

Morsels owners Petrina Loh and Bryan Chia are hot-headed but have learnt to work together

Tan Hsueh Yun

Sit at the counter in front of the kitchen at Morsels, a small-plates restaurant in Mayo Street, and drama may unfold over dinner.

Sometimes, co-owners Petrina Loh and Bryan Chia, both 31, exchange curt words.

She is exacting, he is more laidback. Both say they are hot-headed.

"It's not a bed of roses working as a couple in a heated kitchen. Usually, one works in the kitchen, the other in the front of the house," says Loh, the only child of a businessman and housewife.

"Bryan is not used to having a routine, he's free-spirited; but routine is what's required in the kitchen."

Looking contemplative, Chia says: "When we first started, it was like a nightmare. But we understand each other's strengths and weaknesses now."

That two hot heads with different personalities have managed to stick it out for nine months in a competitive restaurant scene is credit to their determination.

They met in 2010 through mutual friends. Asked about marriage and kids, Chia says: "The restaurant is our baby right now."

That nine-month-old, 48-seat restaurant on the fringe of Little India has a menu that reflects their culinary training in California in the United States.

They grow some of the herbs used in their dishes, make stock and sauces from scratch and work with seasonal produce.

The food also reflects their Singapore roots, and their love of Japanese cuisine and ingredients. A squid ink risotto has poached tako or octopus and a salted egg yolk sauce. One menu item has black kampung chicken egg jelly, and the broth for their steamed clams uses the sort of dried figs found in double-boiled Chinese soups.

Both took different routes to becoming chefs.

Loh majored in finance and marketing at the University of San Francisco and has a master's degree in wealth management from the Singapore Management University. She worked in banking for eight years, spending the last four as a private banker.

She always planned to quit her job to open a restaurant and wanted culinary



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WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST MEAL BE?

Loh: Chicken rice from Tian Tian in Maxwell Road and a chirashi don (rice topped with raw fish).

Chia: I'd have a barbecue with the freshest fish in the world, a smoked lamb shoulder, definitely a keg of beer. Just an endless flow of barbecued meat.

ST PHOTO: NURIA LING

Morsels of drama

training so she would never be held ransom by a chef.

Armed with a degree in hospitality from the University of Hawaii, Chia worked in hotels and resorts, helped people set up restaurants and was a private chef.

He is the younger of two sons. His father runs a shipping navigation business and his mother worked for her father's rice business before becoming what Chia calls "a full-time golfer".

Chia and Loh headed to California in 2011. Loh had quit her job in March that year and left in April, with Chia following suit a couple of months later.

Loh enrolled in Le Cordon Bleu College of Culinary Arts in San Francisco, while

Chia went to the Culinary Institute of America at Greystone in the Napa Valley.

They graduated last year and had worked in restaurants in the Bay Area, but could not get visas to continue doing so, and returned in July.

Loh already had a book full of plans for a restaurant. She says: "I asked him, 'Bryan, do you want to do this?' and he said, 'Ok, you find a place first, go do the paper work'."

They liked the Little India neighbourhood and stumbled on the space in Mayo Street, the former home of The Black Sheep. Its owner, who has since moved his restaurant to Sin Ming Road, gave them encouragement and even the name of the restaurant, after hearing

about their small-plates concept.

Loh says: "I think it's not the easiest location, but people come by word of mouth."

Who inspired you to cook?

Loh: My father. He was a businessman and a really good cook. He taught me how to fry an egg when I was in Primary 3. He died when I was 15, but he used to take me to the market on weekends and teach me how to pick out ingredients and how to check fish gills for freshness.

He used to make pig brain soup and taught me how to remove the membrane with a toothpick. A lot of dark soya sauce, sesame oil and ginger went into his cooking. His best dishes were salted vegetable and duck soup, braised pork and Hokkien mee with dark soya sauce.

Chia: I hated mushrooms and prawns as a kid. My father and brother disliked them too. My grandmother would cook a big Peranakan feast every fortnight. At 13 or

14, I started going into the kitchen and asking questions about how dishes were made.

Once, my father said he would give me \$50 to eat a prawn and that's how it started. It tasted good and I began to wonder where food came from, how it was cooked.

What is your favourite ingredient to cook with?

Chia: Pork. There is so much you can do with it. The head, ears, trotters, ribs, leg, shoulder; you can cook every part.

While I was working at Del Dotto Vineyards in Napa, the chef, Tony Incontro, taught me how to butcher a whole hog and remove the silver skin, the blood vessels.

I want to do it here, on my own, and use the pork for a range of things, but it is hard to get a whole pig.

Loh: Something new that I've discovered is shio koji (steamed rice inoculated with mould and fermented with water and salt). I have been fermenting my own. It adds a roundness to food. I mix it with fresh wasabi for a beef dish or use it as part of a marinade.

Where do you eat after work?

Loh: We finish at 12.30am or 1am, and I cannot go to bed hungry, so I'll have supper, but he thinks it's unhealthy. I like the Hokkien mee at Syed Alwi Road. Sometimes, I have Indomie instant noodles topped with ikura.

Chia: One of our customers told us about Nagomi at Cuppage Plaza and we went, but it was an expensive supper and so it's an occasional treat. Sometimes, I go to bed hungry.

What are some memorable meals you have had?

Chia: Wood-fired margherita pizza at Pizzeria Tra Vigne in Napa. It was so simple and the crust was so perfect. I like simple stuff.

Loh: Eleven Madison Park in New York, five years ago. The chef, Daniel Humm, is outstanding. I'm always intrigued by vegetables and the plating of the vegetables attracted me.

You both work in close proximity. What do you do on your days off?

Loh: On Sundays, we go to church in the morning and then, if Bryan's grandmother is making lunch, we spend some time there. Otherwise, I do paper work; invoices, payroll. I go to Jones The Grocer at Dempsey, eat cheese and work.

Chia: I play soccer, take my pit doberman for walks or to the beach.

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