchased for \$12,000 by Armenian businessmen John Eleazar Johannes and his brother Basil Eleazar Johannes, in partnership with fellow Armenian Arathoon

Martin Sarkies, a cousin of the Sarkies brothers of Raffles Hotel fame. The men took out a loan from Chettiar moneylenders¹¹ for the acquisition.¹²

Money was pumped in to redecorate and furnish the shop, enhance the kitchen and augment the food menu. The restaurant, which reopened around early 1927, operated till 10 pm nightly, serving a la carte meals.¹³ Its cakes remained the most sought-after item on the menu and patrons were advised to order Christmas cakes "in advance so as to avoid disappointment as was the case last year".¹⁴

Within two years, however, poor management by the Johannes brothers resulted in their bankruptcy.¹⁵ In August 1931, *The Singapore Free Press* reported that G.H. Sweet Shop would be liquidated. Fortunately, prominent Parsi merchant Navroji R. Mistri¹⁶ stepped in to save the business and became its new proprietor that same month. Determined to give it a new lease of life, Mistri renamed the shop "G.H. Cafe" and sought to "improve the amenities and the scope of business".¹⁷

Under Mistri, G.H. Cafe continued churning out cakes and confectionery while continuing its restaurant and catering business. In 1932, Raffles Institution held its annual dinner there and the following year, the cafe catered for almost a thousand guests at Mrs Ong

(Below) Navroji R. Mistri (1885–1953) was a businessman and philanthropist who acquired G.H. Cafe in August 1931. The Mistri Wing of the Singapore General Hospital and Mistri Road are named after him. Courtesy of Mr and Mrs Noshir Mistri.

(Below right) An advertisement of The Tea Kiosk, operated by G.H. Sweet Shop, at the Botanic Gardens. *Malayan Saturday Post*, 19 April 1924, p. 4. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

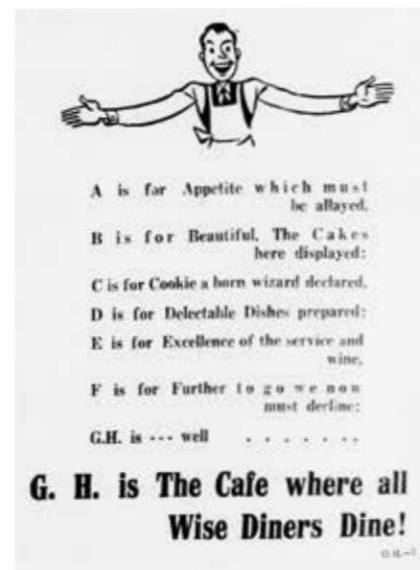


G.H. CAFE

A DINING LANDMARK ON BATTERY ROAD

G.H. Cafe was a fashionable eatery in the business district that was popular among Singapore's well-heeled. Vandana Aggarwal relives the history of this landmark institution.

G.H. Cafe on Battery Road, 1962. In its heyday, this was where the affluent dined. Photo by Wong Ken Foo (K.F. Wong). Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.



(Far left) Hot cross buns were sold at G.H. Cafe. The advertisement took pains to mention that the buns were “baked to a golden brown and hot from the oven” and also reasonably priced. *The Malaya Tribune*, 9 April 1936, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

(Left) On top of its delicious food and excellent service, G.H. Cafe publicised itself as the place where “all wise diners dine”. *The Malaya Tribune*, 1 September 1933, p. 6. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.

“Dear A.S. Lee, you ought to see,
You’ll ne’er have little Jennys
If you eat cakes and sip your tea
At such expensive venues!...”

“I don’t pretend you should not spend
Fair sums to please fair Jenny,
But there are less expensive shops
Than in the Jalan Batt’ry!”²⁷

To expand its customer base, G.H. Cafe began putting up advertisements that emphasised the affordability – yet uncompromising quality – of its meals.²⁸

The cafe had a large repertoire of dishes catering to different tastes. In 1935, Indian cuisine was served at a dinner hosted by Mrs J.T.N. Handy²⁹ in aid of the St Andrew’s School building fund,³⁰ while Rijsttafel tiffin was cooked for the delegates of a Rotary Club conference.³¹ G.H. Cafe also regularly catered at weddings. In 1953, the cafe hosted a dinner party on the occasion of the wedding of Devan Nair (who would be appointed President of Singapore in 1981). Guests included future prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and his wife, Kwa Geok Choo.³²

G.H. Cafe was well patronised at breakfast, lunch and afternoon tea. The day would begin with morning shoppers who dined and relaxed in the cafe before the lunchtime crowd descended. According to prominent Indian businessman Rajabali Jumabhoy, “at 11 o’clock most shipping and insurance people used to go for coffee or a drink at G.H. Cafe and bargains for cargo and insurance... [were] often made there.”³³ Tea-drinking crowds thronged the cafe in the late afternoons. However, the cafe was generally closed in the late afternoons unless an event was held there.



A porcelain plate bearing the logo of G.H. Cafe, 1980s. Courtesy of National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board.

Sam Leong’s¹⁸ 71st birthday celebration held at New World Cabaret.¹⁹

A Popular Hangout

With business doing well, Mistri decided that the restaurant needed a face lift. When G.H. Cafe reopened in 1935 after an extensive refurbishment, it featured a lounge with terrazzo flooring and comfortable low chairs upholstered in green. The main hall, tastefully painted in shades of grey and green, had 40 tables that could accommodate up to 200 diners and ceiling fans to cool the place. Tea and dinner dances could now be held on the spanking new dance floor, accompanied by music played on an automatic electric gramophone.²⁰

G.H. Cafe was a popular venue for hosting visiting dignitaries, wedding receptions and high-profile society events. In 1935, the women-only Lotus Club held a dinner at the cafe in celebration of its jubilee anniversary which saw, for the first time in the club’s history, male attendees.²¹ Other events held at the cafe included the annual general meetings of the Medical Practitioners of Singapore, the Old Boys of St John’s College of Jaffna in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) and the Christian Brothers Old Boys Association.

G.H. Cafe continued to operate during the Japanese Occupation. Mrs Myna Ruth Segeram, who worked in the Library Section of the Economic Research Department for a Japanese officer, remembers that very often, she and other co-workers “piled into his car and went down to G.H. Cafe in Battery Road and he gave us a treat of ice-cream”.²² Mr Trevelyan Hale, a Eurasian who joined the Customs Department during this period, held his wedding reception at the cafe in 1944.²³

After the war, G.H. Cafe became synonymous with an upmarket tea house and luncheon venue. Scotsman Hugh William Jamieson, who arrived in Singapore in 1946 and worked in the vicinity of Raffles Place, recalls the cafe as a “superior place” with “white tablecloths and proper cutlery”.²⁴

Such was the popularity of the cafe that it continued to operate even after an external wall collapsed, taking down part of the first floor. This happened at about 8.30 am on 12 October 1948. Fortunately, there were no customers at the time, and the manager and the chief bartender narrowly escaped with their lives. Later in the day, customers nonchalantly carried on with their meal even as debris was being cleared.²⁵

G.H. Cafe was also an ideal venue to impress a girl, according to a poem written by an “A.S. Lee” and published in *The Straits Times* in July 1949. He wrote:

“A picture in silk and lace by Elsie May,
If my darling, my winsome Jenny!

“I will bring her then to the G.H. Cafe
Where we chat and eat cakes and sip tea”²⁶

A week later, a European resident in Singapore penned a witty poem in response to Lee, admonishing him thus:

and all manner of celebrations. Nicolas Tang, who was then a salaried partner with law firm Allen & Gledhill, recalls that G.H. Cafe was a popular haunt for lawyers in the 1970s:

“When we went to the High Court on summons in chambers days, we would walk back to Raffles Place,

and have coffee at the G.H. Cafe in Battery Road... together with its sinfully delicious kaya cake. If we missed coffee, we could always go there for lunch and sit at a table reserved for lawyers (a sort of ‘mess table’).”³⁵

A Quick Decline

By the mid-1970s, however, the cafe’s accounts were in the red. The management attempted to reinvent the cafe as a nightclub and cocktail lounge in a bid to save the business. In 1973, G.H. Cafe became known as Singapore Kitchen & Cocktail Lounge. The next year saw the space being transformed into a nightclub called Singapore Mini Nite-Club.³⁶ In 1975, the night club was renamed Golden Lucky Cocktail Lounge and, a few months later, Seven-Up Restaurant and Cocktail Lounge.³⁷ Despite the series of makeovers and rebranding, the business failed to revive and went into liquidation in 1981.³⁸ While G.H. Cafe no longer exists today, it remains a fond memory for an older generation of Singaporeans. ♦

Post-Mistri Era

Following Mistri’s death in 1953, G.H. Cafe continued to operate under the same name. Peter Chua Hock Seng, a well-known racehorse owner, became a partner and the managing director of G.H. Cafe until his demise in 1960.³⁴ The cafe remained a trendy place for hosting visitors, club meetings, office parties

A farewell tea party hosted by the Indian Chamber of Commerce at G.H. Cafe for founding member Jamnadas Purshotam. *The Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, 16 April 1936, p. 2. Retrieved from NewspaperSG.



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