



CHEONG LIEW

From modest beginnings making pub sandwiches, the celebrated Malaysian Australian chef has come full circle now helming a Melbourne pub with panache.

MOST OF US ARE UNCOMFORTABLE WITH CHANGE, LET ALONE RADICAL CHANGE, BUT TAKING A LEAP INTO THE UNKNOWN CAN OFTEN BE HUGELY REWARDING. LAST YEAR, RENOWNED MALAYSIAN-CHINESE CHEF CHEONG LIEW LEFT ADELAIDE, THE CITY HE'D CALLED HOME FOR CLOSE TO 40 YEARS, AND THE RESTAURANT THAT HAD SECURED HIS PLACE AS SOUTH AUSTRALIA'S CULINARY GODFATHER. HE WAS READY FOR A NEW ADVENTURE IN MELBOURNE.

From the fine-dining fixture that was The Grange at the Adelaide Hilton to The Botanical in South Yarra, Cheong Liew hasn't just switched one eatery for another, he has also come full circle, returning to the city in which he first lived when he came to Australia – and to a pub kitchen, no less. "I've really enjoyed coming back to work in a pub," he says. "It should be a place where you can experience great casual food with no fuss."

Cheong arrived here from Kuala Lumpur in 1969. Then 19 years old, he came to study electrical engineering at Footscray Tech in Melbourne, also securing a job at Spencer Street Station that involved everything from sweeping floors to sorting the mail.

However, Cheong soon hung up his broom and landed a job at a typically Aussie pub, no doubt experiencing culture shock. "I had to get up at 4.30am to make ham, cheese and pineapple sandwiches," he recalls. "I couldn't believe that people would come to a pub at 6am, but every morning, sure enough, there they were. Truck drivers who'd just delivered fruit and vegetables to the markets next door would come in for a toasted sandwich or grilled lamb chops, bacon and eggs, a shot of whisky and a beer chaser." On Fridays, Cheong would cook the pub mistress' favourite dishes: "rissoles, curried sausages and chop suey made with Gravox powder," he laughs.

This first foray into cooking was not one of Cheong's lifelong culinary influences, however, his next job in a kitchen was something of a revelation. Cheong's brother, Khai, who was a waiter in a Greek restaurant in Adelaide, suggested he move cities for a position as a grill chef. "I knew nothing about Greek food, and most of the staff were Greek women who spoke little English, but somehow it worked and the chef hired me that first night," Cheong recalls. Though the ingredients may have been foreign, the techniques were anything but.

For Cheong, who grew up with three brothers and five sisters on one of Kuala Lumpur's largest poultry farms, food played a central role in his upbringing. "My brothers and sisters were all very close



and we did everything together. We roamed the farm with our pet dogs. There were ducks, pigs, vegetable gardens and fruit trees," he says. "We all used to work in the kitchen with Mum and Grandma. From an early age, we'd be playing with fire, helping out with the satays and roasting chickens."

Much later, those homegrown influences helped in the kitchens where he worked for a living. "At the Greek restaurant, I learnt how to make *youvetsi*, a lamb stew with rice-shaped pasta that was cooked in an earthenware dish, and that really excited me because it was just like a Chinese claypot," Cheong says.

"The *souvlaki*, well, that looked like satay to me – the preparation and presentation were the same as my grandma's in Malaysia; she just used different ingredients."

Inspired by these new flavours and influences, Cheong decided to learn all

he could about Greek food. "I didn't even know where Greece was at that stage," he recalls. Then, he happened upon a *Time* cookbook, which teamed recipes with geographical and historical notes. "That got me thinking about other cultures in terms of their food, from what they ate for breakfast to how they celebrated a wedding."

From *Time* to *Larousse Gastronomique*, and Escoffier to Elizabeth David, Cheong soon became something of a cookbook fanatic. "I now have a whole room full of cookbooks," he says. Does he own hundreds? "Probably more than hundreds," he admits.

After working at the Greek taverna, Cheong manned the pans at an Indian restaurant and a French steakhouse in Adelaide. In 1975, he opened his own restaurant, Neddy's, with his wife, Mary, and business partner, Barry Ross. Drawing on his Malaysian heritage, as well as his cross-culinary escapades, he created a multicultural menu that was one of the forerunners of the East-meets-West fusion. It seemed a very natural mix for this third-generation Malaysian Chinese. "When you're born in Malaysia, you grow up in a very multicultural place," Cheong says. "There are Indian, Portuguese and Hokkien influences, and you're exposed to all of these different cultures and cuisines." »

During his time at Neddy's, Cheong became increasingly interested in regional Chinese food and felt that he had a great deal to learn. "It wasn't until I lived in Australia that I realised there was so much more to Chinese than what I'd experienced in Malaysia."

Cheong travelled to China in 1984 to experience it firsthand, and was immediately impressed. "Even though it was a poor country and the ingredients weren't as good as they are now, I was amazed by their techniques and resourcefulness. Some of the cooking methods – like the double-cooking method they use for pork – have been around since the 16th century.

"It inspired me to look at the food of the world, to look at different civilisations, and those dishes that have been around for centuries remain relatively unchanged today."

While Cheong may be inspired by time-honoured traditions, his cooking style is constantly evolving. Indeed, it is his ability to see similarities rather than contradictions in the cuisines of the world that has influenced his approach. After Neddy's closed in 1988, Cheong did a seven-year teaching stint at the Regency Institute for Hospitality. However, the call of the kitchen won out again, and Cheong took to the stoves at The Grange at the Hilton Adelaide, which became one of South Australia's finest and most-loved restaurants.

For 14 years, Cheong wowed diners with his approach, marrying French techniques with pan-Asian ingredients to critical acclaim. "After so many years, you get all of these flavours and cultures and techniques, and you play them like piano keys," he says.

During this time, Cheong was named one of the world's '10 hottest chefs alive' by American magazine *Food & Wine*. He was inducted into the World Food Media Hall of Fame and in 1999, received an Order of Australia for his services to the food industry. Cheong was so revered in culinary circles that it came as something of a shock when The Grange received a less than favourable review from food critic John Lethlean of *The Weekend Australian* in 2009. Whether or not this influenced Cheong's next move (he maintains that it didn't), he decided to close what was ostensibly the state's favourite restaurant that same year.

Which brings us to The Botanical, a Melbourne establishment for more than 150 years at the city's Royal Botanic Gardens. The restaurant underwent a multimillion-dollar overhaul, proving to be fertile ground for the arrival of one of the nation's most innovative chefs.

Today, as Cheong sits in his trademark chef's blacks in this elegant South Yarra dining room, you get the impression he's enjoying the freedom that comes from catering to both a savvy restaurant crowd and punters in the more relaxed main bar. "I like to think that what we do here at The Bot is modern Australian pub food," he says. "We take our eating seriously, with lots of flavours and textures; it incorporates so many different cultures."

The dining room menu is an alluring mix of 'blokey' pub staples, including a 550-gram dry-aged Gippsland rib-eye ("the kind of steak people dream about," Cheong says); signature dishes such as snapper with leek fondue and shaved calamari, and small bites under a 'Sitting Ducks' heading, which comprise oysters Rockefeller, ocean trout gravlax, curls of squid tossed with lemongrass, chilli and curry leaves, and middle-white suckling pig inspired by a trip to Italy.

"When I was in Turin in Piedmont for the Slow Food Festival, I went to the Sicilian stand at the food fair and bought seven bags of *porchetta* [stuffed roast pork] for all my friends," Cheong recalls, "but they were too busy wine-tasting, so I ate it all myself!"

Meanwhile, the bar menu next door offers Malaysian-inspired, fried, salty beggar's pork, which Cheong believes is perfect with a nice cold beer, and more traditional bar snacks – from fried calamari to cheese plates.

His take on the pie floater, a South Australian institution, sees lamb and shiraz party pies served with a bowl of pea and ham soup on the side. The schnitzel is an organic veal version, served with anchovies, a baby radish salad and a celeriac remoulade. There are vegetarian offerings too, such as stir-fried tempeh with broccolini.

Asked how he sees our relationship with food today, Cheong is characteristically optimistic about the ever-evolving culinary culture in this country. "I think Australian tastes are very adventurous," he says. "It's 40-odd years since I first came to this country

and Australians have always been some of the first to try different things – they'll give it a shot." So, as Cheong continues to refine and tweak The Botanical's menu, that adventurous spirit is what continues to enthuse him, driving him to experiment further.

The Botanical, 169 Domain Rd, South Yarra, Vic, (05) 9820 7888, thebotanical.com.au. Dining Room open every day, 12–3pm and 6–11pm; Wine Store open Mon–Sat, 7am–1am and Sun 7am–11pm. ☎



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