



# Aye Aye, Captain!

Celebrity chef restaurants dot the globe, but their famous namesakes can't be everywhere at once. Who runs the ship when the face of the place is away? ZARA ZHUANG speaks to the chefs who hold the fort and finds out what they think of their legendary bosses

## PAUL ESCHBACH

*Executive Chef at Jean-Georges, Shanghai*

A Culinary Institute of America graduate, Eschbach worked in butchering and catering before joining 66, Jean-Georges Vongerichten's nouveau-Chinese establishment, in 2002, and has helmed Jean-Georges Shanghai since September 2013.

### HOW DO YOU ADHERE TO CHEF JEAN-GEORGES VONGERICHTEN'S CULINARY PHILOSOPHY WHILE INFUSING YOUR PERSONAL STYLE INTO WHAT YOU CREATE?

Keeping things simple and using the best of what is available and flavours that complement. Whether it's a foie with strawberry or salad, it goes back to cooking good food.

### WHAT ARE A FEW HIGHLIGHTS OF YOUR 15 YEARS IN CHEF VONGERICHTEN'S FAMILY OF RESTAURANTS?

I think the drive to be better every day was great. Going to the Union Square Greenmarket to pick out produce in the morning. I'll never forget working at Nougatine

at Jean-Georges in New York on Friday and Saturday nights, where I cooked fish. Even being a sous chef at Nougatine was very rewarding.

### OUT OF ANY PERSONAL INTERACTIONS WITH CHEF VONGERICHTEN, ARE THERE MEMORABLE MOMENTS YOU COULD TELL US ABOUT?

When I worked at Jean-Georges in New York, he was there every day when he wasn't travelling. When I wasn't in the weeds [kitchen lingo for "busy"], I'd watch his eyes and try to see what he was looking for or at. He picked up the smallest piece of litter from the floor, and went through the trash to check for waste in the kitchen. The first thing he would do each day was walk through the kitchen checking the walk-ins, the products, the cleanliness. You learned really fast to not be the dirty, wasteful cook.

### ANY PRESSURE TO LIVE UP TO HIGHER STANDARDS BECAUSE OF THE ASSOCIATION WITH A HIGH-PROFILE NAME?

It's more like you don't want to disappoint a family member. And yes, there is pressure.

## PARK SUK HWAN

*Chef de Cuisine at Dosa by Baek Seung Wook, Seoul*

Originally a sports major, Park worked with Korean-American snowboarder-turned-chef Akira Back (Baek Seung Wook) at the latter's Yellowtail and Rumi in Las Vegas before joining Dosa in Seoul in 2016, and led the team to a Michelin star late last year.

### HOW DOES YOUR PERSONAL STYLE COMPARE WITH CHEF BACK'S?

We're both into transforming seasonal ingredients through new recipes inspired by tradition, and bringing out interesting features in every dish. For example, adding fried shallots to raw fish incorporates crunch amid smooth textures. It's fun just thinking about it. And Chef Back's a pleasant person, he has great regard for detail. I try to follow his style, but I give my team more feedback.

### HOW DO YOU ADHERE TO CHEF BACK'S CULINARY PHILOSOPHY WHILE INFUSING YOUR PERSONAL STYLE INTO WHAT YOU CREATE?

I try to stick to the details Chef Back wants to express, and sometimes I modify elements of a dish without

changing the big picture, such as switching the signature tuna pizza into zucchini pizza. Chef Back tends to trust me a lot; he sets the course and I ensure we stick to it. For menus, he suggests or gives directions and we have teleconferences to work out the details.

### WHEN CHEF BACK IS IN TOWN, WHAT'S IT LIKE IN THE KITCHEN?

He usually comes to Seoul once every two months. When he's here, we work and eat with him. I check that his instructions have been adhered to correctly. And he tries to please the team members of Dosa — everyone likes him when he comes.

### DO YOU FEEL PRESSURE TO LIVE UP TO HIGHER STANDARDS BECAUSE OF THE ASSOCIATION WITH SUCH A HIGH-PROFILE NAME?

I haven't thought about pressure. It is exciting and pleasant to be able to work with people from different environments, backgrounds and experiences. I don't think Michelin-starred chefs are any different. They are people who cook and live every moment with passion.



## STÉPHANE GORTINA

*Executive Chef at Rech by Alain Ducasse, Hong Kong*

Gortina led the restaurant at the InterContinental Hong Kong to one Michelin star in late 2017, less than a year after it opened. He's spent more than a decade working in Alain Ducasse restaurants across France, Russia, Qatar, UK, Mauritius and Hong Kong.

### WHAT'S YOUR PERSONAL STYLE? HOW IS IT SIMILAR TO AND DIFFERENT FROM CHEF ALAIN DUCASSE'S?

After working 13 years with Mr Ducasse, my cooking style is similar to his. My management style is also based on Mr Ducasse's vision, which is to teach new chefs our skills and to share our experience and knowledge. This is how we can grow our skills and develop personally. This is also the basis of how Mr Ducasse grows his global culinary empire — by growing the talent. This is what he has taught me.

### HOW MUCH CONTROL DO YOU HAVE OVER THE DIRECTION OF RECH BY ALAIN DUCASSE?

I propose new dishes for each new menu. However, everything is still approved by Mr Ducasse.

### OUT OF ANY PERSONAL INTERACTIONS WITH CHEF DUCASSE, ARE THERE MEMORABLE MOMENTS YOU COULD TELL US ABOUT?

While I was working with Mr Ducasse on a special event at MIX in St Petersburg, Russia, he personally told me four times during the evening how happy he was. I really felt proud!

### WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON DEVELOPING YOUR OWN CULINARY CAREER IN CHEF DUCASSE'S SHADOW?

Actually, I do feel I am in his shadow. Although I work as executive chef at an Alain Ducasse restaurant, Mr Ducasse still gives me the opportunity to express myself through my cuisine, as well as interviews and interactions with guests and my team. All this allows me to fully develop myself.

## DAVIDE BIZZARRI

*Chef de Cuisine at Fratelli, Singapore*

Bizzarri was chef de cuisine at Resorts World Sentosa's Hotel Michael and now-defunct Palio before taking charge of Fratelli, under the direction of Enrico and Roberto Cerea of the three-Michelin-star Da Vittorio.

### WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS AS A CHEF?

To always give a delicious and memorable dining experience to my guests, to keep improving my skills and to achieve recognition for the restaurant and our team.

### HOW DOES YOUR PERSONAL STYLE COMPARE WITH THAT OF CHEFS ENRICO AND ROBERTO CEREÀ?

It's similar. Their cuisine offers a contemporary take on Italian classics, based on traditional recipes and authentic flavours passed down from their parents. While they are from Lombardy in northern Italy and I am from Pisa in central Italy, there are only subtle differences in our own traditional recipes, and I like their sophisticated

way of presenting Italian dishes. We also have the utmost respect for the natural flavours of ingredients. We like to create dishes that are well-balanced with different flavour profiles and textures — hot and cold, creamy and crunchy, like a musical composition where each instrument can be heard.

### HOW MUCH CONTROL DO YOU HAVE OVER FRATELLI'S DIRECTION?

Chefs Enrico and Roberto set the culinary direction and we plan the menu together. As I have been in Singapore for almost 12 years, they ask for my opinion on dishes that will be popular with our guests here.

### WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON DEVELOPING YOUR CULINARY CAREER IN ASSOCIATION WITH DA VITTORIO?

There are only nine three-Michelin-starred restaurants in Italy. I am representing myself as well as the Cerea chefs' half-a-century of culinary excellence, so I am driven to live up to their high standards.



## PHILIP LEONG

*Head Chef at Nobu, Kuala Lumpur*

The Ipoh native, who started out pursuing interior architecture in Dublin, spent nine years training under Chef Nobuyuki Matsuhisa at Nobu Berkeley Street in London before returning to Malaysia.

### HOW DO YOU ADHERE TO CHEF NOBUYUKI MATSUHISA'S CULINARY PHILOSOPHY WHILE INFUSING YOUR PERSONAL STYLE INTO WHAT YOU CREATE?

Nobu dishes are standard all over the world, but Chef always encourages his chefs to experiment and come up with our own dishes that showcase the signature Nobu flair. I use a mix of locally sourced products. As a Malaysian, I understand the local palate and preferences, so I try to add a homegrown twist to the dishes. We've done freshwater prawn with hazelnut anticucho, dragonfruit ceviche, and Chilean sea bass with beetroot miso.

### OUT OF ANY PERSONAL INTERACTIONS WITH CHEF MATSUHISA, ARE THERE MEMORABLE MOMENTS YOU COULD TELL US ABOUT?

He travels a lot between all locations, so when he visits we always get some time with him in the kitchen for him to show us new recipes. My fondest memory was when I was told I'd be given the opportunity to head Nobu's first restaurant in Malaysia. The second was when we did a pop-up at the F1 Singapore Grand Prix, and Chef was around. It was hectic, with many Nobu chefs there, but he remained calm under pressure. One instance, he started speaking in Japanese to me, to which I replied, "Nobu-san, I don't understand Japanese!" He laughed and replied, "Oh, I thought you were Japanese!"

### WHAT'S SOMETHING ABOUT CHEF MATSUHISA THAT IS LITTLE-KNOWN?

He loves inaniwa noodles! He always finishes his meals with inaniwa udon.

## OLIVIER JEAN

*Executive Chef at L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, Taipei*

Jean earned his stripes through Joël Robuchon restaurants in Paris and Monte Carlo before landing in Taipei, where he has worked and lived for four-and-a-half years.

### OUT OF ANY PERSONAL INTERACTIONS WITH CHEF ROBUCHON, ARE THERE MEMORABLE MOMENTS YOU COULD TELL US ABOUT?

I trained with Monsieur Robuchon for about five years in France. When he announced my new position as executive chef in Taiwan, I was in Paris along the Champs-Élysées. I think that was one of the most intensely emotional days in my professional career.

### WHAT'S IT LIKE HAVING WORKED IN CHEF ROBUCHON'S FAMILY OF RESTAURANTS SINCE 2009? WHAT ARE A FEW HIGHLIGHTS OF YOUR TIME IN TAIWAN?

Monsieur Robuchon is my mentor, chef and boss, and also a father and a protector. Being appointed to L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon in Taipei was first my position abroad; I became acquainted with Taiwan's people, cuisine and cultural heritage. I also learnt how to teach people in a different language and show them the Robuchon way, which is an endless daily challenge.

### WHAT ARE YOUR THOUGHTS ON DEVELOPING YOUR OWN CULINARY CAREER UNDER THE ROBUCHON UMBRELLA? DO YOU FEEL PRESSURE TO LIVE UP TO HIGHER STANDARDS?

I feel this is the place to be. When you are in charge at one of JR's ateliers, it is like your "baby". You can create a connection with your guests, so in the process you are developing your own culinary career. Of course, we are under some pressure to maintain the higher standards, but as long as you respect your work and approach it with passion, the pressure can be a driving force that makes you stronger!



## SABRINA STILLHART

*Executive Chef at Bread Street Kitchen, Singapore*

Starting out at the age of 17 as a kitchen apprentice in Switzerland, Stillhart has spent the last decade with the Gordon Ramsay group, from Savoy Grill to Boxwood Cafe. She led the opening team at Bread Street Kitchen at Marina Bay Sands.

### WHAT ARE A FEW HIGHLIGHTS OF YOUR 10 YEARS IN THE GORDON RAMSAY GROUP OF RESTAURANTS?

They include being part of the opening team at the famous Savoy Grill in 2010 and Bread Street Kitchen London in 2011. Of course, being appointed executive chef for Bread Street Kitchen in Singapore was incredible.

### HOW MUCH CONTROL DO YOU GET OVER THE RESTAURANT'S DIRECTION?

The Bread Street Kitchens, located in London, Hong Kong, Singapore, Dubai and Sanya, feature the same concept, so we all work together. We have a core menu, but we have the freedom to incorporate local influences unique to individual locations. For example, we celebrate local

festivals such as Lunar New Year, and we participate in various worldwide events such as Beef Wellington Week.

### IF CHEF RAMSAY HAPPENS TO BE IN BREAD STREET KITCHEN, HOW DO YOU WORK TOGETHER?

I make sure everything is well-organised so when he arrives he can spend as much time as possible interacting with our guests, who love seeing him in the restaurant. We run through menus and I keep him updated about upcoming events, and he gives me his feedback and input.

### OUT OF ANY PERSONAL INTERACTIONS WITH CHEF RAMSAY, ARE THERE MEMORABLE MOMENTS YOU COULD TELL US ABOUT?

I trained under Stuart Gillies and Erion Karaj, and Chef Gordon was and still is a great inspiration. Once when I was having a family dinner at Union Street Cafe, one of the group's restaurants, he surprised us by joining us for a drink. Till this day, Chef Gordon remembers and always says, "Say hi to your mum for me." ■

