

# PASSION

## - PASTRY MADE POSSIBLE

Text and photos by Dr Valerie Tay



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*"People who love to eat are always the best people."*

– Julia Child

My love for food has been lifelong; that surely must explain the photos of me as a beaming, overweight toddler. Thankfully, that did not carry over into adulthood. Being of a small frame, it is my firm belief that having a lower metabolic (ie, caloric) requirement has led to me being more discerning about what I eat.

After all, for most of our working life, especially when we are on call, the food we consume when we have the opportunity for a decent meal is often the only luxury that we can look forward to.

As a prominent food writer of our fraternity famously says, "Never waste your calories on yucky food!"

Food is a universal language and eating together helps to bring people closer to one another. In recent times, it has also been elevated to an art form. Of course, splatters of sauce on a plate aspiring to be a Jackson Pollack painting have turned many off the idea of haute cuisine, but if one has a well thought-out dish with a good balance of flavours, presentation certainly does enhance the experience for the diner.

### How it began

My social media feed comprises mainly posts of food and pastries. Seeing how numerous home-chefs seemed to be able to create dishes with complex components inspired

me to explore the possibilities of my tiny galley kitchen. As with all good Singaporeans, I decided to upgrade myself (after my exit exams of course). I parlayed my SkillsFuture credits into a cake-decorating course.

The feedback from kind friends and acquaintances was nothing but stellar. The immediate return on investment was probably better than any hands-on surgical course I had ever attended. Perhaps it was time for me to explore further afield!

It was with that inflated sense of self, which all surgeons must surely possess to some degree – that I trooped off to Paris, probably also exuding the same bright-eyed enthusiasm seen in medical students who come into the wards for the first time.

Since then, I've spent a good amount of time taking short courses in various culinary and pastry schools in Paris, and of late, I have ventured into local Peranakan cooking. Despite the aforementioned inflated sense of self, I am not delusional. My skill at cuisine is only good enough for home parties. Pastry is certainly my stronger suit; I have sold my cakes in cafes and also taken in private orders.

### From operating theatre to kitchen

Over time, I have realised that there are many similarities between

working in the kitchen and in medicine.

### Nature of the work

- Art and science  
We all know that medicine is both an art and a science, and that is surely true when it comes to cooking or baking as well. The precision required for tempering chocolate involves narrow temperature ranges in heating and melting the chocolate, cooling it and then raising the temperature again by only around two to three degrees Celsius. This process allows the pastry chef to shape the chocolate into towering sculptures or cute rabbits for Easter.
- Perfectionist streak  
Just as each station cook will have his mise en place, where each dish and ingredient would be ready and laid out in a certain order before service, each procedurist will have his instruments laid out in a particular fashion before the start of a procedure. And I'm sure that just like every resident who would have had their unevenly placed skin sutures snipped off and redone by their seniors, the line cooks would have had their julienned carrots rejected for being uneven.

*"When you acknowledge, as you must, that there is no such thing as perfect food, only the idea of it, then the real purpose of striving toward*

*perfection becomes clear: to make people happy. That's what cooking is all about.*" – Thomas Keller

**Environment**

- Physically demanding  
It is no secret that those in the food and beverage (F&B) industry work long hours. In fact, as a whole, they do work more unsocial hours than doctors do. In both fields, we spend a lot of time on our feet and work with sharp instruments.
- Injuries  
Burns and sharps injuries are common. Just that kitchen staff don't have to take blood tests to screen for HIV when they get pricked or cut.

**In practice**

- Team approach  
The "Brigade de cuisine" was created by Chef Auguste Escoffier and serves as a hierarchy to maintain a chain of command and to separate roles and specialised tasks.

From the chef de cuisine ("chief of the kitchen"), who is responsible for the overall management of the kitchen, to the pastry chef and the line cook, everyone works together as a team to create the dishes that get brought up to the pass, where they are inspected and finished before being served.

Indeed, our clinical units all work in teams these days, and the most important job of the house officers is, of course, making sure they know how their consultant likes his coffee (permutations being *siu dai, gah dai, C, peng, kosong, gao...* have I missed any?).

- Of gods and minions  
Working in the kitchen and operating theatre are both largely apprenticeships. Along with that, one has to put up with the quirks and temper of the supreme being of the day.

- Of meringues and irrigation  
A colleague once said to me, as we were irrigating a dirty wound: "The solution to pollution is dilution".

Whipping up a meringue from egg whites requires a clean and non-greasy stainless steel whisk and bowl. It has often been advised that the meringue will fail if there is even a tiny drop of yolk in your bowl of egg whites. It is my experience that if one has enough egg whites, the drop of egg yolk is inconsequential.

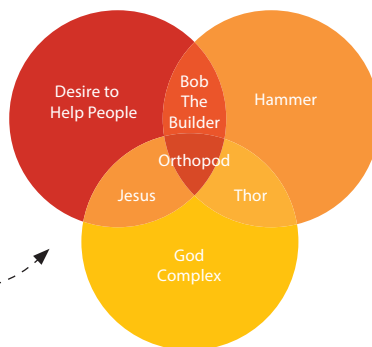
- Finishing  
Senior surgeons often allow the juniors to close the wound after a long surgery, and that would be accompanied with a stern admonishment to "make sure it looks nice", for it would be the only thing the patient can see.

Similarly, in our age of social media, the focus of many F&B establishments is in the finishing and presentation of the product, for that is what attracts consumers.

**In conclusion**

Given the uncanny similarities between our professions, it wouldn't be a stretch to take the discipline and skills that we have honed in our industry and apply it in the kitchen.

Personally, I truly enjoy the creative process. To be able to craft a dish or pastry to my taste buds' liking and also share it with others, gives me great joy and satisfaction. ♦



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**Legend**

1. A golden sail cake that even Midas would be proud of
2. Back to the bottom of the food chain in Paris
3. Tarte aux fraises; strawberries in a shortcrust pastry