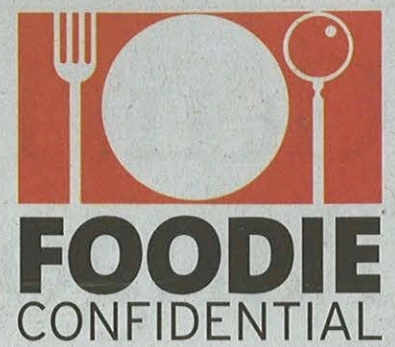


Clueless about carrots

As a trainee cook, Osia sous chef Lee Boon Seng did not even know what a carrot was



ST PHOTO: EDWARD TEO



WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST MEAL BE?

A meal at sushi master Jiro Ono's Sukiyabashi Jiro restaurant in Tokyo.

Eunice Quek

As a 17-year-old trainee cook at Swissotel The Stamford's Equinox Restaurant, Mr Lee Boon Seng's knowledge of Western food was limited to chicken chops, French fries and burgers.

Worse still, the Chinese-educated aspiring chef had no clue what a carrot was.

Kedah-born Lee, now 28 and sous chef at Osia in Resorts World Sentosa, recalls: "I was asked to get a carrot from the chiller and had to ask the chef what it was. I was scolded badly and ended up spending at least 10 hours every day in the kitchen while others spent just eight hours.

"I had to learn about the ingredients on top of chopping and peeling vegetables, as well as cleaning the chiller."

Coming from a poor family, his study options were limited and he had poor job prospects. With no prior cooking experience, he moved to Singapore 11 years ago to work with his brother-in-law, then a chef at Equinox. He spent seven years there before moving to contemporary Australian restaurant Osia in 2010.

The self-taught chef's willingness to learn and his culinary chops earned him the Meat & Livestock Australia Rising Chef Of The Year accolade at the World Gourmet Series Awards Of Excellence last week. The youngest of five siblings has also participated in a dozen culinary competitions such as Food and Hotel Asia (in 2012 and 2010), and the Expogast Culinary World Cup in 2010.

On his experience, Lee, who has a 32-year-old Singaporean girlfriend, says: "The competitions teach you team work. If anything goes wrong, you not only affect yourself, but everyone in the team too.

"Becoming a chef is like running a marathon – you can't be too fast or too slow. There must also be mutual respect for the people, kitchen and products."

What are your childhood memories of food?

My late mother's assam prawn, which was simple and tasty. It never went wrong with a bowl of rice. I also miss having "Luk Luk" at Malaysian food street night markets. You choose various skewered ingredients, such as meats and seafoods, cook them in boiling water, and dip them into chilli, sweet or satay sauces.

What are your favourite restaurants?

In Singapore, I used to frequent Ken's Ramen at Orchard Plaza for a supper of cold ramen. But since it closed down, I go for dim sum at Swee Choon at Jalan Besar. I like their dumplings in spicy Sichuan chilli oil.

My all-time favourite is three-Michelin-starred Victor's Gourmet Restaurant in Schloss Berg, Germany. We spent four to five hours on the tasting menu which had about 11 courses. I remember eating the foie gras terrine with smoked eel.

Other famous restaurants I would love to go to are The French Laundry in California, In De Wulf in Belgium, El Celler de Can Roca in Catalonia, Spain, as well as Noma and Geranium in Copenhagen.

What are your favourite local foods?

Hainanese chicken rice from a coffee shop in Yishun, which I eat at least once a week on my days off. I order the tender and moist chicken breast. I also love chilli crab with mantou from the Jumbo Seafood chain of restaurants. Other local foods I love are Hokkien prawn noodles, char kway teow, claypot frog legs and nasi lemak.

Any food cravings?

Freshly made muah chee (glutinous rice balls) tossed in finely ground peanuts from Malaysia. It is difficult to find nowadays.

What has been your worst kitchen disaster?

I was a trainee cook at Equinox and we were rushing at 8am for the Sunday brunch. For my ratatouille dish, I used the slicing machine to slice the eggplant and ended up slicing my finger. A lot of blood spread on the table and I was sent to the hospital where I got four stitches on my finger. I learnt that no matter how busy things get, we should always stay focused.

What ingredients do you like to cook with?

I like to use lemon and thyme in my marinades for seafood. I also like to use basil.

What is a unique dish you have had to create?

For the Food and Hotel Asia 2012 Culinary Challenge last year, I made a Cauliflower and Black Truffle Royale with Mimolette "Yolk & Chip". I sliced the egg shell in half and filled it with cauliflower mousse. I used mimolette cheese to form a spherical egg "yolk". To add more texture to the dish, I also made a chip from the French cheese. For a unique presentation, I placed the egg on hay.

Is there a dish that best represents you?

A dish created in my past competition called Foie Gras Terrine with Pickled Kombu (kelp), White Port Gelee and Sweet & Sour Rhubarb. The dish has different textures and tastes, such as sour, sweet and bitter. It also represents my journey as a chef. The sweet part is winning the Rising Chef award, while the sour part is working at least 12 hours a day. The bitter part is when my mother died when I was 20, as she was the one who encouraged me to come to Singapore.

If you could invite someone (dead or alive) to a meal, who would you choose?

I would invite my parents, as a way of telling them how far I've come because of them. My dad is back home in Malaysia and seldom comes to Singapore. I would cook assam prawn for them.