

With National Day round the corner, **BT Weekend** spotlights some individuals who are helping to take Singapore's culinary scene to greater heights

Adding local flavour



BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Chef Malcolm Lee (top) says that while 60% of the menu in his new restaurant will consist of Peranakan classics such as ayam buah keluak (above) and chicken curry (left), the rest of it will involve slightly more innovative tweaks to old favourites

turn it into a pizza. Modern Singaporean cuisine is not my style," he clarifies. "A rendang will still be a rendang when I serve it, it's just that the process of getting there might be different."

This means braising his meats in the oven rather than stirring it tirelessly over the stove as the bibiks of yore might have done – both saving on time and helping to maintain uniformity of cooking, he explains.

"I don't want to get too progressive. I still want to serve dishes that I would like to eat every day," he says. Still, acknowledging the current shared plate revolution, he, too, will be trimming his portion sizes so people can try more dishes in one seating. Prices will be shrunk accordingly, with spending averaging \$20 to \$30 a head. A tasting menu for tourists and Peranakan food newbies will also be crafted.

While his first venture was very much a family affair – grandma shared her recipes, mum helped out in the kitchen, and uncles, aunts and friends pitched in as wait-staff – his sophomore effort will be run by professionals.

Most of his kitchen team are currently doing intern stints in various restaurants until the new place is ready, and he'll also be getting on board a female chef currently working in a Michelin star-rated restaurant in Hong Kong, he lets slip, declining to elaborate further.

"Croissants, tapas bars and coffee places may be the 'in' things right now, but there will be a resurgence of interest in cooking local food once hawkers start retiring and people are no longer able to find their favourite dishes," he says.

"It was hard finding staff when we first started. Peranakan food is perceived to be so old-fashioned that even I didn't want to cook it. But now that we have come forward with this new style, it's a different story."

"There are some chefs who really believe in learning and preserving the local cuisine and the way we do it is very different from how others do it, so that's an added interest," he adds. And it's an interest that's not only restricted to locals.

He recalls of his Singapore Tourism Board-sponsored trip to conduct a cooking demonstration at the Culinary Institute of America in Napa Valley late last year: "Many of the students there now want to come to South-east Asia. It used to be that they want to go to France and Italy to train, and now they're all asking, 'How do I get the chance to go to Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore to learn about South-east Asia cuisine?'"

Even Claus Meyer, co-owner of the World's Best Restaurant, Noma, has trumpeted his fascination with Singaporean food with the opening of Nam Nam, his Singapore Peranakan-themed eatery in Copenhagen in June. Mr Lee says of the veteran restaurateur, who he met on the latter's Singapore visit last year: "He's helping us do the marketing. It can only be a good thing."

"When people now ask, 'Which restaurant should I go to try Peranakan food when I'm in Singapore?', we want to be the first name they think of." **DY**

Peranakan showcase

Malcolm Lee
Candlenut Kitchen
 [To be reopened later this year]

WHEN Malcolm Lee first set up Candlenut Kitchen in 2010 with the aim of modernising Peranakan cuisine, eyebrows were raised.

Who was this young chap, fresh out of culinary school and already ballsy enough to take on the fiercely guarded, time-honed recipes of conservative Nonya matriarchs?

But the new-generation Peranakan gradually won over his critics – one sous-vide beef buah keluak at a time – and now, two years later, his food has not only been showcased around the world, he's also amassed enough supporters behind his culinary vision to launch a more ambitious sophomore effort.

Candlenut Kitchen, on a hiatus since the lease on its Neil Road premises ended in February, will reopen in a twice-as-large Chinatown venue by the end of the year. Details are still being inked but if all goes well, the new space will have approxi-

mately 65 seats, a few private rooms, and, in keeping with Mr Lee's modern tastes, a simple decor featuring lots of natural light.

"The young generation of Peranakans have to move on with the times. We don't stay in shophouses pounding spices all day. We attend universities, work in banks and use iPads and iPhones," says the bespectacled Singapore Management University alumnus. His earnest, slightly nervous demeanour is instantly endearing, but once we move on to the topic of cooking, all that melts away to reveal a confident eloquence.

He continues: "It's the same for Peranakan food and restaurants. Why should we get stuck with a certain mindset that our furniture has to look this way, or that our food has to be cooked that way?"

'I'm not trying to take a rendang and turn it into a pizza. Modern Singaporean cuisine is not my style. A rendang will still be a rendang when I serve it, it's just that the process of getting there might be different.'

Malcom Lee

While 60 per cent of the menu at his new restaurant will comprise untweaked favourites aimed to keep the traditionalists happy – so expect all your usual ngoh hiangs and kueh pie tee – the rest of it will feature slightly more innovative tweaks. Like the all-new pork trotter fritters, involving braised pork trotters fashioned into a sausage and then deep fried, he reveals, with the excitement of a young child who has just found a new toy. And a range of achars, slaws and salads "because Peranakan food is not known for its vegetables, so these will help to add lightness, freshness and some colour", adds Mr Lee, who has used the break to dine in competitors' restaurants and travel to Bangkok, where he has found much fodder for new ideas.

"I'm not trying to take a rendang and