

TIME TESTED



Chef Chan Chen Hei

Chef Chan Chen Hei of Chef Chan's Cantonese Cuisine restaurant speaks to **Joey Phua** about his latest book project that will cross the boundaries of time.



Chef Chan's Crispy Roast Chicken

“Nine out of 10 chefs here don't know the Peking duck. They can roast one beautifully, but they have no idea how the duck grows or even what colour its feathers are,” says Chef Chan Chen Hei of Chef Chan's Cantonese Cuisine. “Singapore chefs don't know how to slaughter the ducks and this is not surprising. They have no opportunity to, as everything is flown in. It's like me eating *foie gras* — I don't know how the French farm their ducks.”

To share what he knows best from over 30 years in the culinary field, Chan's latest project is to put together a book of Chinese culinary history and culture titled *Shen Chu San Jue* (Three Supremes Of The Godly Chef). The title shares the Chinese name of his restaurant.

Many think the three supremes in his book represent Chan's signature dishes of crispy roast chicken, shark's fin with crabmeat and fried cuttlefish, but he explains the real meaning: his own culinary experience, ancient culinary expertise and Chan's antique collection.

The Herculean task will see Chan, a Hong Kong native, prowling through history books to research lost ancient recipes that originate from the era of the warring states right through to the Tang, Song, Yuen, Ming, and Qing dynasties. To put his professional skills to good use, he will cook those dishes.

“In China, scholars and experts have discussed the topic widely in theory but they can't cook. As a chef, I have the ability to do the practical part — the cooking,” says Chan.

It will not be easy, even for one who has worked in the kitchen since the age of 13. Chan explains, “A lot of these recipes feature wild, or protected animals as part of the ingredients. After SARS, China has banned the sale of a lot of these creatures.”

That said, Chan is conscious of the environmental and possible health concerns of consuming exotic animals. He says, “Some may question, how can you cook these animals? To me, it is

a process. It is a phase in Chinese culinary history. I'm not trying to encourage the consumption of these animals, but simply make people aware and educate them on what the ancients ate.”

Among the dishes he will cook is *man tan xiang*, a dish from Guangzhou similar to Fuzhou's famous *fu tiao qiang* (Buddha jumps over the wall). While Fuzhou's upmarket version contains the most expensive ingredients in Chinese cuisine, the Guangzhou version will see ingredients accessible to common folk, although it is still a dish that is far from ordinary.

“This dish first appeared in Guangzhou's side street stalls,” says Chan. “They use the six domestic animals, including chicken, duck and dog, as well as shark's lip, fish maw, scallops etc, and cook them in a stew.”

This dish, according to Chan, may still be available in Hong Kong and some parts of China. “I feel this is a very unique dish, and to be able to cook and do a picture illustration will be quite educational,” he says.

Attempting to do ancient cuisine is not totally new to Chan. He organised several promotions of ancient banquets during his days in Pan Pacific Singapore's Hai Tien Lo, where he built a solid reputation as one of Singapore's best Cantonese chefs.

His vast knowledge of Chinese cuisine comes from his annual trips to China, which he likens to the Chinese legend of pilgrims to the west. “I go to China to tour as well as to understand the culinary art. I've learnt to cook the cuisine of all regions, including Beijing, Hangzhou, Sichuan, etc,” he says.

Having completed the conceptualisation and planning stages of his book, Chan will start the fieldwork in China next year. He will go with a very clear aim. “I want people to know what Chinese food really is,” he says. “It is not only about sweet and sour pork ribs and Yangzhou fried rice. I want them to know the culture starting from the basic raw food, then on to cooked food, marinade, and different cooking methods.”