

Modern diaspora cuisine

Buoyed by curiosity, an ambitious chef is spearheading a restaurant driven by the food of the Chinese diaspora communities

EATING OUT

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IN what seems like the strangest anomaly, Malaysian chef Wong Chin Hua, 37, never actually lived in Malaysia until the Covid-19 pandemic.

"I am Malaysian but I was born in Singapore and grew up in Singapore because my parents worked there. When Covid-19 happened, I moved to Malaysia for the first time in my life. I didn't really have a choice at that point because I didn't have a visa to work anywhere else so Malaysia was my only option. And I ended up meeting some amazing people and making a home for myself here," he says.

Chin, as he is better known, is a passionate chef who grew up with a mother who was an inventive, experimental cook. As a result, he developed a deep love for cooking that brewed and percolated until he was a young adult and decided to take charge of his destiny.

As culinary school was too expensive, he opted to learn through the school of hard knocks, and took this literally when he knocked on numerous restaurant doors in Singapore in a bid to gain work experience.

Since those founding years, Chin's career has taken him all over the world, from Tippling Club in Singapore to the one Michelin-starred Canvas in Bangkok, helmed by chef Riley Sanders, a man Chin says was instrumental in moulding his culinary mind.

Chin also spent some time at Ensue by Christopher Kostow in Shenzhen, China, and it was this experience in the Chinese motherland that would prove instrumental in sharpening the idea of the distinctions between Chinese cuisine in China, and the Chinese diaspora.

Which is how Chin ended up opening his own restaurant called Shu (named after his mother) in the heart of Kuala Lumpur.

Shu is a tranquil, cosmopolitan restaurant on the eighth floor of Menara IMC along the thriving artery of Jalan Sultan Ismail.

At Shu, Chin studies, researches and dissects Chinese diaspora (the dispersion of people from their original homeland) cuisine, applying his own sensibilities to the meals he prepares, all tethered to this idea of migration and movement and its impact on communities and their culinary identities.

"Shu was very much inspired by my time in China. Living there and eating food from the motherland, I realised I knew very little about my cuisine. I grew up eating Chinese food but it is very different from what's in China and it got me thinking, 'Why is it so different?'"



Chin was inspired to open Shu after spending time working in China and wondering what made diaspora cuisine so different from the food of the country of origin.

"I am now the fourth generation from the Chinese diaspora, so this is my attempt to reconnect with my own roots. I have been cooking Western food for so long, so this is about taking back a bit of identity to visit my own culture and cooking," he says.

Shu only offers degustation menus. The current one, called "Homecoming" is priced at RM480+ per person.

The Homecoming menu is dotted with plenty of adventurous culinary pursuits but also isn't nonsensical. The idea behind it clearly isn't about just jamming random things together, which so many modern restaurants seem to delight in doing. On the contrary, it is very evident that the methodical Chin puts a lot of thought into what he does.

Some of the highlights of a dinner here include the trio of snacks in the form of the Crispy Mochi with Zheijiang Black Vinegar and Saba which offers a plop-in-your-mouth one-bite meal that takes you through a graceful textural underwater odyssey.

Perhaps one of the most deliberately thought-out snacks on offer is the Jasmine Rice Bread with Lao Gan Ma Butter. Bread isn't a Chinese staple but Chin sought to bridge the gap between rice and bread by making bread out of fermented rice! This is complemented by the butter, which is an ode to the famous Chinese brand of chilli oil.

This is a dish that Chin is extremely proud of – with good reason. The bread has a lovely burnished golden carapace that yields to a delicately fluffy interior. You can then mop up all this warm goodness with the slick oleaginous qualities of the butter, which has a subtle umami undercurrent running through its veins.

Another course, simply called Sarawak, is Chin's ode to umami and his mother's birthplace. Although this particular umami doesn't really bear any resemblance to the traditional iteration



The braised duck rice is undisputedly the most triumphant offering on the menu. – ABIRAMI DURAI/The Star



Chin's interpretation of umami is an entirely modern, but still glorious, reworking of a Borneo favourite.



The chrysanthemum-themed dessert is light and vivacious and provides a cheerful ending to the meal. – ABIRAMI DURAI/The Star



The trio of snacks that prologue the rest of the courses offers a glimpse of the narrative that Chin has woven his food around. – Photos: Restaurant Shu

of the dish, it pinpoints and highlights Chin's narrative and discourse about migration, travel and belonging.

"This is umami that is unrecognisable as umami, but we wanted to bridge that dissonance of being and express it through our food," he says.

The dish is delightful – just don't compare it to umami. On its own merits, it ticks all the right boxes – it is light and effervescent, has an aquatic underbelly and the coconut milk in the mixture adds tropical nuances without drowning all the other elements. In other words, it is very well balanced.

The Mustard Green Fish features aged fish swimming in a house fermented mustard green broth. It is a subtle, understated dish that is perhaps one of the few things on Chin's menu that doesn't impress quite as much as its predecessors. There is nothing particularly wrong with the dish – it just doesn't really engage with the senses quite as strongly in terms of memorability.

The same cannot be said about the 6 Pepper Duck, which features duck sourced from Bidor, Perak. The duck – which is as its name implies – is cooked with six different peppercorns – is the true star of the show here. It boasts a crispy skin and flesh that is sturdy yet yields tenderly at the slightest inclination. The pepper in the mix removes the gaminess so often equated with duck, imbuing it with fresher notes instead. The tofu puree and chayote add textural contrast but the duck is the clear winner of this ensemble cast.

The duck tales continue with the Braised Duck Rice. Made up of glutinous rice layered with pulled duck in a duck and mushroom broth with tiny little bits of taro crunch scattered atop, this is Chin's pièce de résistance – the undeniable head-turning temptress of the night.

The entire dish comes together like an Oscar-winning film because every single component

works. The rice is suffused in the duck and mushroom broth, the taro crunch offers crispy verve and the duck itself is prominent but doesn't endeavour to steal all the thunder.

Instead of a tug-of-war fighting for attention on your palate, each element somehow elevates each other, like a cheer squad of sorts. I promise you, this is the defining dish you will be thinking about when anyone talks about Shu.

It is hard to top something so spectacular, which is why the chrysanthemum-themed dessert goes the opposite route and offers something judiciously light to end the meal. Made up of chrysanthemum-laced panna cotta and rounded off with a honey ice cream, this is a meal that cleanses the palate and offers simple, uncomplicated flavours to cap the night.

Although he has put so much energy behind his brand of Chinese diaspora cuisine, Chin says he doesn't want to be boxed in and eventually hopes to expand to cooking anything that piques his interest as it relates to migration and the movement of people around the world.

"Right now, I am researching food from the Qing dynasty, so I am thinking of doing menus based on historical foods.

"But in the long-term, I will probably want to move the focus away from Chinese food because Chinese food is delicious but the team is also curious about other things and want to work with chefs who specialise in these cuisines. We want to learn and explore migration more – migration is everywhere, so we can't limit ourselves," he says.

RESTAURANT SHU
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(the restaurant is reservation-only)
Open: Tuesday to Saturday,
6pm to 11pm (closed on public
holidays)