LIFE. EXTRAORDINARY

# HONG KONG TATLER

November 2015

## THE FOOD ISSUE

CULINARY COUPLE YENN WONG AND ALAN LO SHARE THEIR SECRET RECIPE FOR SUCCESS

## ON THE MENU

WORLD FAMOUS CHEFS OPEN THEIR FRIDGES

A GOURMET GETAWAY IN EMILIA-ROMAGNA

THE GREAT FOOD DEBATE

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Hélène
Mina
Nicole
Madeleine
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# Food For Thought

*Superfood, sustainability and the future of dining were just a few of the hot topics chewed over by a select group of chefs, restaurateurs and tastemakers at* Hong Kong Tatler's *great food debate.* ***Madeleine Ross*** *reports from the table*

Photography **JONATHAN MALONEY AND INGA BECKMANN** Styling **CHRISTIE SIMPSON**

"I'VE BROUGHT A DISH that reminds me of the summer," says Richard Ekkebus, placing an achingly pretty rendition of ham and melon, a continental classic, on the dining table. "This is a staple of any picnic in Holland or France. It's a lazy man's dish because it's just ham, melon, cheese and bread." The edible art has taken Amber's celebrated culinary director an hour to assemble with tweezers, so there's little chance of anyone taking his statement at face value. The whimsical starter comprises an intensely orange organic cantaloupe, sheep-milk cheese from Corsica, Spanish bellota ham, verbena flowers and a sprinkling of crunch. "I guess we've pimped it a little bit," Richard shrugs.

The chef is one of nine gastronomes joining *Hong Kong Tatler* for a round-table discussion about food at Spring Workshop, a non-profit art space in Wong Chuk Hang operated by Mimi Brown. In potluck style, everyone has brought a dish, and proceedings kick off with each of our guests describing their creation.

Nurdin Topham, head chef at Nur on Lyndhurst Terrace, has brought wafer-thin slivers of cured goose with preserved pickles and radishes. "Food is the most intimate connection we have to our planet—it's something we enjoy every day that connects us to our environment," says Nurdin, known as a trailblazer for his commitment to using local and seasonal produce. "This dish represents my interest in preservation and working in connection with nature."

Mina Park, proprietor of Sook, which produces Korean private kitchen and pop-up dining events, has brought sliced raw abalone with Korean chilli sauce and black rice, inspired by her mother's love of the mollusc. Helina Tesega, the brains behind African pop-up Eat Ethio, has prepared Ethiopian canapés, an oxymoron for anyone au fait with the culinary traditions of the African nation. Snack food is a foreign concept there; diners always sit down for a full meal. "Back home, the food is heavy and we never snack," says Helina. "I'm working on making Ethiopian food more accessible and incorporating more diverse ingredients."

## HONG KONG TATLER'S GREAT FOOD DEBATE

Moderator
**CHARMAINE MOK**
Editor of the *Hong Kong Tatler Best Restaurants Guide*

Guests
**RICHARD EKKEBUS**
Philibon melon with burrata and aged ham

**NURDIN TOPHAM**
Goose ham and goose prosciutto with preserved vegetables and garden herbs

**MINA PARK**
Abalone sushi with black rice and Korean chilli sauce wrapped in perilla leaves

**JANICE LEUNG HAYES**
Caramelised pork ribs

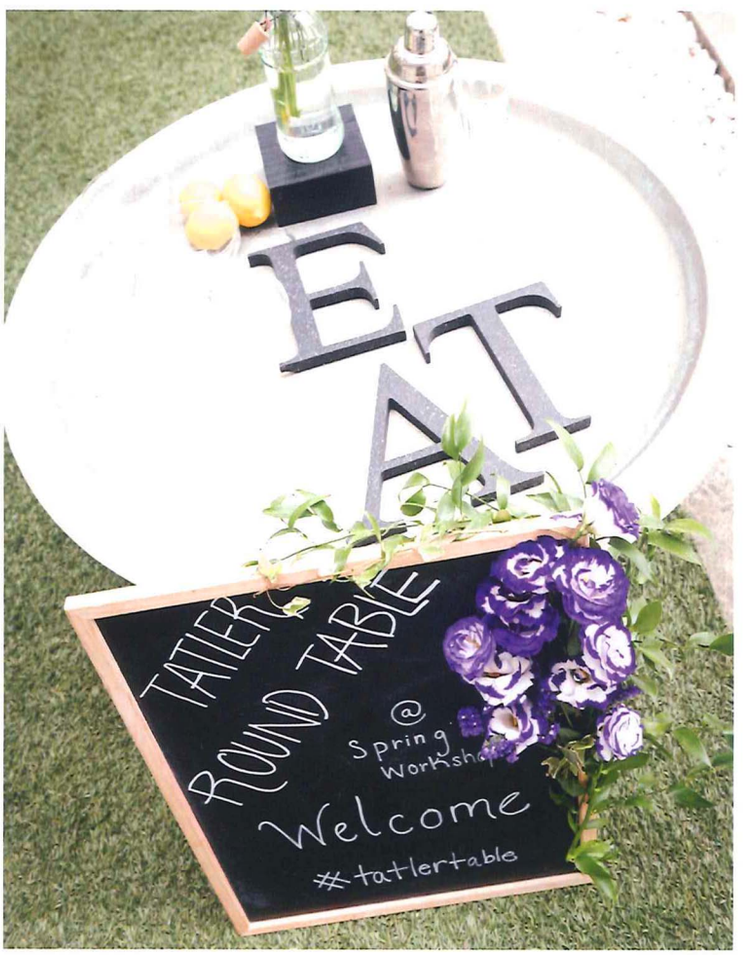
**HELINA TESEGA**
Teff chips with Ethiopian-style lentils, kale and homemade cheese

**PAOLA SINISTERRA**
Salted potatoes with homemade chimichurri sauce, seeded bread and pickles

**DAVID LAI**
Chiu Chow-style marinated raw cockles

**VICTORIA CHOW**
Poddington pea cocktail

Also in Attendance
**MIMI BROWN**
**MICHAEL LEUNG**




***PLATS DU JOUR*** *Clockwise from above left: Richard Ekkebus; Paola Sinisterra and Mina Park; Janice Leung Hayes; a detail from the day*

**LIGHT TOUCH** *Helina Tesega prepares her dish of teff chips with lentils, kale and homemade Ethiopian cheese*

*"The superfood movement gives me the shivers. If you really care about what you eat, why don't you also care about how it affects other people?"*

One of the ingredients in Helina's canapés is teff, an African grain that has gained superfood status in the West of late. The ingredient prompts an impassioned discussion about buzzwords and the fickle nature of food trends. "The superfood movement gives me the shivers," says Helina. Teff has long been a staple in Ethiopian cuisine and is now being exported in bulk to meet demand from middle-class, health-obsessed diners around the world, a trend Helina says is unsustainable. "If you really care about what you eat, why don't you also care about how it affects other people?" she asks. Mina compares the teff situation to an earlier superfood craze, for quinoa, a staple in Latin America. "When quinoa was all the rage, many Bolivians, who had subsisted on it for most of their lives, could no longer afford to eat it because farmers could make more money exporting the grain than feeding their own people."

With that, the conversation segues onto another buzzword, food miles, a measure of the distance an item has had to travel from the producer to the plate and the resources involved in getting it there. The concept implies that eating imported food is bad for the planet and for local communities, the flip side being that buying from neighbourhood producers supports local agriculture and minimises environmental damage.

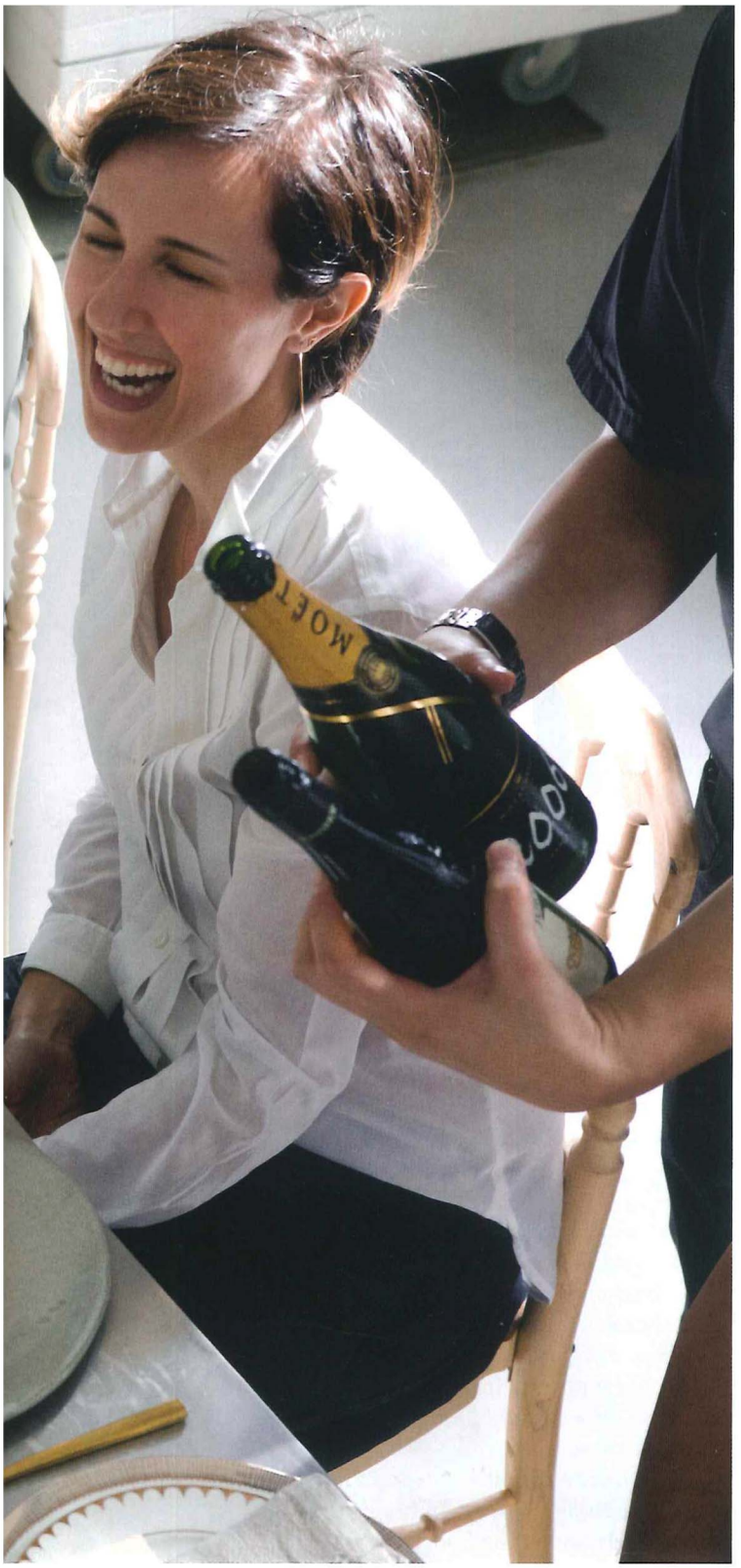
Many at the potluck table support the idea of sourcing local produce. At Richard's restaurant in Shanghai, Fifty 8° Grill, he uses only locally grown organic vegetables, which he says are mainly farmed by expatriates. Restaurateur David Lai loves using local seafood on his menus. "In Hong Kong, fresh and dried seafood is part of the culture and a

product of our unique geography," says David, owner of Neighbourhood and On Lot 10 in Central. "I think it's a tremendous luxury to live somewhere and be able to grow up eating its food." He says Hong Kong's water quality has dramatically improved over the past few years, so diners don't need to be worried about pollution in the ocean.

*"I think it's a tremendous luxury to live somewhere and be able to grow up eating its food"*

That might be difficult for the average Hongkonger to comprehend—the islands' beaches are often littered with rubbish, and the harbour and surrounding waters are constantly traversed by ferries, cruise liners and cargo ships—but Lai emphasises that "fish are not stationary. They move around in different currents and change locations with the seasons," which exposes them to clean ocean waters.

Michael Leung, who as founder of HK Farm has been growing vegetables on Spring Workshop's



***THE SPICE OF LIFE*** *Clockwise from above: Mimi Brown, the owner of Spring Workshop, shares a laugh with the lunch guests; Philibon melon with ham and cheese by Richard Ekkebus; chimichurri potatoes, pickles and bread by Paola Sinisterra, and marinated cockles by David Lai*

terrace during a year-long residency there, is on a mission to encourage restaurants to engage with farmers. His organisation draws together local farmers, artists and designers to communicate the value of rooftop farming and the benefits of locally produced food. In partnership with Spring Workshop, he recently compiled a handbook

# PEAS PLEASE

*The Poddington Pea cocktail from The Woods*

**INGREDIENTS**

50ml gin
10ml green chartreuse
4 sweet peas
1 sprig tarragon
20ml fresh lemon juice
10ml egg white

**METHOD**

Muddle peas and tarragon inside a shaker. Add all the ingredients and dry shake (with no ice) for 30 seconds. Add ice to shaker and shake again. Strain and garnish with half a pea pod, a cucumber wheel and pea tendrils.

**GOOD TASTE** *From left: Paola Sinisterra, Janice Leung Hayes and Richard Ekkebus*

of local farming initiatives, *The HK Farmers' Almanac*, to help educate Hongkongers about sustainable sources of food. The limited edition book comes packaged in a wooden planter box that can be used to grow herbs and flowers, but a digitial version is also available on Spring Workshop's website.

While sourcing locally is generally the best option, that's not to say imports are all bad. "A lot of the good imported ingredients are made by artisans who live around the globe and their productions are not very big," says David. "You need a consumer base across the world to keep them alive. The world is now a small place and these producers, wherever they are, deserve support." Victoria Chow, owner of the Hollywood Road cocktail bar The Woods, weighs in from a beverage perspective, saying the city's bar scene has been revolutionised in recent years by the importing of craft liqueurs and spirits from such producers.

Hong Kong farmers could never hope to sustain the city's population of seven million. Imports are inevitable. But that hasn't discouraged food writer Janice Leung Hayes from promoting the importance of

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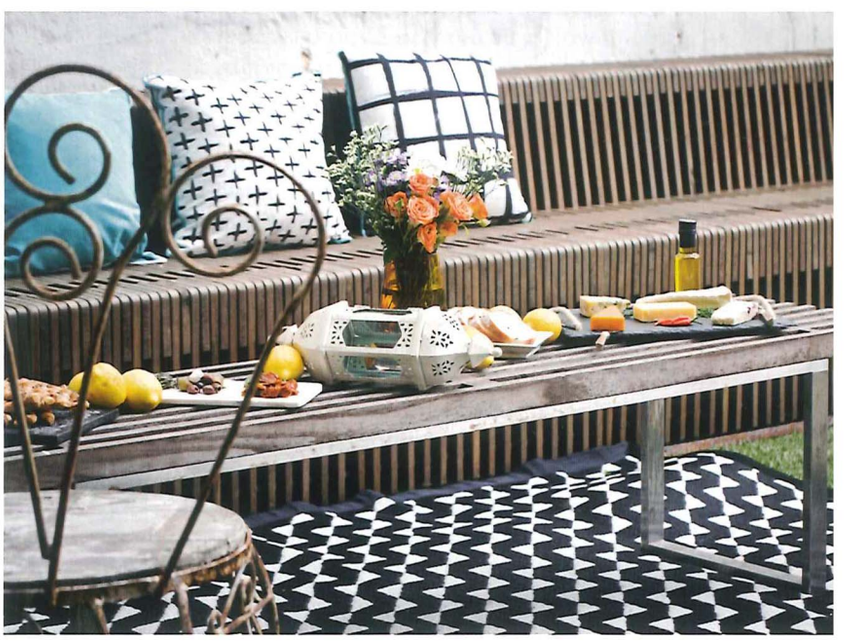


**MOVEABLE FEAST** *From left: Richard Ekkebus, Nurdin Topham, Victoria Chow, Helina Tesega, Mina Park and Charmaine Mok*

*If people realise how much time and effort goes into producing quality food, they will be less inclined to waste it and more likely to support producers who use ethical practices*

locally grown food. Janice founded the Island East Markets in 2012 and more recently the Tong Chong Street Market, which takes over Taikoo Place every Sunday from 11am. "I see markets as a platform for education as well as buying and selling because people need to understand things about the growing process," she says. If people realise how much time and effort goes into producing quality food, they will be less inclined to waste it and more likely to support producers who use ethical practices, she says.

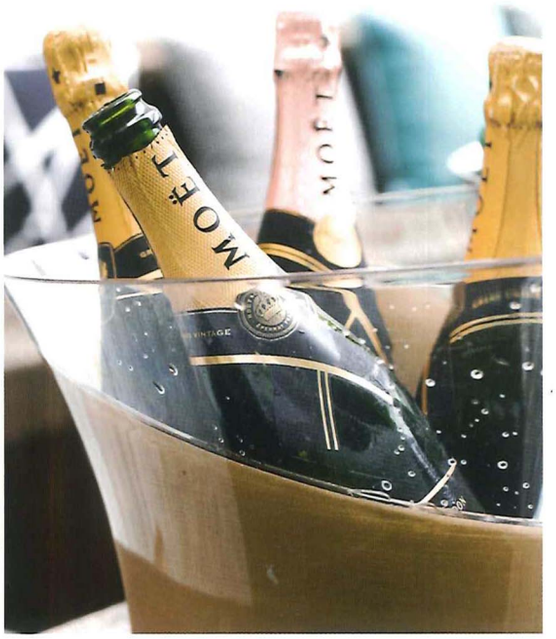
Janice has brought caramelised pork ribs to share with her fellow foodies, a dish her mother calls "one, two, three, four, five spare ribs," because the recipe calls for one teaspoon of Chinese wine, two of vinegar, three of soy sauce, four of sugar and five of water. Janice has used locally reared, chemical-free pork. "I try to eat organic food as much as possible and I think it's really important that we all do, not only for our own health but also for the health of the planet and the whole ecosystem. Modern farming methods are harming us. Chemical run-off is poisoning our waterways and contaminating our soil. People forget soil is a living thing. Once it's dead it's dead, and it's a limited resource."

Which brings us to the subject of labels—hormone free, no antibiotics, organic. How can anyone know for sure if the food they are buying is as virtuous as the supplier says it is? "Many producers in Hong Kong make all sorts of claims but a lot of the time we're not even allowed to visit these farms. That makes

PROPS AND TABLEWARE AVAILABLE THROUGH IDECORATESHOP.COM; CUTTLERY AVAILABLE THROUGH PUMPKIN.COM.HK

me very nervous," says Nurdin. Michael says the best way to know where your food is coming from and how it's grown is to form good relationships with suppliers at wet markets. Ask lots of questions about how the goods are grown and notice whose produce changes with the seasons. The ones who have the same fruit and vegetables the whole year round are probably sourcing their goods from Southeast Asia.

As the diners finish their feast, Hong Kong's notion of fine dining comes up for discussion. How is it changing? Does it still revolve around serving the most expensive ingredients, even if their production is unethical or environmentally damaging? "Luxury for Hongkongers has always been about abundance, about having everything. But I think that's changing," says avid cook and food enthusiast Paola Sinisterra, director of the fashion label Tangram. "Now it's about eating the fish your own fisherman fished this morning in local waters, and it's about reining back."




***SALUTI***
*After their hearty discussion over lunch, our guests made a toast to good food with a glass of Moët & Chandon*

There is, however, still a heavy emphasis on meat on menus in Hong Kong. Richard remembers the days when having beef once a week was considered a luxury. Now diners have come to expect it—or some other form of animal protein—every night. Both he and Nurdin are working hard to make vegetables sexy. "The protein stamp of Hong Kong is so heavy and it's complicated to get rid of that," says Richard. "Amber has been going for 10 years and we know from experience that it takes time to change people's tastes. Now we have a menu with nine courses that are pretty much all vegetarian. I think that's a big victory and shows people are moving forward."

For these gourmands, eating and drinking is most enjoyable when the diner knows how, where and by whom their food has been grown. It's all about forming a connection to what's on your plate. "Fine dining is being redefined," says Janice. "It's about working with people that you get to know—whether here or abroad—and telling a story."