

## Awards of Excellence 2016: Overseas Development Program (ODP)

### **Participants – Chef Bryan Chia (Meat & Livestock Australia Rising Chef of the Year 2015)**

#### *Travel Experience*

Husk Restaurant is nestled in the music city of Nashville, Tennessee. The first concern that came to my mind was how different the culture in the South is. Both Petrina (my fellow co-owner) and I lived and trained in California, where the cuisine is very different from the South. Although the flavour profile is very different from what we are used to creating, we decided on heading South to learn more about the technique of smoking, barbequing, pickling and fermentation. Chef Sean Brock is said to be spending more time in Nashville where he opened the second Husk Restaurant, following the success of the original in Charleston. As he is focusing more on developing heirloom produce there, Chef Brock advised us to head down to Nashville instead of Charleston, bringing on another concern – of whether we would be learning just as much as if we went to Charleston.

It was generally a very positive experience, as we got to experience true Southern hospitality first-hand. At Husk Restaurant, everyone from the kitchen staff to those working the front-of-house were all very friendly and open to sharing their experiences. A server even came up to us and gave us a typed-out sheet of where to eat, drink and see in Nashville. In the kitchen, we got along quickly with the team, getting us involved in their day-to-day preparations. We were spilt up and paired off, buddy system-style. On the first day, I was mentored by Chef Andrew Mcleod, who is their head butcher in charge of the charcuterie program and butchering. Sous Chef Colby, whom I was attached to for the next couple of days, was responsible for smoking the meats and in turn, I got to experience the whole smoking process. Petrina, on the other hand, was assigned to various stations, where she saw how their kitchen is run. At the end of each day, we ran through and cross-checked what one the other was doing, which was very beneficial. The kitchen also adopts a healthy culture of having everyone sit down together to eat at 4pm daily, with the responsibility of preparing a family-styled sharing meal split between all the stations. The kitchen structure at Husk Restaurant is rather straightforward; most of the cooks are also Chef De Partie in charge of a station, so they do their own prep and cooking during service. There are 5 stations altogether: Cold Apps, Hot Apps, Sauté, Grill and Pastry. It was a very good experience, as we not only got to observe how things were done, but also tasted the end product.

Chef De Cuisine, Brian Baxter, arranged for us to visit some of the farms and suppliers they work with upon our request. It was an awesome experience to visit Bear Creek Farm, after days of butchering whole hogs that came to the restaurant straight from the farm. We also visited a produce farm called Bells Bend Farms, and they gave us some garlic and sweet potato to bring home to grow – which we did! Lastly, we visited The Hamery which supplies Husk with country hams, while Ham Bob gave us a detailed tour of The Hamery, which was very interesting. On our last day, we ate at Husk Restaurant and got to enjoy the service end of the dining experience and were treated with great hospitality, where everything we learnt came to fruition. On the other hand, we also observed the obstacles that many restaurants face, which is the shortage of manpower. At this moment, they are understaffed, so it was a very busy period and everyone had to adapt to multi-tasking and taking on multiple roles.

During this trip, I come to learn that creativity is limitless. From a culinary aspect, I was exposed to new techniques of sausage-making, whole animal butchery and pit smoking. It was a kitchen that depended not solely, but hugely on wood to cook their food. At Husk Restaurant, I made a Southern Boudin, which involved cooking pork shoulder sous vide over an open wood fire (which they called embering), prior to grinding it up into sausage meat. I've always been one to follow strict and old-fashioned methods of cooking, and staging at Husk Restaurant has opened my eyes to different cooking techniques and how to think outside the box. I later learnt that what I was doing was a progressive approach to cooking, with learning how to cook things twice or sometimes three times – from smoking the pig ears to pressure cooking to deep frying. The pig ear slider was definitely a life-changing experience for me. In terms of menu, each station created a dish that they would later combine and put it together as a vegetable plate. I thought that was a very good way of encouraging the team to keep thinking, stay creative and constantly learning. All four sous chefs are given the freedom to create their personal culinary projects. While we were there, we saw soya sauce fermenting, various miso being created utilising a myriad of southern grains, the making of homemade vinegars and the curing of duck breasts to make 'bonito'. This method of cooking is very similar to what our restaurant (Morsels) is doing and this just gives me encouragement me to keep it up. The biggest lesson I took away was that I could create anything I wanted, and the only way I was going to do that is by actually doing it. Don't hold any ideas back, think outside the box and stay dynamic.

It has been a real privilege to have the support of the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and the World Gourmet Summit (WGS) team in allowing me to further hone my skills as a chef abroad. Cooking is a life-long journey, and the best way to learn is through interaction with other chefs and culinary geniuses. We've not just taken away culinary skills, but life skills from the people we came across during our trip. I've learnt to push boundaries when creating dishes. Thankfully, I have Petrina by my side as two heads are always better than one. After this experience at Husk Restaurant, upon our return, I've been able to train my cooks on different butchery techniques as every country has their own cuts and I'm better able to tell our suppliers what exactly we are looking for. Also, I've learnt about a different kitchen culture there and approach to cooking which I will impart to my team. Although Morsels is not a smokehouse, getting to witness the smoking process has enhanced my knowledge and ability to combine smoke items into various plated dishes, and deepened my interest in fermentation and other pickling methods. We've always been portioning and butchering produce on our own, and now I'm looking more into more half-carcasses and full carcasses to fabricate, starting with lamb. We are currently in the process of building a pit smoker, and we are trying to import our own produce so we can control the plated dish, from start to finish.