

Internet 'floggers' cash in on food-mad Asia

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

As a Hindu who does not eat beef but craves other meat, Tashny Sukumaran discovered her new passion for pork burgers through her native Malaysia's vibrant food-blogging, or "flogging", scene.

The Muslim-majority country's mainstream media shy from references to pork and other foods objectionable to Islam, but blogs have helped spark a burger boom in a nation with sizeable ethnic Chinese and Indian communities.

"I kept reading about pork burgers on 'flogs' but have never seen much in newspapers, I guess because it's non-halal," said Sukumaran, 22.

Food bloggers have come to dominate Asia's gastronomical discourse, turning diners on to new foods and giving small eateries valuable exposure in an Internet-fueled "democratisation of food reviews", as Australian "flogger" Thang Ngo puts it.

"The number of restaurant reviews is limited by a few pages in the paper each week. Smaller restaurants in particular love bloggers because many may never be reviewed by newspaper critics," he told AFP.

Food blogging is a worldwide phenomenon but has found an especially eager readership in Asia, a region whose diners are typically passionate about eating and fussy about taste, and where food holds great cultural importance.

In China, for example, a common greeting is "Have you eaten?" -- or, in other words, "How are you?"

Nowhere are the passions stronger than in Malaysia, where the dining scene is dominated by open-air cafes and food stalls.

These are typically too small for a restaurant review but inspire intense devotion and debate on blogs about where to find the perfect bowl of steaming noodles or best scoop of spicy curry.

"People don't pray before eating any more, they take pictures instead," says Nazeen Koonda, marketing manager for Time Out Malaysia.

As "floggers" draw increasing clicks, they are finding ways to milk cash from their following.

Singaporean Brad Lau, whose www.ladyironchef.com saw 1.5 million page views in December, sells ads on his site including some unrelated to food.

"Blogs are word-of-mouth on steroids," says Lionel Lau, co-founder of Des Gourmand, a restaurant group that runs several trendy eateries in Malaysia.

South Korea's vibrant online community has no shortage of food bloggers, including so-called "power bloggers" -- reviewers read by tens of thousands daily who can make or break restaurants.

Janice Tan, who runs Ninja Joe, the Kuala Lumpur fast-food joint whose pork patties are favoured by Sukumaran, opened the first outlet in 2009 with husband Tee Tsun Joo. They now have five sites as revenues have soared.

They credit their success to blogs, saying newspapers have avoided mentioning the non-halal pork burger trend. Tan adds that they were refused space in two of Malaysia's largest malls as they sought to expand.

"We didn't invite bloggers, they just came. But as of last year, we had over 130 postings on us," she said, adding that they have never advertised.

But can you still trust food blogs? That is a question increasingly asked as flogging grows and becomes susceptible to the same influences for which it was supposed to provide an alternative, some

in the industry complain.

Chief among these is a growing "pay-to-praise" industry that has spawned brokers who charge businesses large sums for media coverage and positive reviews.

Tony Hong, a South Korean actor who runs several successful restaurants there, de-listed one outlet from a popular review site in 2011, claiming one of its regular contributors demanded 120,000 won (\$114) per month for positive comments.

"After we refused, the number of bad comments snowballed," Hong said.

Lee Khang Yi, food editor for The Malay Mail, a Kuala Lumpur-based newspaper, said Malaysian bloggers can earn from 300-1,500 ringgit (\$100-\$500) per favourable posting.

Bloggers in Singapore say restaurants will pay up to 2,000 Singapore dollars (\$1,630) for a positive posting on a popular blog.

Restaurateurs also increasingly complain of camera-wielding bloggers demanding free meals and threatening bad reviews if denied.

Brad Lau had to publicly deny allegations that he refused to pay a bill of 435 Singapore dollars (\$350) for himself and three friends at a top restaurant in 2010.



Shabbir Ahmed, executive director of AL Haramain Perfumes Ltd, receives a foreign mini pavilion special award from GM Quader, commerce minister, at the closing ceremony of the 18th Dhaka International Trade Fair in the capital recently.

Jamuna Bank gets new MD

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Shafiqul Alam has recently joined Jamuna Bank as its managing director, the bank said in a statement yesterday.

Prior to joining Jamuna, Alam was serving United Commercial Bank as additional managing director.

Alam started his banking career as a management trainee at ANZ Grindlays Bank Ltd in 1980 after fin-



German Commerzbank official due today

STAR BUSINESS DESK

Christof Gabriel Maetze, member of the executive board of management and global head of financial institutions at Commerzbank AG of Germany, is scheduled to arrive in Dhaka today for a two-day official visit.

Maetze will meet with Bangladesh Bank governor and the top brass of different commercial banks in the country regarding opening of a Commerzbank AG Representative Office in Dhaka, the bank said in a statement yesterday.



Legacy Footwear, three brokers fined for breaching rules

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A total of 0.91 lakh trades were executed with 8.74 crore shares and mutual fund units changing hands on the Dhaka bourse.

All the major sectors gained. Non-bank financial institutions rose 1.83 percent, followed by power 0.97 percent and telecom 0.70 percent. Of the 271 issues that traded on the DSE floor, 194 advanced, 53 declined and 24 remained unchanged.

Sunlife Insurance Company appeared on the most traded stocks list with 20.88 lakh shares worth Tk 16.92 crore changing hands.

United Airways and Unique Hotel and Resorts were the next popular stocks of the day.

Paramount Insurance Company was the biggest gainer of the day, as it accelerated 8.92 percent gain, while Kohinoor Chemicals was the worst loser, plunging by 8.33 percent.

New banks to get licences soon

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The BB also asked the proposed chairmen of the banks to comply with the requirements and existing rules and regulations within six months, and to arrange Tk 400 crore as their paid-up capital.

However, the central bank's decision to allow new banks sparked huge debates last year. Analysts said the move would distort the market, which is already saturated with 47 banks in operations.

Following the nationalisation of banks after the country's independence in 1971, the BB gave licences to private banks at first in 1983. The second set of such

Industrial output growth slows on sluggish exports

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The risk factors for the entrepreneurs have increased further because of political uncertainty, he added.

He said a slowdown in industrial production will affect the overall economic growth.

However, output at domestic market-oriented food, beverage and tobacco industries rebounded.

Output of chemical and petroleum products such as petroleum, cosmetics as well as soap and detergents was also higher in July-September, according to the BBS.

Khondaker Golam Moazzem, additional director (research) of Centre for Policy Dialogue, said higher inflation and higher bank interest on loans were the two main reasons behind the slowdown in indus-



M Gaziul Haque, chairman of Eastern Bank, inaugurates the EBL Finance (HK) Ltd, a subsidiary of the bank, in Hong Kong on Wednesday. Ali Reza Iftekhar, managing director of the bank, was also present.



Aftabul Islam, chairman of BD Venture, hands a cheque for Tk 28 lakh as its first venture capital investment to Abu Naser Md Faisal, managing director of Sustainable Power Ltd, at a ceremony yesterday.

Global firms eye lucrative contracts at India air show

AFP, New Delhi

South Asia's biggest airshow kicks off in India on Wednesday, where global armament firms will be vying for multi-billion dollar contracts from the world's biggest importer of weapons.

India launched the biannual Aero India event in 1996, three years before a mini-war with Pakistan prompted New Delhi to go on a global shopping spree for tens of billions of dollars worth of hardware to equip its million-strong military.

A total of 78 countries have confirmed their attendance, while companies from 27 of them will showcase their latest products at the five-day show in Bangalore, the hub of India's aviation, space and IT industries.

Good times for airlines

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A rise in business and non-governmental organisation-based activities in the south-western Khulna division, especially the Mongla port, has boosted the Dhaka-Jessore route, according to Asif.

The introduction of newer domestic routes also contributed to the higher passenger growth in the country, said Tasbirul Ahmed Choudhury, chairman and managing director of United Airways (BD) Ltd.

"We launched two new domestic routes -- Dhaka-Rajshahi and Dhaka-Saidpur -- last year," said Choudhury.

The airline, with a fleet of nine, also plans to operate flights on unused small domestic routes along with the major ones, with Dhaka-Barisal and Dhaka-Ishwardi routes due in March this year.

"We will procure three 19-seater Jetstream aircraft in March to operate flights on the unused small domestic routes in the next two months," Choudhury said.

The airline saw 15 percent more passengers than it was last year, he said.

At present, four local carriers -- Biman Bangladesh Airlines, United Airways, Regent Airways and Novoair -- operate flights to different domestic destinations.

Bangladesh growing faster: EU envoy

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He praised the local industry, saying the world now knows Bangladesh as a shipbuilder.

The EU envoy said the country was earlier known for its garment products only, but the shipbuilding companies here are also moving forward, helping diversify the industry and exports.

The EU ambassador along with his delegation visited the local company, which is building 25 pontoons for the EU.

The EU-financed pontoons will be handed over to the west and east forest departments of the Sundarbans in Khulna and Bagerhat to help conserve the mangrove forest's biodiversity.

The managing director of the dockyard, Mohammad Yasin Chowdhury, also spoke.

The EU envoy also visited Western Marine Shipyard.

Garment subcontracts avoidable? Far from it

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After the incident, Wal-Mart cancelled its entire order worth nearly \$5 million (Tk 40 crore) with the local firm.

Smart Export was executing orders on a subcontract for brands -- Bershka and Lefties -- owned by the Spanish retail giant Inditex when a fire struck on January 26. Inditex has since announced that it would not take the Smart-manufactured items.

Generally, exporters get 45 to 60 days if all materials are to be sourced locally, to fulfil an order, and 90 to 120 days if the materials need to be imported.

"Often, we resort to subcontracts at 20-30 percent higher costs to meet the deadlines of the buyers," said Iqbal Hossain, another exporter.

The poor condition of the Dhaka-Chittagong highway and political unrest eat up a good

portion of the time exporters get from buyers, he said.

Hossain also said all factories, except the composite ones, work on a subcontract basis. There are around 10 composite factories in the country's woven sector.

However, Anwar-ul-Alam Chowdhury Parvez, former president of the BGMEA, said the trend towards subcontracting is on the wane. "Still, many factories rely on subcontracts."

Parvez, however, said the factories having bond licences need to get the BGMEA approval before delegating orders on subcontracts.

Conversely, a factory cannot take up subcontracting work without a bond licence. However, more than 1,000 factories of BGMEA members do not have any bond licence.

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Japan to mint 50cr coins of Tk 2

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Japan Mint will deliver the coins in six shipments starting from April. The coin, made of stainless steel, will carry an image of the Father of the Nation Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur

Rahman on one side and the national emblem and a water lily bordered by rice sheaves on the other.

The last procurement cost of each of the 5.5-gram coin will be Tk 1.22.



Muhammed Ali, managing director of United Commercial Bank, and Michael Kuehner, chief executive of Robi Axiata, exchange documents of a deal at a ceremony in Dhaka recently. Robi users registered with UCASH, the bank's mobile banking service, will be able to receive UCASH services.



Dipal Chandra Barua, president of Bangladesh Solar and Renewable Energy Association, attends the association's first annual general meeting at Gulshan Club in Dhaka recently. Munwar M Moin, senior vice president, was also present.



Mahatabudiin Ahmed, chairman of PRAN-RFL Group, opens an RFL Best Buy shop on Chondi Choron Bose Street in Wari in Dhaka on Saturday. Nabanur Islam Khan, chief operating officer, was also present.