

Awards of Excellence 2016: Overseas Development Program (ODP)

Participants – Chef Janice Wong (Academy of Pastry Arts Malaysia Pastry Chef of the Year)

Cross Exposure Experience

Creativity starts with a blank piece of paper and a pen. That was what I was reminded of, in my time in El Celler de Can Roca. Spanish gastronomy has always been at the forefront with the highly-acclaimed Chef Ferran Adria from El Bulli, Arzak and The Roca brothers. I have been drawn to Spain since I started cooking and spending months at Arzak and Oriol Balaguer has greatly shaped my approach to cuisine and pastry.

I have always been drawn to pastry chef Jordi Roca's approach to pastry as it portrays colours, energy and no boundaries. He visited my pastry shop for the first time in ION Orchard in April 2015 and we have kept in contact since, following each other's social media on our creations and activities.

I spent a day in Barcelona, hosted by Hotel Omm which hosts a one Michelin-star restaurant, Roca Moo, where the menu is designed by the Roca brothers as well as Roca Bar which serves delicious well thought-out tapas. It was my first taste of the Roca brothers' philosophy before spending time with them.

When I entered the restaurant at 9.30 am, the kitchen was in full swing, preparing for the weeks' worth of mise en place. I was greeted by the chefs and was surprised to know that their pastry chefs have heard of us and were accepting 2 internship applications from Singapore right now. It was indeed encouraging. Chef Jordi gave me a tour of the kitchen preparations, movement, service timing and operations. We took a walk across the road to the creative space where they host workshops and classes, as well as a library full of references of different genres. We had lunch together and many sharing sessions covering various topics from his childhood memories, family background and personal history.

After lunch, we spent two hours with the creative team as they ran through new dish ideas and new serving ware. I had the chance to observe and learn from this experience (albeit in Spanish), in the way that they are constantly challenging themselves without fear of failure and only look forward to success. The creative team meet fortnightly, allowing them time to reflect on the meeting they had and to create new dishes. What I have learnt from this short experience with them is how important documentation is and ever since returning to Singapore, I have made it a point with my team to start documenting all our signature dishes with reference to others in the future.

We went to another new space of the Roca brothers which is a month old. They are currently the first restaurant in the world that's making their own wine. Tasting through the collection of fermented wines in the process gave me another source of inspiration and push to continue what we were doing at 2am:lab, documenting all our fermentation processes and experiments.

Next I visited Damian Allsop, their chocolatier, the same chef who Chef Jordi trained with 20 years ago. In this production space, they produce all the ice creams and chocolates for the restaurant. He has also produced his own chocolate called Roca with Caco Berry Or Noir and this has given me yet

another push to finish a project I started last year with Cacao Barry Or Noir team when creating my own chocolate Janice Wong. I have since then e-mailed them to continue with this project.

I returned back to the kitchen and spent the afternoon with Chef Jordi, sharing our project ideas like my edible art projects and his future and current projects. This sharing time was precious and I have never met another like-minded pastry chef who has shared creative processes based on inspirations such as perfumery. Perfumery is another great love of mine and we spoke for an hour about perfume and dessert. The exchange of cultures and approach with another inspiring chef in the trade is priceless.

I went into the kitchen greatly inspired by what we spoke about and started making components of a dish influenced with bergamot, pepper and vinegar. It started with the base notes of pistachio and yogurt, middle notes of coconut and vinegar and top notes of pepper and bergamot.

I spent the night observing dinner service at different stations and it was very exciting and fulfilling watching the days' mise en place being assembled into work of art dishes. There were at least 10 starters with 50 components to prepare – let alone the other dishes from the other stations. I was simply in awe. Every small detail and component which makes the dish complete visually and texturally was treated with much care.

The next day I spent preparing my dishes and components while helping Chef Jordi with a couple of components for his new dish. It was heartening to be creating alongside a chef/artist who constantly challenges himself. One of the bakers I hosted for World Gourmet Summit (WGS) 2012/13 was Daniel Jorda, who visited us in Girona and we had a good time sharing stories and tasting his bread.

I served my dish in the evening, together with a couple of creations created for my book-in-progress 'No References'. The team loved it and what I enjoyed the most was the process of sharing and tasting. The dessert gave me inspiration to call it 'Breakfast in Nature' – a dessert I plan to feature in my next book. I had dinner in the restaurant that night and it was one of the best meals I've had in my life; it's very well-curated and thought out.

I spent the next day in their library and with Maria, who is part of their creative team. The passion and zealousness of the chefs and interns in the kitchen has given me great courage and inspiration in our line of work. The key to their success was the continuous work put in to creating new dishes, thinking of new approaches and facing new challenges, together as team, for the betterment of the restaurant. I left Spain feeling full of encouragement and spur to do better and continue pushing the limits and boundaries of pastry. I spent Sunday night sharing this with my entire team at 2am:dessertbar and we are starting to work on my third book. Lastly I would like to thank Singapore Tourism Board (STB) and Peter Knipp Holdings Ltd for this priceless opportunity to be exposed to such talent and the ability to share our culture and knowledge with the hosts.