

The Food Marvel

FROM BUSINESS SUIT TO CHEF'S HAT IN 18 MONTHS, GUAN LEONG CHUA, THE BREAKOUT STAR OF A UK COOKING COMPETITION SHOW, IS DECIDEDLY PASSIONATE ABOUT INTRODUCING MALAYSIAN CUISINE TO LONDONERS, ONE SUPPER CLUB AT A TIME. **DESMOND LIM ZHENG** SHARES HIS STORY HERE.



Guan Leong Chua

During the debut of “The Taste” television cooking competition in the UK early 2014, for many Malaysians living in the UK there were plenty of noticeably familiar dishes seen on the television screen. As one of the finalists was Malaysian-born, Guan Leong Chua proudly introduced Malaysian food to many English households through the telly.

Modeled after the popular American TV competition, “The Taste UK” is one part “Masterchef”, one part “X Factor”, and one part “Survivor”. Thousands from all over England auditioned, 25 chefs eventually made the cut to be shortlisted, and only 12 advanced as finalists to be mentored by celebrity chefs Nigella Lawson, Anthony Bourdain, and Ludo Lefebvre.

Based on his audition dish, Chua had the pleasure of being wooed by Bourdain and Lefebvre. The audition dish is a familiar dish to many Malaysians – *Sambal Udang*. That delectable bowl of succulent prawns smothered in fiery red chili sauce was his passport to notoriety. “What you did... I want ze recipe. It’s a ‘yes’ from me,” Lefebvre declared. Bourdain’s now-famous line of recruitment is one that many would cherish and covet, “I love the country, I love the food.... It’s a solid, solid ‘yes’. We were born to work together... together we will make music. I implore you, come with me.” And so Chua did.

It is no secret that Bourdain has a keen fancy for Asian cuisine, his well-documented adventures in Southeast Asia having served as inspiration for Chua, whose aptly titled food blog, “The Boy Who Ate The World”, chronicles



The Taste: Team Anthony

PHOTO CREDIT RAY BURNISTON

his culinary adventures across England and Europe based on Bourdain’s “No Reservations” programme. To Chua, Anthony Bourdain is his culinary hero. “Nobody inspires me more than Bourdain to search for the very best in food out there... from down and dirty street carts to the finest of restaurants. This is a mentor who coached me through the finer points of making everything from a Mexican Mole sauce to a Thai Som Tam salad. It was an absolute privilege to have the chance to meet and work with him on set,” said Chua.

Under the mentorship of Bourdain, Chua excelled to the quarterfinal stage of the competition before being eliminated over his dish of Wagyu Beef with Celeriac Purée, Ceps, and Madeira. Although he didn’t bag the coveted first prize, the fact that Chua ranked number six out of thousands and scored praises by food luminaries is a huge accomplishment, especially so when his transformation from a financial analyst to a bona fide chef happened only a mere 18 months ago.

Armed with an engineering degree, Chua spent five years at Goldman Sachs in London as a financial analyst. One day, he made a decision to leave the finance world behind him. “After five years of long hours and working through the worst of



Chicken Kapitan



Kuih Pie Tee



Penang Laksa



the credit crunch, I began to get a bit worn out and disillusioned,” he recounts. As one door closed, however, another opened. His passion for food spawned him to enroll at the prestigious Le Cordon Bleu Culinary school where he spent nine months learning the lore of strict fundamentals of French cooking from Michelin Star-awarded experts. “We mastered a wide array of classical cooking techniques – everything from juicy, evenly browned meats to moist, perfectly cooked fish... the clearest of consommés to perfectly risen soufflés. Having the chance to work with premium ingredients like lobster and *foie gras* was a real revelation – I never would have dared to buy, yet alone use, such products in the past!”

One might find the transition from the methodical background of finance to a far more creative environment to be daunting, but for Chua it seems like he has found his calling. “Cooking for a living and working for oneself feels like a new lease on life; there’s never a dull moment. To have the freedom to create and innovate dishes I can call my own and explore the various avenues of sharing my food with others from Supper Clubs to cookery classes has been really satisfying.”

Perhaps just as old fashioned and pedantic as classical French food, his preparation of Asian cuisine with an

unusual application of classical French cuisine fundamentals gave his cooking an edge. “Adding shellfish stock made from prawn heads to *Sambal Udang* completely transforms the spice paste. Browning chicken to develop some caramelisation on the skin produces a far tastier curry. You can also make a far superior *Tau Yew Bak* (Braised Pork Belly in Soya Sauce) by cooking it long and slow in the oven using a French cast iron pot – it beats the conventional method of cooking it over the stove any day,” he said.

A native of Kuala Lumpur, Chua grew up savoring Nyonya dishes, a Straits-Chinese cuisine unique to certain regions of Malaysia. Like most Malaysians, food plays a central role in everyday life. There’s a saying about Malaysians’ passion for food: “We meet at lunch to talk about what we are going to eat for dinner.” For a country whose culture is popularly defined by food, her cuisine has been severely underrepresented overseas. “The majority of non-Malaysians here have never tasted Malaysian food, whilst the small minority who have think all we eat is Chicken Satay with peanut sauce! One of the reasons I’m flying the flag for Malaysian food now is to challenge this misconception and show those less familiar with our cuisine just how multicultural, diverse, and steeped in heritage our food culture really is.” said Chua who, after his experience on “The



Sambal Prawns

Taste UK”, is mainly focused on Malaysian supper clubs that he organizes from his flat in London.

Serving staples of Nyonya cuisine such as *Kuih Pie Tee* and *Sambal Udang*, the popular supper club brings together Malaysians living abroad as well as non-Malaysians who seek out these food gatherings as a result of Chua’s TV fame. “It’s been a truly rewarding and exciting experience seeing like-minded foodies from all walks of life round my dining table enjoying the food! I plan on doing some larger scale pop-up events at external venues outside of my home. Also in my sights are more regular cookery classes and demonstrations around London.”

Undistracted by the presence of new ventures, Chua confesses, “Cooking and

teaching aside, I’m still a food writer at heart and will continue to focus on food and travel writing on my blog. I’m also in the early stages of writing a Malaysian-themed cookbook.” All just further proof that his seamless transition from finance to food is shaping up to be a success.

“Before ‘The Taste’, I felt I was at a crossroads, deciding between a career in food or heading back to my old day job in finance. Having the chance to work with the mentors and other fellow contestants has really inspired me. It has only reaffirmed my love for cooking more and given me the belief that there is a life and career for me in food after all. I have absolutely no regrets about leaving finance to pursue my passion in food. To wake up everyday and do something you love is something money just can’t buy.”