

# Cream of the crop

Bold designs and a subtle balance of flavors are the secrets to Justin Quek's culinary success

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW  
STAFF REPORTER



With the opening of his new restaurant, Justin's Signatures, just off Taipei's Anhe Road (安和路), Singapore-born celebrity chef Justin Quek (郭文秀) has raised his colors on Taipei's culinary battlefield. Signatures is Quek's third restaurant in the capital, and as the name suggests, it is his most personal. Justin's Signatures will largely be overseen by Quek himself, and will serve the cuisine that has made him the go-to chef of Asia's financial and political elites.

The opening of Signatures follows Quek's withdrawal from a number of high-profile restaurant ventures in Shanghai's trendy Xintiandi (新天地) area, and builds on a foundation he established in Taipei with the establishment of La Petite Cuisine and Just In Bistro in June 2008 and April last year, respectively. With Signatures, which seats around 25 to 30, Quek said he aimed to create an intimate fine dining experience for guests, distinguishing it from both the banquet-oriented La Petite Cuisine and the casual informality of the Just In Bistro.

Speaking with the *Taipei Times* last week, Quek said he was attracted by the enormous potential for fine dining that Taipei offered, and also the abundance of high quality fish and seafood.

"Taipei will really open up in the next two years," he said, pointing to the influx of top international talent, including the recent opening of a restaurant by Michelin-starred chef Joel Robuchon at the Bella Vita shopping mall in Taipei.

Seafood is a favorite foodstuff for Quek, and an ideal medium for him to showcase the unique style he has developed over 25 years as a chef.

"We feature a lot of seafood here because I think that is the forte of this country," he said. "In Hong Kong [where Quek continues to work as a consultant], they can't get seafood like this. They have to import, and the price is up to four times as high ... When you come to this restaurant, you can find three to four different expressions of Pacific Ocean seafood [on the menu] ... prepared in different ways."

#### LEARNING FROM THE MASTERS

Traveling the world as a ship's steward as a young man, Quek realized early on that his real passion was food. He accepted a large pay cut to secure a position at Fourchettes, the French restaurant at Singapore's Oriental Hotel. This experience inspired him to invest his entire life savings in a yearlong trip to France, where with the help of recommendations, stubbornness and his intense passion for all things related to food (a willingness to work 16-hour days for no pay also helped), he obtained positions at some of the top restaurants in France.

Quek was certainly not the only Asian lad working his way through the restaurants of Europe, but he is one of very few who made it to the top. Quek estimates that there are no more than 20 or 30 Chinese working at the top rank of French-based cuisine.

(Quek noted Japan as an exception to the absence of Asians in this field.) Quek attributes his success in rising to his present eminence as a result of his willingness to invest in developing his palate.

"The problem with many Asian chefs is that although they might be working in a French restaurant, when they get off work, what do they eat? They eat a lunch box (便當), they eat McDonald's. They eat cheap things. They don't invest in their palate. They don't invest in what they see," Quek said, adding with a laugh that he has probably spent more money on eating than he has on anything else in his life.

He takes inspiration from everything around him, traveling and eating both in Europe and Asia. "When I look at my food from two years ago and what I am doing now ... it's completely different," he said. "I am constantly reinventing myself."

Although Quek is firmly tapped

into the French culinary tradition, he sees himself as an artist who, having fully internalized the tradition of the grand masters after years of practice, is now free to express himself as a master in his own right. In Quek's case, this means drawing on his knowledge and experience of Asia and the Asian market. He regards his cooking as spontaneous, and believes that the French culinary training he acquired has given him the tools to make use of top-quality local ingredients.

Speaking about the food at La Petite Cuisine, Quek said that it "isn't what traditionalists would consider French. What we do serve is Taiwanese produce prepared using French techniques."

#### NEW FLAVORS

For Quek, the techniques and the traditions he learned in French kitchens provide the structure for his food, and for the rest, he searches the world for the best products that he can find to produce culinary surprises. His command of tradition made him chef to two French ambassadors in Singapore, and his ability to interpret this tradition in an Asian context subsequently saw him become him the chef of choice for former Singapore prime minister Lee Kuan-yew (李光耀).

Quek says he is like a musician who can also compose his own score, and that he is free to riff off his Asian background with greater freedom.

"Fusion is not a popular word to use, but in fact most people are doing fusion food. I would call it food with no frontiers. Even in France, of course they do not want to use the word [fusion], but I have been traveling and eating extensively there. Some [Michelin] two-star or three-star chefs might use lemongrass, or curry leaves ... Consumers nowadays, they look for new flavors ... You go to Europe now, at a top restaurant, you will see raw food, you will see pasta in a French restaurant. Why? The consumer likes this kind of food. It is a la mode, it is in fashion," Quek said, emphasizing that the most important skill of a great chef is being able to find the correct balance of flavors to create a successful dish. Once again, it comes down to palate.

While Quek, like any chef working at this level, uses his share of luxury ingredients such as truffles and foie gras, his inspiration can come from the humblest places. While he delighted in describing in his book *Justin Quek: Passion and Inspiration*, published in 2006, his foie gras soup dumplings (湯包) with a truffle jus that he created for his Shanghai venture, he directly credits a Singapore hawk for inspiring his acclaimed crab beehoon (米粉). In Taiwan, he likes nothing better than a well-prepared bowl of peddler's noodles (擔仔麵), another simple dish that he believes expresses fundamentals of balance and flavor.

As a sample of his style, I tried his signature tagliatelle with sauteed langoustine in aromatic oil. The pasta gleamed in a light coating of the fragrant seafood-flavored oil and was cooked to a texture that had the faintest hint of the Orient, with distant echoes of Cantonese-style *taomian* (撈麵). While there was no mistaking its origins in Western culinary practice, it managed to be both exotic and light at the same time. It was a remarkable balancing act that simply refused to admit the idea of national or cultural boundaries — it was simply an expression of the chef's character.

Having risen from a supplicant to the great temples of gastronomy in France 25 years ago, Quek now finds that the tide has changed and many European chefs are eager to gain work experience in Asia. As a French-trained chef of Chinese background, Quek finds himself on the cusp of a culinary tide that is flowing eastward with growing force.

#### Justin's Signatures

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OPEN: Noon to 3pm and 6pm and 10pm (last setting). Reservations recommended

ON THE NET: www.justinquek.com



Justin's Signatures focuses on providing an intimate and refined dining experience. PHOTOS COURTESY OF JUSTIN QUEK

