

LIFE&TIMES **LIVING**

Karate Kid in the kitchen

Michelin Star chef Christian Mittermeier talks to **Aneeta Sundararaj** about kitchens and cooking



Electrolux Inspiration kitchen range.

YOU'RE hungry and so you reach for a packet of mixed nuts. You don't want to rip apart the packaging in case the nuts go flying everywhere. You open the kitchen drawer to reach for a pair of scissors and it's not there. Short of swearing, you reach for the closest knife and hack that wretched plastic open, ...and throw all the nuts into your mouth.

It's impossible for chef Christian Mittermeier to imagine such a scenario.

"The kitchen in my house — which is more than 600 years old — is the mother of all kitchens," says this jolly 49-year-old German. "I have a work table; it has no drawers; just the hob. Everything else I need is in the cabinets at the back or on the side. Everything has its place. As a professional chef, I don't have three scissors. I have one. That one scissors is sharp and I know exactly where it is. I'm like that Karate Kid — with my eyes closed, I can do anything in my kitchen."

Mittermeier was here recently for the KL Big Kitchen Festival 2015. The culinary festival was organised by Kuala Lumpur City Hall in partnership with the Ministry of Tourism & Culture. He conducted cooking demonstrations to showcase tips and tricks that everyone could apply in their own kitchens using the Electrolux Inspiration Kitchen Range.

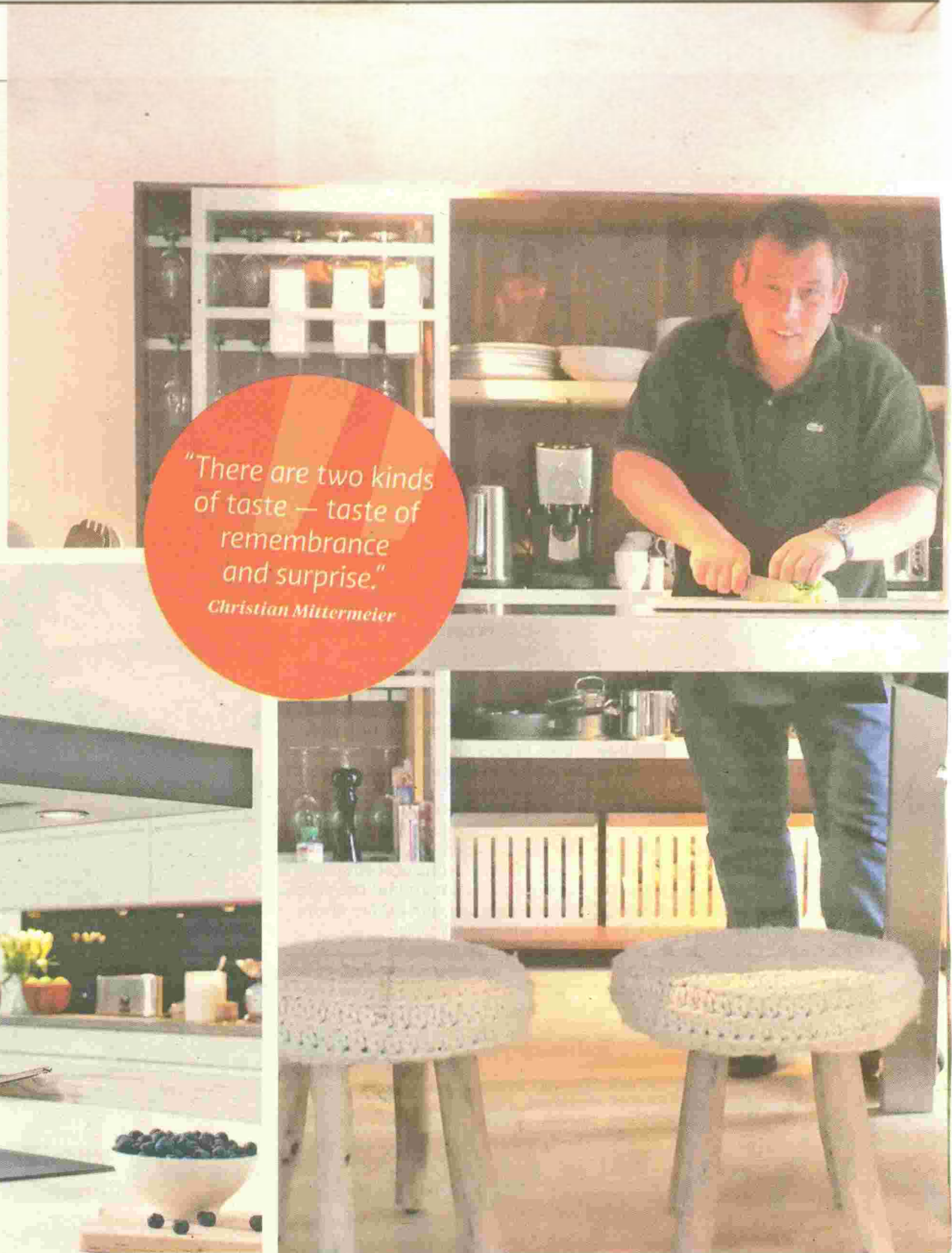
As the only Michelin Star chef at the Festival, he says: "If a kitchen looks good, it will function well. There's no one way to achieving a Michelin star. Some people do the job as good as they can. Others do things in a different way. The most important thing for me is that the ingredients must be good. The product must be excellent. If you get a bad piece of meat, however much you try, you're never going to get a good dish. The judges for the Michelin Star don't come once or twice. They come again and again. Sometimes up to four times. They want to see consistency. Not just

your creativity."

Unable to give a word to the kind of food he creates, Mittermeier adds that it's not possible to compare a Malaysian kitchen to a European one. He prefers to explain how a kitchen — any kitchen — develops and evolves.

Although he's not fond of what's considered "traditional food" — which he says is only for "really old people" — Mittermeier is still conservative and tells of how he came to understand what this means.

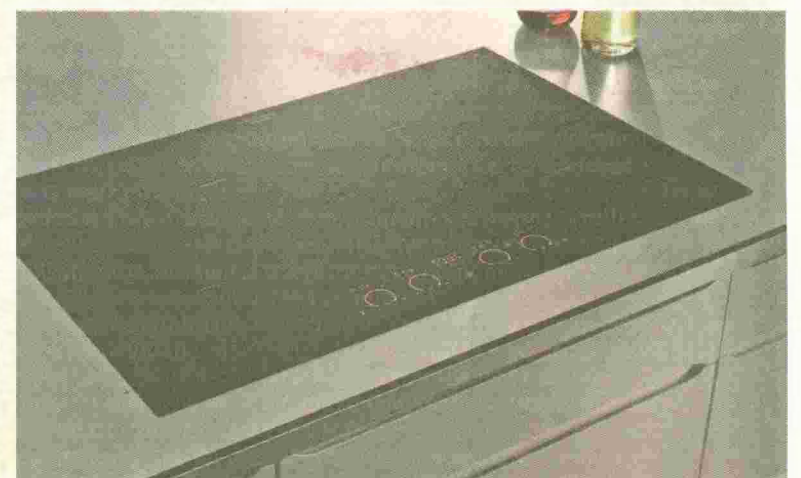
"One day, after a catering job, we were in a bar in Berlin. It was a small bar. Only about 12 places and the barkeeper was once a butler in England. We started to talk about politics and he taught me a good lesson about the two kinds of conservatives. One holds on to traditions because they're good. Another kind of conservative holds on to these traditions because they are scared of change. I'm the first kind."



"There are two kinds of taste — taste of remembrance and surprise."

Christian Mittermeier

Chef Mittermeier showing off his culinary skills in the 'mother of all kitchens'.



Having a reliable hob is important in the kitchen.

Having only been involved in the hospitality industry, he says: "My baby basket was kept in a kitchen. My uncles and aunts and parents were all in the industry. I had no choice."

This lack of choice has not led to lack of freedom, though. He explains that he believes that a kitchen has a

social component in it. "It's the one place in the house where everyone is equal. In the kitchen, I'm free to do what I like. I'm very happy creating my own food. I don't like to be told what to do. There's no crying or throwing pots and pans in my kitchen. If you start to throw your

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Inspiration CombiSteam oven can whip up great meals while preserving food's natural nutrition.

pots and pans, you don't show any control."

Insisting that he doesn't search for employees, but co-workers, he adds: "When I was 18, I took an apprenticeship with a butler. I was trying to make everything correct and kept asking him if I was doing things OK. He turned to me and told me not to ask so many questions because if I did, I may not like the answers."

Of all his experiences, the one he recalls the most has to be catering for

a party where the guests were so rich that they could buy anything. "If you said you were serving the best caviar, these people could afford to go out and buy this caviar. So, it wasn't possible to impress them with luxury goods. I had to give them things they couldn't buy with money. Since the theme of the party was "six" — there were six custom-made cars for these guests and all of them were sold that night — I used my connections and found things that they could never buy, such as six kinds of whisky that

were no longer in production or six types of coffee that they couldn't find anywhere. Or six red wines that no one else could produce."


On his maiden visit here, Mittermeier whips out his phone and shows us a video he's taken during his tour of a pasar malam where he came across a *kway teow* vendor. "Look, it's a coal stove but when he adds the stock, he's creating steam and that locks the moisture in the food. This is how cooking should be. The benefit of cooking with steam like this is that the food will have better crusts and more moisture."

We can replicate such cooking styles in our kitchens, says Chef Mittermeier. "With a steam oven and an induction hob, you can create something similar. Of course, in a tropical country the refrigerator is a must. In addition, it should have a separate section for meat and vegetables."


The point of contention between us remains the hood. After all, a *kway teow* vendor at a pasar malam doesn't have a hood in his outdoor kitchen.

"Well," Mittermeier retorts, nonplussed, "if you don't have a hood in your kitchen, then you'll need a good painter. All your walls are sure to be stained."

Mittermeier says all forms of cooking have similar aims: "There are two kinds of taste — taste of remembrance and surprise. If you stick to these aims, the people you cook for are bound to be happy."




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