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THE STORMY SEAS OF A BUDDING RESTAURATEUR

Starting up and running a restaurant isn't all glitz and glam. We know from various reality shows that the culinary industry can be cutthroat, and it can pose its own set of challenges especially for one who enters without experience and formal training. However, with a strong desire to present and share good food, John Chan – founder of Pasta J – has persevered through the many tribulations and kept on serving good quality food from his restaurant nestled in the suburbs.

With time, though, our frequent customers have realised the quality we offer, despite our lack of pedigree.

With that said, I think the real challenge is probably our lack of experience. We've had to learn very quickly, through a lot of trial and error, about how to operate a restaurant. Over time, we also came to understand the kind of operation we should run that would best suit the high quality and standards that we offer through our food. It has been a slow and very painful journey.

Introduction

When and how did you first start getting interested in cooking?

Experimenting with food and flavours came to me naturally. Even before I was ten years old, I loved adding all kinds of condiments to my instant noodles – Tabasco sauce, soy sauce, oyster sauce and even fish sauce. Yeah, I like strong and salty flavours.

Why the name "Pasta J"?

Honestly, because I couldn't think of any other name! I wanted to go with Pasta Sano at first, but I found a local brand using that name so I had to quickly think of something else. "Pasta J" was what came to mind.

Behind the scenes

Tell us about your core team.

Frankly, creating food like mine with no credentials (experience/training) makes

it very tough to gain acceptance from staff and customers alike. Add to that a very steep learning curve and constant evolution, it has led to high turnover in my restaurant in an industry already notorious for high turnovers. Thus, I would say that our core team is me, my wife and, in the past three years, our only service staff – Xena.

What are some of the challenges the establishment has overcome in its years of operation?

There are simply far too many to list, but one main issue is definitely finding good staff. This is a problem common with all restaurants, at all levels, but more so for us because I do expect a lot from my staff. However, since we do not sell ourselves as an authentic Italian restaurant, and being located in the suburbs, customers are less willing to spend as much as they would in town, even if the quality of the food deserves it.

The food served

With the name "Pasta J", do diners expect traditional Italian cuisine? What are some of the must-try dishes when one visits you?

Well, over the years, we have gone way past being pasta-centric. Our current focus is on meats and lobsters instead.

Some of our must-try dishes include the Salted Fish Burratina – burratina served with salted fish and honeycomb on a bed of dense homemade focaccia, the Wagyu Tomahawk (we have three types), the Live Boston Lobsters served with Kombu Sauce and, with prior notice, the Squid Ink Lobster Stock Risotto that uses lobster stock prepared from 10 kg



John was previously an emcee, events manager and associate lecturer (Republic Polytechnic). He loves dogs, especially Schnauzers, Chinese food and action movies. He loves to create – dishes, fancy event props and even doghouses, once.

worth of lobster heads reduced to just one kilogram – costing me about S\$100 per batch.

Where do you get your ideas for your menu?

I always go back to my Chinese roots – the flavours I had growing up, which I incorporate into my dishes. Other Asian flavours are not forgotten either, as Singapore is a melting pot.

I don't set out to be creative though. I set out to cook something delicious. Creativity is secondary. I also don't set out to use the finest ingredients, as I believe that that is not the key duty of a chef. A chef works with whatever ingredients available to make it as delicious as possible. Focusing on just the ingredient is something anyone with money could do. That is, if one could afford it, one could use any ingredient he/she wants. Why would you need a chef to do that?

There is a deviation towards these two aspects of cooking these days though, ie, being creative and being ingredient-centric. I call it a deviation because they are not part of a chef's key duty, as I see it; I am sure you have had at least one meal that was very creative and prettily plated, maybe even using some very expensive

ingredients, but was unremarkable in terms of taste.

One of your menu items caught our attention: break-up steak. What is the story behind this dish?

It is basically an upgrade of our previous steak in terms of cut and weight. My meat supplier had asked me to try the cut and upon the first bite, I thought to myself, "Oh my, this can heal any broken heart." So if you are going through a break-up and desire some "healing", order this steak.

Going forward

Where will you be going from here?

My plan is to eventually retire Pasta J. This is mostly because it doesn't represent what we do anymore and has stopped doing so for some time. We have evolved over the years.

Many current dishes will remain but their format will change – all to be found under a new name. Aside from launching new dishes, we intend to produce more of our own ingredients through fermentation, brining, curing, ageing and even cultivation.

We also plan on opening in areas closer to town and are in talks with interested parties. Stay tuned for more updates! ♦

Legend

1. Pork Collar Chops with Caramelised Portobello Mushrooms
2. Sanchoku Wagyu Tomahawk in Truffle Sauce
3. Squid Ink Lobster Stock Risotto with Tiger Prawns & Scallops. Live Boston Lobster optional

