

Born to be a chef

What goes into two-Michelin star Sergi Arola's cuisine? It's passion, patience and more, reports **SIMONE ERASMUS**



Sergi Arola: *I do not like to be called a chef. I am a cook. A chef usually has up to 300 people working under him. I don't — only 32, and I'd like them to work with me, not under me.*

HIS favourite local food is the humble Hainese chicken rice. "I went to a street-side stall to have it," said two-Michelin star chef Sergi Arola. "And it was — what do you call it? Ah, magic!" He smiles and snaps his fingers in the air.

Born and bred in Barcelona, Spain, the 34-year-old master chef participant at the World Gourmet Summit is often lost for words when communicating in English. But his expressiveness and spontaneity leaves the listener with no doubt as to what he means — and his exuberance and passion clearly translates to his skill as well.

"It is very important to have passion if you want to cook — and instinct as well," he emphasises. "You must be born with this talent." He uses the example of flamenco singing to reiterate his point. You can train to sing very well, he says, but not for flamenco. You must have the talent to be able to "feel" the art form, he says, before you can master it.

So if chefs are born, not bred, then Arola must have been a prodigy. At the age of 12, he first began creating recipes for his grandfather, a cook. At 16, he enrolled in a school for caterers and chefs. By his late 20s, he had won the Vitoria Certamen de Cocina de Autor (creative cuisine competition), and took over a restaurant called La Broche. His bold and creative cuisine centering around Mediterranean style food was a hit, and at the age of 30, he was awarded his first Michelin star.

But despite the numerous gastronomy awards, he's modest about it. "I do not like to be called a chef. I am a cook. A chef usually has up to 300 people working under him. I don't — only 32, and I'd like them to work with me, not under me. I must be like one of them, so I call myself a cook."

And he even goes so far as to say that he cannot create recipes. He merely follows, he says, Picasso's style. "I can identify with Picasso. He once said: I do not create. I find."

According to Arola, part of the finding process involves years of patient experimentation, something that young chefs do not commit themselves to enough. "These have a

very clear goal — to win the next award or achieve the greatest recognition. That is all they care for." He throws his hands up exasperatedly: "But the customers can taste it! They will be able to tell that no real passion has gone into preparing the cuisine."

Besides passion and patience, Arola also practises simplicity and common sense. Food is meant to be savoured in every mouthful, as easily as possible, and his dish of black grouper with curry and coconut gravy that he served up for dinner at the Raffles Grill had the red and white gravy neatly surrounding the browned fish in a circle. This, he later explained, was to ensure that every time the guest took a scoop out of the fish, the sauce would immediately follow.

Such simplicity extended throughout the eight-course dinner. Main ingredients were seldom tossed together, but laid out side by side, or in a circular pattern. The monkfish, ceviche style, was most unique — served in a glass, with a layer of jellied monkfish atop a sour cream base.

It could be said that Arola's style hinges more on the modern type of cuisine. He had trained under master chef Ferran Adria of El Bulli, who is inclined towards the contemporary methods of cooking and the incorporation of technology into the art. But he also yearns to fuse both the



old and the new. He and some fellow chefs, he says, have been working for five years to create a comfortable intermediate between the two schools.

Meanwhile, he intends to source for more inspiration and keep "finding" through tasting foreign food, be it cheap hawker fare or not. And if that dinner was any indication, all we can say is, *Si Senora*, keep exploring.

Creative cuisine: *Chef Arola's starter — sardines and mussel salad with raspberry and cauliflower. Simplicity and common sense are seen in his style. For Arola, food is meant to be savoured in every mouthful, as easily as possible.*