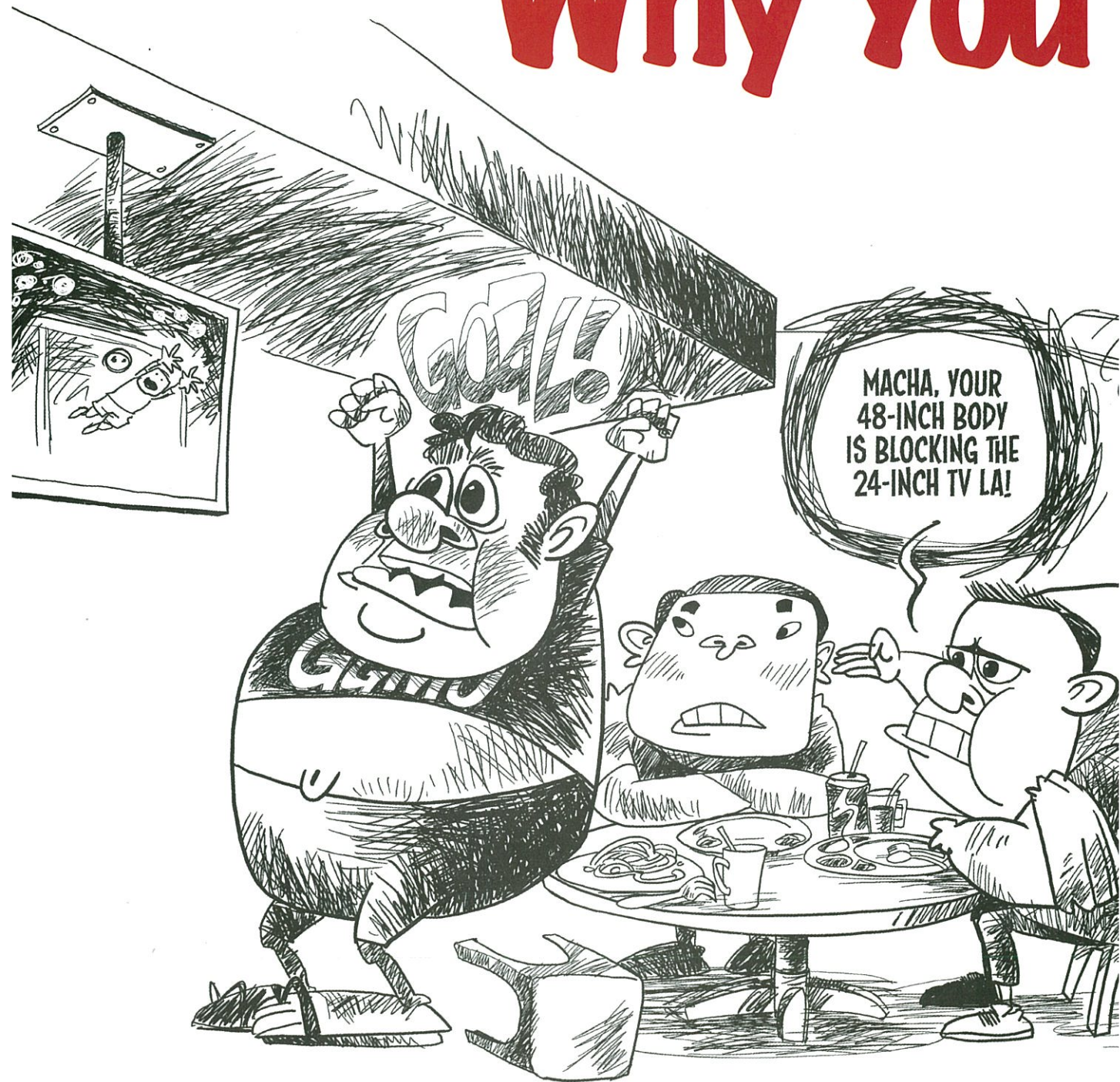


Why You



So Fat Ah?

Malaysia is the fattest nation in Southeast Asia, a situation that's bound to have far-reaching implications for all areas of life. Find out the truth behind the pandemic and how to keep your health in check

IT'S JUST ANOTHER SATURDAY night in Bangsar, and my friend and I are at the *mamak* on the corner catching up over drinks after dinner. The place is full, and all the Malaysian *mamak* clichés are at play tonight: there's a football match being broadcast on the big screen, and amidst the occasional cheering, the distinct sound of spatula-scraped woks emanates from the kitchen. The air is heavy with the scent of food and the voices of people talking loudly as we find a spot and wait for someone to take our order.

"*Anneh, teh o ais dua* [Brother, two iced teas]"

"*Makan?* [Eating?]"

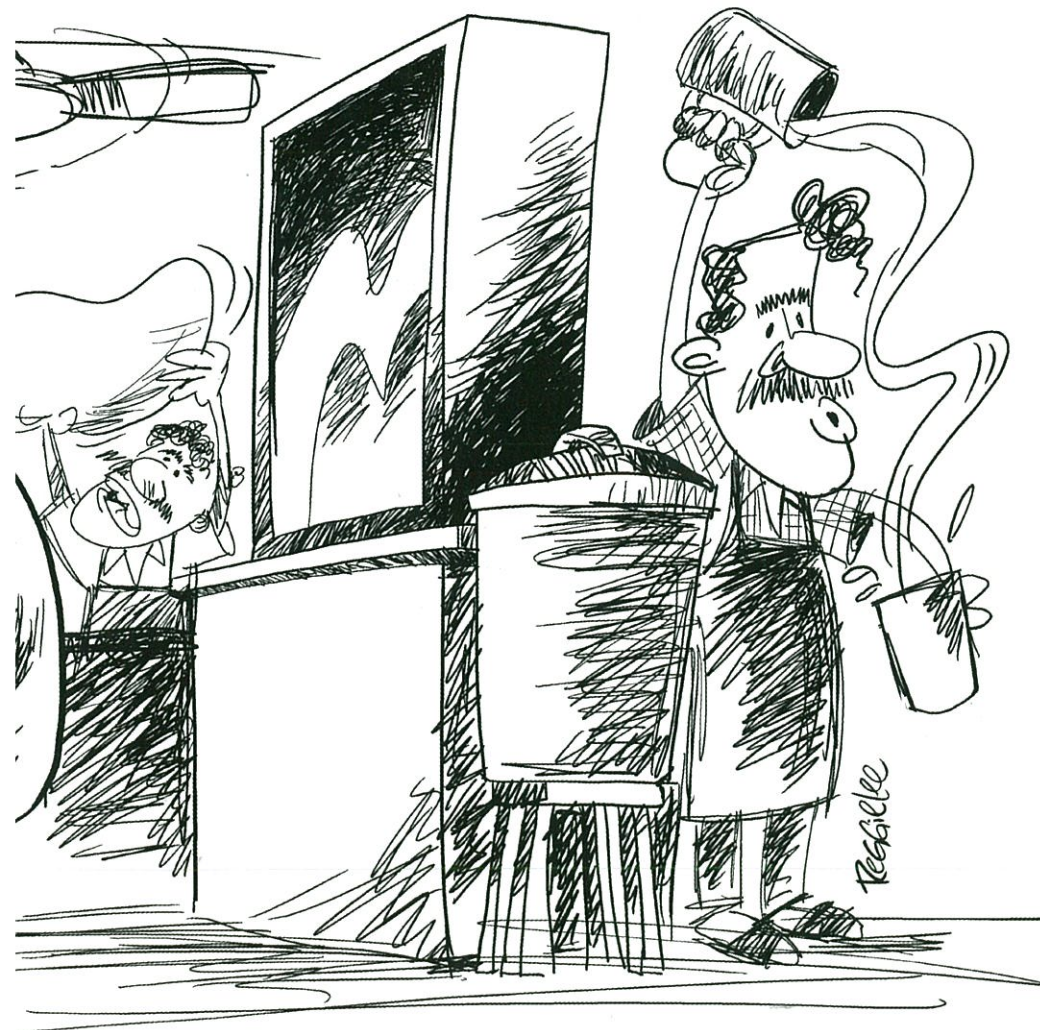
"*Tak makan* [Not eating]"

His reaction – curled lips and a look of absolute incredulity, one that almost screams, "You're *not* eating? Are you friggin' kidding me?" – is immediate, but brief. He shrugs as he jots down our order and walks off.

It would be easy to launch into a discussion about poor customer service, but the truth is, neither my friend nor I could fault the guy for his reaction. Despite it being close to 11pm, all the tables are occupied, and most of the diners are, well, dining. In Malaysia, going to a *mamak* on a Saturday night, ordering plain tea and opting not to eat doesn't make you an anomaly – it immediately downgrades your status to that of a social pariah.

MALAYSIA BOLEH OBESE?

There's been a riot on the streets of Putrajaya for the wrong reasons. The 2015 National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) recently unveiled a shocking finding about Malaysia's administrative capital – it's home to the highest concentration of obese and overweight individuals in the country. The same survey reported that non-communicable diseases (NCDs) are at an all-time high in *Boleh-lah* land, with 48 percent of Malaysians either obese or





overweight. This doesn't just make us the No.1 fattest nation in Southeast Asia, it also raises our ranking to sixth place when it comes to the prevalence of adult obesity in Asia.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) classifies an individual as being overweight when he has a body mass index (BMI) of 25 to 29.9. Exceed that by a decimal point – a BMI of over 30 – and you'll successfully be categorised as obese. Lim Ai Leng (Chief Dietician,

Gleneagles Kuala Lumpur) explains that things get a bit tricky in the Asian context when applying the BMI, as Asians often carry higher levels of abdominal fat. This factor renders WHO's guidelines inadequate at determining those who are at a greater risk of health complications from obesity. As a result, an Asian-centric guideline was drafted, in which individuals are labelled as overweight when they have a BMI of 23 to 24.9, and obese if it's over 25.

Furthermore, the NHMS reports that 47.7 percent of Malaysians have high blood cholesterol levels, while 30.3 percent suffer from high blood pressure, and 17.5 percent are diabetic. These factors combined paint a bleak picture for the future of public health in Malaysia. The Malaysian Ministry of Health (MOH) acknowledges that the sharp spike in NCDs is the leading cause of premature deaths for Malaysian adults. Mohd Hasyami Saihun

(Senior Assistant Director, Nutrition Division, MOH) says that there's been a steady increase of patients seeking treatment for diabetes and hypertension at MOH clinics, not to mention higher hospital admissions for individuals suffering complications from diabetes, heart attacks and strokes.

Surprised? You shouldn't be, according to Goo Chui Hoong (dietician and Adjunct Senior Lecturer at International Medical



“Obesity is a disease. A lot of people don’t think of it as one, but it actually marks the beginning of other health problems and increased hospital bills.”

– Goo Chui Hoong, Dietitian and Adjunct Senior Lecturer at IMU

Asia Group of Companies) says. “There’s a variety of food available, and it’s easy to get food anytime, thanks to 24-hour food stalls and restaurants.” She adds that though easy food accessibility is a modern convenience, it has a dark side: it contributes to an obesogenic environment that influences your desire to eat, potentially leading to excessive weight gain.

Celeste Lau Wai Hong (Manager, Dietetics and Nutrition Services, Sunway Medical Centre) adds to the debate by discussing what role the nation’s diverse racial groups have played in the rising obesity epidemic. “The thing about Malaysia is that we’re a multicultural nation. We have Malay, Chinese and Indian cuisines, as well as western food,” she says. “The food variety – and its availability – in Malaysia is actually higher compared to other countries.” She draws a comparison between Malaysia and neighbouring Singapore, which boasts similar racial demographics and a fanfare of local delicacies too. The situation couldn’t be more different: the 2010 Singapore National Health Survey reported that only 11 percent

of its population was obese. Lau attributes the lower obesity levels on the other side of the Causeway to better public awareness and effective health promotions, pointing out the ultimate problem with Malaysians is the fact that, “We only eat, but we forget to prevent.”

Dr. Vicky Loo Tsui Huei (Consultant Psychiatrist, Department of Psychiatry, Hospital Raja Permaisuri Bainun, Ipoh) delves deeper into the Malaysian psyche to explain the vital role that food plays in our culture, and how it shapes our eating habits. “The variety of food available from different ethnicities in our country means that we’re exposed to a good range of flavours,” she explains. “Generally, our taste buds are trained to eat flavourful food from young, and that tends to contain more salt, sugar and oil – this is what we call learned behaviour.” But perhaps a more compelling interpretation of the vital role food plays in Asian households is this: “Culturally, we tend to express our love through food. For example, if a son returns to his hometown to visit his family, it’s very natural to see the mother express her love through food

iversity Malaysia (IMU). “There’s definite connection between obesity and diseases such as diabetes, hypercholesterolemia [an excess of cholesterol in the bloodstream] and high blood pressure,” she explains, pointing out that obesity increases our risk of contracting certain types of cancer too. But it’s what she says next that’s the real bombshell. “Obesity is a disease. A lot of people don’t think of it as one, but it actually marks the beginning of other health

problems and increased hospital bills. It’s something you have to nip in the bud,” she emphasises.

TROUBLE IN TROPICAL FOODIE PARADISE

You are what you eat. It’s a fitness and nutrition adage that we’ve all heard before, and in the Malaysian context especially, the situation couldn’t be closer to the truth.

“Malaysia is a food paradise,” Kong Woan Fei (dietician, Columbia

by cooking. And rejecting food or saying 'no' to food that's offered can be considered a sign of disrespect," Dr. Loo says.

British expatriate Joseph Ryan (Partner and Global Head of Venues at Attacca Capital) shares his perspective on the local food culture by linking it back to Malaysian hospitality. "It's really second to none. I've celebrated festivals such as Hari Raya and Chinese New Year here, and my experience was beyond being invited for a meal as a guest." His observation mirrors Dr. Loo's analysis of the vital role that food plays in Malaysian culture. "When I first arrived, people were like, 'You just got here. We must look after you.' My friends were always bringing me out to try something new," Ryan says, adding that, in the beginning, he was too shy to decline. "I realised the variety of food available here and thought it was silly to say no," he recalls. But after three months of eating out three to four nights a week, he was hit with the realisation that he was enjoying the food a little too much – especially when it manifested in an expanding waistline. Ryan admits that though he's still keen to enjoy the local food available, he's more mindful about what he eats now and sticks to a stricter exercise regime to keep his weight in check.

THE MALAYSIAN MALE'S PLATES, PORTIONS AND OPTIONS

Let's state the obvious: the way you eat plays a pivotal role in determining whether you succeed or fail in the battle against obesity. When quizzed on the common mistakes that Malaysian men make when choosing food, Yeoh Ee Ling (dietician, Education Manager at Fitness Innovations Malaysia (FITM) and MH adviser) tells it like it is: "Guys don't plan their meals. They'll eat whatever strikes their fancy or come across. It's also known as the see-food diet." Don't be fooled by the comical-sounding name though; Yeoh notes that not being mindful about what you're consuming causes you to turn to calorie-dense local foods and overeat.

Kong and Lau are unanimous in their assessment of how the

MIND OVER PLATTER: THINK YOURSELF THIN

Do you actually pay attention to how much you eat? Use your brain before you open your mouth.

Calories tend to sneak down your gullet while you're looking the other way. Those three sliders you just inhaled? You barely tasted or noticed them. So try something new: mindfulness. Contemplate your eating – before, during, and after. In one study, people who scored low on mindfulness were 34 percent more likely to be obese than high scorers.

Step one is to know the difference between physical and emotional hunger. (See our chart below.) If your hunger is physical, feed it with good fuel, like protein or vegetables. If it's emotional, find three words to describe how you feel (bored, frustrated, horny) and find ways – a walk, chess, a hug – to deal, says Susan Albers, Psy.D., author of *Eating Mindfully*.

When you do eat, avoid distractions like TV. Think about the food. Focus on the taste and texture. Chew slowly. Try using your nondominant hand. And stop between bites – maybe you've had enough. Those leftovers will taste great tomorrow. – KATHERINE DEMPSEY

PHYSICAL HUNGER	Comes on gradually	Is felt in your stomach	Any food will do	Easy to satisfy
EMOTIONAL HUNGER	Hits suddenly	Is a mental craving	Specific food desired	Hard to satisfy

different sexes select food: men have a tendency to opt for larger portions compared to women. "Most men have this misunderstanding that they need to eat more, simply because they're men – that's why they'll order extra rice," Kong says. The irony, however, is that they don't need the extra calories, especially if they work in an office or are sedentary.

Lau draws on her experience of working with various patients and brings the following observation to the table: "Most men claim that they have to eat more meat or protein, complaining they'll feel weak otherwise. I think eating meat helps men feel muscular." She elaborates on this particular mindset, suggesting it could be a vestige from Malaysia's early days as an agricultural and mining economy. "The activity levels for a Malaysian man today are so different. We're no longer farmers, eking out a living through field work – most of us are deskbound in offices instead," she says. "It's become an issue because we still continue to eat – and are perhaps consuming even more – without matching it with the right activity levels." Yeoh highlights that this tendency to consume more than what your body actually requires can be problematic, especially when "physical activity is

not something that we put into our daily routine."

Tunku Halim (author of *So Fat Lah! 30 Perfect Ways to a Slimmer You*) offers an alternative way of looking at our relationship with food and how it's contributed to excessive weight gain. "The local food that we have are our staples; we've been eating them for a long time now and didn't have these issues previously," he says. He draws a correlation between the prevalence of obesity today and the super-sized meal portions that are readily available. "If you go to a restaurant and order *nasi lemak*, it usually comes with a huge piece of fried chicken – it's not something we had before," he notes. "It's not the food itself that's wrong, but the portions."

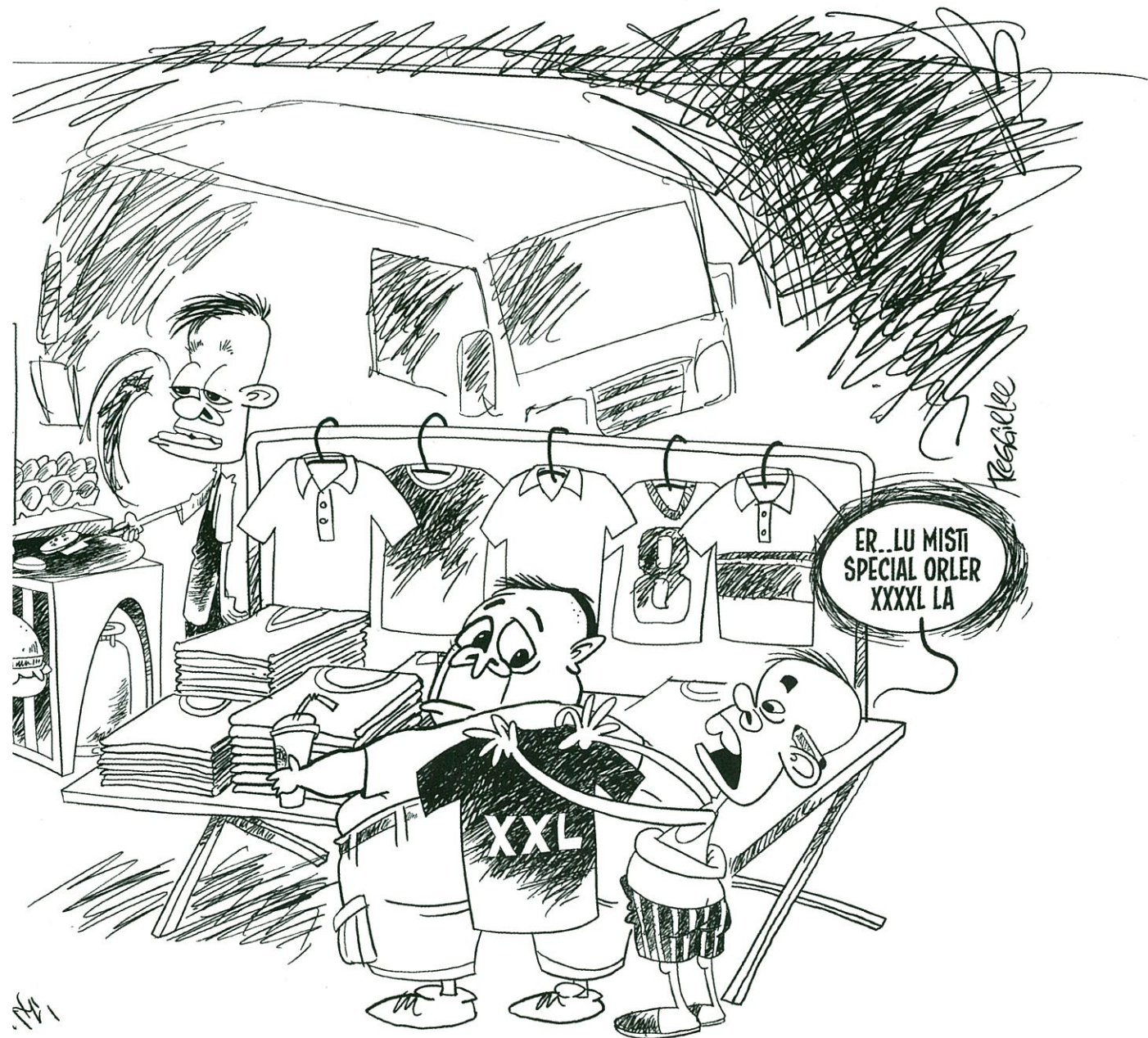
Lau gives the example of Japan, explaining that though the country has an abundance of food too, the portion sizes are significantly smaller compared to Malaysia. Take-san (chef at Nobu KL) weighs in on the differences between Japanese and Malaysian eating cultures. "One thing that surprised me about Malaysian food culture is that people seem to eat any food – like *nasi lemak* – at any time of the day," he observes. "In Japan, we eat different dishes for the different meals of a day."



A SLICE OF AWARENESS ON THE PLATE

At this point, it's worth asking: what's stopping Malaysian men from making healthier lifestyle choices? Is there really a lack of awareness when it comes to adopting healthy eating habits and exercise? "I don't think there's a lack of awareness," Goo says. "I think it's just a lack of commitment. I get the impression that people aren't ready to change." She explains that though most individuals want to lead healthier lives, they're put off from doing so, thinking it will involve a complete lifestyle overhaul.

Case in point: "A lot of people



quate a healthy diet with organic food, which can be quite expensive,” Kong says, revealing that you don’t have to go organic to be healthy. It’s really about making better food choices, choosing healthier ingredients, and creating the right combinations when preparing your own meals.” Unsure where to start? Try a different approach to plating, Kong recommends. “Divide your plate into three. Fill up 50 percent with vegetables. Load up the remaining half with equal amounts of protein and carbs – that’s 25 percent each.” If you’re still not satisfied, drink some water and have some fruit, Kong says.

Switching to a healthier, active lifestyle isn’t easy, but it’s not impossible either, Lau says. Before you get overwhelmed, try asking yourself this: how can you tweak your normal routine to introduce healthier things to your life? Change the way you eat, starting with breakfast, she suggests. “The first meal of the day is the most important. If you don’t start with something good, it could ruin the rest of your day,” Lau states. “So ensure a good start to your day by eating a meal that’s healthy and nutritious.” She also emphasises that just getting in one healthy meal per day can help to keep your diet and fitness goals

on track. “This way, even if you skip lunch and eat a bigger portion for dinner, you’ll be able to fall back on the fact that your day started with a good breakfast,” she adds. Yeoh echoes Lau’s sentiments of sticking to the basics with feasible goals, saying, “Don’t be overambitious. Aim for something simple, sustainable and science-based.” Even though the prospect of weight loss seems daunting, it’s not a goal that’s out of reach. Kong gives her final word on the debate, saying it ultimately boils down to shifting habits and setting reasonable goals. “Learn to practise a combination of healthy habits every day, ones that’ll

help you achieve your target in the long run.”

EXIT FROM THE MAMAK

It’s after midnight by the time we leave the *mamak*, but the establishment shows no signs of slowing down. The venue remains packed and, when I glance back, I see that our seats have already been snapped up by new occupants. It’s hard to grasp how a vital element of our culture like food could be contributing to so many health problems, but perhaps, these are just signs of changing times and a need to re-evaluate what it is that makes us Malaysians. **M+T**