

Culture and cuisine at Chef Chan's



The stir-fried beef. Below: Chef Chan Chen Hei

STORY AND PICTURES BY ALICE CHING

ONE of Singapore's most respected Chinese chefs, Chan Chen Hei's rise to the top is a classic immigrant's story. A poor Canton-born lad, Chan left China with his parents to seek a better life in Hong Kong, overcoming numerous adversities along the way until he found his niche in life.

Chan went to work in the kitchen when he was just 15. Determined and hardworking, the young Chan started right at the bottom, performing menial tasks and putting in long gruelling hours.

His humility and determination caught the eye of a talented senior chef, who accepted him as a protégé. The man instilled in Chan the appreciation of Chinese culture and food.

Chan went on to work in several Hong Kong restaurants, before crossing the South China Sea to join Hotel Inter-Continental's F&B team in Singapore in 1982. Chan rose to fame when he impressed one of the hotel's VIP guests, a certain Mr Mohamed Al-Fayed, owner of Harrod's department store in London. So enamoured was the tycoon with Chan's culinary skills that he offered Chan a job in France. Chan turned him down.

In Singapore, Chan's reputation continued to grow, as did his legions of fans especially during his 13-year spell at the Pan Pacific Singapore's Hai Tien Lo Restaurant. Amongst those who enjoy his food are former Singapore President Wee Kim Wee, Hong Kong magnate Dickson Poon, top government officials, various celebrities and



the media fraternity.

An advocate of Chinese food and culture, Chan is ever willing to share his knowledge with young, aspiring chefs. His first cookbook, *The Art of Taste: Secrets of the Cantonese Kitchen* (Chinese edition) won the Best Chef Cookbook award at the 2003 Gourmand World Cookbook Awards.

Chan opened his own restaurant three years ago. It is called quite simply Chef Chan's Restaurant and is just across the road from Raffles Hotel.

Its imposing interior appears sombre on first impression with its jet-black walls, grey-clad tables and ornate Chinese partitions, but this is dispelled by the tall, soaring red columns upfront and the rows of traditional Chinese lanterns painted with delicate pink lotuses.

There are also countless framed newspaper clippings and photographs of Chef Chan's glorious days in the hotel industry and his personal collection of antique furniture and decorative pieces.

The cavernous main dining hall, festooned with scalloped red bunting and boasting of quaint Chinese wedding attires, is designed to cater to large group



The Hong Kong Por Lor Bun and Baked Egg Tarts.

Dig into Chef Chan's simple, mouth-watering dishes

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bookings, wedding banquets and formal dinners.

One must sample Chef Chan's simple but masterful dishes in order to understand why ordinary and VIP customers alike keep raving about his cooking despite the stiff competition.

His signature dish, Shark's Fin with Braised Superior Stock and Crab Roe (RMS\$26 per bowl), is the perfect example of his craft. The stock is rich and flavourful, and the thick strands of translucent shark fin, creamy crab roe and chunks of crabmeat are a delight.

Another popular specialty is Sautéed Beef with Snow Peas and Celery (S\$20) in Black Pepper Sauce. The cubed beef, marbled with just a little fat, is amazingly tender, and the robust peppery sauce heightens the meat's full-bodied flavour. The sliced celery, green pepper and snow peas add crunch while imparting their own delicate nuances.

Chan's famous Crispy Roast Chicken (S\$28 for half portion) took him six years to perfect.

Its painstaking preparation requires the chicken to be held over a wok with hot oil being carefully ladled over it to ensure the skin turns out crisp and crunchy. The chicken meat,

Non-halal

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though, remains succulent and juicy. The chicken is exquisite when accompanied by a dash of flavoured salt or the restaurant's own piquant homemade chilli dip.

Other outstanding specialties that should satisfy even the most discerning diners include Nanjing Salted Duck, Baked Crispy Fresh Prawns with Spices and Prawn Balls stuffed with Pate and Wine.

Dim Sum, another of Chan's forte, is available for lunch daily.

A must-try is the exceptional Hong Kong Por Lor Buns (S\$3.80), which are cotton-soft buns with sweet, crusty tops and delicate custard fillings. Baked Egg Tarts (S\$6) are another irresistible item, memorable for the tarts' impossibly thin layers of flaky pastry and an egg custard that is mildly infused with ginger juice.

On your next trip to Singapore, make sure you head over to Chef Chan's Restaurant for a memorable dining experience.



The braised shark's fin.