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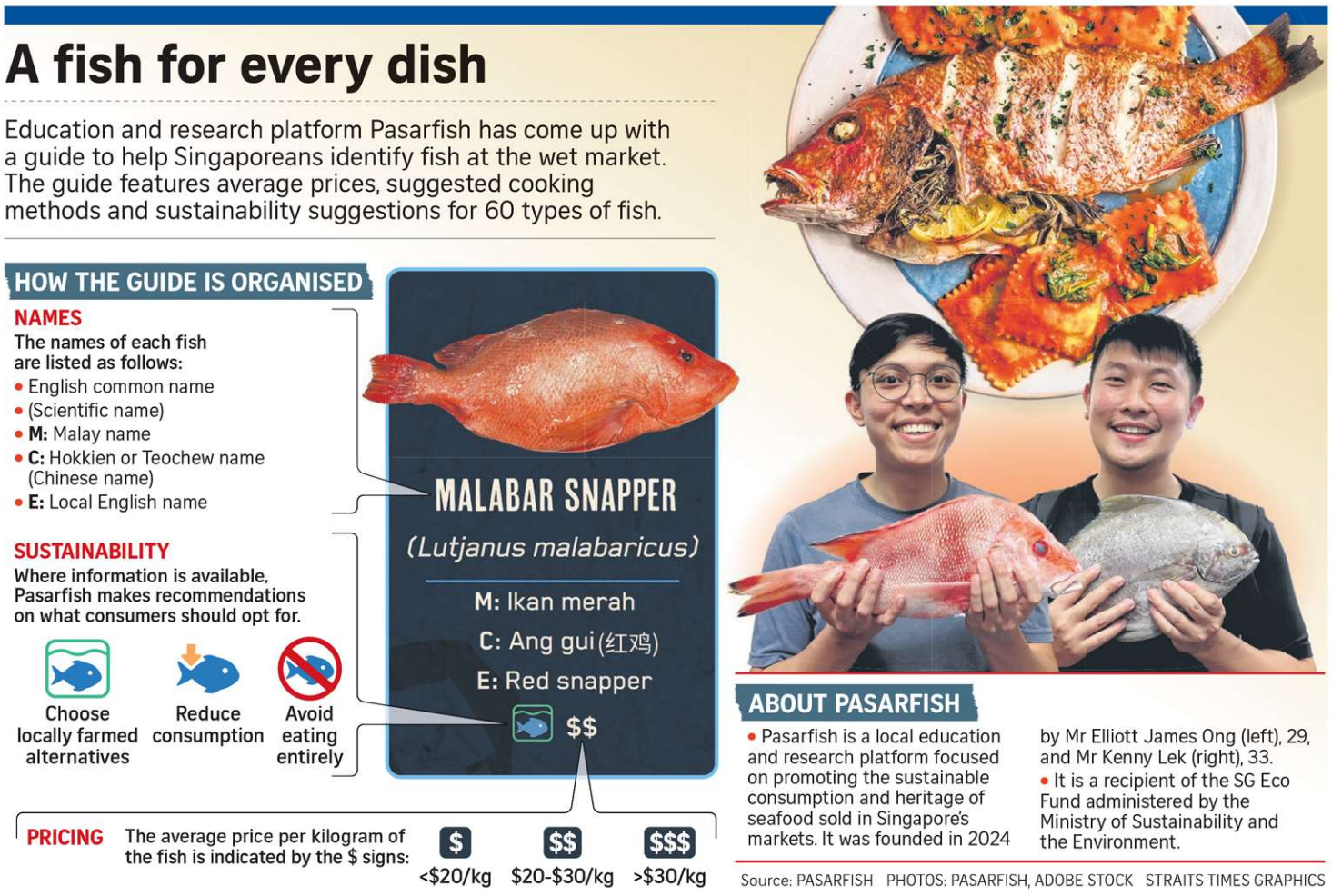

New guide aims to help consumers identify fish at wet markets in Singapore

It includes average price, cooking methods and sustainability recommendations

Calista Wong

Can't tell a snapper from a grouper? Wondering what the English name for batang fish is?

A new guide aims to help customers identify 60 types of fish commonly found at wet markets in Singapore, and more.

It includes the average price per kilogram of fish and some suggested cooking methods, and lists the names of the fish in English, Chinese and Malay.

Called A Fish For Every Dish, the guide also makes sustainability recommendations, such as whether to eat less of a certain type of fish, opt for locally farmed alternatives, or avoid eating it completely.

The online guide is the brainchild of Pasarfish, a local education and research platform dedicated to promoting Singapore's seafood heritage, along with sustainable consumption and traceability. It is available for free on Pasarfish's website at www.pasarfish.com

Pasarfish, a recipient of the SG Eco Fund administered by the Ministry of Sustainability and the Environment, was founded in 2024 by Mr Elliott James Ong, 29, and Mr Kenny Lek, 33.

Said Mr Ong: "We hope for people to go to the wet market to learn more about fish, and hopefully in the process of doing so, they also learn about sustainability."

Mr Lek and Mr Ong began working on the identification guide to document and preserve Singapore's seafood heritage tied to its wet markets – a cultural facet Pasarfish observed to be slowly fading with time.

Mr Ong said: "The common consensus of the fishmongers we spoke to is that business is dropping each year. We observed that the number of people buying produce in wet markets has decreased significantly."

Pasarfish is also releasing merchandise that includes miniature storybooks, and cards featuring recipes and fish identification tips. PHOTO: LIANHE ZAOBAO

Coupled with a notable increase in the sale of salmon and cod, this means that local fish are slowly being forgotten, and along with this, many dishes and recipes that are a big part of Singapore's cultural heritage, he added.

As part of its research, Pasarfish made about 50 visits to Tekka wet market in Little India over the past year, collecting data on more than 250 species of fish.

Pasarfish was assisted by four research assistants from the National University of Singapore, and is currently working with the Singapore Food Agency, which provides it with information on local fish farming.

The team also wanted the guide to "further educate Singaporeans on some of the overfished species that might disappear if we continue our current consumption level", Mr Ong said.

This was after Pasarfish noticed that existing sustainability seafood guides, most of which were produced overseas, are not fully tailored to the local scene.

Although World Wide Fund for Nature Singapore launched its Singapore Seafood Guide in 2016, Mr Lek noted: "Most of the species identified in their guide are not commonly purchased in Singapore, with a focus on fish imported from Western countries."

Pasarfish hopes to build on existing guides by focusing more on local species.

The Singapore Institute of Technology's Associate Professor Matthew Tan, who chairs the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation's working group for sustainable development in agricultural and fishery sectors, said sustainable consumption is "about eating fish in a way that does not deplete species faster than they can reproduce, avoids destructive fishing methods, supports responsible aquaculture practices, and minimises carbon and ecological footprints".

Pasarfish's sustainability suggestions were developed using Indonesia's and Malaysia's – Singapore's top seafood sources – national-level stock assessments conducted by researchers and fisheries officials, and information from the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List, which outlines the conservation status of animals, plants and fungi.

Some consumers The Straits Times spoke to said the guide would be useful.

Ms June Chow, a 56-year-old retired administrative manager, said: "I have a general lack of knowledge of fish for consumption, that is why I stick to a limited selection of frozen fish, like salmon, cod, saba or canned tuna.

"I would be willing to explore buying other types of fish for consumption if I knew what was out there," she said.

Student Muhammad Al Hakim Mohd Laras, 25, who frequently buys fish from supermarkets, hopes the guide can help with his switch to more sustainable shopping habits.

For others, sustainability is not a big concern. For example, cost is a more important factor for financial analyst Leong Wai Leng, 54, and research assistant Vani Ramachandran, 44.

Pasarfish will also be releasing a series of merchandise produced in collaboration with seven artists.

This includes an illustrated map featuring iconic markets in Singapore, a series of miniature storybooks telling the history of some species, and cards featuring recipes and identification tips.

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