The culinary arts can spice up S’pore’s economy

With thousands of students graduating from world-class schools and ever-more top restaurants, Singapore could well become the new culinary sensation in Asia. It’s a far cry from just a decade or two ago when hawker centres and several good but perhaps not world-class restaurants defined the dining scene.

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-