Serving up successful graduates

LEANNE CHUA

From a boy who used a microwave to make scrambled eggs for his sister, Mr Terence Chua, 30, is now the chef-owner of South Union Park, a bistro at Jalan Kembangan.

“It was always my dream to open a restaurant, ever since I was eight when I knew I wanted to be a chef,” said the graduate from the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), Singapore.

Mr Chua is one of a number of CIA bachelor’s programme graduates who have gone on to run their own businesses — helped by their exposure to overseas cultures and relevant kitchen and business skills learnt from their time at CIA.

The world-renowned institute — from which TV food show host Anthony Bourdain graduated — first came to Singapore in 2007 when it partnered Temasek Polytechnic to co-teach the diploma in culinary and catering management programme.

It then partnered the Singapore Institute of Technology in 2010 to offer local polytechnic graduates a two-year programme for the Bachelor of Business Administration in Food Business Management.

It has campuses in the United States and CIA Singapore is its first one in Asia.

Mr Chua said he would have applied to join the New York campus if CIA had not come to Singapore, but he is glad he didn’t have to as it would have been a burden on his parents financially.

The curriculum covers courses including kitchen skills, business and financing principles, and food history.

Chef Eve Felder, managing director of CIA Singapore said: “While they are taking the practical classes, they also are getting a deep dive into business practices and critical thinking skills through multiple courses in the liberal arts.”

At the end of their second year, students get a 15-week local or overseas internship, called externships, at any of the 1,600 approved sites offered by CIA.

Mr Chua completed his externship at Mugartaz in Spain in 2012, when it was rated the world’s third best restaurant, while Miss Jerraldine Chen, 26, co-owner of Sin Lee Foods, completed hers in 2013 at Three-Michelin-starred restaurant Eleven Madison Park in New York, the top US restaurant that year. It was voted the world’s best restaurant this year.

She said Ms Felder: “We encourage them to work with the best people in the industry before opening their own places.”

PASSION

Having scored under 10 points in her O-levels, Miss Chen qualified for top junior colleges but chose instead to follow her passion by pursuing a diploma in culinary and catering management at Temasek Polytechnic and subsequently CIA.

Even though her parents initially didn’t support her decision, “they saw that this is my passion and have been financially supportive of my business ever since,” said Miss Chen, who opened yakitori bar, Moto, with local actor Shane Pow in February.

The institute has helped students make local connections.

Mr Chua started his year-old bistro with two schoolmates, and two more have joined the outfit’s 14 full- and part-time staff.

“I was lucky to find the right people from CIA, who were as passionate as I was about food,” added Mr Chua, who says everything is made from scratch, except fries and ice cream, which needs hefty labour and machinery investments.

Fellow alumni, Mr Arnes Raphael Sim, 25, now runs hawker stall Plum & Rice with two fellow CIA graduates at Block 216, Bedok North Street 1.

HAWKER FARE

Mr Sim took a leap of faith to open the stall last December, selling Japanese-Singapore fusion food sets from $4 each.

The hawker chef said: “This doesn’t make as much money but it is fulfilling, and if it’s a pity if the hawker culture dies out here.”

He cited CIA modules such as menu development, costing and psychology as helpful, as they helped him target customers.

Similarly, for Miss Crystalia Huang, 25, her education at CIA helped in her family’s business, RedDot Brehouse.

Miss Huang, who is now Singapore’s youngest and first female qualified brewmaster, said her experience in the kitchen has helped her work with Red-Dot’s chefs on improving the dishes, calling herself a “lubricant in the kitchen”.

Other graduates from the school include Miss Elaine Koh, who has worked at restaurants Pollen and Odette, and is now a sous chef at acclaimed Michelin star chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten’s Dempsey Cookhouse Bar.

Course mate Yvette Chua, 33, owns Halber Street Bakehouse & Cafe at Kovan, which is now looking to franchise in Malaysia and the Philippines.

Yet another student is Mr Sean Kwek, 27, at American speakeasy, 28 HongKong Street. He was recently the runner-up in the inaugural Singapore Cocktail Festival’s Singapore’s Next Top Cocktail competition with his chicken rice inspired-creation, the Lion City Sour.

Ms Felder added that the course provides students with the foundation and confidence to take risks: “They are not afraid of hard work.”

Said Mr Chua: “With what I’ve learnt, I hope to change the culinary industry in Singapore just a little.”