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Mar 24, 2010

Rebel in the kitchen

Michelin-starred Alvin Leung Jr will tempt with devilishly good dishes at a music and food event
By rebecca lynne tan

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PAPILLON IX

Where: Raffles Hotel Singapore, 1 Beach Road, Bar & Billiard Room

When: Sunday, 7pm

Admission: From \$288 a person from Sistic (go to www.sistic.com.sg or call 6348-5555)



'You don't need a background in cooking to create dishes. You may need it to be able to know how to run a restaurant... I see cooking as something very simple. It is like singing, everybody knows how to do it, but it is just to what degree'

Chef Alvin Leung Jr. -- PHOTO: BO INNOVATION

The boisterous tattooed man with a crop of electric blue and blond hair looks more like a bouncer or rock singer than a chef of a Michelin-starred restaurant.

But chef Alvin Leung Jr, 49, who helms the nouvelle and molecular Chinese restaurant Bo Innovation in Hong Kong, cannot see himself any other way.

'It is all part of my personality. I am a showman. I am somewhat rebellious, and of course, I want to stand out.'

The chef, a trained acoustic engineer, had even thought of becoming a clergyman when he was younger, but now says he probably would not have been accepted, given his appearance.

He will be serving up six dishes, alongside chef Jeff Mosher of the Robert Mondavi Winery in California, this Sunday at Papillon IX, a music and culinary event at the Raffles Hotel Singapore.

On the menu are his signature molecular xiao long bao, cheong fun (rice-noodle roll) with yak-milk cheese, and a new dish - lamb, clams and fermented beancurd.

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Leung says: 'What I do is called extreme Chinese. I try to give you a different and exciting Chinese experience.'

'I want people to utilise all their senses when they eat my cuisine.'

The chef, who has no formal culinary training, began cooking professionally only five years ago when his friend asked him if he was keen to cook in a speakeasy or private restaurant.

Leung, who is married and has a daughter, had been dabbling in the kitchen since he was 12 but had cooked only at home for friends before heading up Bo Innovation, which was awarded two Michelin stars in 2008 and one Michelin star last year.

'I did not have to set anything up. And the speakeasy was a place where I could test my cuisine to see if people would actually pay for it.'

'You don't need a background in cooking to create dishes. You may need it to be able to know how to run a restaurant... but I really see cooking as something very simple. It is like singing, everybody knows how to do it, but it is just to what degree.'

The only culinary course he attended was on raw food, he says.

'I have never been trained at El Bulli or Fat Duck. All that is not true. I wish it were but it isn't.'

He has, however, dined at those restaurants and says dining there is 'just as good as' being trained there, if you are, like him, a professional chef.

'I consider myself, even though I have not been trained as one, a professional chef - one who charges people money for his craft.'

The Chinese characters tattooed on his right arm stand for chu mo or demon chef. He describes himself as being a devil in the kitchen, but how one views that, he says, depends on two things - whether one has worked in his kitchen, or dined at his restaurant.

He is a devil because of his rebellious kitchen style in terms of his culinary fare and scientific cooking techniques, while his food, some diners say, is devilishly good.

He has done so well that he will be opening his first overseas restaurant, a Bo Innovation, in London in September. His 24-year-old daughter studies in the British capital.

He does not rule out the possibility of opening a restaurant here too.

'The scene in Singapore impresses me so much so that I would love to open a restaurant here. And of course, you will want to open a restaurant only in a country where you think there is a dining scene in the first place.'

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