

the good taste, good living magazine

flavours

healthy gourmet burgers



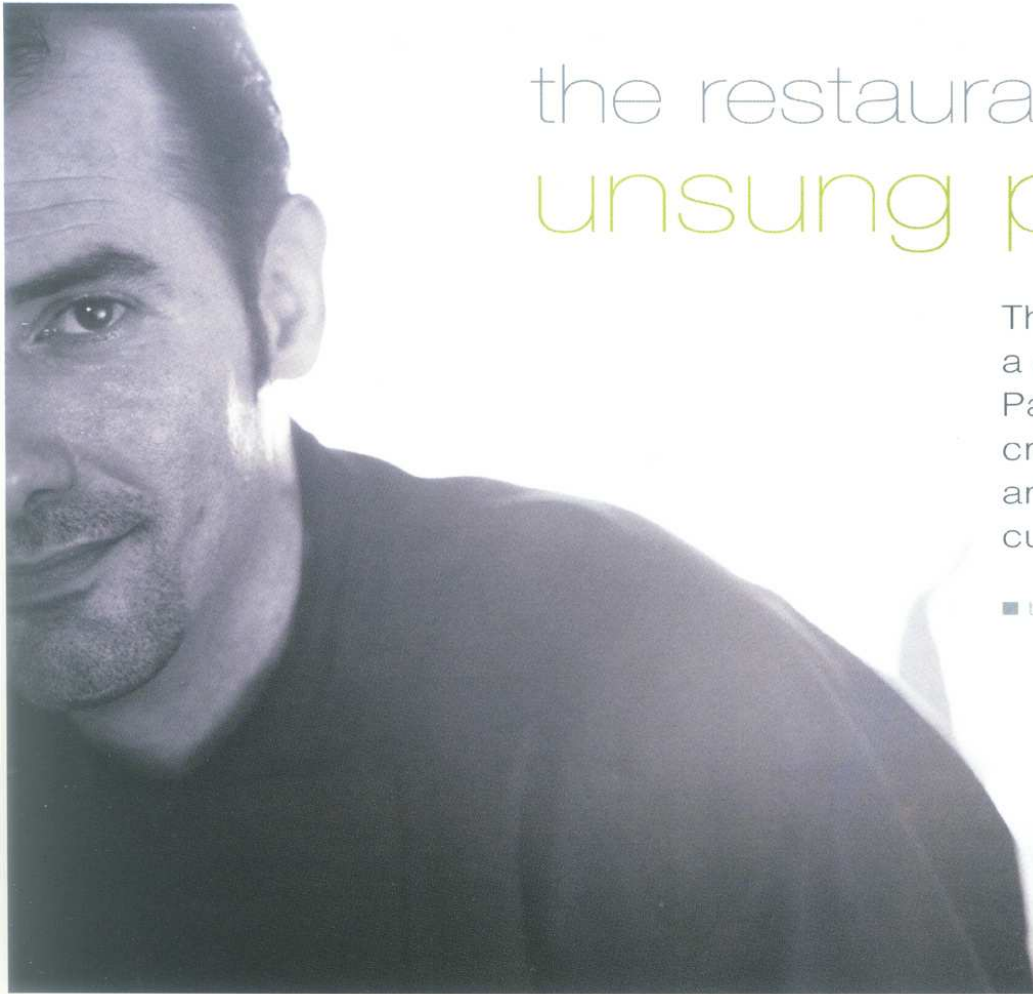
Malaysian favourites:

nasi lemak, roti canai & fried kway teow

MORE: Kylie Kwong's China, taste of New Zealand, pairing cocktail and food Starhill Gallery's Midsummer Nights Feast



9 771311 012004
RM10.80, S\$5.50 (incl. GST)



the restaurant world's unsung picasso

The man is as far from a divo as possible, but Paul Pairet's culinary creations belie true artistic vision and strong culinary know-how.

■ text SIM EE WAUN

PAUL PAIRET is a bit of an unsung Picasso in the world of restaurant chefs; how many have really heard of him until now? He admits to having a "visibility issue", but at the end of the day, it's his love for his work that drives him, which speaks volumes for him. Rather than a carefully-crafted, flamboyant public image or a hunger for fame and publicity, it's his earnestness and sincerity in mastering his craft that is ultimately bringing him renown, especially in these parts. And indeed, he is firmly established in the thick of the action in Shanghai, as chef de cuisine of Jade at the Shangri-La Shanghai.

NOTHING IS AS IT SEEMS

To have a meal prepared by Pairet, 44, is to experience the unexpected. Nothing is what it seems, so be prepared to eat in the spirit of the Mad Hatter.

In Singapore for the World Gourmet Summit, Pairet spent a week at Blu, the Shangri-La Singapore's fine dining restaurant, surprising guests with amusingly-named gastronomic adventures. The amuse bouche was Tomato Peach No Shark Fin Soup, a clear, flavourful broth of tomato served in a Chinese tea cup with strands of peach jelly reminiscent of sharks' fin. The dainty dish made just

a mouthful or two, yet the flavours were surprisingly intense.

Then there was a peculiar piece of frozen, marinated watermelon – a little sweet and a little savoury, decidedly fresh and yummy though you couldn't put your finger on the individual elements, impaled dramatically on a stick. Holding and eating it like a lollipop in a fine dining restaurant was a moment of contrariness and incongruence – whimsy in serious surrounding, a humorous conversation piece, a refreshing new experience, a taste of things to come. It was classic Pairet.

My appetiser was a lightly-textured



Cucumber Peanut Lollipop



Duck a'la orange Sunny Side Up

but intensely flavourful “foie gras opera”, goose liver layered with chocolate, resembling a slice of opera cake. This went down sublimely – divinely even! – with a chocolate martini.

Next to come was a dish of cuttlefish noodles, a pretty offering of coiled noodles made of mashed cuttlefish, prepared and assembled to look almost like a dessert. They were almost marshmallow-like in texture, subtle and gentle in flavour. The Breakfast – Duck a'la orange Sunny Side Up had the duck served with an “omelette” of gelatinised coconut milk and a yolk of orange sauce delicately

encased in a wobbly membrane.

The Jumbo Shrimp in a Citrus Jar was a dramatic presentation of prawns served in a sealed glass jar, opened only at the table to release wafts of lemongrass and citrus-y aromas as a prelude to eating. The soup, Very Lobster Lobster was intriguing, with the soup and lobster sealed under a gelatin film stretched tightly across the top of the soup dish. Break through it and you release an olfactory treat, before tucking into the consommé.

My firm favourite was the Lemon & Lemon Tart, which at first glance, is an unbelievable feat which defies logic. A whole lemon served with

seemingly no opening, is filled with a tangy sweet filling, seemingly a cross between lemon curd and crème brulee. The lemon itself takes four days to prepare – first it is cooked, then poached in sugar so it remains firm yet yielding under the pressure of a fork. It breaks with a satisfying, chewy firmness that counters the softness of the filling. Delicate, clever, witty, delicious and utterly fascinating, this was one of the most unusual, impactful desserts I have ever come across.

MASTERCLASS WITH PAIRET

I had to find out more about this

Paul Pairet and his Lemon & Lemon Tart



Very Lobster Lobster

intriguing artist who calls himself a chef. Faceless and hidden from sight in the restaurant kitchen, he emerged the next day at a World Gourmet Summit master class – a slim, genteel, bookish-looking man – before aspiring home cooks and ardent foodies who packed into the auditorium, all fascinated and eager to know the secrets.

Of course, he wasn't about to expound on all of them, but the hour-long session gave a glimpse of the madness in the kitchen. He left the hands-on work to his assistants, and took on the role of ringmaster, explaining his ideas and techniques in heavily-accented French with a charming, self-deprecatory wit.

Heavily dependent on molecular gastronomy techniques, most of his dishes cannot be recreated in a conventional home kitchen and without a battery of assistants at your beck and call. Take, for instance, the foie gras "cigarette", rolled into a slim tube made out of strawberry gel, tipped with "ash powder" made from powdered and desiccated blue cabbage mixed with flavourings like dried truffles, pickled ginger, vanilla, grey salt and even coco nibs; it's even served in an ashtray! Whimsical, yes, but as Pairet explained later, the ashtray was a practical serving plate for this dish, holding both the "cigarette" and the "ash" perfectly – a meeting of art and practicality, he would have you know. His recipes are peppered with industrial equipment such as syringes, Alto-Shaam and Vita Prep, and ingredients that come straight out of science labs, like alginate and calcium chloride solution.

Then again, holding it together are traditional ingredients combined most creatively, bursting the boundaries of the tried and true. A few are comparatively easy; the Tomato Peach No Sharks Fin Soup can conceivably be made in the home kitchen if you get hold of some alginate which gellifies a liquid instantly

on contact. This is the secret behind molecular gastronomy creations such as lychee “pearls” and other such concoctions, in which drops of liquid have a firm outer layer formed from contact with the alginate.

Others were simple kitchen chemistry “brought to its greatest potential”, according to Pairet. Clearly, the watermelon liquorice-basil stick is his favourite – culinary science at its simplest and best. “It’s the simplest idea exploring the maximum potential of one ingredient,” he declared, “It exploits the ability of watermelon to absorb the marinade, then look like a sorbet on freezing.”

In this simple recipe, Pairet marinates watermelon cubes in a mixture of vanilla syrup, Brown Brothers Muscat, lime puree and aniseed liquorice essence for 24 hours, then freezes it. To serve, it is quickly blowtorched, so that the exterior is scorched without softening, then skewered and served on an ice cube.

MEETING PAIRET

On meeting the man, I find that he is refreshingly candid, unpretentious and so easy to talk to ... quite unlike the image of an artist, who one would expect to show some degree of egotism. But he is a man on top of his game, and he is confident without having to prove a point; he is just here to explain his fascinating art.

Leaning back on a bench by the sidewalk in the heat of the afternoon, Pairet is finally able to kick up his heels a little after a week of working Blu’s kitchens. His assistant nearby is equally exhausted. He laments not having been able to see any of Singapore in his week-long stay here and suggests that he is keen to check out Aurum, Singapore’s only molecular gastronomy restaurant. “It would

be very interesting to see how it is interpreted locally,” he muses.

Yet Pairet would rather call his own cooking “avant garde”, and shies away from the term “molecular” as a label. This is because many of his dishes, he insists, are “classics which defy trends”; he just reconstructs them in an avant garde way. And he tells you that he is not one to create novelty and intrigue just by the clever use of technique.

“Techniques are meaningless to me,” he says, several times, “They are a means to an end and the dishes have to be grounded in tradition.” The Lemon & Lemon Tart for instance is based on the classic lemon curd and lemon tart.

While first impressions are that his food is all whimsy and humour, he explains that all his presentations are based on a practical rationale and deeply-rooted in culinary tradition. He also tries to keep things “as straightforward and uncomplicated as possible”, without unnecessary excess. “You see my foie gras,” he says, referring to his cigarette-like creation. “There is nothing else around it, no other embellishment, nothing else served with it, just in case you don’t like my foie gras. I have to be very sure about my food to serve it to you in that simplicity. The whimsy and sense of humour that you see is just a happy byproduct.” For instance, a tuna-tomato-basil bread is served on a stick encased in a lychee-flavoured foam. It is on a stick, he explains, so that the foam doesn’t break or slide off, as it would if served on a plate. The foam itself is intensely flavoured and forms an integral part of the taste experience, and for the man, it is a demonstration of “the power of lightness”.

His main goal, like other good chefs, is to offer people a good “taste experience” or a good “gastronomic concept”. Not, he repeats, to offer a unique technique or novelty for its own sake.

He doesn’t follow trends, but creates on his own, to the beat of a different drum. “You could say we are a step or two behind the most trendy chefs,” Pairet explains. “They are always looking for something new.” Drawing the image of walking into new rooms of trends, he explains that by the time he enters the room, most trendy chefs already have one foot out the door heading to the next room of newer trends.

“We move in and see what’s left behind, see what we can do to develop it further. Sometimes you miss out on opportunities, but that’s the way it is. When a chef has done a particular dish using a particular technique, I don’t want to do it anymore. I want to make something of my own,” he says.

And indeed, he does it spectacularly, just going by the somewhat limited menu available at Blu during his week-long cookout. He explains that cooking in a different kitchen is hard for him, having to do without much of his equipment. “You have to come to Shanghai to taste the rest of my menu,” he says. “What you have tried here are just the simpler items.”

Work explained and done with, Pairet, the father of a five-year-old, says that he is now looking forward to his family joining him for the week-end in Singapore. Which hawkers should he check out? Where should he take his son? Would he like the beach? Oh, and there’s a hawker centre there too? Then he takes his leave, with a final reminder to visit his restaurant in Shanghai, and to please to let him know in advance. ●