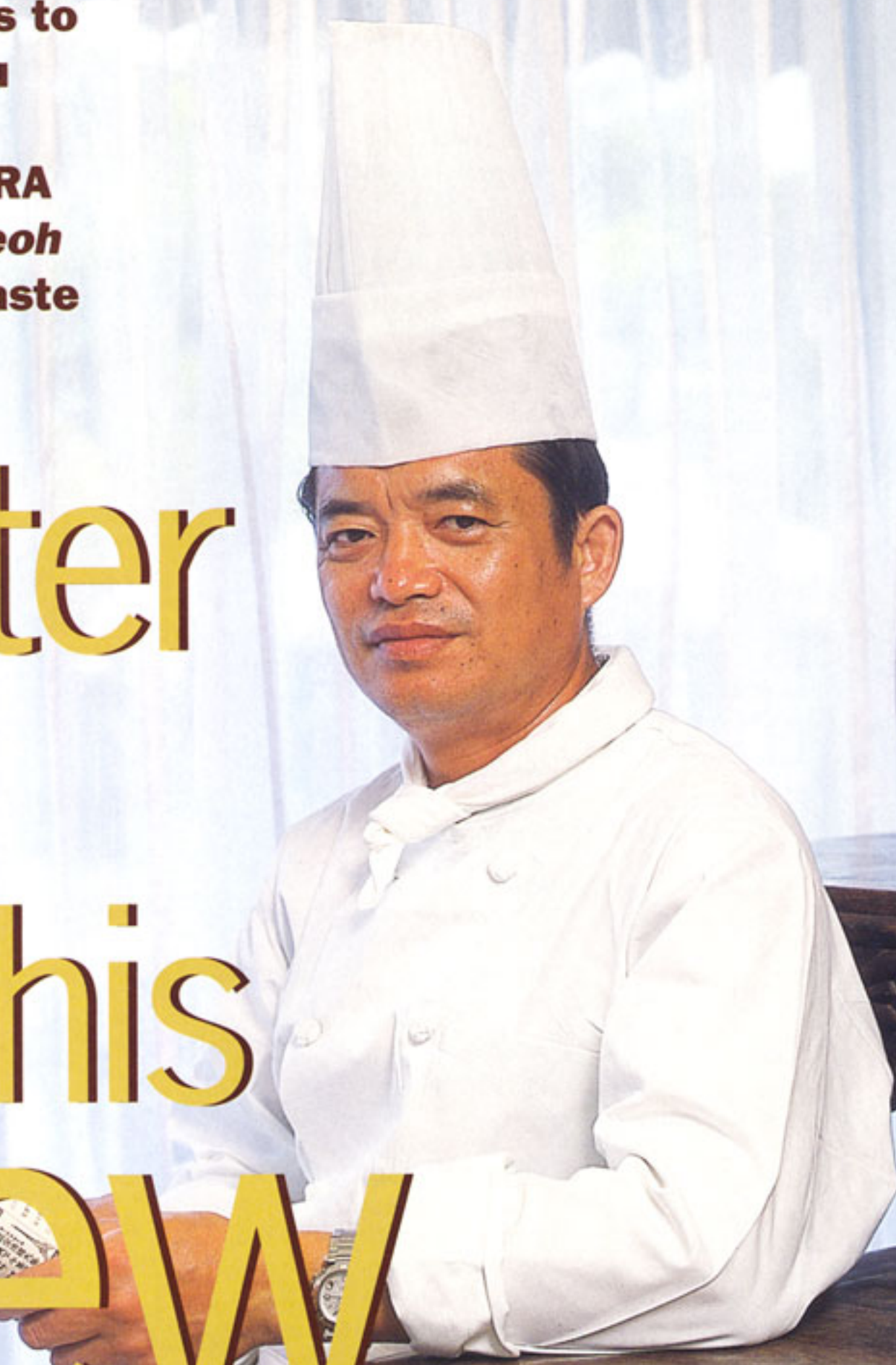


Traditional Cantonese cuisine, plus lots of expensive antiques to ogle at is what you get in Chef Chan's Restaurant at SAFRA Toa Payoh Club. Yeoh Wee Teck gets a taste of the master.

Master chef and his new home



A small discreet sign at the SAFRA Toa Payoh Club is all there is to indicate that you have found the new home of Master Chef Chan Chen Hei, the former chef of the famous Hai Tien Lo.

But as you enter Chef Chan's Restaurant, the opulent furnishings (all part of his personal collection of antiques worth about \$200,000) and courtly-mannered staff say it all — this is a place where good Cantonese food reigns.

From sharksfin to lobster to something as simple as deep-fried chicken, everything placed before the customer is planned and executed with dedication.

Master Chef Chan Chen Hei — who turned 48 in April — is a man of few words but plenty of culinary action.

He defends the traditional way of cooking vigorously.

"Look at the Peking Duck," he said. "It has a long history and it took many chefs many years of hard work to come out with the perfect Peking Duck. We should not change these centuries worth of hard work. Some things must be traditional!"

So passionate is he about food that he declares he doesn't like having customers who don't know how to appreciate the effort he puts into his food.

So it comes as no surprise that Chef Chan only has a team of five cooks he trusts (he has worked with them for 20 years), and seating

capacity at his restaurant is only 140, even though it can fit 350 people comfortably.

But despite his eloquence when it comes to food, Chef Chan is mild when it comes to everything else.

NSman: What is the hardest thing about pleasing Singapore taste buds?

Chef Chan: Singaporeans, as compared to those in Hongkong, Taiwan and China, don't have the background of traditional knowledge to draw from when they are sampling dishes. This could be due to a difference in culture and upbringing.

NSman: Name one thing you can't cook.

Chef Chan: Ancient types of dishes, because we will never know what the exact ingredients are.

NSman: Any funny tales of famous guests?

Chef Chan: It's about the Japanese Premier, Mr Koizumi, when he was dining at Hai Tien Lo. He enjoyed the food so much, he was talking about it all the way to the airport. So, I had nine dragons made out of flour for him, and air-freighted them to him thereafter.

NSman: Why do you wear the chef's hat?

Chef Chan: I only wear it on occasions. Personally, I don't like to wear it, as it gets in the way of

cooking. Once, it actually dropped into the oil and got burnt!

NSman: If you only have \$5, what would you eat?

Chef Chan: Fresh squids, blanched, and added with salt and pepper, or sweet and sour.

NSman: What was the strangest request made of you?

Chef Chan: Monkey's brains!

NSman: If you were a dish, what would it be?

Chef Chan: Golden Fried Chicken. Its colour reminds one of the passion that a chef has in his cooking and his craft.

NSman: Who do you think is the best cook in the world?

Chef Chan: Its hard to say, or pinpoint one person. Each cook has his or her own unique points.

NSman: Which of your seasonings is most important to you?

Chef Chan: Black sauce, sesame oil and wine.

NSman: What was the first dish you cooked?

Chef Chan: Lotus root with pork ribs when I was an apprentice, cooking for the staff of the restaurant. But, the whole wok (with the ribs) fell onto the floor! The staff didn't get to eat it in the end.

You can call 6250-3363 for reservations at the restaurant.

"Mr Koizumi enjoyed the food so much, he talked about it all the way to the airport."

