



Food that tastes better

By Dr Tan Poh Kiang, Editorial Board Member

I was once convinced that the best meals are prepared by the best gourmet chefs. I am not so sure these days.

The turning point came comically one night in the midst of a degustation dinner prepared by a chef who had worked in Michelin Star restaurants in Paris and London. We were a group of five couples and dressed to the nines. Each guy brought along his best bottle from the home cellar and the items on the chef's degustation menu were meticulously paired with the wines. There was no special occasion; we just wanted to pamper ourselves without the kids (they were all deposited in one of our homes where DVDs and the Xbox kept them distracted). Halfway through the menu, one guy remarked, "The dishes come in such minuscule portions, I think I'll be really hungry in the middle of the night. You guys want to join me for beef *hor fun* at Geylang later or not?"

"You're right! Maybe we can pick up some durians for dessert at the roadside stalls?"

"Hey, how about the *bak kut teh* near my place?"

"Good suggestion! If we go for *bak kut teh*, we can enjoy the super *teh tarik* from the same hawker centre."

The excited banter went on until the waiter arrived with the next dish and our group hastily hushed up, not wanting the chef to hear about our post-degustation plan and feel hurt.

I have since learned that the pleasure derived from food is not necessarily merely a result of the quality of the food or the skills involved in preparing it. Truth be told, many of us would admit

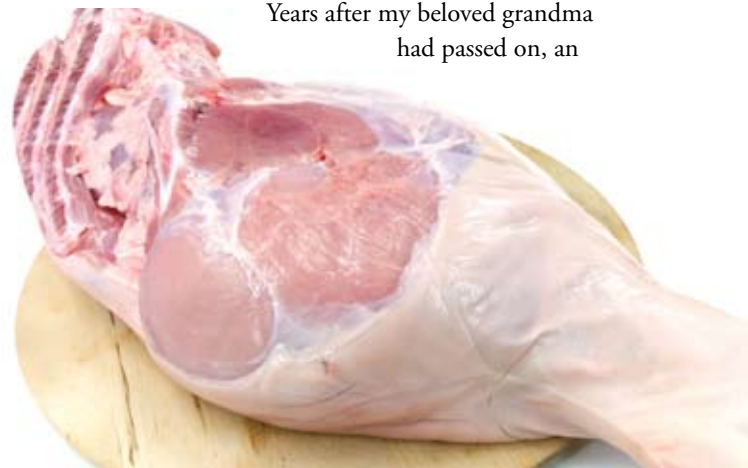
that a bowl of *laksa* consumed in the company of a great friend has the same (or greater) pleasure score as gourmet Italian pasta that costs ten times as much but consumed alone. I discovered that it is when all our senses are fully stimulated that our brain registers what we ingest as a memorable experience. Food critics may advise that the food obviously needs to smell good and taste great. They may also say that presentation has to be elegant, while ambience has to be classy and relaxed. Don't forget that food is never good when taken in isolation – that is, the matching of the right entrée with the main course and the appropriate dessert is an art of orchestration that makes a sumptuous meal. For wine connoisseurs, the matching of food to wines can make or break the dining experience. In spite of all the elaborate preparations described so far, the story of great food is still incomplete.

A recent animated film, *Ratatouille* (Pixar, 2007) gave me an important insight. Close to the end of the movie, there was a tense scene when the much-feared food critic, Antono Ego was waiting to be served his food so that he could proceed to destroy the restaurant, Gusteau's. All the restaurant's guests waited with bated breath as Ego was served ratatouille, a southern French dish comprising tomatoes as a key ingredient, garlic, onions, courgettes (zucchini), aubergine (eggplant), poivron (bell peppers), carrot, marjoram and basil, bay leaf and thyme. He took a cynical bite and was immediately transported back to

his childhood when he had sat in his mother's kitchen savouring that very same dish. The entire bundle of fond childhood memories was re-created for Ego by that magical dish, and he was changed from a bitter cynic into a cheerful and pleasant man. Food tastes better when it is linked to someone or something we cherish dearly.

I was brought up by my grandmother, as my parents were busy toiling to eke out a living. Being the matriarch, my grandma was responsible for ensuring all my aunts (her daughters and daughters-in-law) had proper food during their post-natal confinement periods. That included special soup concoctions, steamed fish and stir-fried liver with ginger. My favourite dish was pig trotters with old ginger and black vinegar. The smell is pungent but delicious. You can't miss it – with a whiff, you will immediately decide if you love it or hate it. Whenever it was being prepared, I would hang around the kitchen to watch the great chef at work. I was not allowed to meddle with the elaborate process except to wash the old ginger. My grandma would let the dish simmer for over an hour before it was cooled and put into the fridge. I would enjoy every inhalation of the intoxicating aroma of ginger, vinegar and sesame oil.

Years after my beloved grandma had passed on, an





personally speaking

elderly patient consulted me for an acute backache. I inquired about the possible contributing factors to the back pain and found out that my patient had been busy cooking for her daughter-in-law's confinement. I shared with her my knowledge of confinement food and she was incredulous that I had a huge relish for pig trotters. She and I had a good laugh when I explained to her why a western doctor would appreciate a traditional dish meant for women, one that incidentally has loads of coronary-clogging potential.

A few days passed and I had forgotten about that consultation until late one morning, an unmistakable fragrance wafted through the clinic's dispensing area into my consultation room. A stack of four aluminium food trays was brought into the room by that old lady. She said, "I'm not sure it is as good as your grandmother's but I hope you enjoy it." This was a number of years before *Ratatouille* but when I sank my teeth into the trotters and gulped down the pungent dark sauce, I was transported back into my grandmother's

kitchen in Toa Payoh. I was once more a boy squatting next to the charcoal stove, fanning the fire while sniffing that familiar smell. It would be an understatement if I merely said I had a good meal of pig trotters that day – it was an emotional meal where all my five senses came alive as I recalled my childhood and the immense love of my grandmother.

However, I have discovered to my chagrin that the same calories taken in now produce vastly different effects as compared to when I was in my twenties. Needless to say, I have had to change my modus operandi from "I live to eat" to "I eat to live". Anyway, many reports have alluded to calorie reduction as the key to longevity. Whether it is for vanity or longevity, I find myself eating far less

than before. With the calorie limitation, I have thus learned the wisdom of making good food choices as well as the company with which to enjoy so that the food I eat will always taste better. **SMA**



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