

LIFE&TIMES MEN

Bread to live on

Baker Lee Kok Seng talks to **Aneeta Sundararaj** about his mission to revive the old ways of making bread

THE next time you're in a bakery, consider the ingredients used to make the loaf of bread you're buying. Other than the basic flour and water, you may also find they include things such as emulsifiers, dough conditioners and other chemicals.

You won't find such ingredients in breads made by Tommy Lee Kok Seng. "My passion is to nurture flour and fermentation," says this 38-year-old baker, who is passionate about all things French. With absolute certainty, he adds: "Wheat flour has chosen me to speak on its behalf."

Trained as a pastry chef, Lee has no plans to open a bakery. In fact, he used to work for a company that did troubleshooting for industrial bakers and he sold the very ingredients he now refuses to use. Then, fate intervened. During the time he took unpaid leave to look after his terminally ill father, he had time to ponder his career. "I was tired of eating bread that was rich in sugars and oils. I wanted to eat bread like how it was before."

Lee also wondered about people's resistance towards bread. "I couldn't understand it. We have been eating bread for so long. Suddenly, you have to have gluten-free bread and other things like that. Where did people get all these allergies from?"

He carried out extensive research on bread making and the various ingredients used. "The main culprits are bakers. They don't allow time for the fermentation process," he says on



An orderly mess.

his findings.

"One day, while on a bus, I chanced upon an Indian flour mill. There I found wheat flour, which the Indians call atta flour. And they grind the wheat using a stone mill. This means that not too much heat is used to grind the wheat into flour." With a twinkle in his eye, he says: "I found gold."

Lee brought two kilogrammes of this unprocessed wheat flour home and started his experiments. Bread making, he says involves the process of fermenting grain using yeast. Fermentation releases sugars trapped in complex starch molecules and also aids in the creation of gluten. The process determines the quality and texture of a bread.

"When I saw that I could use things around my neighbourhood to create great bread, I realised that this was something that I wanted to do," says Lee. By November 2010, he located a space in Viva Residence, off Jalan Ipoh, and opened his bakery, Tommy Le Baker. He offered four bread varieties (baguettes, sour dough, bran loaf and rye bread), a tart and a banana loaf.

"I had a lot of problems in the beginning," he says, drawing on his cigarette. "Nobody in the family

understood why I was doing it. The management of this building wanted a layout plan. They asked me what the concept was." Shaking his head, he adds: "I had nothing of such. I just wanted my own space."

Lee's life history makes it obvious, though. This is a man who will not shy away from doing something just because it's difficult or challenging. After completing his schooling in Singapore, he chose to pursue an Advanced Diploma in French Linguistics.

"I studied Language, Rhetoric and French Business. Rhetoric was very hard because I didn't know what it was. But I wanted to do it. If I have a choice between studying something I know and don't know, I'll choose what I don't know. Then, when what I don't know is on par with what I know, I'll have a choice. And having a choice is power. Rhetoric is the art of substantiating arguments. Don't simply say something. If you want to say, make sure you have something to substantiate what you say."

Giving Tommy Le Baker a sweeping glance, this marathon runner says: "This is my workshop for fermentation. It's an orderly mess." Above the sounds coming from the radio, which is tuned to the French channel France Bleu Basse Normandie, he adds: "It's quaint and tiny. It's where I can do my own thing."

Asked what's the first thing Lee associates with France, his answer is a simple: "Starving".

It wasn't because the couple he was staying with didn't feed him. In fact, he joined them for dinner each day. However, for a Chinese man who grew up accustomed to eating rice and



PIX BYNIK ROSLI ISHAK

"It's quaint and tiny. It's where I can do my own thing."

Lee Kok Seng

noodles, he thought that each meal in France consisted of only salad and meat, and ignored the bread. Then, he wondered how people could eat bread for dinner and ended up secretly stashing away biscuits in his room.

"Then, one day," says Lee "at the end of the meal, my host said 'dessert'. But she said it as though she was asking a question. It hit me that dessert is an option and everything else on the table such as meat, salad and of course, bread was a necessity."

This newfound respect and belief that bread is a necessity permeates every facet of his life, down to the layout of his bakery: "See, the bread part is in front. The pastries and cakes are on the left, hidden a bit." Lee is emphatic when he adds: "It's as though the bread is saying, 'Don't worry. You eat me every day. I make you strong, but you don't have to notice me.' So, I'm going to bring bread back to the front."

For those who have doubts on Lee's seriousness in championing the process of fermentation, here is

his explanation: "I like to think that I've brought together all the elements to make a bread. Now, I have to give them time before I intervene and take them to another level. I imagine what's happening inside the dough. There's the mummy yeast and the papa yeast. They need time to 'make love' and make babies. If I increase the heat they will make too many babies who are agitated. If it's too cold, they are just stiff. So, I need to give them the ideal environment to create beautiful children."

While that explanation may border on the absurd, Lee says: "Don't laugh. Sometimes, when I tell people about fermentation and I used words such as enzymes and starch, they give me a blur look. When I use this, with love and sex, they get it."

Lee message is clear: "I believe that we should respect what nature gives us. I think of what I'm doing as more mission work than business. We should nurture what nature gives us, revive the process of making bread and elevate its nutritional value."

WIN

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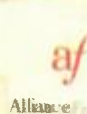
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