

Bibik inspiration

Malcolm Lee credits his Nonya mother and grandmother for his passion for Peranakan food

Eunice Quek

Candlenut's chef-owner Malcolm Lee may have trained at culinary school At-Sunrice GlobalChef Academy, but his expertise in Peranakan cuisine is inherited from his Nonya mother and grandmother.

Speaking passionately about his cuisine, the 29-year-old bachelor says: "All these traditional dishes are disappearing and no one is learning how to cook them. If I don't learn now, they will die off. If you have babi pongteh (stewed pork) versus pasta, the former dish may cost more but people will pay more for the latter."

Referring to the celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay's recent visit here to cook hawker fare, Lee says: "Here we are protecting hawker food, but can we cook it?"

"If I go overseas, I should be telling people about our local food and when they ask if I can teach them, it'll be so malu (embarrassing in Malay) if I don't know."

His interest in cooking started when he went to the United States as part of the Work & Travel programme, an exchange programme sponsored by the US government, and got a job as a barista at Starbucks.

The turning point came when the business management graduate from the Singapore Management University worked at Western restaurant Harry's Tap Room in the Washington Dulles International Airport, to earn more money for his travels.

He says: "I was supposed to be the kitchen helper but they threw me into the kitchen to cook. It was fun and I never felt more alive and at home."

In SMU, he had a hand in running Frujch, a student-run cafe, which also convinced him to further his culinary journey at At-Sunrice.

After graduating, he opened Candlenut Kitchen in 2010 at its previous location in Neil Road. It closed

after the lease ended last year and he reopened Candlenut at the Dorsett Residences on July 1.

Candlenut, he explains, is not buah keluak, but buah keras. It is used as a thickening agent in spice pastes.

On dropping the word "kitchen" from the name, Lee says: "We're no longer just a kitchen. We have matured since we started."

The maternal influence on Lee is still evident in the restaurant. Beaded slippers made by his grandmother are used as decoration and his mother also visits the restaurant for "spot checks".

He says: "She will go into the kitchen and taste the dishes. Sometimes she will say that my assam fish is not sour enough. The recipes are all from her. But, even though you learn recipes, what you don't have is the history and the stories."

What are your childhood memories of food?
 Chinese New Year at my grandmother's house is a feast with dishes such as rendang, chap chye, four soups and ngoh hiang. We may be thinking about getting hongbao, but the food is really what we are looking forward to. You smell the spice paste from the curries and mee siam, and you know you're home. I would help to pound the spices.

What are your favourite local foods?
 It's hard to pick my favourites, some of those I like are fried carrot cake, chicken rice, laksa and roast duck rice. I eat anywhere that is convenient.

Are you a dessert person?
 No, if I had to order a three-course meal, I would order two appetisers and no dessert. However, the best dessert I've had is at Asian restaurant Spice Market in New York, which served layered coconut cake with toasted coconut.

What's the first dish you made?
 Fried rice during home economics class.

Which celebrity chefs did you grow up watching?
 British chef-restaurateur Jamie Oliver's shows, as well as the original Japanese Iron Chef. MasterChef US and Iron Chef US are entertaining, but it's because the Americans are good at making shows.

What are your must-have kitchen tools?
 My immersion circulator for cooking and re-heating

meats, and Pacojet for producing ice cream.

It's been two weeks since your restaurant opened. Are there new dishes in the works?
 Buah keluak ice cream. So far it hasn't worked out because the buah keluak has a very aggressive flavour which is normally balanced when you fry it in rempah. However, with only cream and milk, the flavour is amplified.

What dish best represents you?
 Buah keluak, which looks simple on the surface but is actually very complex. If you use it properly, you'll get good results. It's comfort food for me and I can eat it every day with white rice.

What's the best meal you've ever had?
 Cajun seafood boil and beer with my friends at the void deck. It trumps great meals I've had at Thai restaurant Nahm in Bangkok and The French Laundry in California.

What's the worst thing you've eaten?
 Pig's brain, which I ate on behalf of the bridegroom and fellow groomsmen during the wedding gatecrashing.

I don't like eating slimy things like that. We also had to eat bak chor mee blended with marmite, strawberry and chocolate milk.



ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

If you could invite someone for a meal with you, who would you pick?

My family and close friends who have supported me all these years. I don't need to meet Gordon Ramsay.

euniceq@sph.com.sg

WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST MEAL BE?

Buah keluak, sayur lodeh, curry with rice and sambal belacan. I'll finish with San Pellegrino sparkling water.

