

youareinvited

big, brazen & bespoke

OFF-THE-WALL AND ENTERTAINING,
PRIVATE CHEF RYAN HONG CHARMS US
ALL WITH HIS BOLD, 'EURO-TRASH'
COOKING AND UNABASHED SWEARING

WORDS JOSEPHINE SOH PHOTOGRAPHY JOHAN LIM



If I were skinny, life would be terrible! Tipping the scales at 84 kg, our host for today, Ryan Hong is one big and jovial chap. Off-the-wall and witty, he warms people up with his unique brand of humour.

'Say I'm supposed to weigh 59 kg for my height, but give 5 kg for my rude sense of humour, 3 kg for charisma, another 3 kg for charm and an extra 5 kg for my ability to cook... that basically means I'm only a few kilos overweight!'

On that fun note, we know we're off to a good start for the evening's shoot. Ryan is whipping up a five-course dinner for some friends, all wine experts (Daniel Chia, **appetite's** wine panelist and wine lecturer at Temasek Polytechnic; Lee Chee Wee, manager of Culina's wine and beverage division; Carole Chavaux, winemaker and director of CP Wines; and friends Tracy Goh and Eileen Ng) at his 'clubhouse' in Sentosa Cove, a gorgeous, double-plot luxury residence owned by his buddy Eugene Lim.

Having lived for 17 years in the UK and six in the US, Ryan is glad to be back home in Singapore. Since his homecoming, Ryan has been busy cooking. Not just for his personal dinner parties, but as a private chef for hire. An engineer by training, the 44-year-old has never cooked professionally till now, save for a short culinary course at London's Le Cordon Bleu two decades back. 'Back then, I only cooked for my girlfriends. It's funny how all the girls that I've dated can't cook. Maybe it's part of the natural selection process,' he muses.

'The past two months have been a big, swift rollercoaster ride!' says the fast-talker. 'I've already done 17 private dinners and I'm besieged with product sponsorships. Check these out!' he rattles off coveted brand names, pulling out crockery from Calphalon and kitchen utensils from Kyocera, Wüsthof and Cuisipro. 'This microplane grater is the most incredible thing ever invented. It changes your life!' he says excitedly, and goes on swearing by his pair of Kyocera white and black ceramic knives. 'I'm a sucker for cool stuff. Don't even get me near Sia Huat* because I'll want to buy everything!'

Ryan swears a lot when he talks. 'It costs hundreds of thousands of pounds of education to be able to swear like this, I tell ya!' he laughs and swears again.

'People always love dining with me, if not for the fact that I used to throw money around and dined at the best places, then because they love the verve with which I feast, and how I always order dishes that blend well to make an altogether great meal.'

Given Ryan's relaxed mood, our shoot is taking twice as long but then, how can we hurry him on? At stake — honest to goodness food being prepared by a charming host and copious glasses of luscious wines, all to be enjoyed with great company in one of the island's most beautiful homes.

*Leading supplier of F&B utensils and equipment in Singapore



Prosciutto with baby arugula salad

'So when I returned to Singapore upon my divorce and semi-retirement (he was a ship owner), my friends decided that I should cook for a living.' And his passion for cooking is obvious. 'It's my most fun job to date, though ironically, it's the one that demands the most work. But I enjoy it. It's most satisfying when I see people eat my food.'

'Essentially, I cook food that I like to eat.' And his cuisine style? 'Euro-Trash... Southeastern French cooking with an American influence.' He continues, 'Many people have labelled me a haphazard cook. Like now, I don't even know what I'm doing! But I always tell them, "Out of chaos, comes form." It'll all come together in the end.' Then he clarifies, 'It's different when I'm cooking for money. Everything's organised then.' But of course.

PROSCIUTTO WITH BABY ARUGULA SALAD

Good quality prosciutto paired with tender, pleasantly peppery arugula and balsamic vinaigrette. Faultless. Serves 8.

8 slices prosciutto
Handful of baby arugula

Balsamic vinaigrette: to blend well

1/3 cup balsamic vinegar
1 cup olive oil
Juice of 1/2 lemon
1/2 tsp Dijon mustard
Pinch of salt and sugar

1. Arrange the prosciutto on individual plates.
2. Lightly toss the arugula with the dressing, scatter over prosciutto and serve.



Tomato Mozzarella salad with truffle salt



Slow-steamed Petuna ocean trout in a caviar beurre blanc 'soup'



Four-cheese quiche with sweet fruit and dressed baby green salad

TOMATO MOZZARELLA SALAD WITH TRUFFLE SALT

This is a basic Caprese salad but the addition of truffle salt gives it an exotic slant while significantly enhancing the tomato's natural sweetness. Serves 8.

- 3 large Momotaro tomatoes
- Pinch of Tetsuya's truffle salt*
- 300 g Buffalo Mozzarella, sliced
- Drizzle of balsamic vinegar
- Drizzle of olive oil
- Bunch of fresh basil, thinly sliced into fine ribbons

1. Evenly slice the tomatoes and season with truffle salt.
2. Arrange tomatoes and Mozzarella on individual plates. Drizzle with balsamic vinegar and olive oil.
3. Sprinkle a chiffonade of basil and serve.

* Available at Culina.

SLOW-STEAMED PETUNA OCEAN TROUT IN A CAVIAR BEURRE BLANC 'SOUP'

Steamed in residual heat on a pan filled with white wine (added largely for the cook's olfactory enjoyment, Ryan explains), the

result is a glossy fillet that's beautifully pink and moist throughout. The amount of caviar used in this dish is quite flexible. The more, the better! Serves 8.

- 8 ocean trout fillets (about 150 g each, skinned and de-boned)
- Salt
- Olive oil
- 150 ml white wine
- 1 clove garlic, finely chopped
- 4 shallots, finely chopped
- 750 ml whipping cream
- 100 g caviar (or lumpfish roe or orange trout eggs; set aside 8 tsp for garnish)

1. Lightly salt and brush the top of trout fillets with olive oil.
2. Prepare a pan for steaming with wine, reserving 1/2 cup wine for cooking. Once the wine boils, place the trout into a dish, cover the pan and turn off heat.
3. Allow fish to steam in the pan's residual heat for 12 minutes.
4. In another pan, sauté the garlic and shallots in olive oil for 2 minutes. Add remaining white wine and cook till wine is reduced by half.
5. Add cream, then season with salt to taste. Stir through caviar and remove from fire.

Pour this 'soup' into a shallow serving dish. 6. Place the fillets on the 'soup' and garnish with remaining caviar.

FOUR-CHEESE QUICHE WITH SWEET FRUIT AND DRESSED BABY GREEN SALAD

'Real men don't eat quiche. We make it,' declares Ryan. And he makes a seriously good one, too. The exact quantity of cheese is really dependent on the size of the pie dish. A good idea is to crumble the blue cheese, leaving small lumps that give each mouthful a satisfying bite. Serves 8.

- 1 sheet ready-made short crust or puff pastry
- 4 eggs
- 700 ml whipping cream (depending on depth of pie dish)
- Pinch of salt
- 50 g Gruyere cheese
- 50 g Emmenthal
- 50 g Danish blue cheese
- 100 g Brie
- Handful of parsley and chives, chopped
- Handful of baby green salad leaves
- 4 dried apricots, finely sliced
- Drizzle of balsamic vinaigrette

1. Preheat oven to 190°C.



MENU OF THE DAY

- Prosciutto with baby arugula salad
- Tomato Mozzarella salad with truffle salt
- Four-cheese quiche with sweet fruit and dressed baby green salad
- Slow-steamed Petuna ocean trout in a caviar beurre blanc 'soup'
- Salt-crusted belly pork with Fuji apples and truffle veal reduction





Salt-crusted roast pork belly with Fuji apples and truffle-veal reduction



Blood oranges in jasmine-infused honey lime marinade

2. Lightly butter the sides of the pie dish. Line the dish with the ready-made pastry. Cover with a damp tea towel and set aside.
3. Lightly beat the eggs and cream. Add a pinch of salt.
4. Evenly distribute the four cheeses in the pie dish, leaving small chunks of the blue cheese scattered throughout. Set aside 8 thin slices of brie.
5. Pour in the custard mix and add chopped herbs. Place the brie slices on top of the mixture.
6. Bake in hot oven for 35 minutes, or until cooked. Test by inserting a toothpick in the middle. It is ready when the toothpick comes out clean.
7. Serve with baby salad greens and chopped dried apricots tossed in balsamic vinaigrette.

SALT-CRUSTED PORK BELLY WITH FUJI APPLES AND TRUFFLE-VEAL REDUCTION

The cooking philosophy here is patience, patience and then some patience. The pork used can be skinless or with skin, the difference being the crispy crackling. Writer's note: This non-fan of pork happily polished off two portions of this divine roast. Enough said! Serves 8.

- 2 kg pork belly
- Sea salt
- 2 lemons, juiced
- 5 medium-sized Fuji apples
- 150 ml Choya plum wine
- 1 l veal stock*
- Sugar, to taste
- 1 Tbsp black truffle oil or chopped truffles
- 10 g cold butter

1. Preheat oven to 190°C.
2. To prepare pork belly, generously salt the top and bottom of the slab. Add a good squeeze of lemon juice over meat. Set meat aside to rest for 1/2 hour. Roast for 1 3/4 to 2 hours.
3. Chop the apples and place in pan with enough water to cover the apples. Cook over low heat for 40 minutes till soft. Add some Choya plum wine to taste. Set aside.
4. In a separate pan, reduce the veal stock till syrupy. Add 1 to 2 Tbsp lemon juice, and sugar and salt to taste.
5. Add truffle oil (or chopped truffles) to the sauce. Add a knob of cold butter to give a shine and to thicken the sauce.
6. Check on pork belly. It is ready when skin is crispy, after about 1 3/4 to 2 hours. To assemble dish, slice pork to 1-cm thickness, and serve with veal reduction and apples.

Note: Veal stock is available from www.greengrocer.com.sg. You can also use chicken stock but the colour of the reduction will be lighter.

BLOOD ORANGES IN A JASMINE-INFUSED HONEY LIME MARINADE

An elegant dessert that's amazingly simple to make. The floral perfume of jasmine tea, coupled with the honey's sweetness, elevates this simple dessert to designer status. Serves 8.

- 1 Tbsp jasmine tea leaves
- 250 ml hot water
- 3 large limes, juiced
- Honey, to taste
- 8 small blood oranges
- 1 tsp blood orange zest

1. Make a cup of jasmine tea, add lime and honey to taste, making sure there is a good balance of sweet and sour. Chill.
2. Slice the oranges, arrange on a plate and drizzle the marinade around (not over) the fruit, to get the effect of a glowing sunrise as the red pigment seeps into the marinade.
3. Lightly sprinkle some orange zest over before serving. **a**