

# THE NEW LADY IRON CHEFS

Women chefs are a rarity no more, as more young ones set out to make their mark on the local dining scene

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## LISA TANG Chef-Partner of Kausmo (Opening May/June)

SERENDIPITY, PASSION, and a little nudge from the cosmos, and you have the birth of Kausmo – a tiny culinary planet that hopes to make a Big Bang in the way we eat.

Kausmo is led by 24-year-old chef Lisa Tang (right of picture) and her former schoolmate Quah Chew Shian, 26 – two millennials concerned enough about sustainability and food waste that they've created a tiny little eatery in Shaw Centre to "celebrate imperfection" and bridge "the disconnection between people and produce in Singapore". Inspired by her stint in Primo, a full-circle farm-to-table restaurant in Maine, USA, which grows its own food (and channels food waste back into the land), Chef Tang returned home wanting to do the same. She and Ms Quah – a final year student in business management at SMU – are both graduates of Temasek Polytechnic's Culinary and Catering management programme, although Chef Tang subsequently went on to the Culinary Institute of America in Singapore.

After failed attempts to set up a business selling 'discarded' produce (cucumbers that didn't fit into packaging, imperfect tomatoes, misshapen vegetables, etc), they decided to use their culinary background and start their own restaurant instead.

"After all our research, we realised there needed to be more of a conversation," says Ms Quah, the more effervescent of the two. After ruling out their own homes for a private dining concept, they set out to look for a restaurant space. "We wanted something small. Just one chef, one server, so we can share stories about the food we're serving, the different techniques we use and how there's no such thing as a bad ingredient." That's how the name Kausmo came about – derived from Cosmos, "which is a system of thought – a restaurant of thoughtful decisions."

It was as if the stars were aligned when in November 2018, a string of coincidences led to them being funded by the Les Amis Group to open Kausmo

as part of a three-restaurant concept that's opening in the second quarter of this year. "We happened to get a random text from Matthew (Nonis, Les Amis' group training manager), asking us what we were up to," says Chef Tang, who won a silver medal for academic achievement at Temasek, which was sponsored by the group, as well as being school valedictorian. "Les Amis is an active partner with Temasek as they sponsor a lot of academic prizes." They were asked to meet with group chairman Desmond Lim, who offered them the restaurant space as part of the group's goal to "groom and set the stage for the next generation of chefs."

It was a no-brainer decision after meeting investors who were "more interested in ROI", she says. As a taste of what's to come, Chef Tang did a pop-up dinner in January. "I made a lot of friends in fine dining restaurants that I worked part time in, and they have a lot of premium 'waste' that they don't use – scallop roe which I make into a sauce, and the side muscle which is good for tartare. I get them when they're very fresh and I use them straight away." While her cooking is visually Western because of her training, there will be traces of heritage, especially Teochew, her dialect group.

Naturally, their product range is unpredictable – "it will be like a black box challenge every week," quips Ms Quah. She adds that their approach is three-pronged: there's the cooking; a gourmet retail business that sells sauces or preserves made from their excess produce; and a video/educational arm run by their fellow schoolmate and third partner Robin Thang, a professional videographer.

It's especially fitting, given the male-dominated industry, that this all-girl team is stepping up to the plate. "As a girl, I felt I had to do more – to have the physical strength and I also trained myself to be left-handed as well," says Chef Tang. "But the image of women chefs is changing. We're benefiting from a greater open-mindedness. It's time for the next generation to step up."

**JOSEPHINE LOKE** Chef de Cuisine of 665°F, Andaz Singapore

Armed with a diploma in mass communications, Josephine Loke was all set to become a food writer. To learn more about food, she enrolled in the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) under the Singapore Institute of Technology in 2011. And just like that, the publishing world lost a writer and the restaurant industry gained a chef.

After attaining her Bachelor's degree in Culinary Arts Management, Chef Loke joined the opening team for Pollen, moving on to become senior Chef de Partie at Tippling Club for two years. She then joined Odette as junior Sous Chef, advancing to Sous Chef at Open Farm Community. At Andaz, she helped to open the hotel's two restaurants Alley on 25 and 665°F.

The calm and measured 29-year-old, who helms the kitchen of premium steakhouse 665°F, takes a progressive approach to cuisine but emphasizes the importance of basic skills.

When quizzed if it is challenging to be a female chef in a male-dominated industry, Chef Loke merely smiles, recounting that it may have been in the earlier years of her career, but no longer.

"I can be quite aggressive in the kitchen, and also assertive. Gender-wise, maybe settling down is the only challenge. If you want to start a family, then ladies have to be away from work for a

longer period of time. But apart from that, I don't think there is much of a difference. It is more of the challenge of being a chef," she says.

"People tend to sensationalize the role of a chef; thinking it is glamorous. When they enter the kitchen then they realize it is something totally different. It is back-breaking work." She adds that determination, drive, passion, and a genuine interest for food and produce are the key qualities for getting ahead. To get to the level where one gets a better payout can take a few years, she explains, "so you have to work 16-18 hours a day with very little returns. Some of them don't really want this so they make a switch, but I believe hard work and determination will pay off in the long run".

At every step of the way, she had a chef mentor to spur her on, and her list reads like a chefs' Who's Who: Pollen's Colin Claud and Colin Buchan; Tippling Club's Ryan Clift; Odette's Julien Roger and her current executive chef Soren Lascelles. "They have made me who I am."

Of the future, she hopes to gain overseas work experience. "The good thing about working in a big company like Hyatt is that there will be opportunities to do cross-training at sister properties, so there is the chance for exposure and also for personal growth."



**LAI SOOK YI**  
Sous Chef of Nouri



After years of comfortably being in the shadow of her head chef, Lai Sook Yi will get her first taste of running her own show when she joins the second version of the acclaimed Magic Square pop-up.

She's the first chef to be recruited for this year's chef incubator project by The Naked Finn's Tan Ken Loon, who created Magic Square in May 2018 "to support young chefs and get them ready to run their own place". The twist this year is "that we want to offer the opportunity to female chefs."

For Chef Lai, it is one more example of "things that just fell into place for most of my cooking career," says the 29-year-old who is currently the sous chef at the Michelin-starred Nouri.

Although she started out with a business diploma, she wanted to pursue her passion for pastry, landing a job in a small shop selling baking supplies. Then, the Singapore campus of the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) opened in 2011 - and the rest is history. Upon graduation, she landed her first job with chef Ivan Brehm, who had just arrived in Singapore and was opening Bacchanalia at the time.

She says she's never felt disadvantaged as a female chef compared to her male counterparts.

"Even in school at CIA, we had 34 students and only eight were guys. In our kitchen at Nouri, it is also mostly ladies," she explains.

Still, she's well aware of the challenges of her chosen career. "It takes a toll on your body and we generally don't make that much income. So you really need to have the fire and passion for it. If you lose that focus, it is easy to get thrown off track."

That fire will come in handy at Magic Square, where she will "have a chance to create my own dishes, which I've never done before." Her boss, Chef Brehm, recognised her talent and recommended her for Magic Square "to take her growing interest in food of this region and her proactive attitude, to grow her confidence as a chef and experiment with style."

She is also down-to-earth enough to know it won't be plain sailing.

"Chefs have been glorified on TV. But that glory is not real. It's not a true reflection of what a chef is, but it has helped make this a respectable profession. It's a double-edged sword. We get a lot of younger chefs with stars in their eyes, who think being a chef is very easy; just like a superstar. Except it is not, it takes a lot of hard work and a lot of personal drive to want to be better for yourself."

**TOH LI SI** Chef de Cuisine of BAM!

TOH LI SI RECALLS when she and a male classmate from culinary school entered the same restaurant as trainees. "He was placed at the hot station, but I was assigned to pastry – maybe because of my size? I had to work doubly hard to prove that I was as capable as the rest, and after I performed well, I was moved to the hot kitchen."

But that was 10 years ago, and times have changed, says chef Toh, who has been the chef de cuisine of BAM! Restaurant for two years. "In the past, the language in the kitchen was more vulgar and there were fewer females. I used to always be the only female in the kitchen, besides the ladies in the pastry section."

If anything, the challenge for Chef Toh isn't her gender but her height.

"Because I am short, I may need help reaching the higher shelves. Other than that, I don't feel any discrimination in my workplace. More often than not it is from the public's perspective," says the petite chef.

"We have guests who will ask to speak to 'the chef' at the end of the meal wanting to learn more about their

meal or compliment our team, and they are usually surprised or shocked when I appear. People seem to have this stereotyped image of the chef to be foreign and male. For one, I am local, I'm a woman and I am also small-sized. Often, suppliers who come looking for 'the chef' would mistake me for a trainee. I don't blame them; I can't change the way I look. I am used to it, but it is quite funny and I like to see people's reaction when they find out I am 'the chef,'" she laughs.

It also helps that director and executive chef Pepe Moncayo - who now oversees the business and explores opportunities abroad - gives her free rein.

"He trusts me, and gives me the freedom to create whatever is suitable for the restaurant – our omakase at Bam! has some Spanish influences, some Japanese influences, but we try not to restrict ourselves. He is also very open-minded, and welcomes suggestions. Sometimes, I will propose to change half of the components in his dish and he will be totally cool with it, as long as it makes sense." She enjoys working with seasonal produce and discovering new ingredients. Her

most memorable discovery? Sea cucumber innards from Catalan (crunchy like squid with a unique flavour of the sea, she describes), which she pairs with a congee cooked with Japanese rice and dashi.

The At-Sunrice GlobalChef Academy-alumnus switched to cooking school after junior college instead of going to university. After graduating in 2009 at the age of 19, she worked at Iggy's with chef Akmal Anuar, then spent one and a half years at Mugaritz in Spain – one of her "best experiences". She then worked for chef Anuar in Dubai for three years before finally returning to Singapore and joining BAM!. She now helms the kitchen and manages a team of seven chefs (three females, two in pastry, and four males).

"There are those who say that at 29-years-old you should open your own place. But I think I still have a lot to learn and I want to be more stable before I open my own place. Eventually, I want to, maybe in 10 or 20 years. For now, I just want to do my work very well and keep growing, and also grow my team and train them to become leaders."

