

# The culinary arts can spice up S'pore's economy



RICHARD HARTUNG

Who would have thought that Singapore might be a cook-off with gourmet havens in the region?

Sure, we all know that Singapore has great food, and new restaurants opened by top chefs at the integrated resorts have made dining even better. Along with these, it's the somewhat stealthy expansion at culinary arts schools here that could give the sector more buzz and turn it into an even more strategic economic sector.

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For many years Shatec was almost the only game in town for aspiring professional chefs. Set up by the Singapore Hotel Association in 1983, Shatec says it has more executive chefs employed around the world than "any other institution in the region".

The landscape started changing about half a dozen years ago when At-Sunrice teamed up with

the highly-ranked culinary institute at Johnson & Wales University. It now offers a two-year \$39,000 advanced culinary placement diploma, and its Global Chef Academy is reportedly aiming for more than a thousand students.

Opportunities expanded further when the renowned Culinary Institute of America (CIA) teamed up with Temasek Polytechnic to offer

a diploma, and when the CIA linked up with the Singapore Institute of Technology to launch a \$32,000 bachelor's degree in culinary arts management early next year.

While other countries do have links with renowned international culinary schools, few have moved as far along as Singapore. In Australia and Japan and Korea, for example, there are branches of France's renowned Le Cordon Bleu yet few other links.

It's not only the schools that may make Singapore a culinary centre in Asia, of course. Aspiring chefs benefit from practising their craft at world-class establishments soon after they graduate.

While top restaurants like Les Amis and Iggy's may have offered opportunities in the past, the multitude of new ones offer even more. Joel Robuchon is setting up not one but three restaurants here, for example, and other top chefs like Tetsuya Wakada have set up their own establishments too.

These top restaurants may also help Singapore to move up in the global gourmet rankings. When the Miele Guide announced its 2010 rankings last month, for example, it turned out that two of the top five restaurants in Asia are actually in Singapore – even without including new restaurants opened by glamorous global chefs.

While Michelin seems a little behind in not having a Guide for Singapore yet, especially after director Jean-Luc Naret told *Channel NewsAsia* in 2008 that "Singapore is on the map for a Michelin Guide", it's probably only a matter of time until Sin-

gapore gains stars there as well.

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One key to success will be publicising these developments even more. While events like the annual World Gourmet Summit are big locally, using media and contests and more to get the word out to foodies around the world could bring tremendous benefits.

Perhaps it's time for a re-look at how the culinary sector fits into Singapore's strategy, too. Admittedly food has been on the radar screen. The EDB has said that Singapore could be "a strategic location for food and nutrition businesses", and the Economic Strategies Committee mentioned "a culinary institution to spearhead culinary innovation".

With so many top schools and restaurants already here, though, the industry seems to have surpassed those expectations as well as the Ministry of Trade and Industry's forecast that there would be "smaller niche schools" focusing on the culinary arts.

Thinking grandly, aspiring chefs could even start heading to Singapore from around the world for their education, and great restaurants can attract even more tourists as well as locals who will be delighted with the new choices.

Perhaps faster and bigger than we might ever have imagined, culinary arts looks set to become a new and surprisingly vibrant growth driver for Singapore. ■

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