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"That to succeed, I need to do what I want and love, which is being a chef."

Abdul Halim Jahari

NO EASY ROAD TO SUCCESS

A chef with no formal training is relishing his remarkable journey to international success, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

WHEN a man wins a competition, it is customary for him to show some sort of elation. Some will punch the air while others may smile from ear to ear or let out a whoop of joy.

Not Abdul Halim Jahari, sous chef at DoubleTree By Hilton Kuala Lumpur.

When his bosses introduce Halim as the Culinary Cup Gold Winner for the Hilton South-East Asia F&B Masters 2015, he sits quietly, with his head bent and arms crossed. There is an air of calm humility about him.

Slowly, as his story unfolds, it becomes clear that it is this remarkable lack of arrogance that's carried him throughout his career.

UNEXPECTED CAREER PATH

The story of how Halim, 32, became a chef at the hotel's Italian Tosca restaurant, began when he was still a teenager helping his sister run a stall in Muar, Johor.

Their most popular dish was what he calls their own version of KFC chicken. When he completed his basic schooling, his plan was to go to university to do a course in Accountancy. But he found the qualifying exams too tough and turned his sights to a career in something else instead.

One of the first few job offers that Halim received was from a friend to work in the kitchen at Berjaya Times Square. "I worked in the cafeteria, preparing food for the staff," shares Halim. "So it was Malay style food."

He also worked as a fishmonger for a supermarket chain. "My mother made it look so easy to buy and clean fish," he says.

Still, Halim appreciated the lessons he learnt on his regular visits to the Selayang wholesale market.

None of these experiences, however, prepared him for what he says, was a "culture shock" when he joined the kitchen at Hilton KL in 2004.

"When I came in, I was really fresh," he reveals, wearing a small smile of nostalgia.

Apart from having to

often flared, Halim also had to master a whole new language when preparing western cuisine. For something that the layman called "mixed vegetables", the correct words in this kitchen were "mirepoix".

"These are terms you'd only know if you had gone to culinary school," he says, admitting that those first few months were a steep learning curve.

Subjected to occasional bouts of bullying, such as the time a chef shouted at him and said, "Why do you work here if you know nothing?", Halim was initially hurt.

Friends, however, offered words of encouragement and told him to ignore such comments. Comforted and determined, Halim kept his nose to the grindstone and in time, mastered many of the skills needed to do his job.

Some of these skills are now second nature to him, such as slow-cooking fish at a constant temperature to maintain moisture and tenderness. He also has to be precise when cutting vegetables. Then, there's ice cream to be made in less than two minutes, using liquid nitrogen.

HIS SON, HIS FAN

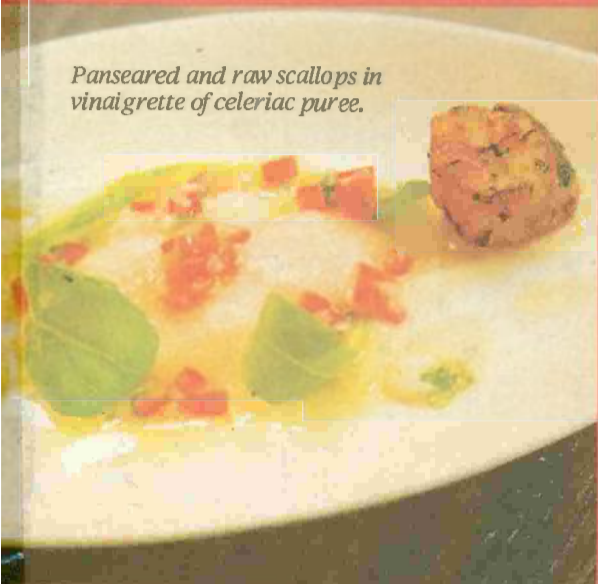
The year 2009 was a meaningful one for this affable chef. It was the year he got married. Today, he's the proud father of three boys. With a broad smile on his face, he tells the story of when he brought his eldest son, Ammar Rayyan, to work sometime last year. There was wonder on the little boy's face when he saw his father all kitted out in his uniform. His six-year-old son, he recalls, couldn't help exclaiming: "Ayah macam Masterchef? (Dad is like a Masterchef)." (Dad is like a Masterchef).

By the time the selection process for the competition began in 2015, Halim was ready. In recognition of his efforts, he was picked to compete in the Hilton South-East Asia F&B Masters competition. His bosses made time to help him hone his skills and gave him pointers.

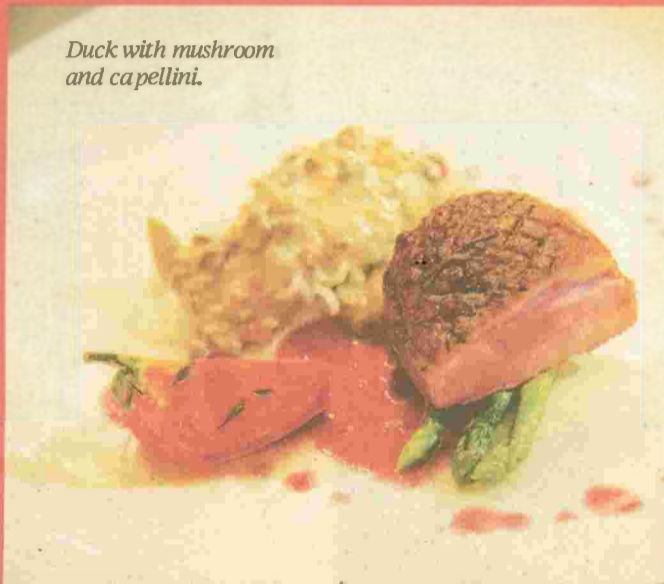
The purpose of the competition, Halim explains, is to develop the skills of an individual and to boost his self-confidence.

During the three-and-a-half-hour competition, contestants were given three ingredients, scallops, duck and chocolate, to create a three-course meal.

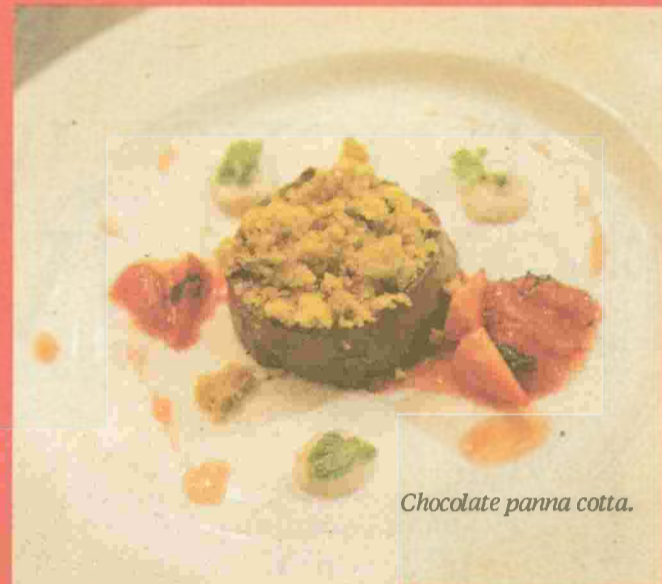
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Panseared and raw scallops in vinaigrette of celeriac puree.



Duck with mushroom and capellini.



Chocolate panna cotta.



Chef Halim's son Ammar Rayyan.



Chef Halim with a yellow fin tuna auction at Tokyo Tsukiji fish market.



Chef Halim with a fishing apparatus at Tokyo's Tsukiji fish market.

with a vinaigrette of celeriac puree and carpaccio (raw), served with tomato-coriander relish.

"I knew I had a chance to win when I saw I was the only one who offered the scallops in two different styles," he shares.

Hilton KL is now serving this dish and the two other dishes that Halim cooked at the competition with a makeover of sorts though. Halim's scallop dish has been given a more fanciful name, Duo Di Capesante Con Crema Di Sedano Rapa.

FULL CIRCLE

One of the prizes that Halim won was an all-expenses-paid trip to Japan. It was almost coming full circle for Halim and, for him, one of the must-visit places in Tokyo was the world-famous Tsukiji Fish Market. He has seen the enormous respect the Japanese have for their food. With a sighing, he adds: "There was no smell. It was so clean. And no flies either."

Halim also discovered that, unlike in Malaysia, the Japanese paid more for locally-produced food while imported food was cheaper.

In spite of having been in the industry for a relatively short time, Halim has learnt many useful lessons. One is that it's necessary to keep things simple and that food must be presented in a palatable manner.

Kitchen knives too must be kept sharp. "If not, you may lose control," explains Halim. "With a sharp knife, you never have to use force to cut anything."

But what is the most important lesson he has learnt? He shares: "That to succeed, I need to do what I want and love, which is being a chef."