

Living his dream

Chef Jose Alonso's mum wanted him to go to university, but he chose culinary school and now has his own restaurant

Eunice Quek

Nothing gives chef Jose Alonso of Binomio Spanish Restaurante more satisfaction than having repeat customers. The 31-year-old chef from La Rioja in northern Spain says: "The biggest success is seeing regular customers. After all, there are so many other restaurants and the local diner can be demanding too."

"For me, the biggest disappointment is if diners ask why a dish is different from their previous experience. We must always be consistent."

On Singaporeans taking to the restaurant's paella, he says: "Singaporeans are used to soft steamed rice, so I was surprised that they like the al dente paella."

"It can be challenging, but we just want the opportunity to let diners try a dish cooked our way. We don't lose our personality."

While his mother pushed him to go to university for "a better life", he opted for culinary school instead.

On weekends, he took a part-time job at Michelin-starred Restaurante Echaurren in La Rioja, headed by Spanish chef Francis Paniego. There, he got to meet chefs from other top restaurants.

He then set his sights on celebrity chef restaurants and has worked with top Spanish chefs such as Sergi Arola. He was also part of the opening team for the late Santi Santamaria's now-defunct restaurant, Santi, at Marina Bay Sands.

Before opening Binomio nine months ago at Craig Road, he also worked at the acclaimed Restaurant Andre at Bukit Pasoh Road.

He and his wife Noelia, 32, who works in marketing, have no plans to return to Spain yet, as he notes that the country's economic situation is "difficult".

But for now, he is living his dream at Binomio, together with his "dream team" of chefs which he enthusiastically gathers for a group photograph.

He says to this reporter: "Everything I've explained to you, I've explained to my staff. I'm not a super chef. It's all about the team."

What are your childhood memories of food?

From the age of 10, I was already in the kitchen with my parents and going to the market to buy food with them. Also, my mother was particular about us eating right. My friends would be eating KitKat and I'd be having chorizo, cheese and ham. Looking back, it's a good habit. But at that time, when I was 12, I kept asking: "Why mum?"

Now, there's a huge problem of people eating artificial foods that are processed or pre-cooked.

What are your favourite local foods?

Chicken rice and black pepper crab. On my days off, I try new foods and I will ask the aunties in the hawker centres to recommend what to eat.

Has any local dish inspired your cooking?

My favourite black pepper crab has inspired my crayfish dish. The boiled crayfish is wrapped in Iberico pork belly and served with steamed potatoes and truffles, with a black pepper sauce.

Are you an adventurous diner?

Not really. I've had fried worms in Thailand, which tasted like fried rice. When I tried durian, I wasn't concerned about the smell. I just found it sweet and rich.

So you don't have a sweet tooth?

I used to like very sweet foods, but not anymore. Perhaps it's an evolution of my palate. I'm more focused on eating healthy now. I'm also trying to introduce vegetables as desserts too.

I've also cut down on Coca-Cola. It's about having balance. I can just have salad with grilled fish.

What is always in your kitchen?

Iberico ham, cheese, chorizo and wine. Since I was young, there has always been wine in my kitchen, particularly from La Rioja, which is a wine-producing region in Spain. It is common to have a glass of wine for lunch or dinner.

What is your food philosophy?

It is close to chef Santi's. He taught me to be honest with customers and to not serve something which we wouldn't pay to eat. We have respect for the product and cook it in the best way.

Give us some tips to making a good paella.

Have a good stock to flavour the rice. You also need a good pot and a thin layer of rice so that it can be crunchy. If the layer is too thin, the rice will be too wet. If it is too thick, the rice will be dry. In Binomio, we use Spanish Bomba rice.

What is your take on molecular gastronomy?

When I was working with Sergi Arola Gastro in Madrid, we'd take the best lobster and boil it. Then we'd remove the shell and convert the meat into mousse or fry it. Then we place a small piece on the plate and call it a lobster. What's the point? I want to be able to see the lobster.

A lot of young chefs go straight to modern cuisine and make emulsion, colourants or spherification. But they can't cook lentils or french fries.

What is your best dining experience?

At three-Michelin-starred restaurant El Poblet in Valencia. The restaurant is now named after the chef, Quique Dacosta. I remember eating a lot, especially dishes with truffles and caviar.

If you could invite someone for a meal with you, who would you pick?

My wife – she's the most important person.

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WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST MEAL BE?

Spanish chicken rice in the restaurant with my staff. The rice is steamed and the chicken is roasted with lots of garlic.