

Directing the kitchen

In theatre director Goh Boon Teck's cooking style, new ideas blend to result in a great production

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When he was 15 years old, theatre director Goh Boon Teck turned up at a chalet outing, toting a pot of pig trotters in black vinegar, a classic confinement dish.

It was quite a contrast to the soft drinks and potato chips that his friends had contributed to the feast.

But it was the first dish that Goh, now 38, had ever made and he had learnt it from his mother, Madam On Ah Chiam.

His friends were puzzled but he says they "still tried it and enjoyed it".

The chief artistic director of Toy Factory Productions still prepares the dish now as he "likes old things and gets nostalgic about flavours that remind me of my mother's cooking".

He says he has a cooking "addiction" as it is therapeutic for him and he "must cook at least once a month". His repertoire includes chicken curry, fried noodles, peanut and pork trotter soup and herbal duck soup. All these he learnt from years of watching his mother, a former Chinese opera singer, cook. He would also go with her to the wet market.

Over the recent Chinese New Year season, he says he cooked for seven days, making complicated dishes such as pen cai and yam paste for his friends.

The director, who has had 22 years' experience in the theatre, says: "Cooking is like directing. I'd add some ingredients to match others, like I would with my stage crew, actors and script. I love the magic in that."

He is currently working on *Maha Mogallana*, a Mandarin musical for Vesak Day. The production, about a monk who goes to hell to rescue his mother, opens on May 28 at the Singapore Expo Hall 2.

With daily rehearsals, sometimes he eats only once a day and often does so in hawker centres. As long as the "cook respects the ingredients", he is happy to eat the food.

He says: "It doesn't have to be expensive stuff. Good food seals the deal if you are meeting clients, breaks the ice faster and changes your mood."

What are your childhood memories of food?

I would eat a lot of big bao, which is essentially a Chinese burger. I also enjoyed pork satay served with pineapple sauce. We also ate ice balls with red-bean filling.

My mother was a Chinese opera performer, so I grew up eating food in packets, such as char siew rice. It must be wrapped in paper and not put in a styrofoam box like they do now. The rice must sit in the paper for the flavours to interact in the heat.

I also remember my grandmother's Hokkien noodles. She would boil the noodles, add fried shallots and ketchup. It's amazing. Her porridge, drizzled with soya sauce and fried fish, is the best.



ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

The dishes at Yi Xin Vegetarian Food in Temple Street are all the more appetising to Goh Boon Teck because of their colours.

What's always in your fridge?

Ginger and garlic, key elements in Chinese dishes. I also have lots of fruit and non-fat milk.

Besides recipes, what have you learnt from your mother?

Every time I help her in the kitchen, I learn something new. I've just learnt how to devein a prawn without removing the shell using a toothpick. I also picked up slicing and chopping skills from her.

What is your cooking style like?

I don't really deep-fry things. I love stewing and baking. I love using my slow cooker as I like the philosophy behind the cooking. All the flavours marry over time to produce a great dish, just like in theatre, where new ideas slowly blend into a great production.

Do you invent your own dishes?

Yes, I'm an experimental cook. For example, when people use wine to cook duck or beef, I'd try it with pork. Normally, my new recipes are quite successful.

Have you had any kitchen disasters?

Of course, many a time I've bombed pots and pans because of overheating. Once I made a pumpkin dish and left it on the stove for too long. The entire base was

WHAT WILL YOUR LAST MEAL BE?

Hokkien rice cake or bee ko, which my mother makes once a year during Chinese New Year. It is a very old-fashioned kueh which is rarely seen now.



burnt, and it was supposed to be a non-stick pot.

What are your favourite local delights?

I eat at Yi Xin Vegetarian Food in Temple Street frequently. I love vegetarian food, and you seldom find vegetarian zi char dishes like they do here. Try their vegetarian version of the kong bak pau (braised pork belly in steamed buns), which is made from yam. It is pleasant and fragrant, and the best part is it's meat free. Their dishes are also very visually appealing, which makes them more appetising as I like a lot of colours in my food. I'm fascinated with the philosophy behind vegetarian food: how it is able to simulate the actual meats and taste so good.

I also love Nan Hua Chang fishhead steamboat at 81 North Bridge Road. The most important part is the stock, made with both dried and salted fish. Using charcoal gives a more earthy aroma and taste since the fragrance of the ingredients binds better through the consistent slow heating.

If I crave Western food, I would go to Riders Cafe in Fairways Drive. I love their buffalo wings. I can just eat them with salad. For crabs, I would go to Hua You Yuan in Upper East Coast Road. I love

both their chilli and black pepper crabs, cooked to perfection and the crab is still moist.

What is your favourite dessert?

Orh nee or yam paste. It appeals to me because it's a traditional dish.

What is your guilty pleasure food?

Durians, because it's unhealthy and I try to be health conscious.

How much do you love Asian food?

It's like a calling from the soul. When I'm overseas, two days without Asian food and my stomach feels uncomfortable. I can eat sandwiches for only two days. I will look for a green pagoda and make a beeline for it as it has to be some Chinese restaurant.

So what do you think of Asian food overseas?

It's actually quite awful in places such as Europe since they use a lot of starch. But then again, I'd still eat it because I want to understand the culture where it has come from. Chilli crab cooked in Malaysia, for example, will have a different accent flowing through it.

What's the most unusual food you've eaten?

Crocodile and bat meat in Malaysia. Like what people say, they did taste like fried chicken, but looked quite scary.

If you could invite someone (living or dead) to a meal with you, who would you choose?

Former porn star Annabel Chong. I'm not meeting her about what she did, but because so little is known about her. Singapore rarely has a gung-ho daredevil like her. Perhaps we'll eat sushi together.

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