

“No one is born ready to cook,” says Alvin Leung. The *enfant terrible* of Hong Kong’s culinary scene is offering encouraging advice to aspiring chefs but he could well be describing his own professional career. After all, it has been a fairytale journey for the self-taught chef who first started out as an acoustic engineer, before making his way into the upper echelons of the city’s dining scene with his Bo Innovation restaurant in 2005. It took Leung just three years to gain two Michelin stars in 2008. While he received only one Michelin star last year, it’s still no mean feat coming from someone who grew up eating instant noodles, a result of his mother’s bad cooking no less.

As far as appearances go, Leung breaks the stereotype of what a chef should look like. Dressed in chef’s blacks, and sporting his trademark purplish blue-streaked long hair, jade and diamond earrings in the shape of a cross on both ears, and the Chinese characters for ‘demon’ and ‘chef’ tattooed on his right bicep, you half expect him to be smashing guitars at a rock concert than creating what he calls “Xtreme Cuisine” in his kitchen. But there’s no mistaking Leung’s passion and drive for food, as he aims to bring Chinese cuisine into the realm of the extraordinary.

Like his self-confessed and most daring dish to date at Bo Innovation—Sex on the Beach—a sweet edible ‘condom’ dish made from tapioca and yam on top of powdered shitake mushroom ‘sand’, the 40-something year old bars none when it comes to creativity. For his recent visit to Singapore for the Papillon IX musical and culinary event held at the Raffles Hotel, Leung served up yet another signature—a liquid xiao long bao.

If there’s one thing Leung believes in, it’s in food that not over flavoured. “In my cooking, I don’t like to use an excess of anything. So you would never find heaps of garlic or herbs that take away from the actual ingredient,” he explains.

epicure spends an hour with the chef to understand his culinary insights.

Why do you go by your moniker ‘demon chef’?

I forgot how the labels ‘demon chef’ and ‘rebel chef’ came about. But right now, it stands for someone who likes to have fun in the kitchen. The whole dining experience should play on all your senses. It doesn’t stand for anything sinister; I just didn’t want to call myself the ‘god of eating’ for example, as many people call themselves the god of this or that in Hong Kong, I think that’s blasphemous. I’m not having any orgies in the kitchen or sacrificing anything, except maybe for the purpose of eating it. So ‘demon’ really stands for something nice and naughty, something out of the ordinary and playful.

What is the current food scene in Hong Kong like?

The food is fantastic and you have a lot of restaurants with various cuisines that are being prepared to very high standards. In Hong Kong, you will find authentic because there are so many restaurateurs or owners of small eateries who have >

Cuisine Xtreme

Part dare-devil and full-fledged savvy entrepreneur, Hong Kong’s Michelin-starred Alvin Leung embodies a new wave of chefs who combine traditional ingredients with molecular cooking techniques. By Jasmine Tham

46 *epicure* 0510

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PHOTO MATTHEW LEE



MOLECULAR XIAO LONG BAO

CARBONATED BLACK SESAME

PHOTOS BO INNOVATION



BO INNOVATION'S MAIN DINING ROOM

DEMON CHOPPER

immigrated to our city. To me, it’s very rare for someone of a different culture to be able to go to a different country, eat their food there and say, “Wow, this is almost like how we do it at home!” and I think these restaurants have been able to achieve that. It is also easy to get good ingredients, which help contribute to the quality of food.

What do you like to eat on a normal day?

As a Chinese and a chef, I definitely eat Chinese food a lot, I love soups and congee. I eat almost anything, as long as it’s well-prepared. And there isn’t any ingredient that I don’t like. The only thing I don’t eat too much of is dessert. I’m diabetic so I stay away from them.

Any kitchen disaster stories to share at Bo Innovation?

Not really. I treat everyday as an adventure. In the kitchen, there is an equal chance for things to go wrong or right. You just have to be prepared for it. The most memorable accident was when I was trying to slice through a lobster. Because I was so lousy with a knife then, I accidentally grabbed the blade on the wrong side. Now I have a scar right here on my palm. I’ve also singed my eyebrows in the cooking process. But I take all these in my stride.

What does it take to be at the top of your game?

Don’t be content to remain at the same level, doing the same thing all the time. When I first started cooking, I did stir-fried Chinese dishes, then went on to molecular cuisine which is what I’m doing now. It’s just like how you do not always need to match red and white wines with classic foods like meat and seafood. Now you can match them with my style of Chinese cuisine. Like my second collaboration with Robert Mondavi Winery for Papillon IX at the Raffles Hotel Singapore. I have been like a little dog, sniffing around for new ideas. A great chef should always have a strong sense of curiosity.

Do you prefer to create or cook?

I see myself more as a creator. I’m a very lazy person. So I like to create, while someone else does the hard part for me, which is cooking it, you know? I feel what I do best is to invent these dishes. e

DEVIANT ART

Different look, same delivery: the Molecular Xiao Long Bao, a bubble-like rendition of the famous Shanghainese dumpling, broke easily in my mouth and unleashed a rich soup. Chef Alvin Leung’s signature dish, achieved using a molecular gastronomy cooking technique called spherification, was snapped up by guests at the Papillon IX culinary event held on March 28, which saw Leung’s food being paired with wines from Robert Mondavi. Another hit was the Seared Sablefish: it was a dream match with the sweet Coconut Curry Froth. Some adventurous concoctions did not fare as well, though, such as the overly sharp and bittersweet notes in the Citrus Cured Salmon served with Pickled Vegetables. Perhaps the dinner’s format, where hurried chefs work behind self-service food stations to serve food to guests, did not do justice to the potential of Leung’s cuisine but it certainly offered more than a glimpse of his culinary ingenuity. —LIN WEIWEI

48 *epicure* 0510