

Singapore king

A cool Walloon chef is creating waves in Asia

Paul Ames

Black magic: Emmanuel Stroobant – known as the Chef in Black – puts the finishing touches to another of his creations

Multicultural Singapore is renowned as a crossroads of some of the world's great cuisines. Local specialities include Indian-inspired fish-head curry, chilli crab served with Chinese buns or Malay beef slow-cooked in coconut milk. Thanks to Emmanuel Stroobant, inhabitants of the city state are also tucking in to croquettes aux crevettes and moules-frites washed down with a cool glass of draft Hoegaarden. Belgian-born Stroobant is a star in South-east Asia. He runs half a dozen eateries in Singapore, from his Belgian bistro – courageously named Brussels Sprouts – to the Saint Pierre, a Relais & Châteaux temple of fine dining.

Known as the Chef in Black from his regular TV show on the Asian Food Channel, Stroobant is a cool character who stands out in Singapore's conservative financial centre with his platinum punk hairdo, penchant for big motorbikes and trademark black jeans and T-shirts. His cookbooks have picked up international prizes and he recently wowed Australian audiences while whipping up scampi and pine mushrooms in a port-enriched bisque on the Down Under version of MasterChef.

It's all a long way from washing dishes in Liège. Stroobant began his culinary career at the bottom, but was soon learning the trade at the renowned Ardennes restaurant Hostellerie Saint-Roch. At the age of just 23, he was already running a kitchen in his hometown of Liège, but he had the travel bug and when an offer came to work in Australia, he grabbed it.

"It was bit of a culture shock, and not only because my English was a bit hectic back then," he jokes. "I learned a lot about Asian ingredients; it was great exploring Asian food." After three years working in Sydney, Perth and Canberra, and a stint running a 200-seat Mediterranean-themed mega-restaurant for a Malaysian millionaire, Stroobant found himself in Singapore in 1999. "I liked Singapore immediately: it's really fast-paced, and I had the chance to get back into cooking again."

Stroobant and his Malaysian wife, Edina Hong, poured their money into the Saint Pierre restaurant in the centre of town. Eleven years on, it's still the heart of their gastronomic empire. "Saint Pierre is the flagship," he explains in a phone interview.

"It's very classic French dining, but it's also very modern. The cuisine is very much what I learned back home, but I use prime quality Asian products, mostly from Japan." The menu also has

a touch of the molecular, with slow, low-temperature cooking and the occasional dash of liquid nitrogen. Stroobant's signature dishes include pan-fried foie gras with caramelised green apples and port sauce; miso-braised black cod with spring vegetables and a truffle-infused Noilly Prat butter sauce; and Belgian chocolate cake layered with dark chocolate mousse and honeycomb ice-cream.

There's also a SG\$226 (€130) tasting menu with wine that moves smoothly through 10 courses including carpaccio of scallop with fresh Japanese sea urchin, poached Japanese turnip and vinaigrette made with shiso (a mint-like herb); rabbit saddle wrapped in carrot ribbons with chorizo and chicken mousse stuffing; and raspberry parfait with white chocolate snow, pistachio powder and freeze-dried raspberry. Saint Pierre's wine list runs to 34 pages and includes a 1959 Lafite Rothschild for SG\$8,000 (€4,570). The bar is also a magnet for the cocktail set, thanks to its trendy molecular concoctions such as the Zentini, made with green tea liqueur, vodka, Noilly Prat and liquid nitrogen.

If that's too fancy for your tastes, you can get a pintje of Stella or any of 120 other varieties of Belgian beer at Brussels Sprouts, Stroobant's big and bustling Belgian bar and bistro.

"It's a fun place, really Belgian," he says. Brussels Sprouts shifts more than 1.5 tonnes of mussels every month, served in 25 varieties – from traditional versions steamed in white wine, cream or beer, to more oriental varieties with coconut, lemon-grass or soy sauce. The concept has proved so successful that Stroobant has just opened a second one.

Other outposts of the Stroobant domain include the Picotin, a French-style bistro built in the stables of an old racecourse; a takeaway pizza joint on the island's east coast; the French Kitchen – a classic restaurant run in collaboration with Jean-Claude Dubois, former chef de cuisine at the legendary Raffles Hotel; and Rocks – a fashionable urban grill and bar overlooking Marina Bay. He's also just opened a yoga centre.

For the foreseeable future, though, Stroobant's compatriots will have a long way to travel to sample his cooking. "We are so deeply rooted here now that it's going to be hard to leave," he says. "It's not that I don't want to come back to Belgium, but it's difficult to run restaurants when you are so far away."

A feast for the senses

Imagination and presentation are the order of the day at Le D'Arville

Sally Tipper

In a converted 19th-century farmhouse tucked between the E411 and the N4 just outside Namur, you'll find Le D'Arville. It's a bucolic location but one that's surprisingly easy to get to. The food on offer, while modern and inventive, is just as accessible.

The two-floor restaurant has been refurbished in contemporary style, as red-brick walls, glass-fronted wood burner, flagstones and beams combine with clever lighting and features. The result is an airy space with plenty of room to breathe between tables – though there's a pleasant rumble of noise, there's no fear of being overheard. The garden terrace suffers a little from the sound of the nearby motorway – and the day we visited, it was raining too hard for us to appreciate the open space with its pretty fountain as we dashed from car to door.

There are three menus on offer at Le D'Arville, alongside à la carte options. There's also a €25 lunch menu, though this isn't available on Sundays. We both opted for the reasonably priced 'Tendance' menu, at €59 including coffee and matched wines, or €39 without.

What would become a feast began with an elegant pair of amuse-bouches: one hot and one cold. The cold trio consisted of a verrine of summery gazpacho-style cucumber, mint and apple; a quail's egg with radish and cabbage; and a distinctive, zingy citrus juice beneath which hid a custard of oyster with a strong meaty flavour – enjoyable for its surprise factor and unusual taste.

The subsequent warm plate – a pork and basil ravioli with parmesan foam – was light but rich, savoury but not too salty. Comforting and totally delicious, and lucky there was just the one each, or our appetites would have been scuppered.

Starter number one was baby squid, cockles and baby red pepper in a red pepper sauce. The vivid colours nicely complemented the warm Mediterranean flavours. Across the table, my Breton mackerel roasted in spices was deliciously moist and flaky.

Another surprise bouche followed, and by this time we were feeling quite spoiled. As a relative newcomer to Belgium, this was my first taste of that old favourite crevettes grises, and these were an ideal introduction, served chilled in a glass with light, well seasoned carrot and potato purée.

With the main course, though, came slight disappointment – the monkfish fillet rolled in Arab kadaïf pastry was overcooked and too dry. Visually it was beautiful, however, and the

textures of two kinds of caramelised pineapple, mild creamy madras sauce and roasted cherry tomatoes combined well. In keeping with the rest of the meal, it was light and pretty, bursting with subtle but exciting flavours.

The first mouthful of pigeon was breathtaking, and elicited an involuntary "wow". The braised breast packed a powerful, gamey punch and the peppery sauce was up to the challenge of accompanying it, while the pastry-wrapped confit of thigh meat lent an Asian feel. Again, it was a handsome offering, with vertical elements giving the plate a distinctive look.

The prelude to the dessert was probably the tastiest of all the sweets: a doll-sized square of marbled chocolate sponge, served with a superb chocolate sauce and devoured in seconds.

Our main desserts were a striking peach melba and a macaroon with fresh blackberries and cocoa sorbet. Both looked the part but didn't quite live up to expectations, with conflicting textures in the case of the melba, and an overpowering sweetness to both. Coffee was then served with – crikey – a final trio

of sugary treats that our teeth didn't thank us for, though it was a pretty, pastel offering. The highlight was a velvety coffee mousse, but the figgy cream and bite-sized macaroon were a sweet step too far.

Wines were served with each dish, perfectly balanced and harmonious, and what a treat to sit back and sip, knowing that whatever you drink has been carefully chosen to complement the food.

Staff are attentive and polite, neither gushing nor stuffy, and happy to explain the finer points of the menu to those less well-versed in modern French cuisine, while the knowledgeable and friendly sommelier expertly introduced each course to its companion wine. Full marks, too, for accommodating our last-minute bank holiday reservation without fuss.

Overall, an interesting experience for the unexpected ingredients,

while the flavour combinations weren't so unusual as to make them off-putting. Top marks for presentation and, monkfish aside, the execution was excellent. It's fair to say the weakest part of the menu was dessert – unless you're the owner of an exceptionally sweet tooth – and the final sweet offering was a little unnecessary. On a return trip, I'll opt for the cheese instead.

Le D'Arville is a good-looking, welcoming spot, fancy enough for that special occasion but suitably laid-back that visiting "just because" wouldn't be a totally over-the-top treat.

Le D'Arville
94 Rue D'Arville
B-5100 Wierde
Tel 081.46.23.65/0473.27.59.55
www.ledarville.be
Open 12.00-14.30, 19.00-22.00
(closed on Mondays, except public holidays)