

## FABIAN CHIOW: Finally, at age 33, a degree in what he's truly passionate about

By GOH CHIN LIAN

TWENTY years have passed but Mr Fabian Chiow still remembers his Primary 6 teacher's stern warning about his dismal PSLE results.

He had squeaked through and his teacher wanted him to know that just "one point less" and he would have been retained.

Born into a family of hawkers, Mr Chiow, now 33, struggled in a system that sorts students into schools and courses based on exam results.

His parents spoke no English. He and his siblings had to help wash dishes and serve food at the family's steamboat stall after school and on weekends.

From hearing hawkers talk about food and watching his father tally up the cost of supplies, Mr Chiow grew interested in the food business.

In secondary school, he aced mathematics but scored Cs and Ds in other subjects.

He scraped through his O levels and secured a provisional entry to a polytechnic. His grades meant he could opt only for shipbuilding and offshore engineering, not business, which was what he wanted to study. After graduating, then national service, he joined curry puff chain Old Chang Kee as a management trainee. Later, he struck out on his own and set up four western food outlets.

While he worked, he studied for



Poor grades meant that Mr Fabian Chiow could not take up the polytechnic course he wanted to pursue. But he continued studying after joining the workforce and, this year, is set to graduate with a degree in culinary arts management. ST PHOTO: RAJ NADARAJAN

an advanced diploma in business management at the Management Development Institute of Singapore.

This year, he is set to graduate with a degree in culinary arts management from the Culinary

Institute of America and the Singapore Institute of Technology. But it is not the paper qualifications he is after.

"At my age, a diploma or degree doesn't matter to me. I need

something that brings me to another level of understanding the whole culture of food.

"It's an art. A layman thinks he must memorise a chef's recipe. But the chef can give you the whole

recipe and you are not able to do the same as him."

He has also got up to speed with culinary and business fundamentals which he felt he lacked when he was running his outlets.

"We were doing a lot of guessing. If people like oxtail stew and beef stew, is it necessary to have both? People will choose one. It makes no business sense for the other one to go wasted.

"And when we cooked a sauce, we didn't know why it became watery instead of being consistent. Now, if you ask me, I can troubleshoot."

The father of a four-year-old boy puts his interest in learning down partly to being more mature, and the course being relevant to his work.

Looking back, he thinks a less academic track would have suited him better.

He counts himself lucky to have scraped through his examinations.

"A lot of times, for me, it was just memorising and throwing it back, without understanding.

"I don't think we can do without examinations. But it could be in terms of projects that test what you have learnt."

He adds: "Grades show only a part of you. In the workforce, you must know how to compromise, give your ideas and make changes diplomatically. There should be some way to assess students on these things."

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