

## Fun and Feast: The Story of Wonder Food Museum

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Figure 1: Wonder Food Museum (Sources: Wonder Food Museum)

Over the past couple of years, a global enthusiasm for food museums seems to have sprung up almost overnight. Museums dedicated to the wider world of food have gotten underway in different parts of the world (Tove Danovich, 2015). In Asia, in recent years, food also earned its very special place in museums. Historical research has shown that opened in 1986, the Museum Kimchikan in Seoul, South Korea is one of the oldest food museums in Asia (Museum Kimchikan, 2020). In 2002, Tteok Museum (Korean Rice Cakes Museum) is another food museum that opened in Seoul to celebrate Korean's rich culinary heritage.

Lucy Dayman (2017), given to Japanese serious love for dietary, Japan is the food museum capital of Asia. Currently, there are at least 14 food museums in Japan, namely Shin-Yokohama Ramen Museum (Yokohama), Cup Noodle Museum (Yokohama and Osaka), Kewpie Mayo Museum (Tokyo), Shimizu Sushi Museum (Shizuoka), Fake Food Museum (Tokyo and Yokohama), Kirin Beer Village (Yokohama), the Sapporo Beer Museum (Hokkaido), Tottori Nijisseiki Pear Museum (Kurayoshi), New Ginger Museum (Tochigi Prefecture), Odaiba Takoyaki Museum (Tokyo), Hakutsuru Sake Brewery Museum (Kobe), Food and Agriculture Museum (Tokyo), and etc. In recent decades, Japan's thriving food culture has also been the catalyst for more food museum boom throughout the country.

In Taiwan, opened in 1998, the Yilan Distillery Chia Chi Lan Wine Museum in Yilan City is generally recognized as the oldest food museum in Taiwan. From 2000 to present, there are at least 7 food museums have been opened in Taiwan, namely, Wu Tao Chishang Lunch Box Cultural History Museum

in Taitung (opened in 2002), Taiwan Salt Museum in Tainan (opened in 2002), Teng Feng Fish Ball Museum located in Tamsui (opened in 2004), Spring Onion Culture Museum in Yilan (opened in 2005), Taiwan Sugar Museum in Kaohsiung (opened in 2006), Kuo Yuan Ye Museum of Cake and Pastry in Taoyuan City (opened in 2011), and Taiwan Mochi Museum in Nantou City (opened in 2011). Besides Japan and Taiwan, mainland China has also developed a strong enthusiasm for developing food museums. As reported by Fuchsia Dunlop (2014), many new museums concerning food culture and culinary arts are opening in the mainland China, for example, the Hangzhou's Cuisine Museum is currently one of the most outstanding food museums that fully funded by the city government to promote China's gastro-diplomacy.

In 2005, Hong Kong also welcomed its first food museum, the Tao Heung Foods of Mankind Museum in Fan Ling (the museum was relocated to Shatin in 2008). In 2018, the first culinary museum of Indian was established in Manipal by WGSHA educational institution to showcase the beauty and greatness of Indian food culture. In 2015, the Wonder Food Museum was opened in Penang, Malaysia as the first food museum in Southeast Asia.

### The Wonder Food Museum

Located in George Town, Penang, Malaysia. The Wonder Food Museum is a private museum established on November 21, 2015. Situated inside Georgetown's colonial architecture built in the 1940s, the museum is the only one of its kind in the world that celebrates diverse Asian dietary. Meanwhile, with a focus on showcasing Malaysia's food culture, the museum is a great place to discover Malaysian culinary heritage. According to Sean Lau (Museum Founder and Director), Wonder Food Museum's mission is to document, preserve, and promote Malaysia's unique food culture which reflects the multiculturalism of the nation. Moreover, the museum's additional, yet not lesser mission is to research, exhibit, and publicize the rich culinary heritage of Asia for the benefit of local residents and international visitors (personal interview, 2020).

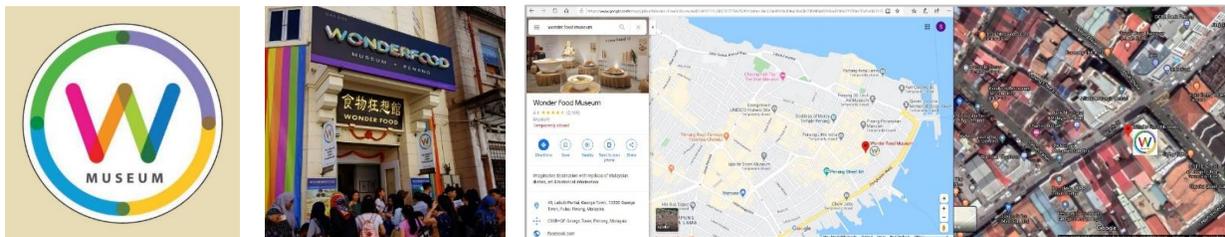


Figure 2: Wonder Food Museum (Sources: Wonder Food Museum)

As a new kind of museum in Malaysia that delicate to showcase Malaysia's food culture with exhibits that allow visitors to "plean" (play + learn) with. The museum is an "edutainment" museum that incorporates elements of entertainment and interactivity into its exhibitions to maximize visitors' experiences. As said by Sean Lau, "Wonder Food Museum is a food museum plus wonderland that aims to provide a rich educational experience on food culture, and inspire creativity and curiosity within every individual."

### The museum's curatorial concept

Sean Lau (2020), the idea of opening a food museum was conceived in 2012, yet to make Wonder Food Museum become a reality is a challenging journey. It took the team nearly four years to overcome all

challenges and have the museum opened in November 2015. The first and the biggest challenge was, there is no food museum in Malaysia and neighboring countries to serve as a reference, and most of the food museums the team has research and learn about did not able to satisfy their interest. As such, to arrive with the concept of a “wonderland” comes only after months of research and discussion. Cheryl Ng (Co-founder) also points out that they want to position this museum as a food wonderland for visitors to engage and enjoy their visit, it is a participating museum that engages visitors in both mental and physical interaction. Therefore, the overall exhibition design and exhibits production are centered around the wonderland’s curatorial concept, and titled the museum Wonder Food Museum”.

### The Museum’s exhibits

All hyper-realistic replica foods exhibited in the museum are handcrafted by the creative team led by Cheryl Ng, who was trained professionally in the art of “shokuhin sampuru”. As said by Cheryl Ng, “my role as the leader of exhibits production is to lead the team to create the most hyper-realistic replica foods with the highest-level of deliciousness. It took the team nearly two years to research and produce close to 200 types of exhibits” (personal interview, 2020).



Figure 3: Wonder Food Museum’s exhibits production (Sources: Wonder Food Museum)

Shokuhin sampuru (food sample), a widespread Japanese art of replica foods was invented by Takizo Iwasaki and Suzu in 1932 (Iwasaki Co., Ltd., 2011). Since then, the culture of using Shokuhin sampuru has become a popular practice by many Japanese restaurants to display their signatures’ dishes on shop windows to attract customers. Today, as times have changed, the roles of replica foods have evolved from just dish samples for restaurant promotion to art that pursuit of reality. As reported by Jared Lubarsky in the New York Times (1985), the craftsmanship of replica foods has been raised to an art form. Japanese plastic food models by the Maizuru Company were exhibited at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum in 1980. Meanwhile, in addition to its traditional roles, replica foods are also being used in many ways, for instance, decoration display for restaurants and grocery, props for movies, television shows, and theatrical plays.

In the 20th century, models of foods and dishes were also used for nutrition education and consumer research (Tamara Bucher et al., 2012). In brief, over the years, replica foods have developed from being fake foods made from plastic, silicone, and resin. They are now cultural artifacts with a global presence that developed alongside with Japanese gastro-diplomacy.

### The museum’s exhibition design

Based on the curatorial concept of a wonderland, the museum’s exhibition is divided into three different zones, namely (1) Info Zone, (2) Wow Zone, and (3) Educational Zone.

(1) Info Zone, the space is dedicated to showcasing Malaysia multiculturalism through the nation's vibrant food culture. More than 100 types of Malaysian foods are exhibited with a highlight of presenting traditional food from Malays, Indians, Chinese, and Baba Nyonya culture. In short, the Info Zone is a gateway to the food wonderland with a grand presentation of Malaysia's culinary heritage.



Figure 4: Info Zone's exhibition (Sources: Wonder Food Museum) (Sources: Wonder Food Museum)

(2) Wow Zone is where the “food wonderland” and its fantasy takes place. Different sections such as ‘Multi-colored foods’, ‘Colorless foods’, ‘Weightless foods’, and ‘Giant displays’ are designed to stimulate visitors’ interaction with foods. For instance, under the giant display section, Malaysia’s well-known dishes such as Cendol, Laksa, Curry Mee, Rojak, Char Kuey Teow and etc were made in a gigantic size to excite visitors and challenge their perceptions about foods.



Figure 5: Wow Zone's exhibition (Sources: Wonder Food Museum) (Sources: Wonder Food Museum)

(3) Educational Zone, this zone aims to bring together the politics and pleasure of foods and proposed questions to raise visitors' awareness of food's production, consumption, and environmental sustainability. Thereupon, at the end of the visit, an image of a helpless child crouched over leftover food on the floor against a red backdrop with the message, “Food is precious, don't waste” is the highlight of the educational zone.”



Figure 6: Educational Zone's exhibition (Sources: Wonder Food Museum)

By and large, the Info Zone is devoted to showcasing the wonder of Malaysia's cultural diversity through its food heritage. The Wow Zone is a food wonderland designed to inspire visitors' participation, and the Educational Zone is dedicated as the zone of enlightenment.

### An interactive museum

Andrew Pekarik et al. (2002), in recent years, museum visitors have come to expect a high level of interactivity in museum exhibitions, especially non-art exhibitions. Kalina Nedelcheva (2019) also describes that, interactive exhibitions have the power to pull the audience closer to artworks and created a more memorable experience. Museums with interactive exhibition design are now in the trend. Therefore, it is not surprising to see that many museums nowadays integrate interactivity into their exhibition design. The interactive exhibit is a hit, yet the interactivities and interactive design are an open-ended concept, the conceptualization and practice of an interactive exhibition have therefore been interpreted differently accordingly to one's exhibition design objective. For instance, an interactive exhibition could be spaces with exhibits designed to encourage visitor's physical participation. It could also be an exhibition with a physical or virtual presentation that involved multi-sensory interactive design. In sum, interactive exhibitions blurred and blended the fine line between education and entertainment experience in a dynamic way. It is a change that shifted the global museum practices (ShawHong Ser, 2019).



Figure 7: Interactive exhibition design at Wonder Food Museum (Sources: Wonder Food Museum)

According to Sean Lau, "exhibitions nowadays have moved away from the passive display to dynamic edutainment installation. Therefore, a museum with a physical interactive design is what interests him. Consequently, a food museum with a wonderland's theme that engaged visitors' in series physical interactions was designed as specialness of Wonder Food Museum". As a museum embraces the idea of interactive exhibitions, in each zone's exhibition, there are exhibits for display, and exhibits serve as "prop" to bridge visitor's engagement. For instance, in Wow Zone, visitors are allowed to "play" with exhibits, it is an exhibition area that stimulates visitors' participation through the freedom to create and explore. In addition to physical interaction design, exhibits and spatial planning of the museum have also been designed as a kind of "Pop-up Museum" to cater to visitors' interest, particularly on young audiences' passion for the selfie phenomenon. According to Manuel Charr (2019), millennials are a new generation that constantly searching out the perfect selfie moment and cultural experiences to enrich their social media feeds. With such a change in the contemporary cultural landscape, the concept of pop-up museums is growing popular worldwide. Emre Cetin (2019) also mentioned that pop-up museums as interactive and "Instagrammable" creative spaces are becoming a new phenomenon.



Figure 8: Interactive exhibition design at Wonder Food Museum (Sources: Wonder Food Museum)

Compared with the “No Photo” policy of the traditional museums due to collection protection and copyrights issue. The pop-up museum engages visitors to experience and have their photos taken and share on social media. With such a feature in its nature, a pop-up museum's concept has been integrated into the overall exhibition planning of Wonder Food Museum. As said by Sean Lau, “to ensure our exhibition is able to stimulate visitors' intellectually and emotionally, we engage their interests through a series of physical interaction design. Moreover, the exhibition's interactivity is not limited to physical interaction, a cross-cultural content interaction, as well as presentation in interactives, have also been implemented”. In sum, the Wonder Food Museum is an interactive museum that requiring visitors' involvement in activities that will maximize their visit. The museum offers freedom of navigation in their visit by allowing visitors to explore information to match their interests. It is a museum that combines innovative formats and playful activities in its overall exhibition concept.

Although still fairly new to the museum scene, Wonder Food Museum has achieved a great milestone in its development. Currently, the museum is recognized as one of the 10 outstanding museums in Malaysia by culturaltrip.com in 2017 and listed among the top 7 Museums in Malaysia by traveltriangle.com in 2019. Meanwhile, in 2017, the museum has been awarded the “Top Museum (Unique Concept) Award” by the INPenang International Awards. In 2019, another honor was granted by INPenang International Awards to celebrate the museum as “Best Tourism (Museum)” in Penang, Malaysia. Furthermore, since 2017 to present, the museum has also been selected as the recipient of the TripAdvisor Certificate of Excellence for three consecutive years. Undeniably, the Wonder Food Museum has now one of the most celebrated food museums in Malaysia and Asia.

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\*Personal interview was conducted with Sean Lau and Cheryl Ng on April 18, 2020.