



FOOD

FOR THE *Soul*

Kitchen Chronicles of a Doctor and Would-be Chef

Text and photos by Dr Audra Fong

Dr Fong is a neuro-ophthalmologist in private practice who loves to unwind the knots in her sulci and gyri with therapeutic cooking sessions. A self-confessed culinary enthusiast, she cherishes her free time spent in her happy place, whipping up dishes for her lucky husband, two teenage children and dog.

My earliest memories of kitchen escapades involved quietly observing my late Cantonese grandmother as she potted about her kitchen, expertly chopping, slicing, tasting and adjusting the seasonings with a skill set honed through decades of experience. I was always in awe of how *Ah Ma* could deftly whip up simple delicacies for my school lunches, yet also cook up a storm each Lunar New Year with her trademark perfect planning, mise en place and execution.

Foundation years

Growing up in the 1980s, mainstream secondary schools included gender-specific courses as part of the standard curriculum. Girls were taught Home Economics, which involved cooking classes and sewing projects, while boys were sent for Technical Class, which had them chisel out various inedible wooden and metalwork pieces. I recall always being excited when it was time for "Home Ec", and I believe that it was there in the retro Home Economics kitchen of Singapore Chinese Girls' School that my lifelong passion for all things culinary began. My budding enthusiasm was palpable and sustained, and I ended up bagging the Home Economics Book Prize two

years in a row. Tasty rock buns and fluffy Victorian sponge cakes aside, I also harboured the belief that the sewing skills imparted in those formative years helped develop some of my rudimentary surgical skills (but that is a story for another day).

*Cooking is like love.
It should be entered into
with abandon or not at all.*

– Harriet Van Horne

Interest piqued at an early age. My leisure hours were spent dabbling with new recipes gleaned from various cookbooks, and I was constantly on the lookout for willing subjects to taste test a new dish or two. However, as time went on, the hectic demands of being a college student, and later on a medical undergraduate, meant that I did not have the luxury of time for culinary escapades, much as I desired to. On the occasions that I actually had company to feed, I discovered, to my surprise, that being in the kitchen helped me to destress. The entire process – from menu planning, shopping and selecting ingredients, the preparatory work, down to the final execution – never failed to bring me a deep sense of satisfaction and joy. The kitchen



thus became my happy place and cooking was a therapeutic exercise in mindfulness. Over the years, cooking has also become my “love language” – the means by which I express my affection for those around me. Watching peoples’ faces light up as they enjoy the work of my heart and hands is enough reward for the countless hours spent dreaming, cooking and creating.

Adventure awaits

Naturally curious and open-minded with regard to anything culinary, I subscribe to the mantra that there is always something new to learn. A self-confessed “gadget-holic” and “cooking science nerd”, I constantly try out new techniques and appliances, firmly believing that there are countless ways to skin the proverbial cat. Friends have even jokingly labelled me a “kitchen influencer” of sorts, probably due to my oft enthusiastic sharing of my latest culinary adventures and experiments. A hilarious handful even attribute their vast range of kitchen toys to my culinary “evangelism”, and claim to name their appliance cabinets after me! To date, I have attempted a plethora of cooking styles ranging from the innovative domain of molecular gastronomy (think pineapple spheres and nitrous oxide-assisted espumas) to the more traditional rigours of Peranakan cooking. It would be hard for me to choose a favourite cuisine among them all, as much of my culinary inclinations and inspirations depend on my mojo, and emotions play a huge part in my creative energy.



Of food truck dreams and beyond

Somewhere in my mid-30s, I had fleeting whimsical thoughts of starting a food truck business in the Central Business District with a fellow cooking buddy, but this was quickly shelved as the punishing realities of the food and beverage industry brought us both back to earth with a bump. *MasterChef Singapore* then came along in 2018 and I signed up on impulse at the last minute; I thought to myself, “Hey, YOLO (you only live once), right?” As it turned out, yours truly was not even shortlisted for the first round of interviews and admittedly, I was a wee bit disappointed by the outcome. When Season 1 of *MasterChef Singapore* eventually aired a few months later, I shuddered at how the contestants had to cook under intense pressure and scrutiny. I realised then that it was probably a blessing in disguise to have been rejected early on. Otherwise, my heart would surely have given out midway,



and it would have been quite a scene to have needed resuscitation on national television! Season 2 is now in the planning stages, and though I have received a generic email invitation to reapply, I have stayed sane and will be giving it a miss.

At present, I am a full-time ophthalmologist in private practice, with subspecialty training in neuro-ophthalmology. Managing complex neurological cases with ocular manifestations (some of which can be life-threatening) can be challenging, and I often look forward to unwinding in my happy place at the end of a tough work day. Many have asked me how I find the energy and time to put dinner on the table after work, and my answer is that a little planning the night before is all that is needed. In the end, love is still the most important ingredient in my book. Cooking for my family thus serves a dual purpose, and I am grateful that my passion and hobby allows nourishment of both body and soul.

What of the future then? Someday, when these hands of mine are beyond microsurgical capabilities, I have dreams of conducting culinary classes and possibly even foraying into private dining. I have a few exciting preliminary plans up my sleeve to bring this to fruition, and I hope to eventually be able to fuse my semi-retirement years with my lifelong passion. As the saying goes – everything begins with a dream, and what is life without purpose and a goal to work towards? ♦

Legend

1. Cooking never fails to make me smile
2. Signature dish – my highly raved about dry laksa goreng
3. Me and my (lucky) well-fed family
4. My happy place in full swing during party preparation for a crowd!

