

LEADING LADIES

Women are increasingly making their mark in the culinary world, and in Asia, this is true nowhere more so than in Singapore. Meet Janice Wong, Karla Mendoza, Sabrina Stillhart, Shen Tan, and Violet Oon, five of the most talented female chefs working in the Lion City today. BY BRIAN SPENCER

Just Desserts
Celebrated pastry chef Janice Wong at 2am:dessertbar, a Holland Village haunt for the sweet-tooth set.



In his tell-all memoir *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*, Anthony Bourdain details at length the machismo, unabashed bluster, and foul-mouthed tomfoolery he experienced—and happily wallowed in—while rising through the ranks of New York City kitchens. The worlds he describes are decidedly masculine; the few women who thrived in these rough-and-tumble boys' clubs, Bourdain notes, did so only by following the unspoken boys'-club rules. "What the system seeks, what it requires, is someone, anyone, who can hold up his station, play the game without getting bent out of shape and taking things personally," he writes.

That may still be true, but times have

Turning the Tables
Pizzeria Mozza's Karla Mendoza, above. Opposite, from left: Swiss chef Sabrina Stillhart helms the kitchen at Gordon Ramsay's Bread Street Kitchen Singapore; Janice Wong's signature Cassis Plum.

changed since Bourdain cut his culinary teeth in the 1970s and '80s. Unseemly shenanigans in restaurants across the world remain part and parcel of the trade, but as in most professions women have long since stormed the kitchen in greater numbers, altering the food world's economy and dynamics. Gender is increasingly irrelevant—in most cases.

For all the strides women have made across the industry, some divides linger, particularly in Asia's upper tiers. Take, for example, the influential Asia's 50 Best Restaurants list, which ranks venues in more than 25 countries across the continent. In 2016, only one restaurant helmed by a female chef—Lanshu Chen's Le Moût in Taichung, Taiwan—made the cut, at number 30. As in its global and other regional iterations, the awards also include a separate group for "Asia's Best Female Chef," which suggests a certain imbalance in terms of who is running the show at the region's top dining establishments.

This overall lack of female representation indicates neither a sexist conspiracy nor a gender-based talent gap, but rather that, particularly in Asia, women leading prestigious restaurants and other food enterprises is still an emerging trend. If the exponential progress of recent years in places like Singapore is any indication, however, it is a trend that's gaining steam.

Few Singaporean women have made a bigger culinary splash this decade than wunderkind chef Janice Wong, who was only 23 when she launched the critically acclaimed 2am:dessertbar in 2007 and who has been twice named "Asia's Best Pastry Chef" by Asia's 50 Best Restaurants. "I'm sure the second time was a fluke, because you're not really supposed to win it twice in a row," she claims.

Maybe, but Wong has built a burgeoning empire since opening 2am:dessertbar, a cool, contemporary hangout in Holland Village where staff pair wine and designer cocktails with such signature desserts as Cassis Plum, a blackcurrant bombe served with elderflower yogurt foam, plum liqueur, and yuzu rubies. At her 370-square-meter production facility, Wong and her small team of chocolatiers today make at least 1,500 chocolates per day, 365 days a year.

The demand stems partly from an influx of galas Wong curates for some of the world's most iconic luxury brands, including Gucci, Dior, and Fendi. Many of these affairs feature Wong's fanciful "edible art": at one Tiffany and Co. launch party, for instance, she suspended 3,500 sugar "diamonds" over a miniature New York City skyline made of chocolate.

In her office, which is littered with white



canvases splashed with a riot of color, Wong explained how she balances the linked, yet disparate elements of her meticulous culinary enterprises. "For desserts, it's always flavor first; for chocolates, it's always design first," she says. "I realized that all the fashion brands care about is the color tone; all they want to see is how everything comes together. Of course, flavor has to be just as important to me."

Production further increased after Wong branched out this year with her first overseas ventures—Cobo House by 2am:dessertbar in Hong Kong, and an eponymous dessert bar in Tokyo's Newoman mall. "We have not expanded for eight years; we kept it at one, and focused on creativity, not on replication," she says. "Now, we're in our prime and moving forward. I feel very comfortable and confident about it."

Over at Marina Bay Sands, meanwhile, Filipina chef Karla Mendoza has helmed Pizzeria Mozza since its debut in December 2010. She opened the original Mozza in Los Angeles as well, and is now the longest-tenured member of the team led by food magnates Mario Batali, Nancy Silverton, and Joe Bastianich. Speaking at the pizzeria—packed at lunchtime on a Wed-

The Details

2am:dessertbar
21a Lorong Liput, Holland Village; 65/6291-9727; 2amdessertbar.com.

Pizzeria Mozza
The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands, 10 Bayfront Ave.; 65/6688-8522; singapore.pizzeria-mozza.com.

Bread Street Kitchen
The Shoppes at Marina Bay Sands, 10 Bayfront Ave.; 65/6688-5665; gordonramsay-restaurants.com.

National Kitchen by Violet Oon
National Gallery Singapore, 1 St. Andrew's Rd.; 65/9834-9935; violetoon.com.



nesday—the 45-year-old chef credits the restaurant's enduring popularity to her staff's focus. "For us, consistency over 700 diners, seven days a week, 365 days a year, is really difficult," she says. "That's the challenge of the pizzeria—it's a machine that has to do the same food over and over again."

Mendoza joined the Batali & Bastianich Hospitality Group with an impressive résumé that included stints at award-winning restaurants across New York, including Eleven Madison Park and the now-defunct Savoy. At what is arguably Singapore's finest pizzeria—where she used to sleep overnight to oversee leavening dough—the chef still works 12 to 13 hours a day, balancing the management of more than 60 kitchen staff with her cooking passion. "I like the freedom, the adrenaline rush, the sweat, the hard work ... that's exhilarating to me," she says. "I like the pressure. I thrive on it."

Like Mendoza, Swiss chef Sabrina Stillhart has quickly worked her way to the top of a high-profile hospitality company making waves in Singapore. Since joining the Gordon Ramsay Group nearly a decade ago, Stillhart has logged time at London's Savoy Grill and York & Albany,



among others, and for three years was the senior sous chef at the original Bread Street Kitchen. Now, she's executive chef at Bread Street Kitchen Singapore, which last year opened as one of the latest celebrity-chef collaborations with Marina Bay Sands. "Everyone has great expectations of Gordon Ramsay, and I like to live up to them as well," she says.

The restaurant is part of a significant expansion of Ramsay's Bread Street Kitchen brand, with other outlets for the modern British bistro landing in Hong Kong and Dubai. Practical and forthright in discussing her new leadership role in Singapore, Stillhart works long days, six days a week, and says she can't get enough of it. "It's not an easy industry—absolutely not—for anyone, male or female. But when you've got your heart, your love, and your passion inside, that's all that matters."

Since leaving a marketing career eight years

Local Legend

Above: Cooking doyenne Violet Oon with her son and daughter at her namesake Peranakan Bistro in Bukit Timah.

ago, Singaporean chef Shen Tan has dabbled in just about every corner of the local food scene. She started with a hawker stall—Madam Tan's Nasi Lemak—at the famed Maxwell Food Centre, an invaluable, if short-lived experience that she found both humbling and educational. "It was a great way to learn how to do your business, and to learn how to cook," she says. "Nine square meters, that's all I had—inventory, prep, retail, everything in that nine square meters."

Soon after, Tan unveiled her first restaurant, Wok & Barrel, where she attracted a loyal following with inventive mod-Sin dishes like *bak chor mee* (pork confit with tagliatelle in a spicy sauce) and *rendang* pizza. She closed the restaurant in 2013, opened another one at the Raffles Hotel Arcade (it shut down last year), and now runs a food-and-beverage consultancy while also serving as culinary director for Gastrogig, which curates secret pop-up food parties and private events. "My priorities have changed. I'm not interested in killing myself and working 17 hours a day," Tan says.

Of course, one cannot discuss local chefs here without recognizing Singaporean food personality Violet Oon. She has seen and done it all over her decades-long career, from her early days as a music and food journalist to later writing best-selling cookbooks, serving as the Singapore Tourism Board's food ambassador, and becoming a restaurant entrepreneur. And, at age 66, she's just getting started.

Building on the success of her chic Peranakan bistro Violet Oon Singapore, and now partnering with TWG Tea co-founder Manoj Murjani, last November Oon opened National Kitchen by Violet Oon in the new US\$380 million National Gallery. The intimate 70-seat space, decked out with black-leather banquettes, recessed mirrored ceilings, and original Peranakan tiles, is Oon's personal homage to Singapore's diverse culinary heritage.

Oon's aunt handed down many of the recipes; others Oon draws from memory, like the chili crab she fondly remembers from visiting a particular Bedok Beach restaurant in the mid-1960s. "I'm so fascinated by the whole story of food," she says. "There's so much sentiment to it, and I feel this place really resonates with Singaporeans." One can sense this love affair in her new space, lined as it is with photos from her past celebrating inspirational moments with food.

Spain's renowned Elena Arzak, one of just seven female chefs to ever hold three Michelin stars, once said during an interview that "the possibility of cooking was always in my heart." All these accomplished women would no doubt agree. ●

COURTESY OF VIOLET OON