



Ever heard of an Olympic chef?

Say hello to Yew Eng Tong, Chef de cuisine of Ocean Restaurant by Cat Cora & the food and beverage industry's equivalent of an award-winning Olympic athlete!

Find out what makes him stand out from the crowd as “something different”, how he handles failure, and more about his “never stop learning” attitude towards cuisine, and lean in closer as he discusses how he is often seen as the chef that “always competes and don't work” and what really drives him to put this little red dot on the culinary world map.

Kühlbarra: How did you start pursuing your culinary career?

Eng Tong: I used to have this vision, many times already lah, of me directing a crew of chefs. Then after that I was thinking to really try my luck in becoming a chef. So I went to Shatec after my “O” Levels.

Kühlbarra: Was there anyone in Shatec who actually motivated you on, to persevere to where you are today?

Eng Tong: I think there's only one person. It's my late mentor. He passed away already, a few years back. When I was in Shatec I was helping my senior in a competition and Chef Toh Thian Ser was invited to give some tips and guidance. From there I got to know him. Then after my school, I joined him in Traders Hotel near Tanglin Mall.

Kühlbarra: What were the experiences you had with him?

Eng Tong: Actually, he's like a father to me. My senior asked me to join him so I can learn more about competitions. So the first day in Traders Hotel, Chef Toh was asking a group of us if we would like to take part in competitions. I was the only one who put up my hand and said that I was interested. Then from there he spent a lot of time with me and taught me a lot. He also imparted a lot of life skills to me and taught me how to be not only a good chef but a good leader too.

Kühlbarra: What were some of the lessons he gave you on how to become a good chef?

Eng Tong: There's a lot leh!

Kühlbarra: Maybe the best few that you can think of?

Eng Tong: He taught me that you need to be skillful, and knowledgeable to gain respect from your fellow colleagues. I still keep telling myself right now that I still need to improve myself by buying and reading books and searching things on the internet. He taught me that I need never stop learning. There was a quote he gave

that I still remember. "If you want to be famous, it's not about how good you are. It's about how you can find a new cooking method that you can teach other people." I think that's the most important.

Kühlbarra: I noticed that you do very innovative dishes. And I think that's why?

Eng Tong: Yeah. You need to do something very original that nobody has done before. And this is very important for competitions.

Kühlbarra: So you've been a competitive chef for more than 8 years already, why have you continued doing competitions for so long?

Eng Tong: Apart from being able to participate in the competitions, I get to travel to other countries, see their products, met other chefs, and see what they are doing. During the process I think it's a great experience for me to actually see and absorb what they have done and then reinvent new things. To me it's really like a very good learning experience ah. But maybe a lot of people will think that Chef Eng Tong always competes and don't work. I think a lot of people think that about me.

Kühlbarra: Oh is it?

Eng Tong: Ya. I think there were a lot of people who categorise chefs like oh this chef is a competition chef, and that chef is a working chef. But think I've always wanted to be something different and take up the challenge to be both. I can work and I can do my competitions. Both are as good.

Kühlbarra: It must be quite tough to balance both right?

Eng Tong: I think the most important part is that the company has to be very supportive. My company is very supportive of me and they let me do my competitions during my work time. But of course you must be able to produce good results, if you don't produce good results, I think nobody will dare to give you this opportunity to work and compete at the same time.

Kühlbarra: So there must be times when you compete when you don't really get the outcome that you wanted. How do you handle these kinds of situations?

Eng Tong: Hmm.. Actually I'm totally fine with it. I feel that you will always get fair results according to the effort you put in. So if you don't train, I don't think that you are able to get good results. I went for this competition in Lyon, and I might have trained 50 times to get 17th position. But the champion has been training 250 times and you have to really respect what they have done. 250 times. That's why I told you I'm totally fine with this. The more effort that you put in, you'll get a better result.

Kühlbarra: So to you, if you don't do as well, then you'd say that you will put in more effort the next time?

Eng Tong: Yes, definitely. Training is definitely more important.

Kühlbarra: Do you feel that your national identity is important to you when you compete?

Eng Tong: Of course it's very important and I'm proud of it. Singapore being a small country and we are able to make a mark. And I feel very honoured to be able to be a part of the team that makes a mark for Singapore.

Kühlbarra: What advice would you give to young aspiring chefs that want to compete for Singapore?

Eng Tong: They will need to sacrifice personal time. And you know that young people now, they want to party. It's a lot of commitment and it's not easy lah. You have to work very very long hours and put in a lot of effort to become a good chef.