



# A LOVE AFFAIR

WITH *BALESTIER*

By Arti Mulchand & Pooja Makhijani

Balestier has historic roots, multifarious cultural connections and boasts some of the best food on the island. And its eclectic mix of old and new yields stories with every step.





Photographer Ian Tan glanced at The New Paper one day in 1999 and saw his uncle's photo staring back. Arsonists had struck his childhood shophouse home at 233A Balestier Road. He resisted brooding until 2005 when bulldozers began to bury his past. Only then did the memories come flooding back. "You don't miss it till it's gone," he says.

Ian Tan, now 35, who had spent the better part of the 1970s and 1980s in a zinc-covered shophouse, documented his "love affair" with Balestier on his blog, *Empty Vessel (iantan.org)*. He recalled fondly the disused opera house adjoining his childhood shophouse, and a martial arts school on the other side, where local television stunt doubles trained. On many nights, Ian can be found gawking at temple mediums poking their cheeks with skewers at the nearby temple, Tai Ji Ya. These days, the Microsoft marketing manager and his family traipse back to Balestier at least twice a month to fulfill their cravings for tau sar piah and bak kut teh, and quite simply, for a whiff of nostalgia that is hard to find elsewhere.

### UNIQUE BALESTIER

That, perhaps, is what makes Balestier so unique — it is where the past and present, and young and old intermingle. Gaze upwards on either side as you walk down Balestier Road and you will get an appreciation of the area's eclectic mix of architectural styles. And then there are the scores of stalls that dish out delicious local food at all hours, including Founders Bak Kut Teh, Teo Seng Teochew Porridge and Loong Fatt Eating House & Confectionary.

A veritable cottage industry also thrives, points out Ms Shaman M, 48, a programme director with a conference company. She moved into her flat, just off Balestier Road in 1993. "Balestier is the 'light street'. People have been coming here for lighting accessories and fixtures as well as home décor solutions for years and it is still where they come." Said Tan: "The neighbourhood offers a real mix of personalities. You have the old residents and stallholders, such as the durian sellers near the temple, and modern cosmopolitan people who have come in...As a neighbourhood, it has softened a lot but you can still find pockets of its past if you know where to look."





01  
RICHLY ORNAMENTED  
LATE SHOPHOUSE  
STYLE OF THE 1920s  
IN BALESTIER

02  
SINGAPORE'S LAST  
FREE WATER KIOSK

03  
MAHA SASANA  
RAMSI BURMESE  
BUDDHIST TEMPLE



## BALESTIER HERITAGE TRAIL

Check out some of the key highlights of the revamped Balestier Heritage Trail by URA and the National Heritage Board:

### 📍 Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (12 Tai Gin Road)

Originally called Bin Chang House, this icon was built around the 1880s. Today, it is a museum exhibiting artifacts belonging to Dr Sun Yat Sen, China's founding father. The Hall was gazetted as a National Monument on 28 October 1994.

### 📍 Old Balestier Market

Also called Or Kio, or "black bridge" market, it was built in the 1920s to cater to farmers who needed to sell their produce. It served as a food-rationing centre during World War II.

### 📍 (Former) Shaw's Malay Film Studio (8 Jalan Ampas)

Built in 1947, this studio served as a workplace to the prolific director, singer, and songwriter Tan Sri P. Ramlee.

### 📍 "Singapore Eclectic" shophouses (292-310 Balestier Road)

Built at the height of the Malayan rubber boom in 1926, these houses feature pastel-coloured walls and fanciful tiles from France, Belgium, and Japan.

### 📍 Art Deco Shophouses (230 and 246 Balestier Road)

These shophouses draw on art deco in their design. The Hoover Hotel and Restaurant, both built in the 1950s, share the namesake of the old Hoover Theatre, which once stood where Shaw Plaza is today.



## COLOURFUL PAST

Balestier Road was named after Joseph Balestier, the first United States Consul of Singapore. He first developed the area in 1834, when he leased 1,000 acres of land for a sugarcane plantation, and named the area Balestier Plain. But the business struggled, and then in the 1840s, he lost his son and wife. Defeated, he sold his property, and left Singapore. A mark had been made though.

Historically, Balestier had been a swampy area infested with tigers and malarial mosquitoes. In a bid to ward off these dangers, Chinese Hokkien immigrants built the Goh Chor Tua Pek Kong temple in 1847, asking deity Tua Pek Kong for protection. Years later, Tan Boon Liat, grandson of philanthropist Tan Tock Seng, funded the creation of a free-standing wayang (theatrical performance) stage in 1906. It is Singapore's only such stage that remains today.

As the area developed, some bigger villas were built, including the Sun Yat Sen Nanyang Memorial Hall (formerly called Sun Yat Sen Villa or Wan Qing Yuan) in the late 19th century. The colonial Victorian-style villa was named in honour of Dr Sun, and it served as the home for the Singapore branch of the Tong Meng Hui, or the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance. Housing developments in nearby Kim Keat and Whampoa blossomed between the 1920s and 1950s. Today, some unique traces of the past remain — Jalan Bahagia, for instance, is one of few places you can actually see HDB terrace houses, built in the Singapore Improvement Trust (now known as the Housing Development Board) days.







01  
SUN YAT SEN  
MEMORIAL HALL

02  
GOH CHOR TUA PEK  
KONG, A HOKKIEN  
TEMPLE BUILT IN 1847

03  
IAN TAN



## CHARM RETAINED

Balestier also brims with other heritage icons, like Maha Sasana Ramsi Burmese Buddhist Temple on Tai Gin Road, the only Buddhist temple outside of Myanmar built in traditional Burmese architectural style, complete with eye-catching golden spire. And at the junction of Boon Teck Road sits what is possibly Singapore's last free water kiosk, a legacy of the early days, when clean water was a luxury. It is still manned by a volunteer from Thong Teck Sian Tong Lian Sia Temple.

Another little-known nugget: Balestier Plain, which today refers to the playing fields bounded by Balestier Road, Tessensohn Road and Moulmein Road, was where the first-ever airplane with a paying passenger landed in Singapore. In 1927, newspaper tycoon W Van Lear Black touched down there in a single-engine monoplane chartered from KLM Royal Dutch Airlines in Europe.

It all makes for an evocative neighbourhood with endless opportunities for discovery, something recognised by URA. Since 2002, when it released its Identity Plan, it has gazetted over 150 shophouses for conservation. In October 2011, the Balestier Heritage Trail was revised with new storyboards and heritage markers, and pedestrian walkways were enhanced, making it easier to get around.

The Sun Yat Sen Memorial Hall reopened after a year of redevelopment, featuring five new galleries, original artefacts and displays that tell the story of Singapore and Nanyang's roles in the 1911 Revolution. At the same time, Zhongshan Park was also developed. The park is part of URA's plans to further enhance Balestier. To Shaman, all these add up to a neighbourhood she loves. "As the years go by, Balestier has constantly improved in terms of connectivity and facilities, without losing its charm." ●