

Asia's hottest kitchens attract world's top chefs

AFP, Singapore

Red-hot chefs make the world's most exclusive restaurants and some of the hottest names in the kitchen are wielding their magical knives in Asia.

A galaxy of Michelin stars, the food lovers' equivalent to the Oscars, is now sprinkled over Asian capitals; Tokyo has more three star restaurants even than Paris, once the undisputed culinary capital of the globe.

But it's not just Tokyo, other Asian kitchens are also catching on to celebrity chef branding to pull in the booming region's dollars, yuan and yen.

Singapore, long famous for its Asian street cuisine like chilli crab and chicken rice, is fast becoming recognised for a growing roster of celebrity western chefs.

French master Joel Robuchon, US-based Wolfgang Puck and Australia's Tetsuya Wakuda have all lent their names to restaurants in the city-state.

"The image of Singapore as a food city is becoming more pronounced over the years, and I've had many overseas friends becoming more interested to visit Singapore as a result of what's happening here," Wakuda told AFP.

But it's the gambling tables that are helping bring fine diners to the dinner table.

The drive to attract celebrity chefs to Singapore gained momentum with the establishment of two casino complexes in 2010 -- Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Sentosa.

Robuchon, Michelin's most decorated chef, is scheduled to open three restaurants by June this year, a Resorts World Sentosa spokesman said.

And competition from the casino resorts has forced local restaurateurs like Raymond Lim of French restaurant Les Amis to raise their game.

"When we have more competition, we will also pull up our socks," he told AFP. "So this is generally a good trend."

For years Tokyo and Hong Kong were well ahead of Singapore, which has a population of just five million, in the race to sign up celebrity chefs.

Robuchon already operates Michelin-starred restaurants in Hong Kong and another high-end eatery in neighbouring Macau.

"Because Asia is coming up as an economic strong power, people from all over are going to come," said Koh Yuen Lin, editorial director of the Miele Guide, set up in 2008 by the German appliance firm to track the Asian scene.

And two Singapore fusion restaurants -- Iggy's and Jaan par Andre -- were named in the prestigious San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants list in 2010.

Iggy's was also picked by the Miele Guide as



Local celebrity chef Justin Quek prepares a dish at his high-end restaurant Sky on 57 on the top floor of the Marina Bay Sands integrated resort in Singapore.

Asia's best restaurant in 2010.

Around a million tourists a month visit Singapore, that's a lot of mouths to feed.

Food and beverage was estimated to have generated Sg\$1.88 billion (\$1.47 billion US) in tourist revenues in 2010, making up 10 percent of total visitor spending and a 23 percent increase from the previous year.

International gastronomic travel agency Gourmet on Tour said more of its customers were asking to come to Asia to sample the region's fare.

"Many of our guests travelling on business to Asia are adding a long weekend, for leisure, to their business schedule," said the London-based firm's managing director Judith von Prockl.

Australian chief Wakuda said tourists constituted "at least half" of his daily clientele of 50 diners at his Japanese-European fusion place Waku Ghin at Marina Bay Sands.

Top Spanish chef Santi Santamaria also set up a self-named restaurant in Marina Bay Sands last year, only to die after a suspected heart attack in the kitchen in February.

Resorts World Sentosa already boasts restaurants by celebrity chefs Kunio Tokuoaka, Susur Lee and Scott Webster.

Chef Pierre Gagnaire has an eponymous restaurant in Hong Kong's Mandarin Oriental hotel, while Alain Ducasse started Spoon restaurant in the InterContinental hotel.

Japan's repertoire of celebrity chefs such as

Robuchon and Ducasse as well as Gordon Ramsay propelled it to the pinnacle of fine dining last year, according to the food lovers bible the Michelin Guide.

Michelin's latest Japan edition, released in November, said the country had for the first time drawn level with France in the number of three-starred restaurants.

Its judges also awarded 14 eateries in Tokyo top marks, giving Japan a total of 26 of the coveted stars nationwide and putting it neck-and-neck with France.

Tokyo managed to keep its status as the world capital of cuisine, according to Michelin, with its 14 three-starred establishments, up from 11 last year, building its lead over Paris, which has just 10.

Disappearing tradition: Najaf abaya makers in decline

AFP, Najaf, Iraq

Known across the region for its fine texture, the Najafi abaya is worn by all manner of VIPs from officials to oil-rich sheikhs. But the men who produce the hand-made cloth, inheritors of a generations-old trade, are increasingly going out of business.

"Let me tell you something," said Kadhim, laughing bitterly while embroidering one of the full-length cloaks, spread across his lap. "If I could find a government job, I would stop all this."

"This work is too hard, and business is not good anymore."

The bazaar where Kadhim has his shop, at the entrance to the shrine to Imam Ali, revered among Shiites, was once dominated by makers of this traditional garb.

Now many stalls sell trinkets, toys and other forms of clothing to pilgrims from mainly Shiite Muslim Iran, as the tradition of hand-made abayas -- those designed and sold in Najaf are only for men -- has seen a dramatic decline in recent years.

The 41-year-old Kadhim, whose family has been in the business so long that he takes the last name Abu Chengal or "father of the crochet hook", does not know if he can hang on much longer.

"My sales of the summer abaya are down to around a fifth of what they were 10 years ago -- I used to sell hundreds but now I sell dozens," he moaned.

The 2003 US-led invasion that ousted Saddam Hussein unleashed a number of changes, from ending the UN trade embargo on Iraq and lifting the country's own protectionist policies to pushing up the value of the Iraqi dinar.

The unrest itself caused a sudden drop in demand for abaya, as fewer customers dared venture to Najaf. And for what orders remained, traditional abaya weavers and tailors found them-

selves dramatically undercut, prompting many to scramble for secure government jobs.

The new competition came not only from imported textiles, now flooding the market alongside other imported goods, but from improvements in abaya cloth produced in domestic factories and much cheaper than its hand-made counterpart.

While an embroidered hand-made abaya sells in Najaf's market for between 500,000 and 800,000 Iraqi dinars (\$425-\$675), factory-made or imported ones can be bought for as little as 75,000 dinars (\$65).

"When I quit a few years ago, I was

selling each abaya cloth for 120,000 to 150,000 dinars (\$100-\$125)," lamented Hussein Sayed, 63, a weaver who left the trade in 2005.

The hand-made item is labour intensive, he pointed out, taking one worker three to 10 days to weave cloth for one abaya, even before it is embroidered.

Meanwhile, "you could buy a piece of cloth for an abaya for 20,000 dinars (\$17) -- that price was too low, I could not compete," said Sayed. "As soon as international trade began, our jobs were finished."

Four of his six sons learned the craft but are now taxi drivers.

-- 'People have moved on' --

Razzaq Mohammed, 58, told a similar story -- he dropped weaving to open a general store in 2006 when the craft no longer generated sufficient income.

"It was all we did, my family has done this for more than 100 years -- I opened my eyes at birth, and my family was making abayas this way," he said, standing by three looms kept in a separate room of his home.

"The sheikhs, the VIPs, they still want hand-made Najafi abayas. But the work is not continuous, it is not dependable."

His son Ahmed, 31, still practices the craft, painstakingly unknitting yarn

made from sheep wool, warping the loom and weaving abaya panels on the old frame with its series of weights and pulleys affixed to the wall and ceiling.

But the amount of work on offer is not enough. "I will leave all this if I find another job that covers the needs of my family," Ahmed said.

A major boost in the Iraqi dinar made the Najafi abaya less attractive to overseas customers -- whereas \$1 bought around 3,000 dinars prior to the 2003 invasion, it now gets only 1,180 dinars.

And a change in Najaf's own clientele has added to the impact. Before the invasion, Saddam allowed only a few hundred pilgrims into Iraq on a daily basis to visit holy Shiite shrines. Their number has now jumped to an estimated 3,500 every day, the vast majority Iranian, causing many bazaar merchants to rethink their products.

"It used to be all about abayas, but now we sell gifts for tourists," said Yusuf Mohammed Ali, a former tailor who switched to peddling scarves, rings and prayer beads.

Hassan Issa al-Hakim, who teaches Islamic history at Kufa University in Najaf's twin city, said the industry dates back more than 150 years and the Najafi abaya "represents the identity of the city".

"It was a gift that would be given to political and religious leaders who visited, and it used to be exported across the region," the 69-year-old said.

Even now, "there are those who make amazing hand-made abayas but they all depend on requests from clients."

Back in the "abaya market", as it is still called, Kadhim sat alongside his friend Ahmed al-Ghazali, both life-long abaya tailors.

"Look here," Kadhim said waving into the bazaar. "All of this used to be for selling abayas."

"Not anymore. People have moved on."



Mohammed Kadhim Abu Chengal weaves a fabric for a Najafi abaya, a hand-made traditional Arab cloak for men on March 9, 2011 in the holy Shiite city of Najaf, south of Baghdad, where men who produce the hand-made cloth, inheritors of a generations-old trade, are increasingly going out of business.