

[首语]

# TRENDS

# N

# CHOICES

DAMN YOU MEGGS!

FOOD + DRINK + HOSPITALITY

Los Mochos \$200

DURING THE DAYS WHEN I WAS STILL A CHEF, THE AUDITORS FOR THE HOTEL WHERE I WORKED IN WENT TO THE GENERAL MANAGER'S OFFICE, AND ASKED, "WHY DOES THE CHEF ORDER A \$22 RACK OF LAMB, WHEN THEY CAN BUY IT FROM ELSEWHERE FOR \$11?" MY ANSWER TO THE GENERAL MANAGER WAS, "WELL, IF YOU WANT THE AUDITOR TO COOK, THAT'S FINE WITH ME." TODAY, I'D LIKE TO EXAMINE THE ISSUE OF LUXURY INGREDIENTS - WOULD YOU RATHER HAVE A 30 PERCENT FOOD COST ON A \$10 SALES PRICE, OR A 40 PERCENT FOOD COST ON A \$20 SALES PRICE?

STOP

it

Los Mochos \$200

SPRAY



I have here with me Andrew Tjioe, managing director of TungLok Group, Michael Ma, founder of IndoChine, Chef Jonathan Wright of Swissôtel The Stamford and Chef Damien Le Bihan of Deliciae Group. Tjioe starts first: "I would prefer to sell one bottle of Pétrus, than ten bottles of table red. If I can sell one portion of bird's nest, that would be better than ten portions of tofu." For Ma, it is a balancing act. "We'd taste ten types of wagyu beef, or ten lobsters, and we'll go for the top three or four, bearing in mind the price-quality relationship. I'm not going to spend ridiculous money for the best oysters. Even for our simple house pour, we do take the time to taste them, then find the best value for money. We are buying consistency, freshness, and reliability." Chef Wright sees the entire operation as a whole. "In a restaurant, you have food revenue, and beverage revenue. You've got very high end, and you've got very low end, so you have to make the volume work for you. It has to do with course design – when you look at the recipe, does it have to be on the plate. I try to stay true to myself. If I had to use the best quality in one place, why not use lesser cuts, or by-products of certain ingredients, elsewhere in a different application? A lot of it comes down to perception. And it is true, the guest knows, when they taste the beef, or the tomato, they know what they're expecting. So the onus has to come from us, to play in to where their expectations are."

Would you rather have a 30 percent food cost on a S\$10 sales price, or a 40 percent food cost on a S\$20 sales price?  
>Peter A Knipp

"It's like brand integrity. You can cheapen yourself to a certain extent. But at the end of the day, your staff is still working the same amount of hours, you are still using the same amount of gas. In a lot of our outlets, we offer guests a choice. So they know that one dish might use a Colorado lamb, and another might use New Zealand lamb, which is great, because it gives your guests a choice. If your price is reasonable, your guests would understand. You are giving them the choice, letting them make the differentiation between 'quality' and 'expensive.'"

Where Chef Wright comes from (Seattle), people understand the importance of ingredients. It's almost like they've been educated, so if you go to a farmer's market, it's full of people, but if you go to a superstore, it's empty. Here, the cost of shipping drives prices up. However, Chef Le Bihan disagrees that top quality ingredients are difficult to come by in Singapore. "I used to work in Las Vegas, and I find that the fish we get here in Singapore are fresher than what we get in Las Vegas. Today's diners want to know where the food comes from, how the food is grown and taken care of, and they are able to distinguish between the different flavours on the plates. It is not a question of how much we pay for our ingredients, it is more a question of what kind of guests you are targeting."

I was brought up on a farm with a fifth-generation farming family. We grew all our own vegetables, raised sheep, chicken, ducks, goats, and pigs. To harvest quality, it has to be a passion. >Jonathan Wright



Tjioe also thinks that whether we use a luxury ingredient depends on the kind of restaurant you are talking about. "Unlike ultra-fine dining, for middle-upper and casual eateries, you don't want to use the very top quality ingredients, because people are not going to pay that kind of price. So, on ingredients, Singapore is pretty blessed – though we don't have anything, yet we have everything. Even if certain products are not available temporarily, given time, it can still be done, your importers, your suppliers, will be able to bring them in. In Singapore, so far, I can get almost everything I need. For those items which I cannot get, I can easily find substitutes, which are as good, if not better."

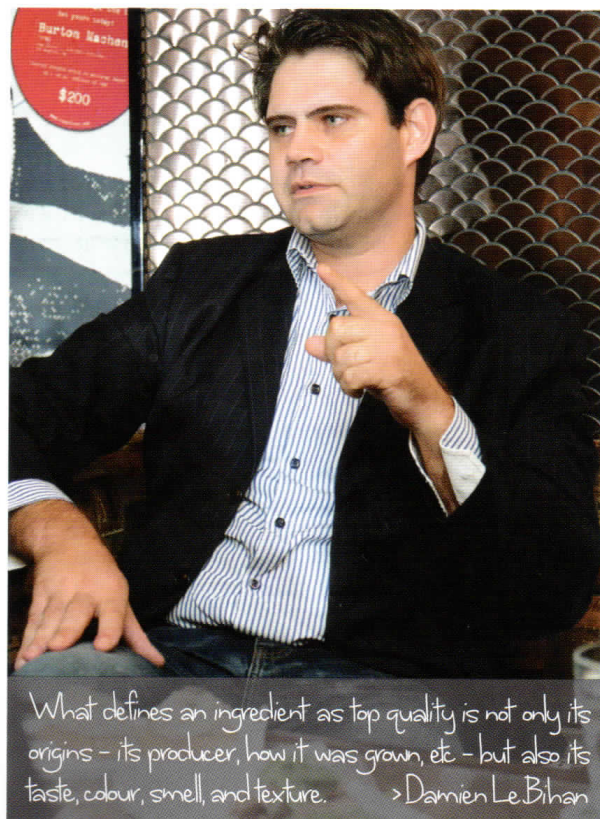
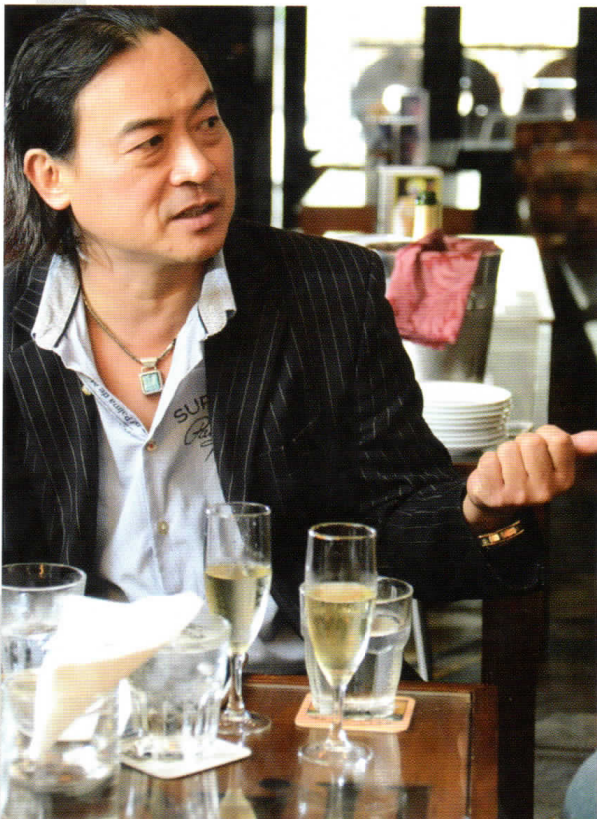
### Politically Correct Dining

Ma raises a point on sustainability: "We don't do shark's fin soup, blue fin tuna, yellow fin tuna, and Russian caviar. I'm glad that Russia clammed down on the availability of the caviar." Russian caviar comes from the sturgeon, the descendants of a pre-historic animal, which has been fished to the point of extinction. That's why we promote farmed products, and controlled environment products. "At two metres, a blue fin tuna reaches its sexual maturity. It could go up to four metres. But today they've been so overfished, they don't even get to two metres anymore."

Take the hydroponic tomato. You can't taste the vegetables we have here in Asia. At my friend's farm in Ukraine, I tasted a tomato, and for the first time, I could taste the mineral, from the ground. >Michael Ma



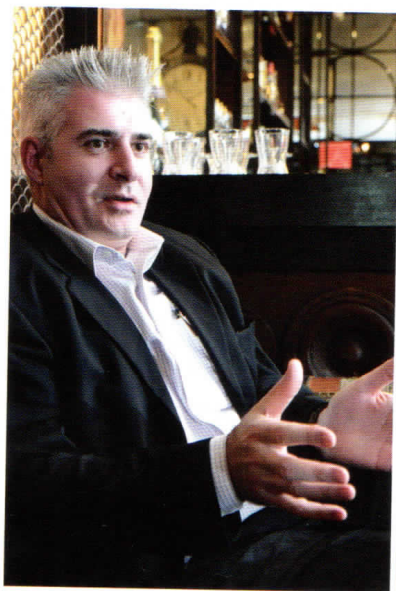
Product quality and safety here is well taken care of by Agri-food & Veterinary Authority (AVA). When Fukushima crisis happened, we couldn't get certain products from Japan, but a few months later, when AVA said, 'Okay, it is safe to consume', we had the items back almost immediately. > Andrew Tjioe



What defines an ingredient as top quality is not only its origins – its producer, how it was grown, etc – but also its taste, colour, smell, and texture. >Damien Le Bihan

What we are harvesting is a juvenile. And in due course, they're all going to be wiped out. Shark's fins, as well, is basically wiped out; soon it'll be like the rhino horns and elephant tusks. I'm an expert at the shark's fin. The guy that cooks it doesn't understand the environment." To summarise, chefs do use premium ingredients in the pursuit of quality. At the same time, we should also respect Mother Nature, and not use products that are on the endangered species list. Tjioe, however, feels that the issue is debatable. "I think it has to be about responsible harvesting. In regards to sharks, environmentalists propagate the idea that once fishermen have cut the fin off, they'd throw the fish back into the sea. In reality, only small-time fishermen do that. The ocean liners harvest everything, because sharks, from head to tail, can be consumed."

noticed that bistros like Gavroche, Bar-Roque, and Sabio by the Sea are packed with diners. I asked my dear friend from Bar-Roque how she deals with the staff shortage, and she says, "Very simple. I don't have a wine steward, I just put the bottle on the table, and guests help themselves." The dining scene has become a lot more casual. Gone are the table cloths, and the focus is now on the cooking, which reflects tradition. I just came back from Strasbourg; none of them would worry about whether their foie gras is politically correct. There is no pretence. Chef Wright agrees that sometimes it is the hole-in-the-wall restaurants which make the biggest impression. "Take El Bulli. When you went to El Bulli, it's as though you stepped into someone's home. It's all about the quality, the integrity of the cooking." He believes that restaurants have the advantage of receiving



## Restaurant Trends 2014

As this is our last publisher's perspective for this year, I am also interested in what our panellists have to say about the distinctive changes they have seen in 2013, and what they expect to see in 2014. Tjioe says, "When it comes to diversity in cuisine, not many Asian countries can compare to Singapore. You can even have some of the best Lebanese food in Singapore. Singapore is a small country of only 730 square kilometres, with a relatively small population. If you compare her with Tokyo, or Shanghai, and look at the diversity of cuisine we have here, this is something we should be proud of. Moving forward, I'm afraid it is not going to be the same. Diversity will remain, but growth is not going to be double digit, it's going to be low single digit. And it has to do with manpower issues." Chef Le Bihan thinks that small restaurants will be the way to go. "People want contact with the chef. Diners don't come to restaurant just to eat, they are here because there is a story behind the bistro." I have

I am very precise in choosing ingredients that make up certain dishes, so we don't use the most expensive vinegars, salts, tomatoes when producing base recipes. Essentially, I apply the best ingredients where they make the biggest impact in the dish.

> Jonathan Wright

"What makes the food & beverage scene interesting are the smaller players. It is the boys that really create the vibrancy of this industry."

> Andrew Tjioe



"More people are going away from the starched linen table cloths, and concentrating back on the cooking. We are going back to authenticity." > Peter A Knipp

In the great restaurants in Burgundy or Germany, there is staff loyalty; they've been there for ten to 20 years. In Singapore, you can't get parttimers to stay for three months." > Michael Ma

The restaurant of tomorrow is small, with an open-kitchen. Diners can watch the chef cooking. This proximity and intimacy makes the dining experience different." > Damien Le Bihan

Then you'll be able to price your food more competitively." In summary, the panel foresees more self-service, less table-service, less back-of-the-house preparation, less ware-washing, and you either have a central kitchen, or you buy pre-prepared products. And although Tjioe says, "Work force is the biggest problem. I don't think there will be as many restaurants opening, because I've seen a lot of restaurants closing, because they don't have staff," I wonder, "Is that necessarily a bad thing? Don't the boys get separated from the men?" There are people who come with a big heart, a big mind, who know what they are doing, rather than those who happen to have spare money, but get themselves heavily burned, because they don't know the industry.

constant feedback from guests, unlike a hotel restaurant. "They don't need to wait for something to appear on trip advisor. There's a natural sense of ownership which is not there in a hotel restaurant." Tjioe foresees that the future food and beverage scene will be concept-driven. "I recently visited an eatery with a simple concept. They don't provide cutlery, because you don't need cutlery. You pick your own shell fish, use your hands to break open the shell, and drop it into a high-density plastic bag with lemon, corn, spices. Wrap it all up, boil, and when it's done, just throw it onto the table. You pick your food up with your fingers, dip in the sauce, and eat!" Chef Wright feels that for restaurants that are not doing very well, it could be because the identity and concept has been lost over the years. Tjioe thinks that concept-drive restaurants which are simple, and back to basics, will be the way to go. "When you are concept-driven, you will do away with the manpower problem. Costs will go down.

Having said all this, dear reader, do we really think we would want to fold up our sleeves and dirty our hands when we go out to eat? Do we really want to forgo our foie gras and caviar to be politically correct? Or do we go to a restaurant, to be pampered, to be served, to enjoy one of the few legitimate pleasures left – the flavours of brilliantly prepared food, a reward for a hard day's work? Something to think about, in the privacy and liberty of the freedom of choice that you possess.

Let me know your thoughts and concerns on [www.facebook.com/p.knipp](http://www.facebook.com/p.knipp) or tweet me at @PeterAKnipp.

Peter A Knipp