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Wong: Dishes from Childhood

by Sophia Hsu

Chef Simpson Wong is a celebrity in New York having made a name for himself in the restaurant business for being imaginative, focusing on fresh, local ingredients. A self-taught chef, this Malaysian-born Chinese from humble beginnings has helped bring Chinese, Vietnamese, and Thai food out of the blindingly fluorescent-lit, bullet-proof glass and stainless steel takeout joints and into a warmly-lit, casually fine dining experience in the form of Wong, his latest venture. With Wong, he reclaimed the nostalgic flavors of his childhood much like the salvaged elementary school desk chairs (tip:



use the built-in basket underneath the chairs to hold coats, hats, scarves, and bags as winter is upon us), chalkboard specials, and communal lunch tables that fill Wong.

While preparing for the dinner rush, Simpson sat down with Asian Fusion and told stories behind each of Wong's signature dishes. Growing up in Malaysia with several siblings teaches a person to really appreciate food, especially the time and peaceful atmosphere in which to enjoy really good food. Being one of the younger siblings, it was a treat to get lobster egg foo young on the weekends with his father on the way home from the lumber mill. This simple dish of eggs, bean sprouts, onions, lobster, and gravy always seems to bring out the little kid in the chef.

"When I go back to Malaysia, I like to take my mother on trips to countries outside of Malaysia to try new foods." On one of these

trips to Vietnam, in a waterside restaurant for locals slightly off the beaten path, Simpson and his mother shared a moment of culinary discovery. After having taken a bite of a crispy shrimp fritter bursting with shredded jicama and sweet potato, Simpson wordlessly looked at his mother, and his mother looked up from her dish and nodded in agreement. They had telepathically agreed that this crispy whole shrimp fritter needed to be on the menu.

Another dish popular in Hanoi and discovered along with his mother while in Vietnam was Cha ca La Wong, a grilled, then pan-fried fish dish with fresh dill served on a hot skillet alongside a bowl of thread noodles and fresh vegetables. The sweet, salty, and aromatic dish harmonizes with the crisp, clean taste of the thread noodles and fresh vegetables that keeps you wanting more.

What everyone should experience at least once in his or her lifetime is the Duckavore Dinner for four at Wong. The word "Wong" really should take on the connotation of "succulent duck" from now on. I have never sampled a slice of crispy duck breast flavored so tenderly and cooked so perfectly that it melted in my mouth with little effort from my knife and fork. The special six course dinner for four features duck in every bite down to the dessert of duck ice cream currently paired with a rhombus of pistachio cake.

For more information about Chef Simpson, visit his website <http://www.simpsonwong.com>. To see what's on the current menu as they do change with seasonal availability, visit <http://wongnewyork.com>, and make a reservation for the Duckavore Dinner for four (requires a 48-hour advance notice).

