

# Metro

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The Loke Thye Kee building that used to house one of Penang's oldest restaurants is scheduled for reopening in December. >2&3



### Back in business

The newly restored Loke Thye Kee Building in Burma Road, George Town. — ZHAFARAN NASIB / The Star



# A Hainanese hangout

Regulars hope restaurant will continue to serve quality fare like before



**Before and after:** (Top) An old photo of the Loke Thye Kee building and the newly renovated building.

**L**OKE Thye Kee's popularity among locals is evident from the gushing testimonials from old timers who are looking forward to its reopening.

Former Penang Hainan Association vice-chairman Datuk Lim Theng Yit, 91, said the restaurant was famous for its authentic, value-for-money Hainanese dishes.

"I used to go to Loke Thye Kee when I was younger and it was popular because the price was fair. I hope that when it reopens, it will continue the legacy of serving quality fare as prepared by Hainanese cooks," said Lim who is looking forward to sample the food once the restaurant reopens.

Federation of Penang Hawkers president Lam Tong Ying, 73, agreed.

Recalling how he used to patronise the restaurant regularly in the 1970s, Lam said the curry fish, or *ark* (yam duck) and *choon pia* (spring roll) were favourites.

"The curry had a nice sour taste that was very different from the version prepared by other Chinese communities and the *choon pia* is crispy and light – very nice.



**Loy:** We closed shop because we could not afford the rent

"It's good that the restaurant is re-opening after so long but it must maintain the high standard Loke Thye Kee is known for," he said.

Khoo Sian Ewe's fifth son, Datuk Seri Khoo Keat Siew, 82, said his father would have been "very proud" if he was still alive today.

"He definitely would have been

happy and proud to see that the building and business he played a part in establishing are still going strong and have been given a new lease of life," he said.

Keat Siew, who started patronising the restaurant in the 1960s, described the food served at Loke Thye Kee as "very good".

"The place was always full of hungry patrons as there were not many restaurants back in those days. They mainly came for the chicken chop, curry Kapitan and *choon piah*," he said.

The restaurant was not only popular among locals but the Japanese and British as well.

It has been reported that during the Japanese Occupation, the restaurant served as a popular "hang-out" for high-ranking Japanese officers seeking rest and relaxation from wartime stress.

Loy Kia Liang, whose father Kok Dai was one of the restaurant's founders, recalled that the British loved their *inche kabin* and *choon pia*.

He also recalled that during the annual Qing Ming Festival, they had stacks of tiffin carriers to fill as peo-

ple catered their food as offerings to ancestors.

Kia Liang, 78, said he was studying in China in the 1950s when his father requested that he return to help in the thriving restaurant.

He was 21 then and started working at the restaurant as a server and eventually became one of the cooks.

"Those days, there were some eight cooks crammed in a small kitchen – everyone has their own duty and speciality dish.

"Through the years, the restaurant has catered for many happy occasions especially wedding banquets and engagement parties," said Kia Liang whose son, Jimmy, 55, later joined the restaurant as a cook.

Kia Liang said after decades of renting the premises, the Loy family finally decided to close shop when they could not afford the new rent rates just before the repeal of the Rent Control Act in 2000 came into effect.

"Business was still good as we kept to our original recipes but we just could not afford the steep rent increase," said Kia Liang who now does private catering from home.





**Standing proud:** Loke Thye Kee building in Burma Road, George Town.



**Up to mark:** Ong (left) and Foo checking out the restoration work.



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# House of Happiness

## Popular restaurant slated for reopening after RM2mil renovation

By **CHRISTINA CHIN**  
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**O**NE of Penang's oldest restaurants, Loke Thye Kee, is set to be George Town Unesco World Heritage Site's latest attraction when it opens its doors again soon.

Building owner Jonathan Foo said the RM2mil restoration work on the heritage pre-war structure started in December last year and was recently completed.

"The biggest challenges in restoring the 83-year-old building were sourcing for fixtures like the tiles, ceiling fans and door knobs and undoing the renovations that didn't comply with the essence of the original structure," he said in an interview yesterday.

He said the restoration work remained true to the heritage of the building with the team going as far as Vietnam and Thailand to import materials that matched the original.

Even the traditional surface mounted wiring system was used to maintain the building's authenticity.

"We were fortunate that some 80% of the tiles were in good condition because the dirt actually protected it from damage.

"And, surprisingly, there were no termite issues. Most of the damage was wear and tear from the years of neglect since the building was vacated in 1996.

"We did put in substantial effort to restore the wall surfaces though.

"Recycled wood was used to replace the rotting timber and while a lift was fitted into the building, it was done in the old storage area hidden from view," Foo said.

He said the restoration team was unable to identify the original colour of the building even after five layers of different coloured paints were scrapped off.

"In the end, we settled for green which blended beautifully with the surroundings," he said.

Located at the junction of Burma Road and Penang Road, the restaurant was founded in 1919 by two Hainanese brothers, Loy Kok Boon and Kok Dai.

The lack of good Chinese restaurants in Penang led to its establishment and to provide the city's elite with the finest Chinese-European

food.

Initially known as Loke Hai Kee, the restaurant was originally situated beside the present Church Street Pier.

In its heyday, the restaurant was also known as Dragon's Inn as it provided lodgings for visitors from Hainan.

The construction of the ferry terminal led the brothers to approach the late Khoo Sian Ewe, who built the present day triple-storey ship-shaped Loke Thye Kee in the 1929.

According to the book 'Streets of George Town' by Penang Heritage Trust president Khoo Salma Nasution, the unique boat-shaped restaurant used to be a favourite matchmaking venue.

Candidates of arranged marriages would come here for discreet viewing.

To confirm or decline the engagement, one or the other party would tactfully give a sign by taking tea in a certain way.

The name Loke Thye Kee, meaning House of Happiness, was chosen after consulting a geomancer.

The brothers employed Hainanese cooks known for their culinary expertise, who were former house cooks for the English.

The 'steamship' building was among 28 projects that received funding from the George Town Grants Programme (GTGP) under Think City Sdn Bhd, a subsidiary of Khazanah Nasional.

Launched in December 2009, the seed-funding initiative is for urban rejuvenation projects within the George Town World Heritage Site.

Today, a signing ceremony between Foo and FoodPeople will be held to appoint the latter as operator and manager of Loke Thye Kee.

After nine months of extensive restoration work, the place is expected to open in December this year.

FoodPeople managing director Ong Ban Seang said Loke Thye Kee was a heritage brand name.

"FoodPeople will sign a six-year lease on the place. Our plans are to set up retail outlets selling items like traditional foodstuff on the ground floor.

"The first floor will be dedicated to Hainanese and fusion food and beverage outlets while the second floor will likely be a lounge," he said.



**Top of the building:** Parties can be held at the uppermost floor of Loke Thye Kee.