

A world of food

JULIAN TEOH whets his appetite in anticipation of the World Gourmet Summit in Singapore.

FRANCIS Poulouse is a very busy man. He is about to be a father again in eight days. This child, like the seven he has had before, has been gestating for 12 months, and thousands of people from across the world will join in a pilgrimage to see it.

But this is not an episode of the *X-Files* – Poulouse’s “baby” is the World Gourmet Summit (WGS), a no holds barred food and wine festival that will run in Singapore from April 18 to 29 and bring together some of the world’s finest chefs and winemakers.

Of course, there is no one better to talk about the baby than the proud and doting father.

“The Summit is a platform where you have the world’s best chefs and winemakers coming together to create gastronomic excellence,” says the veteran of the hospitality industry who earned his stripes at Singapore’s iconic Raffles Hotel where he worked his way up to Manager of Food and Beverage Marketing and Promotions. He clearly knows his way around a big event and is now general manager at Peter Knipp Holdings, the organisers of the WGS.

“You have several great food festivals in the world, like the Masters of Food and Wine in Carmel (California), and the St Moritz Gourmet Festival.

“These are iconic festivals, and we realised that there wasn’t one for Asia. You always have hotels in the region that do their own little thing, maybe they have two or three visiting guest chefs. These are great little festivals, but they lack regional and international reach.”

This is “gastro-tourism” with a global edge. Forget travelling to Valencia for paella, hopping down to Burgundy for frogs’ legs and wrapping up in Tokyo’s Ginza district for Edomae-style sushi. Why not bring the whole lot down to one place?

That, according to Poulouse, is precisely what’s happening: “We wanted to do more than showcase talent from the West. We also wanted to showcase the best culinary talent from the region, like Japan, India and Hong Kong. That’s why we called it the World Gourmet Summit – because we want to bring the best chefs from all continents together.”

The calibre of the participants is nothing short of outstanding. Guests include chefs like Naren Thimmaiah from Bangalore’s famous Karavalli restaurant, a pioneer of seafood cuisine, and Ryuiichi Yoshii, a Tokyo-trained sushi master who has wowed local and international critics at his eponymous Sydney restaurant. And anyone who has experienced the silken otherworldliness of aged Chateau Pichon-Longueville or the impressive finish of Frescobaldi’s Brunello di Montalcino will be excited to see winemakers Christian Seely and Marchesi Leonardo di Frescobaldi working the room at wine dinners and tutored tastings.

Singapore is abuzz with the promise of a bumper Summit in 2005. “We got inquiries from as early as December,” says Poulouse, “and people were asking: When can we make reservations? Who’s coming out



Celebrity chef Anthony Bourdain will host a dinner at the World Gourmet Summit.

here? And right now, it's WGS buzz time.''



Alain Passard is another big-name chef who will be at the Summit.

How does the WGS select its participants?

“What we've realised is you have to match your guest chefs with the level of exposure that your society has. For example, you can bring in a really, really great chef, but if he doesn't have that popularity, people will take time to warm to him, mainly because they're not aware of him or what he does. So you've really got to choose people whom society can recognise, besides just being great cooks or winemakers.”

And big names don't come any bigger than Anthony Bourdain and Alain Passard, both of whom will be hosting special dinners at this year's Summit. After a lifetime as a line cook, Bourdain is today one of the world's most recognisable celebrity chefs, thanks to his pull-no-punches account of life as a professional cook in *Kitchen Confidential* and his gastronomic television journey *A Cook's Tour* (featured on Discovery Travel & Living).

Passard, conversely, is not an author or entertainer. He also only has one restaurant, which is unusual for a celebrity chef of his profile and calibre. Working his way up through France's greatest kitchens, this is the man who, after defending his hard-earned set of three Michelin stars for many years, decided to risk it all and concentrate on vegetarian cuisine, lavishing his impeccable skills and attention to detail on green leaves and nasturtium petals.

A dinner at his Paris restaurant L'Arpege is best described as an experience, not least for the mortgage-busting prices. Love him or hate him, he is undoubtedly one of the truly original masters of modern French cuisine.

So what else is the man behind the scenes looking forward to this year?

Poulose reckons Barcelona's one Michelin-starred Ramon Freixa (named Spain's best chef in 2000) will really shine. He is also a big fan of the Sunday Brunch (April 24), set in idyllic Sentosa Resort and Spa, presumably where guests and overworked media hacks will shake off their hangovers from the excesses of the World Gourmet Summit Awards Night (April 23).

“The Awards Night will be really challenging to organise; for the first time, sixteen awards (accompanied by courses from all the master chefs and guest chefs and matching wines) will be presented at this dinner.”

If an endless food and wine binge wasn't enough incentive, come along and show your patriotic spirit by cheering for Malaysia's own Sharon Tan (her excellent *Teochew cuisine* was nominated for best Asian food article) and Taylor's College Bandung (culinary institution of the year).

“We have a tagline, ‘Unique Dining, Great Wines, Fine Cuisine’,” Poulose explains.

“If you were to plan your vacation around the Summit, you'll have it all – this great group of winemakers and master chefs in one location as opposed to having to travel across the world. Malaysians, it's just a hop, skip and a jump away, and I think that's brilliant.”

- For more information, visit worldgourmetsummit.com