

# Knocking judges over with local touch

A Malaysian team showed Malaysia 'Boleh' by winning the silver medal at the recent Culinary Olympics in Germany, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



**Chef Mohamad Noor Musa** (centre) and members of the winning team at the Culinary Olympics.

WE all know London hosted the Olympics last year. However, are you aware that some four months after the Olympic Games, a town called Erfurt in Germany played host to another sort of Olympics?

This is the World Culinary Olympics or, as it's actually called, *Internationale Kochkunst Ausstellung*.

"It is commonly known as Culinary Olympics," says Chef Richmond Lim Beng Poh, 48, executive chef at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre. The event began in 1900 and is held every four years. Last year, more than 1,300 chefs from 54 countries took part and the Malaysian team clinched the silver medal in a group category.

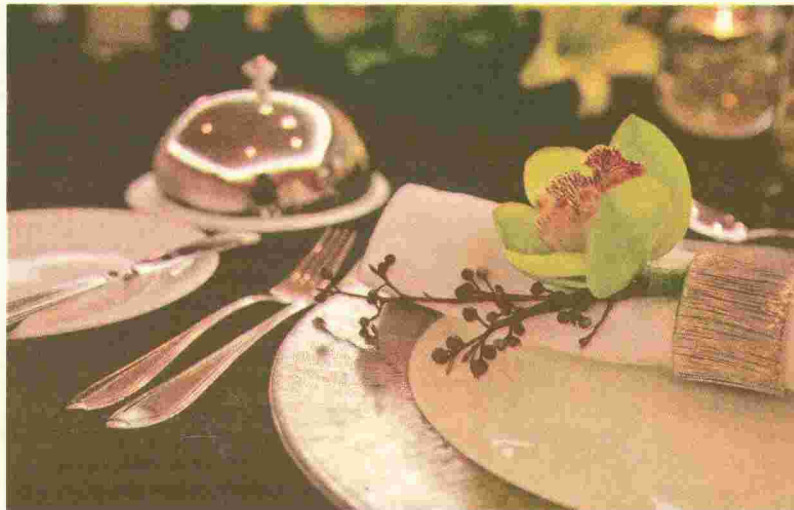
There is obvious pride in Rich-

mond's voice when he says: "One of my chefs, Mohamad Noor Musa, won a silver in the Individual category with his entry, Symphony Seafood Platter."

Mohamad Noor, 35, says shyly: "For me, it's a dream come true." The fourth among five children, his journey to internationally-recognised culinary "sportsman" began in Pokok Sena, Kedah.

"I was in a science school. My family wanted me to study to become an engineer. My sketches were good, but I couldn't understand what I was doing. This was not my passion. I wanted to study culinary art."

Initially, his father did not approve of his choice of career. Exasperated, Mohamad Noor says: "No one truly understands what a chef does. Most



**5-Star Banqueting.**



**Seafood Platter - Winning Entry for C**

people say that if I become one, it's a *tukang masak*. That's not what a chef does. A chef doesn't just cook. There is R&D. We are food designers and also look after the business."

He then adds: "But my mother's dream, 'It's your dream', gave her consent. I left engineering. I went to Pulau Langkawi to study culinary art."

Mohamad Noor never looked back. Today, he is the garde manger chef at the catering arm of the convention centre. This term refers to a person who specialises in cold kitchen, which means he's in charge of dishes such as appetisers and sandwiches.

When describing the creative process for the winning entrée at the Culinary Olympics, it is evident



ef Mohamad Noor Musa.

Black Sevruga Caviar on Black Atlantic Cod.



Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre, Executive Chef, **Richmond Lim** (left) and Senior Sous Chef, **Mohd Noor Musa**.

Then, we had classical, modern, contemporary and, now, we have science and technology." A moment later, he repeats, "Yes. The science and technology of food."

It makes sense when he explains that it is common to be catering to 1,000 people at any one time in the convention centre.

"I have to make sure the food served to each and every one is the same," he says. "With technology, we can serve up to 104 plates in six minutes. That's 1,000 plates in 18 minutes."

Richmond has a formula: STT — speed, time and temperature.

"The food must be served fast, on time and at the right temperature," he says. "We also edit our kitchens regularly." Again, after a momentary pause, he repeats: "Yes. Editing. We edit our kitchens."

In a matter-of-fact manner, he explains: "We have hygiene officers who make sure that procedures are followed. Our staff must know when to put gloves on, when not to put them on. Remember, the quality of the food must be good."

Glancing at Mohamad Noor, Richmond adds: "We work as a team. Take Mohamad Noor. It's like Bluetooth — I think of something and he'll know what I mean. For example, I just have to say I want to create the seven wonders of the sea world and he'll understand what I want."

Mohamad Noor says: "Actually, Richmond doesn't just say that. He'll tell us a story. He'll say, 'When I'm underwater, I want to see diamonds, things that are shining.'" So, I try and interpret what he means. Diamond means he wants something special

and luxurious."

His excitement is undeniable as he starts to speak in clipped tones. "I mean, the ocean. Underwater. Exclusive. So much to choose from. There's coral and so many types of fish. Yellow king fish, Tasmanian trout."

Richmond reaches for his award-winning, revolutionary guidebook to banqueting called *The Stainless Steel Kitchen*. He turns the pages and points to a picture. "This was what we created. It's called Black On Black — black Sevruga caviar on black Atlantic cod."

With such tantalising dishes created with precision and attention to detail, does anything ever go wrong?

Richmond laughs and tells several stories, the funniest of which is this: "It was an 8-course Chinese dinner for 1,600 people. So, that's 160 tables.

The second course was sharks' fin soup. We hired some casual staff. One of them was pushing the trolley used to transport the soup. He thought the entire route would be smooth, so he decided to jump onto the trolley. He didn't see a cable on the floor. It was like going over a speed bump. He had no control and the whole thing tipped over. So we had to move the second course to the fifth course and make a quick replacement dish."

Despite their skills in creating gourmet cuisine, the favourite food of these chefs is something closer to home. For Mohamad Noor, it's *nasi and sambal petai*. As for Richmond, he "likes a good salad with good quality pieces of meat".

"It has to be something simple and natural and must be flavoured by its own original taste," he says.



the two chefs think along the same lines. Mohamad Noor explains: "Say you want to eat a prawn. If I just fry one and give it to you, will you want to eat it?"

Having established that a fried prawn held in front of one's face may not look appetising, he adds: "Now, imagine if I present it in a proper way. I put it on a plate and arrange it with other ingredients to make it look harmonious. You'll surely want to eat it, yes?"

Richmond interjects: "We must connect everything back to the food. Cooking is a skill. Presentation is an art. And eating is the hardest part. For instance, take sambal petai. If it doesn't taste good, ask yourself why. Is it the prawn? Are there too many

prawns? Are the prawns fresh?"

Leaning forward, he elaborates: "You see, we eat first with our eyes. We see the food. Then, we smell it. Taste and texture come next — when we put the food in our mouth. Finally, when we come together and listen to each other's comments about the food, we hear about it."

With a desire to tantalise the five senses of the judges with his culinary creation, Mohamad Noor says: "My mission and vision was to promote the country and our food. I also wanted to highlight all our natural resources."

He avoided using herbs such as tarragon, sage and thyme. Instead, he

focused on local ingredients, using bunga kantan, lemon grass, ginger flower and kaffir lime leaf with seafood to create a dish of "harmonious colours".

He says: "When I use crab, squid and mussels, I can come up with all sorts of colours such as orange, black and pink."

"Can you see that passion in him?" Richmond asks. "It's these kinds of skills that I like to tap into."

He then explains more about managing an award-winning banqueting service, some of which sounds odd in a kitchen setting. For instance, "We started in the 1970s with traditional