

Culinary Poetry with Santi Santamaria

MENU

(Notes by the author)

Royale Truffle

A delicious looking liquid consommé with truffles

Surf & Turf

A Spanish rice dish similar to the Italian risotto

Caramelized Pineapple Millefeuille

A spiced fruit dessert

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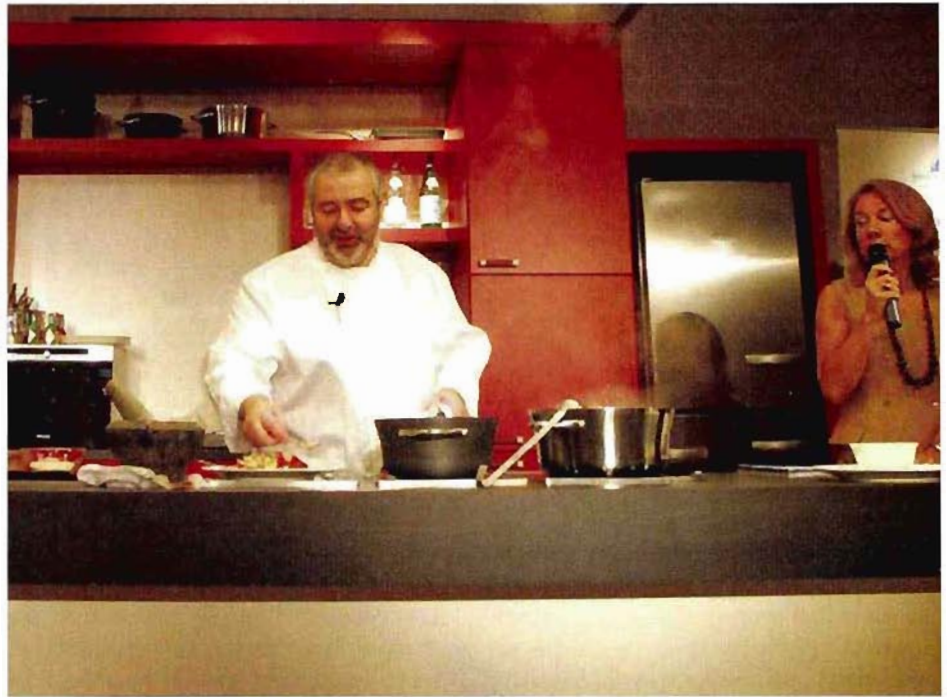
and taking extensive gourmet trips throughout Europe.

Santamaria grew up in a household where cooking played a central role in his family. Sunday was a special day at home: it was lunch with his father and mother (both of them good cooks) when the three of them would talk a great deal about cooking and dishes.

Santamaria believes that one needs to learn the technical principles of cooking. Since he is self-taught, his learning process has sometimes taken him longer than usual as it is learnt through trial and error. He is inspired by what he eats, by the great all-time cooking classics – whether medieval cooks, French Revolution chefs and modern-day French chefs, or great contemporary Japanese cooks. Although Santamaria likes traditional cooking, which he translates as cooking from the past, heritage cooking, family cooking or local cooking, he does not serve this at his restaurant as he believes that he can make a bigger contribution to the customer's enjoyment than what he terms as "home cooking".

Santamaria is adamant that he only cooks with the seasons; he uses seasonal products so that the produce is at its freshest. He also stays away from manufactured products that include preservatives and stabilizers. Santi prefers his products in their purest state so that he can adapt them to his preferences and produce a dish that does not betray the essence of the product, i.e., we should all be able to recognize what we eat.

With that, he turned to prepare the final touches to the caramelized pineapple *millefeuille*. His time was up and lunch was ready to be served to us. Although I didn't learn exactly how to cook any of the dishes, I think it was safe to say none of us expected this to be a hands-on cooking class. What I got out of this experience was that behind the simplicity of Santi Santamaria's cooking lies an elaborate and emotional cuisine deeply rooted in well-reasoned theories. And yes, I tucked into my food with great anticipation and it certainly did not disappoint! 🍷





Pauline D Loh

Perfectionist at work

SUSUR LEE, named one of the world's top 10 chefs, is a hyperactive hands-on cook who never stops experiencing, experimenting and re-inventing recipes. Publisher Pauline D Loh examines his past achievements and future plans



HOW OFTEN do you get to sit down and talk shop for an hour with one of the top 10 icons of the culinary world? Susur Lee, in person, is every bit what one imagines him to be. He shoots off answers and ideas at rapid-fire pace, eyes sparkling with enthusiasm, passion fuelled by several cups of café latte.

Yep. Susur Lee was back in Singapore to show off his culinary genius once again at Club Chinois, the elegant fusion Chinese restaurant he helped Tung Lok set up in 1997.

His trademark ponytail is still neatly bundled away behind and he looks more like a gongfu master than the spectacularly successful chef that he is.

Lauded as one of Canada's top culinary talents, Susur was initiated into the top 10 international list by the prestigious North American publication Food & Wine in 1999. That was just about the time he was consulting chef to both Club Chinois and the Ritz-Carlton in Singapore.

Susur's journey through the kitchens started when he was just 14 years old, but he had trained with the best.

He apprenticed in the kitchens of The Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong and stayed there until 1978, when he emigrated to Toronto. Once in Canada, Susur Lee stayed true to his calling by working steadily through a succession of well-known restaurants until he finally opened his own place – Lotus – in 1987.

In less than 10 years, the young apprentice from Hong Kong had won over his Canadian patrons with a mastery of both Chinese and western cooking. Lotus was an undisputed success and won enough recognition and awards to catapult its chef-owner into culinary limelight.

Lotus closed in 1997 for many reasons,

both professional and personal. It was a blessing in disguise, at least for Singapore gourmets, as it led to the opening of Club Chinois.

Club Chinois, a bold experiment by the Tung Lok Group to bring about a refreshing marriage of Chinese cuisine presented with western élan, benefited from Susur's guidance. Before long, the restaurant had garnered the support of jet-setting gourmands both in Singapore and the region.

Almost another decade later, Susur is back in town, having gone back to Canada in the meantime and moved yet another level up with the opening of not one, but two restaurants.

He is even more poised and confident now. The lunch he designs at Club Chinois showcases the mellow maturity of his culinary skills and the total mastery of ingredients. Every dish is the result of a harmonious marriage of east and west.

Let's just look at one dish – the skate fin soup Susur Lee created.

Skate, better known as sting ray to an Asian audience, can be a difficult fish to cook. Like the shark, which is a close relative, skate can smell of ammonia if it is not properly prepared.

Susur Lee's skate fin soup is delicately flavoured with chicken broth, but has none of the pungency that local cooks love to disguise with dollops of spice pastes.

This is Susur's answer to shark's fin soup. The thin slivers of skate flakes naturally and its chicken-like texture pleases the palate. Bean sprouts and thread-thin ham julienne both season and provide a tactile contrast.

It is exactly this detailed attention to

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WHEN IN TORONTO, visit:

Susur

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Lee

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Photos courtesy of Peter Knipp Holdings Pte Ltd. <www.asiacuisine.com>

colour, taste and texture that makes his two restaurants stand out in a city full of Asian immigrant culinary showcases.

As Susur explains, his name-sake outlet opened in 2000 caters for patrons who like to dine elegantly. Both food and ambience take care of that. Soon, critics were calling it "an international dining destination".

Lee, opened in 2004, caters for those who want fuss-free dining. It is a less expensive, more accessible venue located next door to his famous flagship. The menu also features signature specialities created by Susur, but executed by his protégé executive chef Jason Carter.

It was also during this time when Susur decided to fulfill another dream – publish a cookbook.

"When we were preparing for the launch of Lee, so many ideas were in my head that I thought it would be a good time to get some of it down on paper," he said.

Susur: A Culinary Life is both autobiography and cookbook. The two-volume set describes his culinary journey and contains a collection of 90 recipes, all painstakingly photographed.

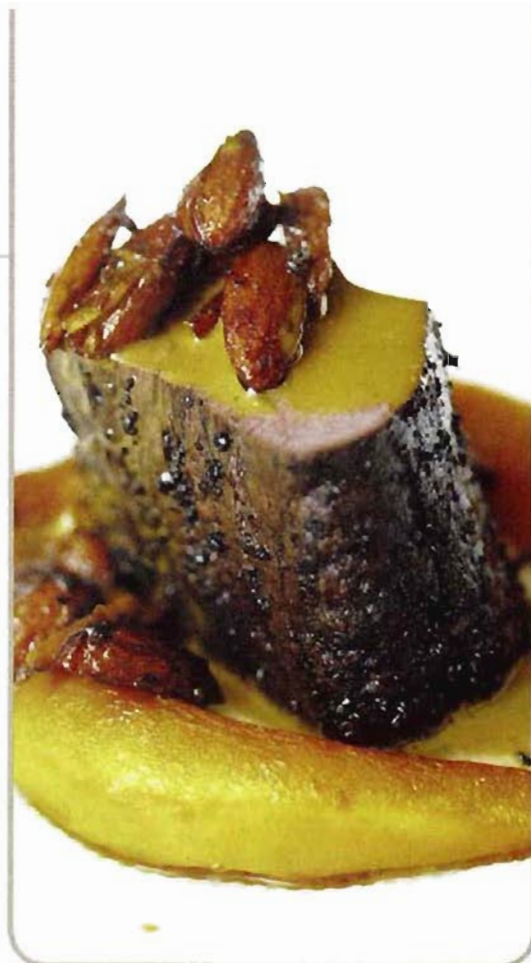
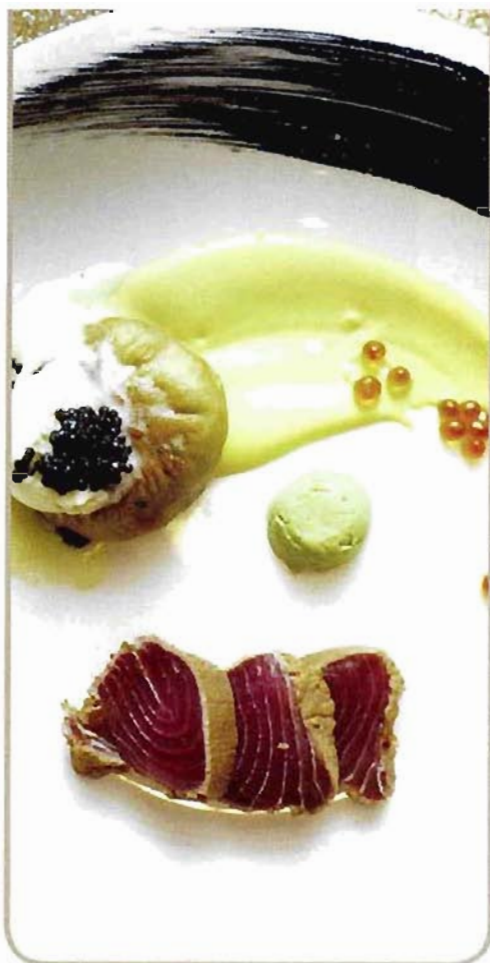
In fact, Susur supervised all the photography himself, so it is a great compliment when he looks at our magazine and notices how we craft our pictures.

"I like that. You focus on the food, not the frills." At last, our meticulous efforts are recognised.

Susur Lee, chef extraordinaire, is at the pinnacle of his success, so where else will he find new challenges?

"A private dining room. Where I can cook what I like and serve it to a select number of diners each evening. A place where I can control the whole dining experience."

Knowing Susur, we can expect to visit this new restaurant any time soon. 🍴





Lynette Foo

Learning from culinary icon Santi Santamaria

Food lessons from the top Catalan chef at the World Gourmet Summit

IT IS not every day that an iconic three-Michelin star chef comes to Singapore. A month after the recently concluded 10th Anniversary of the World Gourmet Summit, I look back fondly on the cooking class I attended last April where Catalan chef Santi Santamaria of Can Fabes provided us a gastronomic learning experience with his culinary poetry.

I showed up early because I was *kiasu* and I wanted to get the best seat in this much-anticipated class but the doors to the demonstration theatre were firmly shut. After half an hour, I was getting really worried. Did he wake up late or what? Little did I know that Santamaria, the first chef in Catalonia to receive Michelin recognition, had changed impromptu the menu that morning and was quietly briefing his support team at The Grand Hyatt. We were, however, suitably distracted with the chocolate chip cookies and the superb

coffee offered by Miele's mobile oven and coffee maker.

Alas, when the door opened I was so visibly distracted from consuming the cookies and coffee that I was the last one in (can you believe?) and had to sit right at the back.

Santamaria strolled in soon after and every one turned around to greet him. Looking like a shorter, more rotund version of Andrea Bocelli (the famous Italian tenor); Santamaria is a quiet and soft-spoken man. Speaking through a translator, Santamaria discussed how his philosophy of life shaped his cooking as his assistants prepared the award-winning dishes to be served.

Like me, Santi Santamaria is a completely self-taught chef. He has never worked in any other restaurant in his life. He honed and refined his technical skills by learning from the people who worked with him.

