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- Jane Goodall's special bond with animals
- Siem Reap – an all-girl perspective

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A taste of Tuscany

Domenico Francone, resident chef at Sala Dei Grappoli at Castello Banfi, an award-winning winery and hotel in the Tuscany region of Italy, was on tour here recently. He speaks to CHERYL YEE about food, wine and creating culinary masterpieces.

As resident chef for Sala Dei Grappoli at Castello Banfi, how do you design a complete degustation menu? What are the important factors that you take into account, especially as you are from Montalcino where the produce is fresh?

At Sala Dei Grappoli, we're all about territoriality and fresh local produce, which is the primary reason we are only open from March to November. We normally create three seasonal menus – spring, summer and autumn – using the produce that Mother Nature offers during that season. It is essential for us to visit the farms and nearby farms to choose the ingredients that will compose our menu 15 days before the opening season. Thereafter, we taste the created dishes with our sommelier to find the perfect pairing with our Banfi wines. The secret is careful attention to detail and the constant pursuit of the best flavours.

What is your most memorable experience as resident chef for Sala Dei Grappoli? Having worked abroad and in Italy, what are your best memories? Are there challenges in creating the dishes?

Every new dish I create is an experience and a challenge to me as I value the creativity involved in cooking and the originality of the dish. I faced the most challenges when I was with Apsley's, a restaurant in London. Life



CHEF DOMENICO FRANCONI



DUCK RAVIOLI SERVED WITH CREAM OF CARROT AND TRUFFLES

heat! I really appreciated the fine flavours of KL's street food while I was there.

As you work for Castello Banfi, could you tell us your favourite Italian wines to pair with Asian food? Did you face any challenges in pairing the food and wines when you were touring Malaysia recently?

Asian cuisine is generally very spice-oriented so I reckon a good white wine with some character (is a good match). When I was the guest chef at Senja, The Saujana Hotel Kuala Lumpur recently, we paired the dishes with Banfi's Principessa Gavia and San Angelo, both wines with uniquely fruity fresh characteristics. Red meats pair well with Brunello di Montalcino.

As a chef, what is your ultimate dream? Do you aspire to own a string of Michelin Star Restaurants or would you prefer to remain a renowned chef in a grand establishment like Castello Banfi?

It's my goal and dream to obtain a Michelin star rating for Sala dei Grappoli within the next two years. We have the right criteria and potential to be of that high standard. The famous saying "Home is where the heart is" encapsulates how I feel about where I come from – I love Italy and of course Tuscany but should an opportunity arise for me to be posted to an establishment in Asia, I would consider the offer.

The *Masterchef* programmes on TV have led to more interest, especially among children, to become a chef. Can you tell us what it's really like? What would your advice to young chefs be?

Young aspiring chefs have to understand that there is a lot of sacrifice and challenges involved in being a chef. The main "ingredient" for this career is passion. Programmes like *Masterchef* have created public awareness about what it takes to be a chef. Everyone now knows there are many components involved in creating a great dish – one has to study the flavours, put in hard work and hours of trial and error in the kitchen to create a masterpiece.

took a turn for the better when I joined Castello Banfi. I became more mature in my thoughts and now have the opportunity to travel around the world. I feel at home at Castello Banfi and it has cultivated my passion for having my own restaurant.

As the chef behind the cooking masterclass at Castello Banfi, could you tell us a little about what the experience is like?

I founded the masterclass 11 years ago and I fell in love with the concept. Being the pioneer chef to carry out this task has been memorable. The cooking classes take about five hours for each session so there is ample time to share my culinary secrets and exchange my passion for cooking with the people in the classes.

When you travel abroad, what is the first thing you do when you arrive in the country? Do you go for local street food or local fine cuisine?

I am truly lucky to be able to travel in the course of work. I usually embrace what each city has to offer. Using both my vision and senses to explore my surroundings, I don't deny that I love local market and street delicacies. When time permits, I try to have a meal at a good restaurant recommended by my colleagues or the locals. I love Asian cuisine; with Thai food as my favourite – I've even learnt how to use chopsticks! On a recent trip to Malaysia, I had the opportunity to try the famous *Char Kway Teow*, *Ikan Bakar*, *Bak Kut Teh*, Prawn Noodles and ABC (*air batu campur*), which helped to cool me down in the blistering



STEWED CHICKEN WITH MASH POTATOES AND VEGETABLES



TARTARE CHIANINA WITH ASPARAGUS SALAD AND EGG SAUCE



STIR FRIED FRESH VEGETABLES



CHEESECAKE SERVED WITH STRAWBERRIES AND MOZZARELLA ICE CREAM



CASTELLO TIRAMISÙ SERVED WITH STRAWBERRIES AND VANILLA GELATO