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FOOD



Purpose-driven meals

An innovative, sustainability-driven restaurant in Singapore utilises unwanted, irregular produce and secondary cuts of meat to produce interesting, original meals.

A dish of cucumber veloute features misshapen cucumbers that would typically be discarded by importers. — KAUSMO

By ABIRAMI DURAI
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IN recent times, there has emerged a curious problem associated with modern living: food waste.

In days of yore, there was no such thing as food waste because well, nothing was wasted. People – especially in post-war times – were frugal, careful and extremely adept at repurposing different ingredients. But over the years, those time-treasured methods and the generation that birthed them have tapered off and in its place has emerged an Instagram-savvy generation obsessed with looks.

This endearment to aesthetic superiority has translated to food

and by extension, fresh produce as well. Everyone wants the best, no one wants second best and therein lies the problem. In Malaysia alone, estimates indicate that up to 40% of perfectly edible fresh produce is thrown away at the farm level because it does not meet industry beauty standards.

This has a cascading, trick-

le-down effect and often supermarkets, wholesalers, importers and suppliers are forced to throw away produce deemed ineligible for market contention because consumers simply won't buy them. The reason? They don't look good enough, never mind that they are

perfectly edible.

In Singapore, a tiny little 16-seater restaurant called Kausmo is trying to tackle this problem in a small, meaningful way by utilising produce that is considered aesthetically inferior and cuts of meat that are often discarded or underrepresented in restaurant menus. Their aim? To spread and inculcate awareness about the lens in which consumers view fresh produce.

A novel approach









Started in 2019 by twen-

ty-something co-founders and friends Lisa Tang and Kuah Chew Shian under the auspices of the Le Amis Group, Kausmo, which is derived from the word 'cosmos' (indicating a system of thought) offers a unique perspective on how aesthetically filtered produce can be used to make refined meals.

This is especially pertinent in restaurants where chefs often vie for the best premium products. Tang herself knows this only too well as she has worked in some of the best restaurants in Singapore, from Jaan to the three Michelin-starred Le Amis and was even a nominee for the Rising Female Chef Award at the World Gourmet Summit 2019.

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Turning what would be trashed into treasure

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To put together the dishes at Kausmo, Tang and Kuah work with importers, who are often the first handlers of the produce that comes into Singapore. Importers typically sort and pack produce according to retailers and wholesalers' standards and specifications and this produce is routinely subject to some degree of filtering.

What this means in reality is that any produce that is oddly-shaped, oddly-sized, overstocked or overripened typically get relegated to food waste, simply because they are deemed unpalatable for consumers, who are unlikely to purchase them. This is exactly the sort of produce that Kuah and Tang end up purchasing from the importers.

"One of our importers mentioned that a full shipment of bananas got stuck out at sea for one additional day and the tip of the bananas turned a bit yellow so the bananas were not entirely green and didn't meet the industry standards.

"When a fruit shows a little bit of ripeness, it is considered overripe. If a cucumber is curved, it often gets thrown out because it cannot be packaged well.

"So in such cases, the importers actually have to pay additional money to discard these items. Some importers will give away the produce to their staff, but there is only so much that can be done. So we are just raising awareness that this is happening," says Tang.

The menu at Kausmo is designed to be *carte blanche*, which means blank menu. This is by design as Tang and Kuah don't always know what they're getting.

"It is certainly challenging to work with



Kuah (left) and Tang are the twenty-something co-founders of Kausmo, and are passionate about driving change and awareness about food waste. — KAUSMO

aesthetically-filtered ingredients but it also pushes us to get creative and explore preservation techniques. At times, some ingredients do not fit into our current menu flow. In such cases we might preserve or ferment them, or turn them into sauces and purées for future use.

"For the meats, we actually prefer to use these underrated cuts of meat as they are often more robust in flavour as compared to primary cuts that have crowd-pleasing textures.

"We hope to convey to our guests that with the appropriate preparation technique, we can improve the textures of these underrated cuts, and they too can be very tasty and interesting.

"We are also very particular in our sourcing of protein; we typically purchase from suppliers who are more thoughtful in their farming methods and are kinder to the envi-



Kausmo's char-grilled flat iron steak features a part of the cow that is typically disregarded by many restaurants because of the tough connective tissue that runs through the meat. — ABIRAMI DURAI/The Star



Tang (right) often has to think up creative ways to use the odd-shaped or overripe produce that she gets and find ways to utilise them either as main components in meals or as complementary assemblages. — ABIRAMI DURAI/The Star

ronment. In Kausmo, we have served vintage beef and carbon-neutral pork," says Tang.

Unpredictability is part of the nature of Tang's job these days and she now takes it in her stride and constantly brainstorming once she has an inkling of the produce coming her way.

"It usually starts with figuring out where the produce might fit in the current menu structure – is it going to be a highlight pro-

duce featured in one of the appetisers, or can it be a complementing component in the other courses?

"Then comes figuring out what flavours of herbs and spices work well with the particular produce. If it does not fit well in the current menu structure, then perhaps it could be cooked down into bases like sauces or compotes to be used in our retail product line via Krusty by Kausmo," explains Tang.



Lastra was born in Mexico City but his Mexican restaurant in London utilises local ingredients to recreate Mexican flavours. — KOL

A Mexican restaurant with a difference

By KATE KRADER

MEXICAN food in the UK is famously bad, similar to other places around the world that don't have many transplanted chefs from Mexico. You wouldn't think ignoring the ingredients that define the cuisine would fix things.

But at London's best Mexican restaurant, Kol, you won't find staples such as avocados, tomatillos, mangos, cactus, coconut, and jicama. The most notable ingredient not in evidence at the Michelin-starred restaurant in the West End, where the tasting menu goes for £125 (RM652)? Limes.

"In Mexico, you get a delivery of limes every day, a mountain of limes. You don't have a Mexican restaurant without limes," says Santiago Lastra, Kol's chef and owner, who was born in Mexico City and worked in kitchens there.

But Lastra offers terrific foundational Mexican dishes-tacos, tamales, mole, and aguachile, the ceviche-style seafood dish that depends on the citrus for flavour – without limes. The chef does it by creating incredible

hacks of ingredients that aren't found in the UK, with just a few exceptions. He imports a handful of ingredients – specifically corn, chiles, chocolate, and coffee ("and mezcal," he laughs) for which he can't find adequate alternatives. As an added benefit, many of the products he sources support small, indigenous communities.

The chef, who worked as project manager for the Noma Mexico residency in Tulum in 2017, has cooked around the world, from Denmark to France to Taiwan. Everywhere he's worked, he says, people have asked him to make Mexican food. He refused because he wouldn't be able to source the quality of ingredients he needed.

Then he decided to think about cooking in terms of flavors, rather than components. Before he opened Kol in 2020, Lastra spent seven months in a test kitchen with his brother Edourado, an industrial engineer, and a few chefs, perfecting alternatives to products that wouldn't be as good when flown in. There are few things as disappoint-



A dish of aguachile is made using summer

tomato, fig leaf, cherry, fermented blackcurrant and salsa macha instead of the traditional version using cucumber juice and chilli. — KOL

ing as an unripe, untasty avocado. Kol's version of lime juice is made from fermented gooseberries, with a splash of aged black-tea kombucha. He'll also use seabuckthorn, the fruit that grows wild on beaches around the UK. The result has the

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Oddly-shaped vegetables like this one are often discarded by retailers, importers and wholesalers and typically end up in landfills, even though they are perfectly edible. — CATE BLIGH/Unsplash



Focaccia bread served alongside a roasted portobello mushroom butter, which utilised mushrooms that were odd-shaped and would otherwise have been discarded by importers. — ABIRAMI DURAI/The Star

Plant-based celebrity fare



Actor-comedian Kevin Hart has opened his first plant-based fast-food restaurant in America. — AFP

The food

At the recent Passport to Feast event, a two-month long culinary extravaganza organised in the Klang Valley by the Singapore Tourism Board in conjunction with the Singapore Food Festival 2022, Malaysian diners finally had the opportunity to taste Tang's food on local ground when she served up a two-night-only six-course dinner at Cuiscene in Petaling Jaya.

So, what does food made using aesthetically-filtered produce actually taste like? Pretty darn good actually. Especially in instances where it is hard to see how the produce could have been rejected in the first place.

Tang's opener of focaccia bread with a house-made portobello mushroom butter, made using aesthetically-filtered mushrooms was a true wonder. The bread was fluffy and tender and the butter was opulent and suitably rich, with the woody notes of the mushroom permeating each molecule of this goodness.

It was also a clever way of repurposing an ingredient which may not be looking its best, by using its best qualities and injecting it into another vessel.

The cucumber velouté with bergamot and maple cashew and black bean chilli meanwhile made use of cucumbers that were rejected because they did not fit a standard aesthetic mould i.e. they were curved or had an otherwise irregular shape.

The dish was incredibly invigorating and refreshing and given that the cucumber was shredded thinly and tasted great, it was impossible for anyone to see these physical irregularities at all, which meant you would never know that these were cucumbers destined for the landfill!

The char-grilled flat iron steak with honeyed Thai chilli and fiddlehead fern meanwhile made use of a lesser-known cut of beef also known as chuck steak or oyster

blade steak, attained from the shoulder of the cow.

Chuck steak was once thought of as waste meat and is still somewhat underutilised by restaurants because of the connective tissue that runs through it. The tissue often renders the meat extremely tough, but once removed, the steak is incredibly tender.

In this instance, Tang's flat iron steak was done to perfection and retained a beautifully pink interior that was velvety soft and tender and an exterior that had a slight char and rusticity.

Throughout the dinner, Kuah regaled diners with elaborate information about each dish – running through the inspiration behind its formation as well as more surprising elements about why a particular sort of produce could end up in a landfill.

"We make an effort to share stories about the ingredients that go into each dish, and many diners are surprised to learn the reasons why certain ingredients are filtered. We love seeing reactions from guests when they are intrigued by these locally-grown edibles and ask more questions about them," explains Kuah.

The future

Despite purchasing cuts of meat and produce that other restaurants and retailers typically don't want, Tang admits that she and Kuah don't actually end up saving much money on food costs, simply because they run such a small establishment.

"Contrary to popular belief, we do not save much in terms of purchasing aesthetically-filtered produce. While the importers sell them to us at a lower price, we are ultimately a small restaurant and the volume of ingredients that we can procure do not meet their minimum delivery requirements.

"As a result, we have to arrange for our

own delivery through hiring our own drivers, and this hidden cost means we lose out on whatever savings we get from procurement. There are also times where the delivery costs outweigh the savings we received, but it is cost we willingly incur as we are fully committed to utilising these ingredients," says Kuah.

While there are limitations to what they can do, Tang believes that their strength is in the fact that they are able to share stories with diners and impart wisdom and understanding about food waste in an easily digestible way. Although their impact is small, she says what they are doing is inherently valuable as both a model and an educational platform of sorts.

"Yes, we aren't able to purchase a big enough volume of aesthetically-filtered produce to make an impact, but our impact is a little bit different – it is intangible. For us, it is more about reaching out to consumers, growing awareness about food waste and talking about it and finding a solution and getting people more aware," says Tang.

Although both Tang and Kuah admit there is a long way to go in terms of making a dent in food waste, they do have plans to scale up the restaurant at some point in the future. This would then give the eatery a bigger platform and an opportunity to make an impact that is felt more keenly in the industry.

In the meantime, though, they are content to keep spreading awareness and pushing the message that all produce – regardless of how it looks – deserves a place on the dinner table.

"We constantly push ourselves to discover new ways to utilise less appreciated parts of our produce. This would then help diners to see what is possible and better appreciate them, and hopefully encourage them to make the most out of ingredients found in their own kitchens," says Tang.

bright tartness of lime, rather than the flat-out acidity of a straight vinegar substitute. A tiny bowl of his lime juice accompanies just-cooked langoustine tacos with pickled onions; the shellfish head sits in the bowl, to be used as a mop for sprinkling the taco with the tart liquid.

His most brilliant innovation might be his "avocado," made from pistachios and served pureed as a garnish on such dishes as crab and mushroom chalupas.

"If you had a magic wand and could convert an avocado, it would become a pistachio," says Lastra of the sweet, nutty taste they share.

He purees the nuts with water to make a smooth, guacamole-like condiment that also includes roasted garlic, his fermented gooseberries/lime juice concoction, and a little chilis. The approximation to a very good avocado puree is uncanny.

Lastra insists that he's not doing this to be gimmicky; he wants to highlight the potential of local products. At the same time, his goal isn't to go to extreme lengths to recreate, say, a pineapple: "It's not like Frankenstein." The question, he says, is how to recreate something simple, like fruit. Take mangoes. "You start with: What is yellow?" Lastra says.

"Butternut squash doesn't taste like mango or have the same texture. But it's yellow." Next, he experiments with different treatments of squash, for texture and taste. For what became his mango puree, Lastra settled on a mix of raw, cooked, and pickled butter-



Limes are ubiquitous in Mexican cuisine, but are notably missing from Kol's menu. — MARCO ANTONIO VICTORINO/Pexels

nut squash, pureed with a little elderflower syrup to get the fruit's floral hits and aged kombucha to blunt the vegetable flavor. At Kol, you can taste it as a pre-dessert sorbet.

Sometimes, Lastra's hacked ingredient is pure serendipity. That's what happened with coconut, which, improbably, he fashions from squid. (Yes, squid.) On a beach in Mexico, Lastra started snacking on a coconut he had left out in the sun. "I thought it was squid. It was warm coconut with the smell of the sea. And I said, 'Oh my god, it's like a perfectly cooked squid.'"

At the restaurant, he reverse-engineers the dish, serving faux coconut as a dessert. (This wasn't on the menu when I ate at Kol; as



Lastra's version of guacamole is made using pureed pistachios in lieu of avocadoes. — PAUL WENCE/Pexels

good as his inventive substitutions are, I fear that a squid that becomes a coconut is pushing it.)

If an enterprising farmer grew avocados in the UK, would Lastra use them? "I'd have to try them," he says, after a pause. "Not because I have to stick to my concept." But, he says, "it would have to taste like an avocado I want to have." — Bloomberg

KEVIN Hart already has a thriving comedy and acting career, and now he's aiming for people's stomachs.

The prolific actor-comedian opened his first plant-based, fast-food restaurant called Hart House on Thursday in the Westchester neighborhood of Los Angeles near the city's airport. He wants this new venture to attract regular plant-base eaters along with those who haven't yet been introduced to that world of healthy eating.

"Our business is in the business of feeling good. That's what Kevin Hart is about," he said in an interview before the restaurant's official opening, which got off to a strong start with a long line of customers throughout the day. While sitting alongside his wife, Eniko Hart, the actor scarfed down a plant-based crispy chick'n sandwich, chick'n nuggets and tots.

Rapper Lil Baby showed up to the preview to place an order from the fully plant-based menu that also features burgers, salads, fries, ice teas and a lime-ade. The restaurant's milkshakes are made from an oat-and-soy blend.

"I say this all the time: 'Live, love, laugh,'" Hart continued. "Here, we say 'Eat your heart out.' People have a curiosity about plant-based food. It's something I eat. It's really good. When you look at other restaurants, Hart House is just as good and maybe even better in some respects."

Hart felt the need to create a healthy space within the fast-food spectrum that's affordable for customers. There are several other plant-based, fast-food options located throughout Los Angeles, but Hart House's approach is to serve quality food with sandwiches and burgers that are within the \$5-\$7 (RM22 to RM31) price range – less than competitors.

"It's a major priority for us," Hart said. "We want to make an environment where people feel good."

In creating Hart House, the comedian-actor teamed up with restaurateur Andy Hooper, chef Mike Salem and businessman Michael Rubin, who was an investor.

Salem, who developed Hart House's menu options, was the head of culinary innovation at Burger King where he helped launch the impossible Whopper.

"One of the cool things about our leadership is that the majority of us are carnivores," he said. "But we wanted to create this plant-base concept and bring Kevin's vision to light. We wanted to keep this simple. This is straightforward classic American comfort food."

Along with his flagship location, Hart wants to open six more Hart House restaurants by the end of the year. He already has two locations under construction in Los Angeles including one in the Hollywood area.

"We're being open-minded," he said. "This is a new generation and new way of thinking when it comes to food consumption. This is the beginning stages for us. We will continue to get better over time." — AP