

OPEN DOOR

Chinois by Susur Lee



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The buzz: The famed ponytailed chef from Toronto is back and this time, he's not just working as a consultant, he's got his name on the door as well.

The décor: Definitely classier than the hotel it's situated in, Chinois by Susur Lee is what you get when you take equal parts neo-Asian glam and zen aesthetics, shake the two together and stir. Expect clean lines and tasteful scarlet hues tempered with wood and stone elements.

The food: Haute modern Asian. From the moment you open the coffee table menu, you know that eating here is not just about filling your stomach. Lee describes his cooking as avant garde, which in plain English means 1) Dishes come with names that read like poetry (case in point; the Chinois duet: Barbeque eel and taro squares glazed with sweet soya, \$10 for four pieces; fresh crab meat curry salad with avocado, pears and mango served in a coconut basket, \$16); 2) Traditional Asian recipes get a stylish makeover (the roast marinated baby lamb loin served with a piquant Sichuan eggplant stew and the cutest little Hainanese chicken rice balls, \$18, is succulent, nuanced and an absolute must try); 3) You get Euro-Asian entrees like the braised assorted wild mushrooms en papillote served with morel mushrooms and a soy milk consommé (\$18 per person); and 4) Every dish looks like a work of art.

The drinks: There are various kinds of Chinese tea and also more than 150 wines.

Why you'll be back: Because given the quality of the cooking and despite having a celebrity chef fronting it, Chinois is not as insanely expensive as it could be. *Lisa-Ann Lee*

#02-142/143 Hotel Michael, Resorts World Sentosa, 26 Sentosa Gateway, 6884-7888.

Chinese-Canadian chef Susur Lee was in town recently to promote a special set menu at his restaurant in Resorts World Sentosa. We got him to dispense career advice and tell us what pisses him off.

How do you gauge a chef's skills?

If I'm hiring someone, I'll say, "Okay, cut me something." I can tell how good that person is from their brunoise (fine dice) or julienne.

What's the most difficult thing to master in Chinese cooking?

Ingredients and understanding what should be hitting the wok first. You need to know how to judge the heat and give the wok "smell." And now, very important in modern Asian cooking, making sure that you don't use too much oil.

A lot of people dream of opening their own restaurant because they love to cook. What are the realities of running your own place?

A lot of people are like, "Oh, I can make great Hainanese chicken rice." OK, but can you do it a thousand times from six o'clock to a certain time? When you're in the kitchen, you need to have good organizational skills, taste and timing. You need to use all your senses, focus, and be consistently good. A lot of people underestimate this. The restaurant business is really one of the hardest professions out there.

Have you ever thrown anyone out of your restaurant?

Absolutely—when people get stupid. I tell them, "You don't have to pay, just get the f@#k out of here." Sometimes you get to the point where it's not about the money, but being respectful. If someone feels a dish is too oily or salty, no problem; we can change it. But sometimes, you get really ridiculous customers. Like, I had this guy recently in my restaurant in Toronto. He was having a green curry and he said, "I've lived in Chiang Mai and Bangkok and green curry does not have coriander." I just wanted to slap him. And he was going on and on to someone. So I said, "Listen, dinner is on the house but you have to leave now."

Please don't do this ...

Chefs (aspiring or otherwise) and restaurateurs, take note.

1. Dull knives drive me crazy. That's one thing I tell my staff: It doesn't matter if you're an apprentice or if you're using a small knife; keep it sharp. There's no way you can cut something nicely if the knife is dull.
2. Cold food. If I go to a Chinese restaurant, the most annoying thing is if the food (especially soup because I'm from Hong Kong) is not too hot.
3. When you hear someone sneezing in the kitchen or in the hallway, and you don't know if your food is coming.
4. When a server doesn't take you seriously. Sometimes when you go to a Chinese restaurant, and you tell the server, "Can you make sure that the food isn't too oily" and the waiter doesn't think your request is important; it really annoys me. Another time, I went to a three-star Michelin restaurant in Europe. The waiter was describing the food and I could tell that he wasn't being serious about it as he probably thought I was an Asian tourist. So I started asking all these questions and then he started behaving more professionally. *Lisa-Ann Lee*

TRICKS
OF THE
TRADE
with Chef
Susur Lee

