

CUISINE

TASTE INVASIONS

The chefs behind some of Southeast Asia's most celebrated restaurants chew over the foodie trends emerging in the region

By Lara Dunston
Photography by Terence Carter



Fine fish:
chefs at Singapore's Waku Ghin restaurant prepare the seafood they are famous for

ON streets across the region, from Phnom Penh to Singapore, Yangon to Bangkok, groups of friends and families can be found, huddled together, sharing food and stories from their lives.

Southeast Asian cultures have always eaten 'family-style' and shared plates of food, serving everything all at once. There has always been a tendency toward casual eating, from street food stalls to hawker

centres. Fire has always been integral, especially grilling. Barely cooked vegetables, be it morning glory, long greens or *bok choy*, are menu staples. People of the region cook the dishes of their mothers, grandmothers and great-grandmothers, because that is what they know best.

But there are new trends emerging, as evidenced in the restaurants of the region's culinary capitals. At the recent Asia's 50 Best Restaurants awards, held

in Singapore, chef David Thompson of Nahm restaurant in Bangkok spearheaded the Future of Food forum as part of the event, and it turned up some interesting findings.

"I have no right to cook Thai food," the Australian chef declared at the opening of a discussion about authenticity and integrity in food. Despite his 25 years cooking Thai cuisine, most recently inspired by the recipes of historical Thai matriarchs, Thompson's

statement inspired a passionate debate on the state of gastronomy and culinary trends across Asia.

Thompson distributed a questionnaire to the chefs and restaurant industry professionals who voted in the Best Restaurant awards to determine their concerns about the state of food in the region. Three key issues became apparent: sustainability and sound restaurant practices with respect to the environment; authenticity, integrity

and interpretation in cooking; and the performance of chefs and who is most important to success in a kitchen in Asia, where there is more of a communal spirit than in the West.

When it comes to sustainability, local, organic produce is of the utmost importance. Agriculturally rich countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam may surround Singapore, for example, but the supply channels don't

exist, producers can't deliver the quantities restaurants require and the supply and quality are not always consistent.

Singapore's Catalunya restaurant – run by chef Alain Devahive Tolosa, formerly of elBulli in Spain – imports its truffles, ham and olives from Europe, while the sublime seafood at Waku Ghin comes in from Japan and Australasia. At many of Singapore's other superlative restaurants – Les Amis, Restaurant Andre, Jaan and

Man of the hour:
chef David
Thompson's Nahm
restaurant was
recently named the
best in Asia



Fiercely fresh:
carefully grown and raised
produce is the star of the
show at Singapore's Jaan
restaurant



New is better:
Singapore's Bacchanalia
is helmed by chefs
trained at Heston
Blumenthal's The Fat
Duck and serves up
reinvented classics



Tippling Club, to name but a few – most of the produce is imported due to the fact that the heavily urbanised island-state doesn't have many producers of its own. Chef 'Bo' Duangporn Songvisava of Bo.lan restaurant told the Future of Food forum she had similar problems in Bangkok.

"Five years ago when we opened Bo.lan, people asked me why. I said I wanted to show Thailand's culinary diversity," she said. "Bangkok should be the best place

to get ingredients but three weeks after opening I proved myself wrong. No problem getting the best *jamón*, but it was almost impossible to find organic produce in Thailand."

Chef Bo set to work sourcing from small producers of artisanal organic ingredients and started a monthly farmer's market in the restaurant's car park, encouraging farmers to keep producing, promising that the restaurant would buy what they

didn't sell, and encouraging a bartering system among suppliers.

Back in Singapore, chef Ivan Brehm has planted a small experimental garden next to his restaurant, Bacchanalia, where he's attempting to grow the produce he currently has to import. "French chef Pierre Gagnaire used to say one should measure a chef not by what he can cook with great strawberries, but what he is able to produce with average ones," Brehm said.


"Of course we want the best ingredient, but we also want to understand it, treat it well and be creative with it."

Thompson's notions of authenticity, integrity and interpretation are also crucial. "Authenticity is a nebulous beast," Thompson, whose Nahm restaurant would be named Asia's best the following day, told the forum. "It's slippery. You'd think it should be easy to define. It means something that is real

and that has a genuine quality that is executed faithfully, but once you start to put it into action it becomes imbued with a complexity of meaning."

Thompson believes authenticity lies not only in the ingredients used, but also in the cooks and how they work together to achieve an exacting result. "In our kitchen, we work in the same way in which Thailand works, as a consensual country where together a group

of people decide, and this develops an authenticity that has a genuine quality," he explained. "I've found it in the city of Bangkok and in the kitchen where I cook with Thai cooks."

Whereas many chefs are increasingly returning to simpler ways of cooking that allow the produce to shine, Brehm, who worked at some of the world's most innovative restaurants including Per Se, Mugaritz and The Fat Duck, 



In the details:
dishes from Singapore's
Bacchanalia (left) and
Esquina take inspiration
from Spain's tapas
culture



believes science-driven cuisine should be the backbone.

"The techniques developed by Heston Blumenthal and his scientific approach were only a means to achieve a more enlightened way of approaching the work of a chef. Scientific method and exploration in the kitchen were never really meant to be the end," he explained. "Every ingredient-driven dish we cook is deeply rooted in scientific exploration. The quest is really to understand the processes so that one can cook better – not to have the process be the star, but the supporting actor. Sourcing is merely the beginning of a chef's task."

If sourcing is only the beginning, a chef's performance and interaction with diners is equally important. Tetsuya Wakuda's Waku Ghin in Singapore, which focuses on deft preparation of fine ingredients in front of diners, keeps records of the dishes it serves to guests to ensure a unique experience the next time they visit.

Catalunya's Tolosa also aims to continually surprise diners. His tasting menus



PETAL POWER

Pollen restaurant, located in Singapore and overlooking the Marina Bay waterfront, takes inspiration from Mediterranean culture and cuisine.

alternate between some of the most playful and whimsical dishes from elBulli, such as the Spherical Olive, which explodes olive oil in the mouth, and the more traditional, such as the Bikini, Tolosa's take on the ham and cheese toastie, made with the finest Iberico ham and black truffles.

Such moves are prompted in part by increasingly fickle and demanding contemporary diners, many of them motivated by the current wave of 'foodie-ism' inspired by such contemporary phenomena as celebrity chefs, food porn, wall-to-wall TV cooking shows, food festivals and food tours. The most ambitious chefs admit to continually desiring change themselves, to getting bored in the kitchen cooking the same thing night after night and to wanting to experiment with new flavours.

For many chefs, however, the future of dining in Asia lies in the traditional past. "Small neighbourhood restaurants run by chefs making authentic dishes with local, seasonal produce," said chef Tolosa, "that's the future of Asian food." ■

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