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Les Amis Group: Grooming Singapore's Top Culinary Talents

The Singapore restaurant group, which turns 25 this year, continues to groom and nurture culinary talents through its growing number of concepts.

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It is 1pm on a sweltering Tuesday afternoon and two-Michelin-starred French fine-dining restaurant **Les Amis** is in the thick of lunch service. Its opulent dining room on the ground level at Shaw Centre is teeming with diners — a mix of businessmen and ladies who lunch.

Observing the lively scene from a corner of the main dining room is Desmond Lim, the famously low-key chairman of the **Les Amis Group**, who is waiting to host The MICHELIN Guide Digital for a rare lunch-cum-interview session. Dressed in a sharp black jacket, crisp white shirt and jeans, the bespectacled 62-year-old looks fresh and youthful.





Throughout the leisurely three-hour lunch, Lim (left) peppers the conversation with anecdotes of the highs and lows of running one of Singapore's most prominent restaurant groups, which include dealing with a steady flow of business proposals and ideas from chefs, surviving in a competitive business landscape and investing in the restaurant operations — from staff training to gleaming food trolleys, which make a frequent appearance throughout the eight-course meal.

He says in jest: “There are way too many trolleys in this restaurant — bread, cheese, whiskey and even ice-cream trolleys. We should have a parking lot somewhere.”

As we tuck into the sublime canapes of gougere and fava bean tart, Lim reminds us that his day job is running his family's stockbroking firm Lim & Tan Securities. Being a restaurateur, on the other hand, sounds more like a hobby for the hard-core gourmand.



The founding team of Les Amis Restaurant including (from left) Ignatius Chan, Justin Quek, Dr Chong and Mr Lim (seated)

In 1994, Lim co-founded Les Amis Restaurant together with his friends, Dr Chong Yap Seng, chef Justin Quek and sommelier-turned-restaurateur Ignatius Chan. At that time, it was Singapore's first French fine-dining restaurant that was not located in a hotel. The group's crown jewel establishment has received two Michelin stars since 2016, under the stewardship of French chef **Sebastien Lepinoy**.

Besides the fine-dining restaurant, the group has grown steadfastly to 21 restaurant brands spread across in 29 outlets in Singapore, spanning French, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Japanese, Italian and Spanish cuisines. The group also operates more than 30 overseas restaurants, which are mainly joint ventures.

Asked about the similarities between running a stockbroking company and a restaurant group, Lim says that both are people-centric business. He says: “Both businesses are about building relationships in order to keep people coming back. It is not about hard-selling. The restaurant business is a happy industry to be in, though it can be commercially tough.”

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Attracting New Blood With Young Head Chefs


Reinvention is part and parcel of Singapore's cut-throat dining industry. Lim hopes to inject some new blood into his 25-year-old company. He has brought in young chefs, who are in their 20s, to head two of the four new restaurants that will open in June.

One of them is **Indigo Blue Kitchen**, the group's first Peranakan restaurant, which also alludes to Lim's roots. For Lim, who was brought up on Peranakan food by his paternal grandmother, this upcoming restaurant is a project that is close to his heart. The 74-seat restaurant in Shaw Centre will be helmed by 29-year-old chef Chong Jun Xiang (left), who used to work at one-starred **Alma by Juan Amador** and private club 1880.

Chong is not a Peranakan. In fact, it was his determination and open-mindedness that won the head honcho over, coupled with strong recommendations from the industry. He was offered the opportunity after a second meeting and, more astonishingly — without a trial.

Relying mostly on his instincts for this hiring decision, Lim says: "Young chefs have to be open-minded and be prepared to be guided. I can read a person well enough and am prepared to bet on them."





Besides Chong, he is also giving two budding female food and beverage professionals a leg up at Kausmo, which is also opening in June. The 16-seat sustainability-themed restaurant will offer a carte blanche menu using in-season fruit and vegetables that are overstocked and oddly shaped, and the dishes will be paired with kombucha.

Kausmo, which will be on the third floor of Shaw Centre, will be fronted by chef Lisa Tang, 24 (far right), and Kuah Chew Shian, 26 (right), who heads the front of house. The young chefs are given the creative leeway to explore their cuisine while the group provides financial and logistical support.

By bringing in a fresh crop of younger head chefs, Lim hopes to keep the Les Amis Group on the radar of younger talent, especially those from Singapore. “You need to be realistic to work around government tightening labour quotas here,” he says. “This is kind of our human resource strategy to attract Singapore talent.”

With younger chefs on board, he also hopes to attract a new generation of diners, who use social media and start exploring the other concepts in the group.

On the flip side, he points out that young chefs are getting more savvy and gung-ho over the years. He recounts that some of them start asking for more freedom even before signing a contract, as they are wary of being associated with a big dining group. “They need to be reassured that they will be given space to express their creativity, while being able to tap on the resources of the restaurant group.”

Nurturing Singapore's Culinary Talents

Attracting and grooming young culinary talent is something that the Les Amis

Group has been doing over the years. The alumni list of Les Amis Group reads out like the who's who of the Singapore food and beverage industry. Many chefs and service staff who have worked in the group have gone on to grow their careers and start food businesses, ranging from Michelin-recognised restaurants to hawker stalls.

The flagship Les Amis Restaurant, which is one the first standalone French fine-dining restaurants here, was an important training ground in Singapore's nascent fine-dining scene in the 1990s. The founding team of Les Amis Restaurant, including Justin Quek and Ignatius Chan, have gone on to start **Chinoiserie Modern Asian** and one-Michelin-starred **Iggy's** respectively. Other prominent names that have worked in the Les Amis Restaurant include Jason Tan of one-Michelin-starred **Corner House**, Gunther Hubrechen of **Gunther's** and Singapore's dessert queen, **Janice Wong**. More recently, Les Amis' former chef de partie Koh Han Jie, who won the Young Talent Escoffier Asia culinary competition in 2017, is co-helming a contemporary European restaurant **El Fuego By Collin's** in Jewel Changi Airport.

Some May Go But Some Do Return

Investing in Les Amis Group's best asset – its more than 380 staff — is a critical part of cultivating good relationships. Over the past 15 years, the group has organised fully funded trips to France, Italy, San Sebastian in Spain and Japanese capital Tokyo (which Lim proclaims that it is his “ultimate foodie destination”) for chefs and service staff to dine in restaurants and meet food producers, such as Mons fromagerie and caviar producer Kaviari. These trips help to deepen the staff's understanding and appreciation for their culinary craft.

After pumping in so much investment and fostering a close relationship, how does he feel when chefs leave to either join a competitor or start their own businesses?

Lim says: “Though there is some regret, I don't take their departures personally. We should allow young people to have a platform to fly as high

and far as they want to do. Let the birds fly and, someday, some of them may fly back to you eventually.” He says with a chuckle: “I run my business with more of my heart than my head, though it should really be more of the other way.”

READ MORE: [Chef’s Travel Black Book: Les Amis’ Pastry Chef Cheryl Koh’s Food Guide To Paris](#)



Yujin Izakaya is run by chef Freddie Lee and his wife Purdey Poon. The couple met while they were working at Les Amis Restaurant. (Photo: Les Amis Group)

One such returning “birds” is chef Freddie Lee, chef-owner of [Yujin Izakaya](#), which opened on 15 March this year — the exact same date when Les Amis first opened 25 years ago. Lee runs Yujin Izakaya with his wife, Purdey Poon, whom he met while working at Les Amis Restaurant. The 58-seat restaurant

offers contemporary Japanese food, such as kushiyaki dishes, yakitori and grilled meat.

Lee left Les Amis restaurant in 2004 after a 10-year stint to start his restaurant Infuzi in Biopolis. After Infuzi shuttered, Lim offered Lee a joint venture to run a **Peperoni Pizzeria** outlet. When Les Amis Group's Bistro Du Vin in Zion Road closed down last year, Lee took up the opportunity to convert the space into Yujin Izakaya.

Besides Lee, Lim has partnered chef Nam Q Nguyen (who is fondly known as chef Nam), who helmed The Lighthouse restaurant when it was run by the Les Amis Group, to start casual Vietnamese chain **NamNam**.



Sebastien Lepinoy, executive chef of Les Amis Restaurant, played a crucial role in helping the restaurant to secure two Michelin stars. (Photo: Les Amis Group)

Current chefs in the group can also attest to Lim's support for their

restaurant vision. One of them is Lepinoy, executive chef of Les Amis Restaurant, who joined the group in 2010. He says that Lim shares his sentiments of taking care of the finer details, such as sourcing for ingredients and wines, engaging with guests and investing in staff development. For example, the restaurant sources langoustine from Loctudy, a small port in Brittany, French **Ike jime** sea bass and Moulin du Calanquet olive oil.

He adds: "Mr Lim gives me the autonomy to run Les Amis in a way I deem fit, which has allowed us to evolve over the years into the restaurant that we are today."



Pastry chef Pang Kok Keong says that the best years of his career were when he was running Canele patisserie, which was part of the Les Amis Group. (Photo: Antoinette)

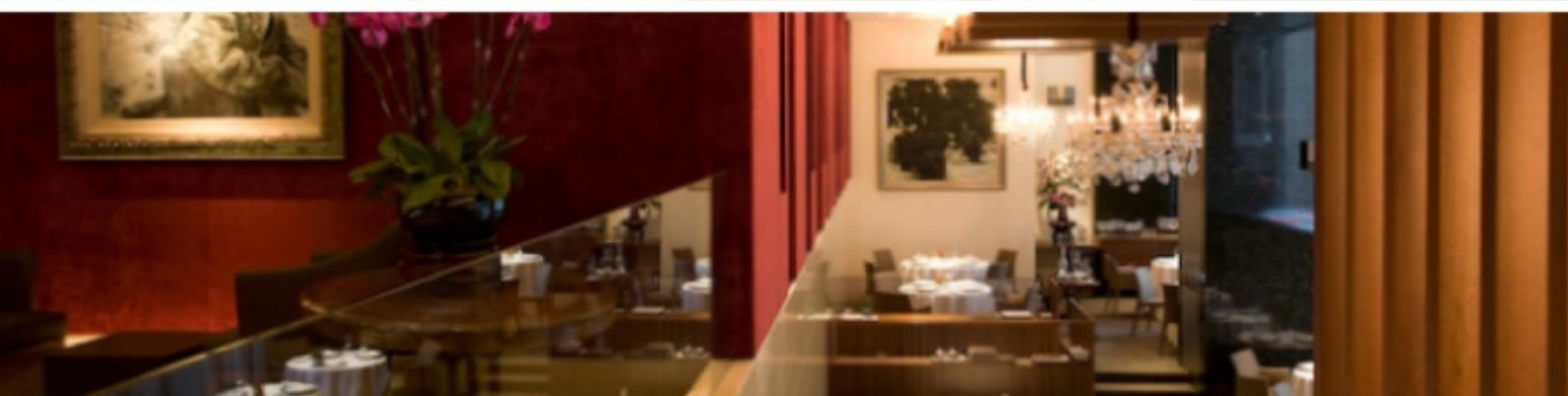
Sharing Lepinoy's sentiments is chef **Pang Kok Keong** who runs French

patisserie chain [Antoinette](#). He was also known as the mastermind behind Canele, one of the first shops to offer high-end French pastries, macarons and cakes in Singapore that started in 2004.

Then 29, a gutsy Pang e-mailed a proposal to Lim to start a French-style pastry shop. He says with a laugh: “At the beginning, he was not receptive to the idea and said that I was not in the right mind to do something like this. I think he was more convinced by my motivation and passion than the concept.”

Pang adds that Lim, who does not have a sweet tooth, gave him the freedom to be creative and experiment with new products and ideas — though it took awhile for business to grow at Canele. He adds: “Back then, I was hot-headed and did not respond to criticism well, but Mr Lim was always patient and kind.”

Looking back, Pang, who still catches up with Lim every year, treasures his Canele days as “the best years of his career”. He reflects: “I had the freedom to be creative without having to worry about not making money. Not everyone would be so generous to support my vision. That was the best arrangement that a young chef could ask for.”






Les Amis Restaurant in 1994 (top) and the current restaurant (below). (Photos: Les Amis Group)

What's Next On Les Amis' Plate

Up next, Lim hopes to explore opening more Asian concepts under his restaurant empire. Recently, the group opened Jinjo, a Japanese robataya, and the Singapore outpost of popular Hong Kong congee stall Mui Kee.

In Hong Kong, Les Amis Group is part of a partnership that runs **Lady M**, a New York dessert chain, with Upper East Holdings, which is also behind **Sugarfina** candy boutique and an upcoming venture with French pastry chef and Cronut creator **Dominique Ansel** in Hong Kong that will be ready by the last quarter of this year. There are plans to open more restaurants in Hanoi. Lim adds that he prefers to take on projects that are easy to scale in key growth markets in Asia.



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However, he is steering clear of opening a fine-dining concept overseas. After all, its French fine-dining restaurant Cepage closed down in Hong Kong in 2013. He says: "It is tough. If you're purely chasing after financial returns from a fine-dining restaurant, you can forget about it. There are high costs involved to maintain a high quality of service and food." He shares that 90% of the ingredients used in Les Amis Restaurant, are imported.

He adds: "The aim of having Les Amis is a platform to show how far and wide a home-grown fine-dining restaurant can go. It would be nice to have some sort of profit margin running it. It should not lose money. At worst, we break even."

On the biggest lesson that he has learnt about running restaurants over the

years, he says: “Listen to the market as it is always right, it will always prove whether you are right or wrong. It is not always about what you want.”

The three-hour lunch-interview concludes with the classic French dessert of rhum baba, but Lim is already thinking of dinner — it is at pop-up dining space Magic Square with his staff. He quizzes his public relations staff on the profiles and cuisines of the young budding chefs helming the space. He says: “I am curious to see how such a semi-permanent pop-up is run, the food and the talent behind it.”

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Written by Kenneth Goh

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Kenneth is a former newspaper journalist who relishes uncovering stories in eateries and kitchens as much as hunting for new chomping grounds. With more than five years of content production experiences on print, online and video platforms, he enjoys his min chiang kueh as much as moussaka. From chefs, restaurateurs to hawkers, he is intrigued by the blend of ingenuity and hard work behind their food.