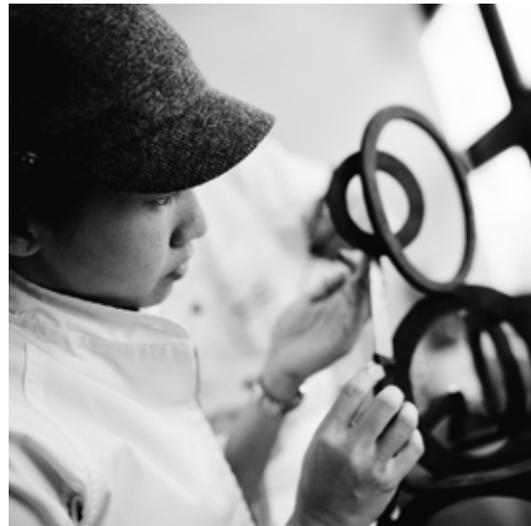


LATE NIGHT DESSERT AND EDIBLE ART

By Marissa Trew

With a mouth full of chocolate, we spoke with Janice Wong – the mastermind behind 2am:dessertbar – to uncover what inspires her, how her ever-changing philosophy drives her forward and the one dessert that will always remain true to her heart.





■ **NS: How old were you when you started seriously considering cooking as a career?**

■ **JW:** I was probably about 22. And I never looked back. I went overseas to train – to Paris, New York, Chicago, Spain – working with different chefs and different kitchens. Since then the business has evolved so much and there's a lot on my plate right now.

■ **NS: What ignited your passion in the very beginning?**

■ **JW:** I think it's more of a journey. My parents influenced me a lot. They're big foodies so we'd go around and choose the best food. I have a huge passion for sweets for sure and I think it all started when I

grew up in Japan. I always ate choux puffs and these delicious sweets and cakes.

Their cream is so different. The sugar and the confectionaries are so different from here. They keep their traditions through so many generations. It's always amazing going back to Japan. I travel to Japan a lot with my family as it was a huge influence on me. I always go to Tokyo but I also really like the coast... the Setouchi region is really beautiful.

■ **NS: Is this how you imagined your career developing?**

■ **JW:** No, I think you never see where you are at, especially with me being so competitive.

I'm always trying to do something different. The main thing is that at 2am, I'm thinking of new things to do and always challenging myself. I get bored very easily.

■ **NS: When you look back, is there anything you wish you had done differently?**

■ **JW:** I think that if you try and change your past, then the future is already different. I always look forward. I never ever look back. Looking back is just a reflection, looking forward is more progressive. Looking so 'fast forward' that people can't catch you. Even my team find it very hard to grasp what I'm trying to do. Even I sometimes don't know what I'm trying to do.



■ **NS: So what inspires your creations when you start from scratch? Where do you draw your ideas?**

■ **JW:** Nature plays a big part. I immerse myself in nature to take in the forms and the colours. I even challenge my perceptions, for example 'going blind'. I get inspired by fashion too – I love Coco Chanel and think she's a great inspiration. I have her quote in my office, "I don't make fashion, I am fashion."

■ **NS: Is there a creation you consider to be your favourite, one that is particularly close to your heart?**

■ **JW:** My current favourite would have to be the Cassis Plum – the dish that I entered on MasterChef Asia – because it was created without reference. I basically took ingredients and made something new. Usually you follow a recipe, and you're always looking at other recipes. So just taking raw ingredients and making something different is the most difficult thing to do.

■ **NS: Is there a particular ingredient you love to work with more than others?**

■ **JW:** Chocolate. I love making chocolates and I'm very glad I have the platform here to do it every day.

■ **NS: What is your favourite flavour to blend with chocolate?**

■ **JW:** There are so many possibilities but I love caramel and chocolate – it's a marriage that can't be beaten.

■ **NS: In the past you have done caviar and chocolate (to contrast salty and sweet), so do you stick with flavour bases and mix and match when experimenting?**

■ **JW:** I have a whole mind map. There are a lot of disasters and a lot of trial and error

but we experiment almost every day. I can't remember any disasters right now but typically things that are too harsh on the palate don't work. I think I did something once with black garlic... as a sweet.

■ **NS: You have a lot of work featuring edible art. How did you decide between art and dessert?**

■ **JW:** Well I was always interested in both but honestly, it really merged together in 2011 when I launched the book, "Perfect in Imperfection." I had to feed 400 people for the book launch and I wanted everyone to 'taste the book,' so we created massive edible installations. So for example, I would take a page and I would recreate it on a wall so everybody could eat it.

■ **NS: You also recently returned from a trip to Spain where you spent time with the renowned Roca brothers. What did you do there?**

■ **JW:** I went there for five days as part of a culinary exchange. I was introduced to their family and learned about their craft and their philosophy. It was more about learning their philosophy than any kind of skill set. What I always want to capture is a philosophy. It's the gist of everything, like 'how are you going to approach an apple' kind of thing. Everybody approaches an apple differently.

■ **NS: What would you say your own philosophy is?**

■ **JW:** I think philosophies will always keep evolving with time, culture and exposure. I grew up overseas in Hong Kong and Japan, and that allowed me to be exposed to a lot of cultures. I kept moving around, going to four different primary schools and two different secondary schools, so it was always about adaptation. And then my palate kept



changing, from being exposed to delicious creams and seafood in Japan, then going back to Hong Kong where it was lot of eggs, oil, deep-fried food and fresh seafood. Hong Kong cuisine is so different from Japanese cuisine. I kept doing that for the last eight years of my childhood, before I came back to Singapore. Another factor that has helped me is the discipline involved in competitive sport. When I was younger I played squash for 12 or 13 years for Singapore. So I would train every day – some days more than once – and entered around 14 competitions a year. The training was very intense and really pushed me to a new level. It became so engrained in me so it just comes naturally with the discipline and the focus in what I do. I've always been very curious and inquisitive.

■ **NS: Are you doing anything for the World Gourmet Summit this year?**

■ **JW:** This year I've been included in the Hall of Fame. When they sent me the e-mail informing me, I thought oh no, I'm so old! But looking back I'm not that old yet!

■ **NS: What are your current projects?**

■ **JW:** We have just released the Singapore Signature Series of chocolates, which includes local flavours like laksa leaf, lemongrass, chilli padi, kaffir lime and even *bak kwa* (barbeque pork).

In Hong Kong, we open a full-fledged restaurant on March 22 so I have been working on the menu everyday. The outlet in Japan opens on April 15. We began planning the Japan outlet almost two years ago and Hong Kong came along a year later. I didn't choose the timing!

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