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Where Singaporean foodies are keeping up with the Joneses

Singapore's Dempsey Hill is a bucolic paradise of grassy knolls, soccer fields and bijou chapels, cosseted by thick tropical greenery. Once upon a time, when England was still colonial overlord, the hill was home to the British military brass. But once the sprawling barracks were decommissioned three decades ago, the area quickly languished into stately disrepair, with only a few locals venturing out here to a well-known fish-head curry restaurant down the road. Then, two years ago, driven away by Orchard Road's high rents, canny entrepreneurs began snapping up the dilapidated barracks, overhauling the interiors and moving in.

These days, Dempsey Hill has been transformed into a lively hub of galleries, restaurants, bars and spas. And in the midst of the area's renaissance, the recent opening of Australian gourmet shop and deli Jones the Grocer has given Dempsey a hit of unmistakable Down Under chic.

The first Jones the Grocer store opened in 1996 in an old mechanic's warehouse in Woollahra, one of Sydney's most affluent neighbourhoods. With its tempting mix of a charcuterie, a cheese room, a café and a deli that stocked all manner of oils, exotic spices and prepared meals, Jones quickly seduced a discerning market of foodies hungry for locally sourced, quality produce. Within a few years, 12 Jones outlets had sprung up, even skipping across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand.

The Singapore Jones is the group's 13th outlet and its first foray into Asia. For local franchise director Michael Sawyer, the island was an obvious choice. 'Its main attraction is an affluent, English-speaking market,' he says. 'Singaporeans are really very well travelled and educated.'

For the debut, Sydney-based interior architects Landini Associates – Mark Landini is a former creative director of Conran Design and his outfit is behind the Harrods 102 store in London – lined the cavernous 6,200 sq ft space with a glossy concrete floor, bright industrial >>



JO SOH, 31

Fashion designer

In her basket: Sicilian ginger biscuits, Brie, linguine and Orange Pekoe tea. Soh was scouting the aisles for ingredients for a romantic dinner that evening. 'It's my first time here. They've lots of interesting stuff I've not tried before, like organic sparkling cola. I never have a lot of time to cook, so what I'm buying is really quite easy. I'll probably make a carbonara.'

Above, the meat counter includes fine lamb and wagyu beef from Australia, appealing to Singapore's expat community



SAKINAH MANAFF, 36
Editor

In her basket: Persian fairy floss, vanilla tea, red hot chilli crackers, lobster oil, and wild hibiscus in syrup. Manaff's long hours at her custom publishing job means she has little time at home to make complicated meals. 'I keep a well stocked larder with quick shops here. I'll use the wild hibiscus to make a champagne cocktail.'

IAN DONLAN, 35
Architect

In his basket: pasta, crushed tomatoes, pesto, Bircher muesli, chocolate-coated honeycomb and olive oil. 'I've just had my breakfast here and I now need to pick up supplies for a dinner party I'm holding tonight. I'm a really big fan of their range of pre-made foods and cheeses – it just reminds me of home in Sydney.'



lamps and rows of shelves crammed with goodies like Italian biscuits, gourmet salts, orange blossom water, dried pasta and huge slabs of home-made rocky road.

Flanking the cold counter – stocked with rosemary sausages, olives marinated in lemongrass and pepper, and tubs of Meredith feta steeped in garlic oil – are racks of dried goods and an unusual spice collection of blade mace, candied fennel seeds and Spanish smoked sweet paprika.

'It's a very accessible shop,' manager Leisl White says. 'And we're able to stock the best produce with fresh shipments coming in from Australia every week and from Europe every fortnight.'

The weekends are especially busy as local and expatriate shoppers fill up the long communal tables for a brunch of smoked salmon sandwiches and organic Roquefort and caramelised walnut salad. Suitably sated, they leisurely stock their baskets with olive oils, freshly baked loaves and cheeses. The cheese room is the shop's pride and joy, stocking scores of artisanal varieties, including Manchego, Stilton and six-year-old Parmesan.

Sawyer and his partners have plans to open more outlets in Singapore over the next 18 months. As for the rest of Asia, next up is a Jones the Grocer in Hong Kong, and negotiations are under way in Japan and the Philippines. We're clearing our kitchen counter space already. ✦

Block 9, Dempsey Road, Singapore, tel: 65.6476 1512, www.jonesthegrocer.com