Graduates return to roots

Former hawkers Fabian Chew, 35, is the oldest graduate from the first batch of students from the Culinary Institute of America – and proud of it.

The father of a four-year-old son says: “I decided to return to school to upgrade my skills. Through the course, I’ve learnt a lot about working as a team as there is a lot of group work. I also learnt to be open to ideas from my classmates.”

Mr Chew, whose father and uncle were also hawkers, used to run four outlets called Western Chow, which sold Western food for four years.

He graduated with a degree in culinary arts management from the Culinary Institute of America and the Singapore Institute of Technology.

He and classmates Norfarasah Mohamed Shariff, 22, have moved into The American Club, where they did their internships. She says: “It was a good learning experience with good mentors at The American Club. When we proved that we had many ideas and skills, they gave us more opportunities to develop. In the future, I will need more marketing, business and finance knowledge. It is evident that I will need more knowledge in the future.”

Another graduate, Ms Kym Ng, 25, looks to return to her family’s roots as her great-grandparents used to run hawkers stalls. “My dream is for my family, who love good food, to return to running an F&B business. I hope to take local cuisine to a higher level,” she says.

She will join Furama, headed by chef and institute alumnus Ivan Brehm, when it opens in March. Together with Australian chef Mark Ellms, they used to work for The Fat Duck, owned by celebrity chef Heston Blumenthal.

Mr Ng, 25, who did his internship at Cuttack’s Italian Grill, says: “The course is rigorous and while we may have long hours, everyone works closely as a team to encourage one another to improve. Whether with friends or diners, food is a great way to connect with people.”

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33 earn culinary degree

They are the first batch to graduate from Culinary Institute of America campus here

Eunice Quirk

The first batch of graduates from the Culinary Institute of America’s campus here graduated yesterday after completing a two-year degree course.

About two-thirds of the 35 students, who held bachelor of Professional Studies degrees in Culinary Arts Management, are Singaporean, with the rest being from other countries, who have just returned from internships overseas, are currently seeking jobs.

The graduation ceremony, held at the institute’s premises in Temasek Polytechnic, and attended by Dr Chee Choon Low, the institute’s chief executive, saw:

- “We have all had the opportunity to experience living and studying in the United States. There are now two more batches, each with 42 students, undergoing the same programme.”
- “Our faculty, the institute’s managing director, is looking at potential growth for the school. It is a path with the Singapore Institute of Technology, which offers degree programmes to polytechnics.”

She says: “We are in talks to offer additional programmes. The increase will help address the issues of manpower shortage in the food and beverage industry and catering sectors.”

All 33 students have a diploma from a Singapore polytechnic and want experience in a professional kitchen. Aside from learning 3,500 hours of “hands-on experience”, their education includes courses in food behaviour, food accounting and wine studies.

Singapore and international students are welcome to apply. Course fees start at $10,000 a year for Singaporeans.

Compared to the curriculum 10 years ago, Dr Lye notes a shift towards global cuisine, health and food science, and understanding ingredients.

In 1997, students who “looked at hands-on cooking” would learn how to cook as well. Now, we can include a new ingredient or giving students information like nutrition facts. But we want to be flexible,” he says.

Mr Wee adds: “All our first-year house, a mother cried because her daughter wanted to drop out of university to go into the institute. But at our second house, a father was pushing for us to accept her son.”

The course includes a 10-week “externship” for students to be attached to a restaurant or hotel.

On the degree programme, Dr Lye says: “It is for those who love food. But be sure of what you want to do.”

On the institute’s rigorous rules, new graduate Kym Ng, 25, says: “People say that training in a kitchen is tougher than school. But at our internships, we were wondering why none weren’t adhered to or why ingredients weren’t dusted off or bleached. Back in school, we didn’t eat and sleep as much.”

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