



epicurean harmony of true value

THEY HAVE COME AND GONE, LEAVING A WHIRLWIND OF IMPRESSIVE GASTRONOMIC EXPERIENCES AND MEMORIES OF TINGLING TASTE BUDS. WE PRESENT THE WORLD GOURMET SUMMIT MASTERCHEFS IN TWO ISSUES, IN CELEBRATION OF FINE CULINARY TALENT AND A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF INTERNATIONAL GOURMET FOOD.

BY JENNY TAN



Hunglay curry



Arun Sampathavivat

This chef's story is a mini miracle in itself. With a degree in literature and foreign language, a master degree in international relations and yet another master degree in political science, his road to achieving a Ph.D in Asian affairs was halted for the purpose of starting up his own restaurant. "At that time, there was no model of a fine-dining Thai restaurant for us to follow," explained the man who persisted alone after his friends backed out, citing that "There was nothing to lose but to go on". With no training in cooking which was regarded as a woman's arena in Thai culture, the only epicurean experience he had was learning from a grandfather who had ardent passion for food.

"But it all comes back to you, all that you have learnt," said Sampathavivat in his pleasingly lilting English. "I guess I was lucky. In two month's time, we got a four star rating from the *Chicago Tribune*, which was quite unheard of." With utmost humility, he added, "I have no idea what exactly it was, but I must have done something that struck the chord. I was lucky."

Fans of Sampathavivat will beg to differ that it was pure luck. His style of Thai cuisine that resists "borrowing too much" in order to keep the integrity of Thai cooking has won rave reviews – proof that brains and food can be a mighty combination. "I was able to put all my Maslow and Hasburg theories into use! Running a small establishment means that I have to adopt an authoritarian management that is more 'family-like' and not ideological." His genius also led to cutting-edge implementations, which only allowed credit card reservations and a *dégustation*-only menu.

A peek at the 'curry menu' he put together for World Gourmet Summit, or the way he elaborates endlessly on their merits shows his unmistakable passion, "Curries are versatile and can be made from any kind of ingredients. It's a melting pot of all the layers of tastes – savoury, sweetness or sourness. It inspires interaction and activity in the kitchen and lastly, this is the origin. If you know how to master the art of making curry, you can master all kinds of sauce. Unlike Indian curries,

Thai curries are based mainly on herbs and are in a class of their own."

After good friend Charlie Trotter successfully insisted that he take part in this year's World Gourmet Summit, Sampathavivat came to share with Singaporeans his wide spectrum of curry interpretations. His curries thickened with mashed potatoes (French style) bear the unmistakable tamarind Thai influence, and some are even given a characteristically Japanese texture and presented like *chowamooishi*.

Of Asia's potential, Sampathavivat acknowledges that the art of service is lacking. Asia's readiness, however, is apparent. "Everyone wants to take part in this same piece of pie. But you must abide by the same rules of international cuisine."

As an academic who fit into a chef's mould perfectly without even knowing he could do it, this man holds on to what his university lecturer once said. "Everyone has hidden potential that's invisible. Just like a wet towel, you don't see the water until you wring that out".

Undoubtedly, this is a towel that's well wrung-dry.

Ettore Bocchia

Ettore Bocchia emanates an air of solemnity - whether he's working in the kitchen or answering questions in the middle of an interview.

His career was a steady climb, with environment and surroundings as a form of inspiration. "Parma, where I'm from in Italy had 11 to 12 Michelin-starred restaurants in that small 30 km square town," he said. "Becoming a chef seemed a natural course of action."

Despite constant travel, this chef has kept close to his roots. He holds the fort as executive chef at Lake Como, but makes it a point to travel for five months every year: "Travelling is important. People should open their minds to all senses," he said. Bocchia often tries to "change the structure of dishes" without compromising true-blue Italian flavours. He mixes all the cultural elements of Italy in his cooking, making sure the ingredients are all in harmony, be it in colour or geometry.



seabass ravioli with oyster fricassee

Unlike other chefs who look towards the West or East for inspiration nowadays, Chef Bocchia looks to the other parts of his home country. "Italy has been divided for a very long time, so every part in Italy has a different culture, and therefore the cuisine is not the same." At this year's World Gourmet Summit, he brought in special chocolate made with chilli, vanilla and cinnamon from by a chocolate maker in Sicily. "It's very different and not popular," he said, but such is his dedication in introducing dishes that boast 'new style'.

Call this chef a 'success' to his face and be prepared to be corrected immediately. "If you think you are a success, you have finished work," came the austere reply.

Hemant Oberoi

Believe it or not this stately chef's childhood aspirations lay in the arena of medicine. Thankfully, by some twist of fate, a career in the kitchen beckoned him, landing the world with one talented chef who is of Michelin-star quality. "Let's keep our fingers crossed. But if the Michelin guide is to go beyond Europe, there have been discussions, and we stand a good chance of getting the first Michelin star in Asia," revealed the grinning chef.

As executive chef of the Taj Mahal Hotel group and his own brand of Cali-Indian cuisine, he stands as an unofficial ambassador of Indian cuisine. "Food is the passion of my life," was the unrelenting declaration. And there is no doubt about this, if one should judge from the types of dishes he can create from lemongrass alone – over 30 variations on the ingredient, from starters to desserts.

Travelling with an excess of 120 kg in Indian spices just for World Gourmet Summit, he believes this boils down to bringing the true taste of India to his customers, with guaranteed freshness and the right spices blended to perfection.

"The food must talk. Our restaurants have become a sort of branding – food, quality and consistency of food," he said. "People should serve Indian food with a difference, and we always serve food that is ahead of the times." His innovation has seen interpretations like *naan* pizza, which is topped with spices, sauces then cheese. There's also *dhsal* baskets, and chicken *tikka* Caesar salad that is sprinkled with Indian bread instead of the usual croutons. It is with this renegade attitude that he will oversee the opening of 12 restaurants worldwide in the next three years. Masala Art, a contemporary restaurant due to open in October in Bombay, will be the first restaurant where they grind their own flour and have their own *chapatti* making machine. Freshness is guaranteed, as Indian chefs serve diners at a food bar not dissimilar to the Japanese *teppanyaki* counters.

With a hint of national pride, he concludes, "Indian chefs are doing so well in London and New York. I am happy that our kind of cuisine has been recognised."

Marcus Samuelsson

Modern Scandinavian cuisine captured the hearts and palates of diners in Singapore during the World Gourmet Summit as this Ethiopian born chef brought the crowds in to mezza9's dining spaces each night of the week.

This chef's methodological intelligence is reflected in his food. "I work on building blocks," he said, before picking up a pen to illustrate this concept on a piece of paper. "I work on seafood, game, pickling and preserves. These are true to Scandinavian cuisine culture. From my travelling, I have picked up the art of aesthetics, texture and temperature." In theory, he 'plays around' with these blocks,



masala crab & prawns mille feuille

which has been the base of his signature style – one reason why his 15-year old restaurant in New York, Aquavit (which in direct translation means ‘water of life’), has been lauded with accolades.

As he charmed the diners in Singapore, local cuisine was at the same time charming him, with its unique flavours. “If you think about most cities, the food scene is rather homogeneous. Singapore is an extremely mixed city with Chinese, Malay and Indian culture and there’s a reflection in the food.” The refreshing *ice kacang* dessert that is so familiar to Singaporeans was to him, exciting and “completely different.”

Yet should you expect to see something directly similar on his menus, you may be disappointed. “I don’t really work like that. I sit down and have my own ideas but I can be influenced by a lot of the cooking here.”

The future for this young spirited chef is promising, and there are opportunities like cookbook and television shows. That, however, is not an all-encompassing view. “I consider myself very lucky to be able to put my passion into my profession. I’d also like to work on other concepts, not just food – like finding that balance in life. Not just work, work, work!”

David Laris

Not many chefs can boast of working in one of the largest restaurants in Europe and David Laris takes his position at Mezzo in UK with pride. “It is a challenge to keep the standards,” says the towering chef. He further elaborated, “This is why training your staff is essential. Imagine doing 700 covers in one restaurant per night. You’ve got to ask yourself: how



do I deliver a world-class dish?” With this in mind, he more often opts for simplicity so that it will be done in the right manner rather than try to be ‘too clever’.

Laris stands out in a multitude of ways. Where other chefs define their culinary styles specifically, this chef chooses to identify all his various influences. “You can say I have quite a few cuisine styles. At the moment, there is the South East Asian, Mediterranean, Greek or Middle-Eastern influence,” he rattled on at bullet speed. That celebration of Australian identity is also easily detected in his breezy attitude. “The Australian mentality is to have a laidback approach but to still be very serious. Like everywhere else in the world, we do have trends and phases, but we tend to lighten everything up.”

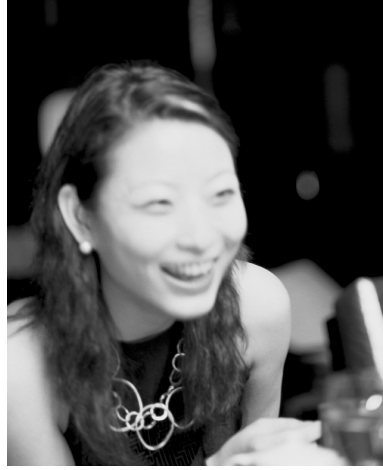
That passion for food seems to have stemmed from the other side of his half-Greek heritage. To him, it seemed natural that he killed his first chicken when he was eight years old, pickled olives and pickled them, and grew up amongst vineyards and olive groves. Living in the way “the world used to be in the old days” instilled in him a respect for the product. “I hate

the idea of taking a fish and doing 50 things to it. It should be a nice piece of fish,” he said. “The only complicated factor is that I like my food to look pretty. Being Australian, I like the stacks and towers, oils and garnishes. Food that looks elegant.”

Despite having to run a restaurant that has more than 500 seats and split into various sections, certain ethics he does not compromise. “It’s so easy to say ‘it’s cheaper and easier to cut corners’, but I believe in being loyal to my customers and restaurant. You need to have the discipline to stay true to them.”

David Laris and the chef duo from Restaurant VII, the brotherhood of chefs





Zhang Jin Jie

"I cook because I like to," came the adamant reply in response to being called a 'chef'. Resistance to labels and names extends even to the cuisine of this young Beijing chef (okay, 'professional') and musician.

Be it Shanghainese, Beijing or Sichuan cooking, her style lies somewhere in the middle of the wide universe of Chinese cuisine. On top of that, elements from other cultures are also loosely incorporated. "I put a lot of fresh herbs, cheese, cream sauce, brandy, white wine, Chinese wine and champagne," she shared, in her usual sprightly manner.

Art plays a predominant role in her creations. Her table setting at Asian Restaurant & Bar included individualistic plates which were sourced from all over the world. Her signature green tea dumplings were served on an irregularly shaped plate, simply because "plates have their own personality". Menus are dwelled upon and conceptualised painstakingly before she crafts them by hand. Even the choice of music is given much thought, considering that she is an established musician in the arena of *yang-qin* and *gu-zheng*. On one occasion, her dishes were untouched at the end of the event. "They (the guests) didn't realise that the food was edible because it was so pretty!" she recounted laughingly.

As owner of Green Tea House in Beijing, she professes that one of the main ingredients she uses in her cooking is tea. She herself sticks to a tea-only diet. "Not all teas have caffeine. *Oolong* tea is good for those who want to go on a diet, and green tea is good for the skin," she explained. In truth, tea bears an even deeper significance for her: "Tea is the blood of Chinese. The knowledge of tea is only part of it – it's the culture and spirit too." JT

In the next issue, we will bring you more interviews with other World Gourmet Summit masterchefs, so watch this space!