Eyeing the cherry on the cake

Patrick Sau is leading Malaysia's team to the prestigious World Pastry Cup competition in Lyon, France

BY MARION FERNANDO

Most pastry chefs can only dream of participating in the prestigious Coupe du Monde de la Patisserie, or World Pastry Cup competition, but for chef Patrick Sau, it’s no dream.

Sau (left), the head chef at Sunway University School of Hospitality, will be leading Malaysia’s team of top pastry chefs - Tan Wei Loon, Otto Tay, and Loi Ming Ai - to this competitive culinary event held every two years in Lyon, France.

These pastry chefs, who are from different institutions in the country, came together after a national selection to pick the best chefs in the country for the Asian competition. They have been training in the last seven months after emerging champion in the qualifying Asian Pastry Cup 2018, with hopes of bringing home the winner’s title.

But first, they have to defeat 20 other nations in this world competition taking place this Jan 27 and 28.

In a recent ‘eat, meet, and greet’ evening hosted by Sunway University to celebrate the chefs’ entry into the World Pastry Cup, guests were treated to a four-course dinner that included a chocolate dessert prepared by the team.

Present at the dinner were Gilles Barrier, the first secretary-cum-deputy head of mission and charge d’affaires of the Embassy of France in Malaysia, as well as celebrity chefs Datuk Redzuwan Ismail aka Chef Wan, and Datuk Fazley Yaakob.

Sau started his career as a cuisine chef, but turned to pastry and dessert-making 15 years ago after being inspired by French pastry chef Jean Francois Arnaud.

Speaking before the event, he credits the team’s shared ambition and commitment as the core factors that will aid them in the competition.

Sau said: “This is a commitment that (each of the chefs) needs to put in. You can’t afford to say, ‘oh, I need to take a two-week break for a holiday: There is no such thing.

“You’re not just talking about one person. You’re talking about a team ... when you have empty time-slots, (you ask) ‘how can you help me, and how can I help you’?

“It’s not about three people or individuals slotting together - no. It’s three people who must jive together.”

Each of the chefs must take charge of one of three tasks - creating a sugar sculpture and chocolate cake, a chocolate sculpture and identical plated desserts, and an ice sculpture with an ice cream cake - all within 10 hours.

As the manager, Sau said he will be joining the other countries’ managers as judge in the tasting of the dishes. “(We) will only know the day before which category that we will be judging. We won’t know beforehand. It has to be fair.”

Sau added that in accordance with this year’s World Pastry Cup theme of ‘Nature, Flora and Fauna,’ the team needed to draw out the building blocks of the sculpture, the cake designs, and how they will taste.

To this end, the team has been conducting weekly taste trials. “[Deciding] flavour combinations, timing, and texture. This is the role that I play,” said Sau.

Though he is the team manager, the chef insists that this is a team effort, where each person brings something to the table. “I put it as us sharing our experiences.”

Sau also had to look for sponsors to fund the team, since they required about RM100,000 to reach the competition in France.

He said people don’t realise that competing costs a lot of money, logistics-wise as well as ingredients.

So the team is grateful to have international logistics company DHL along as a sponsor “because [there is] a lot of cargo. We’re shipping about 750kg worth of things!”

These include tools the chefs will be using in France. “Imagine I [will be] going to your house and cooking, and the tools are different,” said Sau. “I won’t be able to perform well. So we always train with the same tools.”

Creating desserts and pastries for competition is also very different from making pastries for sale, Sau added. Competing desserts require much more precision and complexity. “For example, the cake that my teammates produce - we’re talking about layers - it’s a seven-layer combination of flavours and textures.

“When it comes to commercial ones [like] those in cake counters, you have 10 types of desserts, so you can play with a lot of flavours.

“But for competitions, you only have one chance to showcase your best skills. You have to shoot for the best flavour you can produce.”