

# FOOD, TRAVEL & ENTERTAINING



Plating, presentation, poetry. When food is art you truly eat first with your eyes.  
The Garden Dessert, by Food artist Janice Wong

CLEAN EAT THROUGH THE SEASON OF INDULGENCE. FIJI CELEBRATES NEW YEAR'S TWICE IN 24 HOURS. THE CHIC GUIDE TO FESTIVE FOOD, TRAVEL AND ENTERTAINING





# Desserts with personality

FOOD ART IS GAINING A HUGE FOLLOWING AMONG AFICIONADOS OF FINE DINING. PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN THE TWO, JANICE WONG TRACES HER JOURNEY IN CONVERSATION WITH HARVEENA HERR.

Chef and artist Janice Wong is quite unfazed by the urgent buzz of activity around her in the frenetic moments before the art exhibition – Urbanness: Encountering the City – is to open in Dubai. In the midst of the excitement, Chef Wong is all calm focus – painting a chocolate sea around white chocolate studs that hold little nuggets of surprise and contrasting tastes, on a map of Singapore. I pop one chocolate into my mouth and through the silkiness emerges the citrus intensity of kaffir lime salted caramel. The next one yields praline pop rocks and I smile through the sparklers singing in my mouth as I make my way to claim a few minutes of her time.

This is her third visit to sun-soaked Dubai. So what has the young chef done this time that is different? She is faintly regretful – Wong is here just for the day, courtesy of Singapore Tourism Board, to open the exhibition celebrating Singapore’s golden jubilee. She couldn’t carve out a slice of time to go for skydiving. What else would she like to do? Not scuba diving, surely. “I like the high up and the down under,” she grins, “don’t like staying on middle ground”.

And that, quite aptly describes Chef Janice Wong, because her oeuvre is all about pushing boundaries, between sweet and savoury, of taste and texture and bringing new experiences to all who sample her creations. Her restaurant in upscale Holland Village in Singapore, is called 2am:dessertbar and specialises in progressive desserts with unique flavour pairings and varying textures. Think red miso and yuzu. Gary Mehigan on MasterChef Australia said while introducing her as a judge on the show: “She



doesn’t merely push boundaries – she crashes them”.

Having studied at Le Cordon Bleu in France, she went on to work with Wylie Dufresne of WD-50. Her mentors include some of the best pastry chefs in the world – New York’s Will Goldfarb, Spanish chocolatier Oriol Balaguer



## SWEET REWARDS

- 2015** Pastry Chef of the Year (World Gourmet Summit awards of excellence)
- 2015** Favourite Chef in Singapore (City Nomads Singapore)
- 2014** Gourmand Cookbook award - Winner in Singapore for *Dim Sum*
- 2014** Best Dessert Restaurant (IS Magazine)
- 2014** San Pellegrino Asia 50 Best awards, Asia's Best Pastry Chef
- 2013** San Pellegrino Asia 50 Best awards, Asia's Best Pastry Chef
- 2013** At-Sunrice GlobalChef Award
- 2012** Best of HOW international design award for *Perfection in Imperfection*
- 2012** Young Woman of the Year 2012 (Her World)
- 2012** Best Dessert Restaurant (IS Magazine)
- 2012** Shortlisted for President's Design award (for 2am:lab & 2am:experience)
- 2011** RSBF private dinner with MM Lee - Guest Chef
- 2011** Opening of SPICE in London - Guest Chef
- 2011** Pastry Chef of the Year (World Gourmet Summit awards)



and king of patisserie, French pastry chef Pierre Herme.

Wong graduated in Economics from Singapore. On an exchange programme in Melbourne, she had a lot of time off. Yarra Valley, Mount Buller, farms and vineyards beckoned. She recalls going to a berry farm and tasting fresh berries from the ground for the very first time. The taste of that bounty started her on a journey that she had never imagined. "I wanted to capture that incredible freshness. I thought of myself more as a curator than an artist." Wong converted early to the philosophy of ground to table, joining a growing number of chefs who forage for ingredients in the wild. "That allows me the freedom to use any ingredient... like laksa leaf!" she says to emphasise her point.

This openness to new ideas could in part be ascribed to her upbringing. Her father was a banker and travelled extensively which helped shape her outlook. But when she told her parents that her dream was to be a pastry chef, they were startled, and not particularly pleased. Eventually they came round, even bankrolling her first venture.

To launch her book in 2011, Janice wanted something memorable, and decided to make her pieces larger than life. Some 400 guests got to have a 'taste' of her book, as they entered a dark tunnel to her event and sampled her work: from bergamot and marshmallow ceilings, chocolate moss-covered sugar rocks, and lychee-infused gummy walls that were a part of her show. And that was when food became art. In an inspired move, when she put marshmallows on the ceiling, she thought she was presenting confectionery. But people loved her creativity and saw it as art.

A couple of years ago, Wong decided to go sightless for 72 hours. The stripping of one sense heightens the others, and she opened herself to the experience. The challenge inspires her and produces her best game. Like an athlete I think, as I notice her ease and sparseness of movement. We are not far off the mark. Janice Wong was a star squash player and has even represented Singapore. Her squash practice has contributed significantly to her focus and stamina, and her love of taking it to the next level.

And so the young chef is taking her game further afield. Within the next six months, she is opening two new restaurants. Cobo House by 2am:dessertbar will open in Kennedy Town, a hip new area on the western edge of Hong Kong overlooking Victoria Bay. The 82-cover casual fine-dining restaurant in KTown will be followed by the eponymous 40-seat dessert restaurant Janice Wong, in buzzing Shinjuku district of Tokyo. That's impressive, I say. "We're eight years old, we've grown, evolved," she responds easily. Eight years of practice, patience, technique, flavours, surprise, experience. She nods with conviction: "It's the right time." ✨

Facing page, top: Edible art installation COLORS, New York City. Below: Chef Janice Wong.

Above: Shades of Green Pandan. Middle: Isomalt sugar vases and coral, part of installation at Marina Bay Sands, Singapore. Below: From Edible art installation COLORS, New York City.