

Recipe for success? Passion

Love of cooking helps S'porean find his calling

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MARK CHIN is 32 and already getting noticed in the food industry as general manager of Dressed, a hip new chain of gourmet salad-and-sandwich restaurants in Hong Kong.

He has come a long way from 15 years ago when he was at Nanyang Polytechnic and struggling with mechatronics.

It was the only course he qualified for.

"It was either that or nursing at the ITE (Institute of Technical Education) and I knew I would never make a good nurse," says Mr Chin.

He was bored, did not do well and needed an extra year to get his polytechnic diploma.

When he next toyed with going to university, his older sister Lovey, a marketer, advised him to think hard.

"She told me I would never be successful unless I picked something I truly loved," he recalled.

After much soul-searching, it dawned on him that he had always loved cooking, thanks to his mum, Madam Jasmine Tham.

"She is a great cook and because I would hang out with her in the kitchen, I absorbed much of her skills and love for cooking," he said.

But first he had to see if he could take the heat in the kitchen. He went to work in French bistro Sebastien's, in Greenwood Avenue in 2003.

"I started at the bottom - I would boil and peel potatoes for days," he said, recalling that "gruelling experience".

"It took me weeks to learn how to make the perfect french fries. The first few days, the chef kept throwing them into the bin."

But he learnt to appreciate the finer points of cooking.

"I realised how much went into getting a dish just right, even a simple one like french fries."

Encouraged, he did his homework and found that one of the best schools was at the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), consistently ranked the top cooking school in the United States.

He applied for a place at CIA's Hyde Park campus in New York, attaching the glowing recommendations from Sebastien's owner Sebastien Reuller. The school replied with an offer of a place in the culinary arts management degree course.

But how was he going to raise the \$200,000 needed for his tuition fees and living expenses over three years?

Mr Mark Chin (left) took his sister's advice to pick something he truly loved in order to be successful. With the support of his father Vincent Chin (right), and his family, who downgraded to a smaller flat and took on extra work to help pay for his studies overseas, Mr Chin graduated from the prestigious Culinary Institute of America.

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Chin, 58, told him not to worry.

The family downgraded from a five-room flat in Bukit Batok to a four-room flat in Clementi. Both parents cashed out their insurance policies.

His father drove longer hours and took on a second job selling ship-repair equipment. His mother worked longer hours as a clinic assistant. His grandmother chipped in with a loan too.

Mindful of their sacrifices, the young man resolved to do well when he headed to New York in 2004.

He learnt everything from classic and contemporary culinary techniques to business aspects of the food and beverage industry.

He left CIA three years later with a bachelor's degree, a grade point average of 3.58 and glowing testimonials from his instructors.

With his stellar results, he landed a job in Atlanta, Georgia, where he gained valuable experience setting up a new restaurant.

Six months later, he moved to Macau to be closer to his fiance Carrie Shum. They were married a year later.

Last year, he was headhunted to be food and beverage manager of Dressed, a new chain started by American Chris Rork. Within six months, he was made general manager.

The chain of five restaurants in Hong Kong is already earning rave reviews for its gourmet salads and sandwiches.

Mr Chin was in Singapore last week to speak to prospective students of the CIA degree course being offered through the Singapore Institute of Technology.

He advised them to ask themselves where their true passion and interest lay.

Echoing his sister's advice to him years ago, he told them: "If you are passionate about what you do, success will naturally follow."

He is also all praise for Singapore's move to bring in top-ranked foreign schools to offer specialised degrees to young Singaporeans.

With the Government subsidising 75 per cent of the fees, students pay only about \$20,000 to \$27,000, depending on the course.

Besides the CIA, which will offer its courses from next year, there is the University of Nevada Las Vegas, well known for its hospitality programmes and DigiPen, which runs courses for animators and game developers.

"Young people have different interests and it's important to give them different choices and paths," said Mr Chin.

He said he was lucky to have parents who helped him fulfil his dream and intends to repay the money they had spent on him.

"My parents had to scrimp and save to find \$200,000 to send me to the US. Now the kids can study for a CIA degree in Singapore for one-tenth of that. Good for them. They should seize the opportunity."

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