



How Les Amis Thrives In Singapore's Volatile Dining Industry

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May 13, 2019



COVER Williams pear poached in an infusion of star anise and bourbon vanilla, and paired with light vanilla

After 25 years as a leader in the business of dining well, Les Amis Group's investment in talent is clearly paying off

 5 VIEW GALLERY

Singapore's remarkable dining scene is deservedly world-renowned. But the one thing that almost always throws a food critic off in his or her attempt to confer some poised, personal and, to some extent, impartial advice on where to eat is the local restaurant industry's volatile nature. Not all good restaurants survive this competitive market. But the ones that do, such as fine-dining restaurant Les Amis, often share a vested interest in serving good food and nurturing talent. The fact that the restaurant is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year is impressive, but even more so how its owners have grown the business to include a group of other successful dining concepts.

“I believe our concepts have to be about good food. Fundamentally, that’s what it has always been about,” says Desmond Lim, chairman of Les Amis Group. In 1994, Lim founded restaurant Les Amis (French for “the friends”) with three of his pals—business partner and clinician-researcher Chong Yap Seng, then-sommelier Ignatius Chan (now the proud owner of one Michelin-starred Iggy’s) and chef Justin Quek. It is Singapore’s oldest independent French restaurant and, not surprisingly, one that many would not hesitate to recommend, confident that it would be as good as when they last visited.

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ABOVE Les Amis Group founders (from left) Ignatius Chan, Justin Quek with a former pastry chef, Chong Yap Seng and Desmond Lim (seated)

The restaurant didn’t just survive the last quarter of a century. It

helped set the benchmark for service, quality and value within the industry, and continues to do so—even if it means lowering its prices to make it more accessible to a wider pool of diners. Case in point: when executive chef Sebastien Lepinoy took over the kitchen at Les Amis in 2013 and managed to convince his bosses to adopt a much more competitive pricing strategy. The resulting profit helped fund a \$1.5m kitchen overhaul the following year. Not long after, the restaurant earned its two Michelin stars.

By June this year, Les Amis Group will have 21 dining concepts and 29 outlets in Singapore alone, spread across a diverse range of experiences—from high-end French and Japanese restaurants to the more accessible options, be it casual Italian or Spanish tapas.

Lim, a stockbroker with more than a knack for the restaurant business, never imagined that the idea to open a restaurant would grow into a group of F&B concepts that is also successfully expanding overseas, specifically a NamNam Noodle Bar franchise in Bali and more than 25 joint ventures across Hong Kong, Indonesia, Vietnam and Myanmar.

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Les Amis

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ABOVE Williams pear poached in an infusion of star anise and bourbon vanilla, and paired with light vanilla

NURTURING BY NATURE

Key to Les Amis Group's success is its investment in talent and its culture of encouraging passionate individuals, who eventually go on to spread their wings and start their own ventures. Its namesake restaurant's list of feted alumni, which includes Jason Tan of Corner House, Pang Kok Keong of Antoinette, Sufian Zain of Waku Ghin, Gunther Hubrechen of Gunther's and pastry chef Janice Wong, speaks for itself.

“Talent and memorable food are what inspire me the most,” says Lim. “I am just as excited today as I was 25 years ago when I come across raw talent. I believe young talent should be given wings to fly as far and high as they can go.”

To guide them, the company has also sent staff members and restaurant teams on overseas learning trips with its suppliers and partners. “Talent with the right DNA and heart has helped the group to become successful and also expand overseas,” Lim asserts, adding that many have returned from such trips inspired to do more and be more creative. In fact, two of the group’s new concepts will be helmed by young chefs under 30 who are keen to share their cooking philosophies, while another two concepts will spotlight a duo of the group’s existing chefs who are looking to head their own place.



ABOVE Cold angel hair pasta with truffle and caviar

MAKING IT COUNT

To be part of a family of award-winning restaurants is attractive enough for some, but those with a vision to pursue a specific pace and style of cuisine have certainly found the support they need from Les Amis Group.

Yujin Izakaya on Zion Road, which opened in March, is the first of four new concepts to open this year. It is helmed by chef-owner Freddie Lee, who was part of the original opening team of Les Amis. Managing the front of house is his wife Purdey Poon, whom he met while working at Les Amis in the late 1990s. Safe to say, the fact that yujin is the Japanese word for “friend” is no coincidence.

The other three restaurants, all located on the third floor of Shaw Centre and slated to open by June, reflect a move to embrace more local flavours. Indigo Blue Kitchen, for instance, which is named after the iconic blue butterfly pea flower often used in Peranakan cuisine, aims to preserve and tell the stories of the culture through its updated heritage dishes. The 74-seater restaurant is helmed by chef Chong Jun Xiang, but is close to Lim’s heart—and stomach.

“Indigo Blue Kitchen is a personal heritage project for me as the recipes are my grandmother’s and I’m hoping to share them before they’re lost,” he professes. “I also believe that the current market is looking towards more casual dining, with the focus still on taste, presentation and experience.”

(Related: [The Restaurants That Made It Into The Michelin Guide Singapore 2018](#))



ABOVE Kausmo's young but ambitious duo Kuah Chew Shian and Lisa Tang

Similarly, Uncle Wok, a 46-seater quick service restaurant, strives to offer well-prepared Asian dishes using recipes that have been carefully put together by chef Danny Tan, who has been with Les Amis Group for more than 15 years. Elsewhere at Kausmo, an intimate 16-seater restaurant fronted by chef Lisa Tang and front-of-house manager Kuah Chew Shian, food consumption norms are challenged. The team here promotes conscientious choices through the use of fresh fruits and vegetables grown locally and regionally, which are overstocked and oddly shaped and sized, but at their optimal level of ripeness for consumption. “These restaurants may not be our usual kind of concepts, but we are keen to have them on board as they represent the future of the things to come,” Lim muses.

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