

SUSTAINABILITY

You are what you eat, so eat well and responsibly, says chef Petrina Loh

by GRACE MA 



Petrina Loh, chef-owner of Morsels. (Photo: Morsels)

Morsels' chef-owner goes over the provenance of her ingredients with a fine-tooth fork, and maintains a zero-waste policy in her kitchen.

From the day she set up Morsels at Mayo Street in 2013, Petrina Loh was adamant that she knew where every ingredient in her dishes came from and that nothing would go to waste in her kitchen. The 40-seater restaurant, which has now relocated to Dempsey Hill, has herbs such as bay leaf, rosemary, wormwood, Indian borage and watercress growing in its backyard.

Loh personally knows the farming processes of all her suppliers, which include winemakers, sake brewers and local fisheries such as Kuhlbarra. She brings this knowledge closer to her diners with themed dinners where she invites winemakers to share their sustainability ethos. On May 9, Morsels will host a fundraising dinner for singer-artiste Inch Chua's musical, 'Til The End of the World, We Meet in No Man's Land, which seeks to bring awareness to climate change.



Salted kamasu (barracuda) being dried in Morsels' backyard. (Photo: Morsels)

“Since day one, we have always practiced zero waste and sourced only sustainable produce,” said Loh, who was a private banker for eight years before she pursued her passion for cooking at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, which runs the Le Cordon Bleu programme.

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Being mentored by San Francisco Michelin-starred chefs like Stuart Brioza from State Bird Provisions and Spruce's Mark Sullivan and the restaurant's former chef de cuisine Walter Abrams, all of whom have

their own farms and worked with the local community on zero waste and fermentation, left her convinced that this was the right way to go as a responsible chef.



An off-menu Morsels Special: White meat “Kataifi”, comprising green aioli, pandan oil and Worcestershire vinaigrette. (Photo: Morsels)

But transplanting that mindset in Singapore was a different kettle of fish altogether. Suppliers did not know her and were hesitant to go into partnership. Pricing was a challenge as her purchasing power was small and shortlanding – goods falling short of its ordered quantity – was common.

“Over the years, those who have kept faith with me, I’ve also stayed loyal and continued working with them,” said Loh. “We use New Zealand wild-caught fish like tarakihi and lingcod. If we wanted local fish, I would go to Kuhlbarra, which provides sustainable, well-farmed fish. I’ve been to their farm twice and I like what they are doing a lot from feed to farm.”



The Toriyama Wagyu Chuck Roll, featuring petai ume sambal, whipped potato and cincalok emulsion. (Photo: Morsels)

Her prawns are farmed wild and sustainably at sea and have come from the same source for the past six years. Fruit peels are used to make various vinegars and are also buried in the soil with other vegetable scrap to encourage composting. Kitchen scraps are put to

good use in rhubarb gin and grapefruit rum, while kimchi juice and fermented brines are spun into Bloody Marys and dirty martinis respectively.

She says, “I need to know the source, what it is fed, etc. If my suppliers can’t tell me the details, I can’t use it. I need to feed my guests responsibly. You are what you eat.”

Loh also applies the principle of *yin* and *yang* in her cooking through the use of Chinese herbs and fermentation, which adds a depth of flavour. She personally selects the restaurant’s wines and beverages and brings in biodynamic gems such as stalwart Hirsch Vineyards and rising star Cruse Wines.



The Beef Tongue, featuring a padron yogurt sauce, mustard vegetable and crispy noodle. (Photo: Morsels)

Loh admits that all these gestures, while good, don't come cheap – “I can't bring in 10 kg of produce to reduce my cost.” But she is grateful that there are guests who appreciate her rigorous sourcing process and can taste the difference.

For the others, she had come to accept that it might get “lost in translation”. At the same time, she imparts her sustainable philosophy to interns from the Institute of Technical Education (ITE) culinary programme and At-Sunrice GlobalChef Academy.

She says, “We explain the provenance of the ingredients and over the years, guests come to us for that. But you can't please everyone. To me, as long as my food ethos is right, and at least one guest is appreciative, it's a good enough reason to be doing what I'm doing.”

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