

Where to eat in 2020

F&B industry players look back at 2019 and what to expect in the year to come

27/12/2019 - 05:50

by

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AS YOU WIPE off the last crumbs of mince pie or log cake and take your last sniff of a dying Christmas tree now emitting wafts of rancid pine, thoughts turn to, what else, food. Or at this time of the year, a look back at what you ate in 2019, and what restaurateurs have in store for you in 2020.

Will there be another food trend so equally embraced and vilified as brown sugar bubble milk tea? Will our burgers be filled not with hand-chopped wagyu but 'bleeding' Impossible patties? Will we be inundated with more celebrity chef-backed restaurants or welcome more independent Singaporean chef-run eateries like the runaway success Mustard Seed? And is sustainability a pipe dream or are we all going to eat that way?

Pseudo Meat

Plant-based meats like Impossible and Beyond burgers and other pseudo chicken or seafood are here to stay, not as a trend but an industry disrupter, reckons Loh Lik Peng of the Unlisted Collection group.

"We'll continue to see more innovative products coming from plants. (What we see now) are essentially first-generation products and they are far from perfect right now, but in a few years' time the average Joe will not be able to tell the difference between real and fake meat, from taste, texture, looks and smell."

The same goes for lab-grown meat, "because the technology exists and commercial scale is just a few years away," adds Mr Loh.

Already, restaurants are paving the way for plant-based meat, adds Christine Kaelbel-Sheares, Marina Bay Sands' vice president of food and beverage. "One of the highlights for us this year was the collaboration with Impossible Foods for some of our restaurants to be the first in Singapore to launch plant-based meat dishes - namely, Adrift, Bread Street Kitchen and Cut."

Sustainability

It's official: sustainability is going to be a dominating force going forward.

"Currently, it is viewed as a 'dining trend' but the goal should be to evolve it into an expected standard in the industry," says Malcolm Wood, managing director and culinary director of Maximal Concepts, which is bringing the much anticipated, eco-friendly Chinese restaurant Mott 32 to Marina Bay Sands in the latter part of



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“People are starting to be more conscious of how the things they consume (restaurants included) and the businesses they run have an impact on the environment. The hope is that sustainable and zero-waste practices become the industry norm.”

MBS is on the same page too, says Ms Kaelbel-Sheares. “We are on track to delivering our promise of having 50 per cent of all our seafood by volume sourced responsibly by 2020.”

“There’s a strong hunger for F&B innovation - from plant breeding and science to plant-based alternatives,” says Lo & Behold Group’s Wee Teng Wen. “We’re always looking to explore sustainable alternatives. For example, at The Black Swan, head chef Alysia Chan’s menu reflects a minimal waste philosophy and introduces diners to unconventional cuts of meat and produce.” A prime source of inspiration for him would have to be “Blue Hill at Stone Barns, New York, where I sat in Chef Dan Barber’s kitchen and could taste unadulterated flavours right off each plate”. It was, he says, one of the best meals he had in 2019.

Discerning diners

Had the feeling that you’ve seen too many restaurants doing fundamentally the same thing? “I think conceptually the industry is going through a little crisis,” observes Ivan Brehm, chef-owner of Nouri. “Food has never been better, that is true, and the average quality is now quite high, but I feel a certain creative drain in the kind of restaurants opening this year. The market is slower, and the recession is felt across the board, but concepts with discerning quality such as Cloudstreet and Mustard Seed were able to stand out in 2019.”

He notices that while Instagram and bragging rights are some of the reasons diners eat out at fancy restaurants instead of what’s actually being served, he’s seeing more consumers interested in the message behind the food, especially at Nouri. “It’s no longer enough to serve good quality, we need a ‘why’ for consuming. Diners and chefs alike are bombarded with products and ideas, so the one with the better story is going to stand out.”

As for chef-restaurateur Bjorn Shen, he’s just glad that “a lot of annoying food trends from the years before seemed to have died out.” The veteran owner of Artichoke adds with characteristic candour: “There’s less multi-coloured rubbish pretending to be food, less truffle oil and salted egg on everything, less over-the-top milkshakes with half a supermarket confectionery aisle piled on top, etc.”

He cites a return to more “wholesome” themes such as “minimal waste, a return to locavorism/sustainability, plant-based eating, sourdough baking, private dining, probiotics and more.”

As always, the same challenges still plague the industry from manpower shortage to market oversaturation. “But on the upside, it was impressive to see many young chefs leaving the relative comfort of their fancy workplaces (usually European cuisines) and breathing fresh life into local food such as Indigo Blue Kitchen and Gubak Kia (which opened their doors in 2019).”

This was the year for local talent too. "After Magic Square started in 2018, we've noticed more opportunities for young chefs," says Tan Ken Loon of The Naked Finn who founded the pop-up as a platform for fresh talent to run their own restaurant under his guidance. "Kausmo is one example, and Mustard Seed is doing really well. We also saw a lot more private dining chefs cooking at their own homes."

It's still an uphill climb for local chefs, for sure. "They still have to work hard but (what we've found is that) there's more support from within the industry and also from diners. We only hope that Magic Square #2 can do more for the industry."

While opportunities are there, raising the level of creativity is another thing, muses Mr Shen. "The levels of risk-taking in Singapore are very low, especially among local chefs. It's hard because creativity comes from travel and eating out, and this profession doesn't pay well enough for them to do so. So what happens is that their world view remains narrow; they only benchmark locally. Hence you see the same ideas flogged to death - a 'truffle oil and sous vide egg upgrades everything' mentality. On top of that is the price-sensitivity of Singapore diners - so if we want chefs to step up, it requires a full ecosystem of diners who can appreciate the outcome and pay the slight premium."

How will we eat?

Despite the proliferation of food delivery, people will still dine out, believes Unlisted Collection's Mr Loh. "It's a social thing," he says. "I do plenty of Grab and Deliveroo myself but if I want to have fun with friends and family, we still go out. Having it at home is not the same as gathering in a social place like a restaurant or bar, but these places will have to up their game in the future to make it worthwhile for guests to continue going out to dine and drink. This means more immersive and dynamic experiences that make it more compelling to lure diners away from dining at home or having food delivered."

What's Cooking for 2020

Magic of the Square

By late March, the second version of Magic Square will open in a permanent space at 7 Portsdown Road, as founder Tan Ken Loon takes the plunge to cement the former pop-up's reputation as a training ground for young chef talent.

"We will have four chefs instead of three," he says. Two chefs have already been recruited: Sook Yi Lai who had worked at the one Michelin-starred Nouri, and Shane Gan, who also hails from starred restaurants such as Candlenut and Cheek by Jowl. Mr Tan is still in the midst of recruiting the remaining two chefs.

"It will be a dedicated research kitchen for the team to focus on exploration and experimentation. This time, it's all counter seating with 21 seats instead of 18. We're also opening up a position for a general manager/sommelier-type role to help develop the next generation of Front-of-House staff. The format remains the same with one chef driving the menu for one month and the other three as sous chefs. It'll be S\$78 per head, with two seatings."

Small is the new big

Intimate, low-on-investment-but-big-on-ideas concepts seem to be a thing in

2020 with both Naked Finn and Artichoke embarking on tiny passion projects. "Small's is a four-seat chef's counter/private dining room within Artichoke itself," says Chef Shen, who adds that he's making use of existing resources rather than commit to a new lease and team somewhere else.

"I'm running it myself three days a week, so my time and energy is the only real overhead. This way, I can afford to take huge risks and do really out-there kinds of things that any sensible restaurant owner won't ever do. If what I do doesn't work out, so be it. Right now, the plan is a pizza omakase menu and if it turns out to be absolute rubbish, it's no real loss apart from the \$5,000 plus pizza equipment that I installed. The space is generic enough to be home to the next concept, be it a chicken nugget and champagne bar, or a takeout banh mi shop. I've got so many ideas and Small's is where I'll be road-testing them."

In turn, The Naked Finn's Mr Tan will open a counter seating-only concept in the second half of 2020, serving "a simple multi-course menu with a small team". The menu will be Japanese-French, and he got the idea after meeting a talented chef on one of his trips to Japan. Impressed with his cooking, Mr Tan wanted to offer him an opportunity in Singapore, and at the same time showcase the plethora of Japanese seafood which he imports, and locally farmed vegetables.

He hasn't got a name or space just yet, but it will be a 12-seater, and he intends to make the prices reasonable, rather than go the fine dining route. Although he acknowledges new restaurants are always a risk, "we still need to grow and we believe in our products".

Returning to his roots

Six months ago, Sri Lanka-born chef Rishi Naleendra was nervous about opening Cloudstreet, his most ambitious and personal dining concept that could either make or break his culinary career. But now that it's a certified overwhelming success, he's not only elated, but he's also got the confidence to open a new restaurant that's close to his heart - serving Sri Lankan food.

A joint venture with Loh Lik Peng (who also co-owns Cloudstreet) - "we've been wanting to open a Sri Lankan place for the longest time" - Chef Naleendra adds that the new eatery will be located at the newly-refurbished Wanderlust hotel. Originally owned by Mr Loh, the building was sold two years ago to 8M Collective, which will re-open it with the same name.

Scheduled to open in March, the restaurant - he has a name in mind but hasn't officially bought it yet - will serve classic Sri Lankan food in a modern, funky environment designed by the same people who did Cloudstreet. Think three kinds of Sri Lankan crab curry, string hoppers, lamprais, koththu roti and the like. "It'll be vibrant, colourful and very cocktail-driven." The cocktails will have a cricket theme, and be named after the game's shots and positions. The chef is from Sri Lanka, whom Chef Naleendra met two years ago when he was doing a consultancy project, and will move to Singapore early in the year.

While he had never thought about serving Sri Lankan food, Chef Naleendra adds that Cloudstreet has proved to him that "when you come up with concepts that people can appreciate and enjoy, it has a higher success rate". And while he's "always nervous" about opening new eateries, it's clear that with his sense of authenticity - and Singaporeans' love for crabs - there's a ready crowd that can't wait for him to open.

Chill out and be Nourished

At Nouri, chef-owner Ivan Brehm brings food cultures together with his brand of Crossroads cooking, but some time in 2020, he'll be offering guests a chill-out space to have a drink, listen to music and enjoy a streamlined version of his cooking.

"We want to continue to talk about culture, but in a way that is accessible and interesting for people who might not be the typical Nouri dinner," says Chef Brehm. Besides working on reaching out to a wider audience with Nouri's culinary direction, he will also be taking over the space above the restaurant in Amoy Street.

"Singapore lacks a serious music and art scene outside of the gallery space or concert hall, and people who crave this are coming together and making it happen with their own hands. We are some of these people," hints Chef Brehm. "Imagine a flat built for the enjoyment of good food and drink, great music, art and a ton of grown-up parties. All with the intention of bringing people closer together." Watch this space.

Designer Chinese and Japanese cuisine

There are two major dining experiences awaiting at Marina Bay Sands this year, and the first off the block is the highly-anticipated Hong Kong import, Mott 32. The design-centric eatery's USP is to offer "a unique experience different from any other Chinese restaurant that people are used to", says its managing director and culinary director, Malcolm Wood. With branches in Vancouver, Las Vegas and Seoul, each Mott 32 has a distinctive look that reflects the city it's in and for Singapore, "we drew inspiration from the city's botanicals, and chose to highlight elements of rich foliage and flora to showcase the city's love for gardens, parks and natural trails". What's on the menu also promises to be stunning - namely Apple Wood Roasted 42 Days Peking Duck featuring ducks that are literally 42 days old and imported from Beijing; and barbecued Spanish iberico pork with yellow mountain honey.

Modern Chinese cooking aside, the return of veteran chef Tetsuya Wakuda to the refurbished Waku Ghin in February will also be an anticipated experience. "Designed by award-winning interior designer Yohei Akao, the new Waku Ghin will continue to showcase the brilliance of Chef Tetsuya Wakuda's cuisine through four distinct dining spaces," says Ms Kaelbel-Sheares.

Return to Raffles

He started out as the first chef to head Shinji Kanesaka's debut sushi restaurant in Raffles Singapore and now, 10 years later, Koichiro Oshino has come full circle, but with his own name on the door.

After several delays, Oshino Sushi will open at the former Ah Teng's Bakery premises in mid-February, says Joni Ong, managing director of Shinji by Kanesaka, which includes the Michelin-starred outlet in Carlton Hotel, and another in St Regis Singapore. "I see Oshino as a separate restaurant from Shinji," says Ms Ong. "It will be helmed by Oshino san and his wife Motoko, and a washoku chef. It will be very much a dining experience focused on the chef's skills, seasonality and quality of the food, as well as the service of the husband-wife team."

Oshino will be small at just under 1,000 sq ft, "but it's appropriately intimate for

an eight-seater only counter.”

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