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Artistic dining

Chefs Zhang Jin Jie and Arun Sampanthavivat demonstrate well how food can become an art form.

By Cheah Ui Hoon

Business Times Executive Lifestyle, 15 April 02



The Tung Lok group hosted two 'renaissance' chefs at their Asian and Club Chinois restaurants this week, as part of the World Gourmet Summit. With their diverse training, interests and backgrounds exemplifying the spirit of art and learning, those qualities made for an artful dining experience.

Chef Zhang Jin Jie, the sole female chef in this year's Summit, transformed Asian's dining tables with curled ribbons, foliage and flowers, creating a little garden on each of them. She made each course an aesthetic, sensual one, with her combination of line and

proportion, colour and texture.

With wildflowers. The handwritten menu was 'scented' with words like strawberries, jasmine, Apple Rose, and rose petals.

Surprisingly, her cuisine wasn't as 'feminine' as her presentations might have lulled us into expecting. Instead, they were quite robust in their spiced ways. Her Pear Crastini had a host of crumbly and nutty flavours, atop a thin slice of light, crunchy pear. Autumn Leaves Roasted Eggplant featured beef, mixed with ingredients like cheese, foiled within the cushiony texture of the fluffy eggplant.

When we finished our meal at Asian, it was time to pile into the hired bus that chauffeured us to Club Chinois, where chef Arun Sampanthavivat from Chicago had whipped up some signature curries.

Presented in sophisticated French style, Arun's curries were delicately fragranced, with the usual potency of herbs and spices halved - hints of lemongrass, mint and tamarind, for instance, made a tantalising bouquet rather than overwhelming the dish. His fried curried crab and

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pork quenelle was a light, fluffy cutlet while his 'shooshee' (so named because of the sound made when they're being fried) prawns were succulent.

The piece de resistance, however, was Arun's almond mousse with red bean paste and black sesame cream. This dessert melted on the tongue and lifted the spirits. We could have started the meal all over again, with a big bowl of that mousse.



Besides wowing us with their refined cuisines, both chefs' personal accomplishments sounded quite staggering. Arun, for instance, has a degree in literature and foreign languages, a masters degree in Political Science, and a PhD in Asian Affairs from the University of Chicago.

Zhang, 32, is a former musician with the National Orchestra, and during her stint here, has impressed many with her ad-lib yang qin performances.

Two chefs, two different cuisines, but the same spirit of artistry. They demonstrated that food can be elevated into an art form.

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