

Wild Rocket & Waku-Ghin – World Class Palate-ive Care

By Stefanie Yuen Thio

When Toh Han Chong called to ask me to write a restaurant review, my first thought was: Why me? Maybe those desserts I had been demolishing had migrated south and taken up prominent residence in my hips. I immediately looked around for a mirror to check out my butt. Depressing. Remember not to do that again.

Then the lawyer in me took over: What if those pictures of pork crackling and foie gras send patients into cardiac arrest? How would I live with myself?

Han Chong assured me that it's because I have a well-travelled and discerning palate that he asked me. Yeah right, I thought. Never trust an ex-ACS debater. Flattery is second nature to them. I should know – I married one.

But we lawyers never pass up on a chance to appear knowledgeable even when we aren't, so I said yes. And so, here is my take on two not-to-be-missed exponents of modern fusion cuisine in Singapore.

◀ Wild Rocket - Strawberry cheesecake
▶ Waku-Ghin - Fresh seafood





◀ Willin Low
 ▶ Flower granita

Wild Rocket

This is an improbable restaurant, run by an accidental chef at an implausible venue.

Willin Low is a lawyer-turned-chef who has no formal cooking training and who became a chef out of sheer love for the art. His best dishes were created from raw talent, with a dash of necessity thrown in. His signature strawberry cheesecake is a case in point. Having promised a friend that he would make the cake, her favourite, for her birthday celebration, he then had to figure out how this should be done. This, coming from a man who had never baked a cake in his life. Other people have molecular cuisine; Willin created modular cooking. That is, figure out the bits that go into the dish, try and make them first, then put them all together. Which explains why his amazing dessert is served in a martini glass (it holds the pieces together better than a plate), and why his wait staff must take pains to explain that you should get a bit of the strawberry compote, the sinfully delicious biscuit and the maple walnut ice cream into each spoonful.

The man is a genius in melding tastes. He takes what we grew up loving – whether it is the comfort of a rich but simple rice porridge,

the decadence of braised pork, or the taste explosion of *bae bee biam* (the fragrant dried shrimp that my great grandmother used to fry with shallots and chilli, which I used to slather onto white Gardenia bread with French butter) – and modernises it with dishes that we appreciate today. So Willin has brought us a Hae Bee Hiam Pasta, created a Braised Pork Cannelloni and entranced us with Blue Swimmer Crab Congee.

His talents extend to the dessert tray, where his childhood love for icicles from the ice cream man on a bicycle has led him to create a number of tantalising granitas – from lime to most recently, a flower-based one. I will say no more about his signature cheesecake, save that a woman once savoured her first mouthful, closed her eyes and announced in a husky voice, “Oh my god, this is better than sex.” The man, presumably her husband, seated across from her, looked somewhat... deflated, after that. A prick to the male ego, obviously.

By day, sunlight streams in through the floor-to-ceiling glass windows; by night, the dark wood décor transforms the restaurant into a more sophisticated wine-bar feel. An eclectic mix of diners stream in – old folks

with old money, families with young children, and young professionals wielding the powerful pink dollar. All receive a warm smile of genuine welcome from Sam, the manager and sommelier rolled into one. Many of the customers are repeats, and Willin will prepare bespoke dishes for them or create special off-menu items. Some are enjoying a stolen moment of romance, and ask for a discreet table in the corner. It's a place where marriage proposals are made, grandpas' birthdays are celebrated and class reunions take place.

His intimate eatery is tucked into a little known hotel at the top of Mount Emily, but the off-the-beaten-track location has not stopped it from being noticed internationally, including by the *New York Times* and the *Financial Times*, both of whom have written glowingly about Wild Rocket, and the creativity of its proprietor-chef. Willin is the guy to watch, not least of which because he will steal your grandma's recipe and turn it into a magical new dish that you won't be able to get out of your mind.

Willin has created a restaurant that is a slice of Singapore, redefined and reinvented; one that we can all be very proud of.



▲ Salted fish pasta



▲ Pan fried seabass

Waku Ghin

If Willin is creating the new Singapore fusion experience, Tetsuya Wakuda is the “si fu”, the master, of the art of East-meets-West.

Much has been written about the sublimity of Waku-Ghin, Chef Tetsuya’s new restaurant in Singapore, but that does not do it justice. Because, in my view, the only appropriate response to tasting one of Chef Tetsuya’s creations is total, awestruck, silence.

The restaurant sits on 10,000 square feet of prime space, on the gourmet restaurant floor where Guy Savoy rubs shoulders with Santi. But it seats only 25 diners at a time; that’s how exclusive it is.

At first, you get the feeling you are

that the chef will serve an eight to ten-course meal and that all you need do is let them know what you do not eat. A little too sure of themselves, aren’t they, you wonder.

Until the first course arrives and you lose yourself in the explosion of delicate flavours in your mouth. It is a raw scallop dish that is both delicate and rich, tart and savoury. Beyond that, it defies description, so strong is the sensory overload. It is followed shortly by what I consider the chef’s signature dish – sea urchin served with sweet raw prawn and caviar, in the shell. This dish alone, with its dense flavours, is enough reason to sell the Patek, just to dine here once.

What follows is wave after wave of sensory assault. The pan fried whole abalone, paired

somehow isn’t. There is a cheese plate, if you like, which is its own slice of heaven. If you have never tried cheese with honey, after this meal, you may not want to eat cheese without the nectar ever again.

And then, almost as an afterthought, your server shows up with a silver bowl of innocent looking macaroons. Try the rum and raisin ones, he casually suggests. And they are delicious. Light as candy floss, they disintegrate in your mouth, leaving the rich taste and texture of the filling. With a sinking heart, you look at the five or six remaining macaroons and realise that you will not have the willpower to leave any behind. In for a penny, in for a pound, you tell yourself. Or in your case, probably quite a few pounds.



▲ Abalone



▲ Sea urchin



▲ Pan fried tuna belly

being deliberately intimidated. There is no prominent sign outside the restaurant and you wonder if only the “in-the-know” deserve to eat there. But as a well-groomed staff member pulls open the large stainless steel and glass door, and welcomes you with impeccable politeness, you start to realise that this is all part of the experience that is dining at Waku-Ghin. There is an air of zen stillness, and walking along the winding carpeted corridor is almost like wending your way along a Japanese garden, before you are ushered into the dining area.

Each one is a semi-private room that seats six to eight around a teppanyaki table. The sommelier appears at your elbow, ready to discuss sake or shiraz, or offer you Tsingtao or sencha. Your server then explains

with a light pasta and tomato sauce, sounds misconceived but turns out to be a winner. Who would have ever put abalone and tomato sauce in a pan together? But this is what makes fusion cuisine good, and what makes Chef Tetsuya great. We are bowled over by the pan-seared sliver of *toro* (tuna belly), and the two incredible beef dishes. It is a virtuoso performance, where the food is the main actor and the chef who comes to prepare it in front of you, the supporting cast.

By the time dessert comes around, you cannot imagine facing another morsel. You are led, waddling, into another room, this one overlooking the bay. Dessert comes in two courses: the first, a fruit-based palate cleanser, the second an incredibly light cheesecake that should be too heavy but

You squelch the thought as you bite into the passionfruit macaroon.

I am convinced that creative masters like Willin Low and Tetsuya Wakuda will put Singapore on the world gastronomic map. We are a country renowned for its street food; it’s great that we will now be able to boast top exponents across the whole spectrum of the dining scene. A meal at the hands of maestro chefs like these is about as much satisfaction as you will get in Singapore, well, with your clothes on anyway. **SMA**



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