

FoodPicks

Tan Hsueh Yun Life Editor recommends



EXPERIMENTAL FARE

There is no shortage of ambition among people venturing into the ultra competitive food and beverage industry in Singapore. But those who do not think things through quickly crash and burn.

In the midst of all this comes Magic Square in Portsdown Road, from the people behind The Naked Finn in Gillman Barracks. The idea behind restaurateur Tan Ken Loon's year-long pop-up is one that sounds brave or foolish, depending on how you look at it. He wants to groom a new generation of Singaporean chefs, by giving them the space to create, learn, fail and to pick themselves up again. Talent alone is not enough, the chefs have to be hard workers too.

In the Magic Square then are Desmond Shen, 25; Marcus Leow, 26; and Abel Su, 29. Each chef presents his menu for one month, with the other two supporting him in the kitchen and the cycle begins anew.

Shen's menu is showcased in the opening month and it is intriguing and ingenious, with some real gems. The chef has worked at two-Michelin-starred Odette at National Gallery Singapore, Whitegrass at Chijmes and Blackwattle in Amoy Street.

The meal starts on a high note with a bouquet of baby herbs, grown in the restaurant, to be dipped into a caramel



tempered by a tart juice made from some of the more sour herbs. Aromatic and complex, this amuse (above) sets the stage for the rest of the meal.

Other highlights include petai miso, petai and wingbean salad in a tangy dressing, to be spooned on rice crackers studded with kaffir lime leaves. That miso has such depth of flavour and tastes very different from the base ingredient petai, otherwise known as stink beans. Another course of charred alliums, Shaoxing wine and bottarga butter sauce with black vinegar caramel is a knockout, showing that simple ingredients can add up to something glorious.

I also like a course of confit pumpkin glazed with turmeric, with a

COFFEE HAVEN

If you were among the fervent fans who used to swarm Liberty Coffee, back when it was in Rangoon Road and opened only sometimes, good news. The home-grown coffee roaster has opened a cafe bar in Jalan Besar.

The coffee is stellar, but of course. Not on the menu, but a must-order, is the Gooley (\$6), a deliberately over-extracted shot of espresso floating on cold milk. Take a sip immediately to get a blast from the coffee, then set the glass down and swirl it, so the shot mixes in with the milk. Heaven in a glass. The Nitro Brew (\$6) kept me perky one long work day.

Also on offer are two cocktails (\$16 each), both made with slow-brewed coffee. The coffee is not front and centre in either drink, but you know it is there, humming in the background. The Slow Fashioned is made with bourbon, sherry and bitters, while the Libertine has gin, Campari, Cointreau and lemon.

Along with the drinks, there is food. Sloppy Jo Fries (\$9) is something I can pick on all afternoon because I love the gutsy beef Bolognese piled on top of fries. I say all afternoon because these Stealth Fries, coated with potato starch, stay crisp a lot longer.

Hot Butt Sub (\$13) is inspired by a Cubano sandwich owners Terence Tay and Pauline Tan had in Seattle. It has a distinct banh mi vibe, too. Strips of pulled pork are piled into a soft bun and topped with jalapeno aioli, caramelised onions, fresh coriander leaves and pickled carrot and cucumber. This Cuban-Vietnamese hybrid is a winner in my book.

Chickichanga (\$13, left) is expertly fried and greaseless. Quite a feat, since the chicken, cooked in adobo sauce and wrapped like a burrito in a tortilla, is substantial.

Ms Tan used to offer a cake of some sort at the old Liberty. Her gula melaka and pandan cake set off a wave of copycats.

If only she would bake something, anything, now.

**WHERE:** Liberty Coffee Bar, 387 Jalan Besar  
**MRT:** Jalan Besar **OPEN:** 10am to 6pm (Tuesdays to Fridays), 10am to 8pm (Saturdays), closed on Sundays and Mondays **TEL:** 6392-2903 **INFO:** www.libertycoffee.sg or www.facebook.com/libertycoffee

serunding-like coconut mixture on top, on a pool of burnt coconut cream and galangal oil. The flavours are familiar, yet different. Most importantly, the dish works.

Already, there have been casualties. A course of steamed threadfin in warm coconut broth, topped with chopped young coconut flesh and shaved ginger flower, has been jettisoned because not enough diners like it. I did, unfortunately, love it. It takes courage to put such a simple dish on the menu and the idea of serving fish in coconut water is a great one, and the ginger flower is an inspired addition.

Diners eat at a communal table with 18 seats and there are two seatings a night. It is best not to be late, so you can enjoy the nine-course meal without rushing.

Is the meal perfect? No, but the willingness of the chef to take constructive criticism bodes well for his future. Is the dinner worth its \$78++ price tag? Yes. I have paid more for mediocre meals.

Now, what will the two other chefs come up with? I cannot wait to find out.

**WHERE:** Magic Square, 5B Portsdown Road **MRT:** Kent Ridge **OPEN:** 6 to 8pm, 8.15 to 10.15pm (Tuesdays to Saturdays), closed on Sundays and Mondays **TEL:** 8181-0102 **INFO:** www.facebook.com/magicsquare.sg/

PHOTOS:  
LIBERTY  
COFFEE BAR,  
MAGIC SQUARE  
TAN HSUEH  
YUN



SINFUL GREENS

You know right away you have walked into a cafe run by the people behind Strangers' Reunion when you look at the upholstery on the chairs. The fabrics are gorgeous, natch, a little retro and very covetable.

The group's newest cafe, Wakey Wakey at the Concourse Skyline, has an added draw – it is not crazy crowded at the moment. How long this will last, I don't know, so make tracks there quickly.

I love the chilled bottled drinks and Matcha (\$7) is a must. It gets bonus points for not being too sweet. Sea Salt Chocolate (\$7) is another good one and, on a hot day, both are very soothing.

On my first visit, there was a Big Boys section of substantial main courses, with the tantalising "Coming Soon" tag, but that has been replaced by a rather more prosaic list of Grain Bowls, which interests me not at all. However, I find many things to love in the Green Things section, dishes I'd go back for.

Chief among them is Zucchini (\$13.90, above), comprising ribbons of the squash artfully arranged in a ring, tossed with a very lemony pesto and topped with toasted pine nuts and grated Grana Padano cheese. It is the perfect food for hot weather. Cauliflower (\$12.50) is just as good. Fried florets seasoned with Vadouvan, the French version of masala, sit on lemon puree and fish sauce caramel. They are so easy to pop and the flavours are strong and true.

For something a little more indulgent, order Bergedil (\$13.90), deep fried potato balls on Romesco sauce, yoghurt, pine nuts and fried curry leaves. I have to stop myself from finishing the whole plate.

If vegetables do not appeal, order the Grilled Cheese (\$9.50). The brioche comes lovely and golden, and the sandwich is filled with mozzarella, cheddar, emmental and parmesan cheeses. Simple but done well.

**WHERE:** Wakey Wakey, 01-04/05 Concourse Skyline, 302 Beach Road **MRT:** Rochor **OPEN:** 9am to 6pm daily **TEL:** 6291-0227 **INFO:** www.facebook.com/WakeySG/



DUCK WORTH QUEUEING FOR

Tucked away in Upper Thomson Road is the smallest Sembawang Hill Food Centre. I usually go there for bak chor mee and curry puffs and have found yet another reason to head there: braised duck rice.

One recent Sunday morning, I walked past Seng Huat Duck Rice and the warm, sweet smell of cinnamon and star anise stopped me in my tracks. I had pretty much written off the stall because there was a queue and I was hungry.

Something told me to get in line and I have no regrets.

My Duck Rice Set (\$4.50, above) comprised a sizeable platter of chopped up braised duck, to which I added an egg for 60 cents and duck liver for 70 cents.

I find the meat chopped too thin, but there is no mistaking the skill that went into making it taste good. Duck leg meat, which can be chewy, was silky. The lightly spicy soya sauce braising liquid, which so captivated me, had permeated the meat thoroughly. Aromatic coriander leaves on top add a note of freshness, never to be underestimated when eating a rather heavy dish in hot weather.

What surprised me even more was the bowl of deep, dark soup. With bak chor mee and other similar dishes, the soup tends to be throwaway. Some might even dismiss it as just water and MSG boiled together.

Seng Huat's is like a thinner version of its braising sauce, aromatic and full of oomph.

Even though it was sweltering, I finished every drop.

**WHERE:** Seng Huat Duck Rice, 01-07 Sembawang Hill Food Centre, 590 Upper Thomson Road **MRT:** Yio Chu Kang **OPEN:** 8.30am to 12.30pm (Wednesdays to Sundays), closed on Mondays and Tuesdays

FOOD

PROMOTIONS

Spectacle Of Meats At Cafe Swiss

Cafe Swiss, Swissotel The Stamford's all-day dining buffet restaurant, is offering a Hearty Meats Buffet Dinner. Highlights include live stations serving chicken quesadilla, slow-cooked beef carnitas and grilled meats such as lamb chop, filet mignon, striploin, veal schnitzel, chicken piccata, sausages and Ras El hanout marinated prime rib eye and chinese roasts. Other items include Swiss Cheese Fondue, seafood selection of Chilean black mussels, tiger prawns, italian venus clams, japanese scallops, poached slipper lobsters and salmon sashimi.

**WHERE:** Level 2 Swissotel The Stamford, 2 Stamford Road **MRT:** City Hall **WHEN:** Weekdays till May 26, 6.30 - 10pm **PRICE:** Adult \$72++ (beer/wine add-ons available), child \$36++ **TEL:** 6431-6156 **INFO:** E-mail dining.singapore@swissotel.com

Peranakan Festival At Feast@East

Grand Mercure Singapore Roxy is bringing back its signature Peranakan Food Festival at Feast@East Buffet Restaurant with a spread of Peranakan cuisine along with new surprises created by head chef Lester Wang and guest chef Madam Jane, who is Peranakan. Diners can check out booths in the restaurant displaying items such as clothes and food closely related to Peranakan heritage.

**WHERE:** Level 3 Grand Mercure Singapore Roxy, 50 East Coast Road **MRT:** Eunos/Dakota **WHEN/PRICE:** Till June 3; lunch (noon - 2.30pm) daily except public holidays' eve): \$46++, pioneers/seniors: \$31/\$35 nett; dinner (6 - 9.30pm): \$50++ - \$52++, pioneers/seniors: \$33 - \$34/\$37 -

\$38 nett; high tea (3 - 5pm Saturdays): \$28++; children (up to 12 years) half price for all meals **TEL:** 6340-5665 **INFO:** E-mail H3610-FB3@accor.com

Sear Goes Nordic

Sear Steakhouse has unveiled a seasonal dinner menu showcasing Nordic cuisine made with high-quality fresh ingredients. The Nordic Kitchen menu is available in two, four or six courses.

**WHERE:** Level 45 Singapore Land Tower, 50 Raffles Place **MRT:** Raffles Place **WHEN:** Saturdays (till June 30), 6 - 10pm **PRICE:** Price: \$58++ - \$108++, add \$32++ - \$58++ for wine-pairing **TEL:** 6221-9555 **INFO:** E-mail hello@50rp.com.sg

New Four-Course Menu At The Ottomani

Middle Eastern supper club The Ottomani has launched a new four-course dining menu featuring innovative dishes curated by chef Beau Churchill, who uses charcoal grills and wood fire roasting.

Highlights include Boston Lobster with burnt oranges, cashew and dill, and lamb shoulder with spiced molasses and sumac gremolata. **WHERE:** 48 Peck Seah Street **MRT:** Tanjong Pagar **WHEN:** Mon - Sat from 6.30pm **PRICE:** \$98++ (Flame) - \$108++ (Pit Roasted) a person, wine-pairing from \$68++ **TEL:** 9231-9316 **INFO:** E-mail info@theottomani.com

RAMADAN

Ifar Gatherings At The Botanic Gardens

The Halia's Communal Feast, suitable for groups of up to four people (a la carte add-ons are available for larger groups), features 11 dishes such as Blackmore wagyu masala beef, pan-fried barramundi with beetroot

salsa, pickled raisins & macadamia nuts and bluefin tuna tartare. at the villa, the buffet spread comprises 20 dishes such as chilli crab spaghetti, Australian grain-fed beef ribeye, Cajun spiced chicken leg, baked seabass and red fruit mascarpone cream tartlet or raspberry opera. **WHERE:** Ginger Garden (enter via Tyersall Avenue), Singapore Botanic Gardens, 1 Cluny Road **MRT:** Botanic Gardens **WHEN/PRICE:** Till June 14 (7 - 10pm); Halia \$220++ (for four), The Villa (Fridays - Sundays only) adult \$50++, child (five - 10 years old) \$20++ **TEL:** 8444-1148 **INFO:** thehalia.com

Hilton Rooftop Pop-Up

Hilton Singapore has brought back its Iftar buffet pop-up restaurant at a newly renovated event space on the rooftop, with more than 90 dishes from crowd favourites to new speciality dishes. Six live stations will serve items such as roasted whole baby lamb, roasted beef sirloin, udang balado, ayam masak merah, ikan masak asam pedas, Singapore laksa, mixed fruit rojak and Ramly burger. **WHERE:** Level 24 (rooftop) Hilton Singapore, 581 Orchard Road **MRT:** Orchard **WHEN:** Till June 14, 6.30 - 10.30pm **PRICE:** Adult \$68++ - \$78++, child (five - 12 years old) \$34++ - \$39++ (free for those below five); 25 per cent off for six or more diners **TEL:** 6737-2233 **INFO:** E-mail sinhif&b@hilton.com

Mediterranean & Asian BBQ Favourites At Carousel

The offerings at Royal Plaza on Scotts' Carousel include Applewood Smoked BBQ beef ribs, Chinese Grilled Stingray with sambal and chincalok, Thai BBQ Stuffed Squid with spicy dipping sauce, Traditional Malay Boneless Ayam Percik (spiced chicken) marinated in turmeric and coriander. There will also be a special Turkish spread of appetisers and desserts such as makarna salatasi

(macaroni salad), patikan salatasi (eggplant with yoghurt), sutlac (rice pudding) and baklava (pistachio puff). **WHERE:** Level 1 Royal Plaza on Scotts, 25 Scotts Road **MRT:** Orchard **WHEN:** Till June 14, 6.30 - 9.30pm **PRICE:** Adult \$78++ - \$83++, child \$46++ - \$49++ **TEL:** 6589-7799 **INFO:** E-mail carousel@royalplaza.com.sg

FATHER'S DAY

Lavish Buffet Or Tapas At Swissotel Merchant Court

Ellenborough Market Cafe's lunch and dinner buffets will feature Peranakan, local and international favourites, and come with a complimentary glass of Tiger Beer or Guinness Stout for fathers. For a smaller meal, Crossroads Bar offers an assortment of tapas such as crispy soft shell chilli crab, pan-fried pork and shrimp gyoza, chicken karaage and deep-fried shrimp wanton. **WHERE:** Swissotel Merchant Court Singapore, 20 Merchant Road **MRT:** Clarke Quay **WHEN/PRICE:** June 16 - 17; Ellenborough Market Cafe: lunch noon - 2.30pm (adult \$52++, child \$26++), dinner 6.30 - 10pm (adult \$68++, child \$34++); Crossroads Bar: 6 - 9.30pm (\$48++ - \$68++ a person) **TEL:** 6239-1847/1848 **INFO:** E-mail dining.merchantcourt@swissotel.com

Flavours Of South-east Asia At River Wok

Enjoy traditional favourites and re-interpretations of well-known dishes from Laos, Vietnam, Thailand and Indonesia, along with a complimentary glass of prosecco. On the menu are fresh oysters, poached prawns, whelk and dishes such as duck mango salad, green curry chicken, salted baked barramundi, udang sambal java, pad thai and mango sticky rice. **WHERE:** 01-12 The Pier, 80 Mohamed Sultan Road **MRT:** Fort Canning

**WHEN:** June 17, noon - 3pm, 6 - 10pm **PRICE:** \$68++ a person **TEL:** 6732-1126 **INFO:** facebook.com/RiverWok

DRAGON BOAT FESTIVAL

From Signatures To Classic Treats From Man Fu Yuan

Man Fu Yuan is offering four varieties of handcrafted bamboo leaf-wrapped dumplings that are available for takeaway and dine-in. The barbecued smoked char siu rice dumpling (300g, \$12.80 nett) contains slices of the restaurant's new signature barbecued Kagoshima pork belly char siu. The Hokkien-style dumpling (200g, \$9) comes with five-spice seasoned pork belly, chestnuts and salted egg yolk. Perennial favourites, the signature X.O. sauce Nyonya rice dumpling (200g, \$10.80) and the red bean lye rice version (200g, \$8), are also available.

**WHERE:** InterContinental Singapore, 80 Middle Road **MRT:** Bugis **WHEN:** Till June 18; lunch: weekdays noon - 3pm, weekends and public holidays 11.30am - 1.15pm/1.30 - 3.15pm; dinner: 6.30 - 10.30pm daily **PRICE:** \$8.30 - \$10.80 nett (takeaway); 20 per cent discount for orders by May 31 **TEL:** 6825-1062 **INFO:** E-mail sinhbmanfu@ihg.com

WINE/COGNAC/WHISKY EVENTS

Wine Carnival At Tanjong Pagar Centre

This carnival features wine from 12 wineries for tasting, and activities include masterclasses, live performances by home-grown artists and a magic show. There is a blind wine-tasting competition – where the labels on the wine bottles will be covered and participants stand to win an \$800 cash prize. Other prizes include a Vintec Wine Fridge and a Riedel Crystal Decanter.

**WHERE:** Urban Park, Level 1 Tanjong Pagar Centre, 1 Wallich Street **MRT:** Tanjong Pagar **WHEN:** Tomorrow - Sun, 2 - 10pm **PRICE:** \$98 a person (20 per cent off for Mastercard holders), includes goodie bag worth \$300 **INFO:** Register at sistic.com.sg/events/cwine0518 (minimum age 18 years)

Blackwattle Cognac Pairing Dinner

Blackwattle is collaborating with Frapin Cognac for a five-course cognac-pairing dinner with official cognac representative Patrice Piveteau and head chef Joeri Timmermans. The menu includes Blackwattle's signature seasonal items such as Raw Kingfish (paired with Frapin VSOP), Hokkaido scallops (Frapin V.I.P XO), David Blackmore wagyu (Frapin Fontpinot) and Jackfruit custard (Frapin Cigar blend). **WHERE:** 97 Amoy Street **MRT:** Telok Ayer **WHEN:** Tue, 6 - 9pm **PRICE:** \$150++ a person **TEL:** 6224-2232 **INFO:** E-mail info@blackwattle.com.sg

Hua Ting-Writing Club Whisky Dinner

Hua Ting Restaurant and The Writing Club are hosting a Whisky Pairing Dinner featuring Cantonese delicacies and rare whiskies. Highlights of the six-course menu by masterchef Lap Fai include crispy suckling pig, glutinous rice and wild mushrooms with Glenmorangie 10 Year Old, pan-seared japanese wagyu beef and rock salt with Glendronach 12 Year Old, and braised superior shark's fin, crab claw and superior duck sauce with Knockando 12 Years Old.

**WHERE:** Chairman's Room, Hua Ting Restaurant, Level 2 Orchard Hotel Singapore, 442 Orchard Road **MRT:** Orchard **WHEN:** May 25, 7pm **PRICE:** \$318++ a person **TEL:** 6739-6666 **INFO:** E-mail huating.ohs@millenniumhotels.com