Getting roti prata down pat

Culinary student Wong Ju Lih visited eateries six times in a week and practised on damp pieces of cloth to hone his skill of flipping dough for the crispy flat bread.

Kenneth Goh

He cooks Western dishes such as potato gratin and chicken roulade with fines gras and parma ham with ease, but when he had to make roti prata for a school project two years ago, culinary student Wong Ju Lih was clueless.

Then a final-year student in Temasek Polytechnic’s baking and culinary science diploma course, he had to figure out how to make the crispy flat bread.

So, he visited eateries such as Al-Annan Eating House in Cheong Chin Nam Road and The Roti Prata House in Upper Thomson Road six times in a week, to observe how the dough was stretched and rolled.

He spent about two hours in total standing by ovens to observe cooks flipping prata.

The 22-year-old bachelor recalls: “I could not catch up with the quick movements I watched in online videos, so the best way was to see it up close.”

He honed his skills by practising on damp pieces of cloth in his free time. These days, he can flip a prata in less than 20 seconds.

His recipe for roti prata is one of 25 in the cookbook, Singapore Hawker Classics Unveiled, published by Marshall Cavendish.

The book contains step-by-step cooking photographs and information on the history and science of cooking these popular main dishes, snacks and desserts.

Dishes include Hainanese chicken rice, Indian mee goreng,.trace, ondeh-ondeh and chendol.

The cookbook was launched last month by Singapore ambassador-at-large, Professor Tommy Koh. Supported by the National Heritage Board, the book aims to preserve time-honoured recipes of well-loved hawker dishes and share them with the younger generation.

The recipes were developed by Temasek Polytechnic’s final-year students from the baking and culinary science diploma course and its faculty over five years.

Now a first-year culinary arts management undergraduate at The Culinary Institute of America, Singapore, Mr Wong really realises that it took him more than 15 attempts to nail down the proportions of ingredients and temperature of the Charcoal with how long to rest the dough to properly develop gluten.

This allows the dough to be stretched as thin as possible without tearing.

He says: “Having a love-hate relationship with the dough. While it can be therapeutic and amusing when the dough tears apart while being flipped.”

He also tweaked the recipe by replacing ghee with corn oil as it is a healthier alternative. However, this causes the roti prata to become less crisp and flat.

Working on the cookbook has made him see the dish in a new light.

He says: “I used to just enjoy it as a meal, but I now have a deeper appreciation for hawker food as I know more about its rich history. I feel proud that it is part of our food culture.”

The second of four children has cooked Hokkien mee, char kway teow and chicken rice at home, on top of making dishes such as chocolate lava cake, pasta carbonara and prawn and vegetable tempura for his family on weekends.

His father, S.T., does missionary work for a church and his mother, S.T., is a school teacher.

When asked if he would consider becoming a hawker, Mr Wong says he has set his sights on working in fine-dining restaurants in the United States, such as Eleven Madison Park in New York City.

“Opening a hawker stall can be hot and tough,” he says. “I prefer the fine-dining route, so that I can learn from the best in the culinary world, add my own flair and bring that back home.”