



“We persevere on to make Singapore proud.”

Edmund Toh, President of the Singapore Chefs Association, sits down with Kühlbarra and talks about his motivations, the lack of awareness & challenges that Singaporean chefs face and how he has persevered all these years.

Kühlbarra: At 16 years old you failed your “O” Levels and became a kitchen porter & at the age of 21 you took formal education in culinary studies. Why did you make that decision?

Edmund: At that time, Shangri-La wanted to recruit 20 interns from men who had just finished their National Service. It was a great opportunity for me because I didn't have to pay for the school fees plus I was paid some allowance to enroll into Shangri-La, and Shangri-La was the best hotel in Singapore then. So I got the opportunity to get free studies and upgrade my skills. That's why I enrolled.

Kühlbarra: What motivated you to stay on in this industry for over 30 years?

Edmund: At Shangri-La, I had very good mentors in Chef Toh Thian Ser, who has already passed away, and Chef Terence Chew. Both of them had been sent to the famous Rochester Hotel in London and I wanted to become the third one so I hanged on there. But by then they didn't have any funding to send the third one. Even though I was disappointed, I stayed on and completed my internship and was placed in Fine Dining at Latour. I stayed on and continued to pursue my career as a chef, because my vision was that I wanted to be like them.

Kühlbarra: How did Chef Toh and Chef Terence inspire you?

Edmund: They treated me like a brother and spent a lot of their time coaching me. I am Chinese-educated and Chef Toh was also Chinese-educated. He once told me, “Among the 20 of you, you are the only Chinese-educated one, but don't look down on yourself. See, I'm also Chinese-educated and if I can reach this level, you can also reach this level!”

Kühlbarra: You have indeed reached that level. You are a celebrity chef now!

Edmund: [laughs] Yes, MediaCorp, has given a lot of opportunities to local chefs like Eric Teo and myself, and through this, we become celebrity chefs. We also hope to see more support coming from other mainstream media.

Kühlbarra: Being a chef is a lot of hard work. Do you think we have done enough to recognize Singaporean chefs?

Edmund: I think that Singaporean chefs are not well recognized & supported and it's a bit sad. I hope to see more support from the government agencies. But we never give up and find ways to overcome the challenges we face because of this.

Kühlbarra: As a result of the low recognition local chefs receive, what are some of the challenges you encounter and how do you overcome them?

Edmund: A problem we face is financial support. We find it hard to train our young chefs and enter local chefs into competitions. So we have to find different government bodies like e2i, which has been very supportive of us. We work with them to conduct many master classes and workshops in order to fund our competitions and educational programmes. But we persevere on and never give up in order to build up a platform for our potential young chefs to grow, enter competitions and to make Singapore proud.