



PORTRAITS OF A CHEF

THE LIFE OF A CHEF
ISN'T EASY.
CONVERSATIONS
WITH SOME OF THE
PHILIPPINES' BEST
HAVE US MORE
CONVINCED THAT
THESE ARE THE PEOPLE
WHO TAKE THEIR WORK
HOME WITH THEM.
HERE ARE SIX CHEFS
ON WHAT GETS THEM
UP IN THE MORNING,
AND WHAT KEEPS THEM
UP AT NIGHT.

by NINA UNLAY
Photography by MIGUEL NACIANGENO
Photos of Josh Boutwood by SONNY THAKUR

JORDY NAVARRA

TOYO EATERY

TOYO EATERY HAS MADE A NAME FOR ITSELF FOR ITS ELEVATED TAKES ON FILIPINO CLASSICS, ALTHOUGH JORDY HIMSELF MIGHT FIGHT YOU ON THE WORD “ELEVATED.” NEVERTHELESS, THIS CLASSY RESTAURANT’S INTERPRETATION OF FILIPINO DISHES HAS WON THE MIELE ONE TO WATCH AWARD FOR ASIA 2018.

Jordy Navarra finds it more enjoyable to eat in other restaurants. “It feels... narcissistic,” he says about eating his own food. He cringes when he describes how critical he can be: “Even when it’s simple, actually even more so when it’s simple. Simple things like rice can’t hide behind layers of complexity.”

But for Jordy, the act of making food is not an exclusively objective, critical experience—it’s simultaneously an emotional one. As the creator of Toyo Eatery, Jordy has practically melded heart and mind with the concept of Toyo—rarely referring to himself as a single unit, preferring pronouns like “we”—and the idea of homey flavors that everyone can enjoy. “Cooks like to cook for other people,” he says. His home kitchen—in little things like equipment and ingredients—has migrated into Toyo’s kitchen, where he can enjoy the company of other cooks. They don’t mind fucking up once or twice; rather, the fuck-up might just be a step in the right direction.

“Food is dynamic. It’s everyone’s. Chinese restaurants back in the day would put Spanish names on Chinese food. For [Filipinos], asado is char siu. In Argentina, you say asado and they’ll be like, ‘Why is it sweet? Why does it look like Chinese food?’ For Filipinos, you can’t tell us that it’s not supposed to be like that. If we were more mayabang [as a] gastronomic culture, we would give it a different name and people would say, ‘Oh that’s ganito from the Philippines.’ But we’re not like that.”

That’s the fun of it, he claims—that in the Philippines, international cuisines can live in the same menu. “At Toyo, we don’t think, ‘We’re gonna elevate Filipino cuisine!’ or ‘We’re gonna make it fancy!’ It was never [about] that. As Filipino chefs in the Philippines, how will we represent where we’re from, how we eat, what we do?”





“Ano ba ang Filipino condiment?
What do we contribute to the
culinary world? There are lots that
are similar with other cultures.
But banana ketchup is something
very Pinoy. For others, it’s weird.
For us, it’s normal.”







JOSH BOUTWOOD

HELM

FROM ALCHEMY
IN BORACAY TO
TEST KITCHEN,
SAVAGE, AND NOW
HELM—
JOSH BOUTWOOD'S
RESTAURANTS
BEGIN WITH
MINDFULLY
CREATED
CONCEPTS AND
END WITH
INCREDIBLE
FLAVORS. BUT HE'S
NOT FINISHED.



Josh Boutwood eats for sustenance, not for pleasure. After a long hard day's work in the kitchen, he's more than happy to come home and open the fridge to leftover rice and yesterday's chicken, which isn't to say he isn't thinking about the pleasures of food constantly—rather, he goes to sleep thinking about it. So often that his daughter has received a “Shit, get it out of the oven!” when she attempted to wake him up.

It also doesn't leave him detached from the idea of food: “You have to name the child,” he tells us, after he pulls out a slimy layer from his ginormous mason jar of kombucha. The mother scoby inside had been sitting there for two years. A scoby is what they call the base mixture of yeast and bacteria that grows over time. Eventually, the mother births children, which can be put into another jar to make more kombucha. In time, the child becomes the mother. From outside the jar looking in, it looks like mucky line art. It's almost magical in its rawness.

“It's time,” Josh says. “Time is my favorite ingredient.” He pulls out what looks like a hundred teabags out of their box to start boiling the tea component in the kombucha. I ask if he always prefers teabags to tea leaves. No, he says. Time was low on stock that day; it was the week of Helm's opening. But the chef's trickiest ingredients—time, restrictions, rules—are also Josh's best.

“Helm is my playground,” he says over three cups of Americanos (surely he still enjoys the pleasure and function of a good cup of coffee). The menu changes every four months, according to a theme, usually born from an idea or thought that he has during one of his many other projects. The current menu features local ingredients sourced from different regions of the Philippines. The kombucha—a vital part of his drink and food pairings—is just another rung on the jungle gym of Josh's mind, and Helm just another step in the right direction. “I honestly don't believe we should measure our success as an end goal, rather than as a journey. I don't look back on milestones. I would rather look forward to challenges, and in saying that... my work will never be finished. There will always be something that needs to be done or has to get done. It will be a constant journey. We have to keep going and never find a finish line.”



“Time is an ingredient because look at what happens when time passes... it matures flavors, oftentimes it creates a better texture; if we were to take a tomato and not properly age it in the sense that we get the most of the vegetable, we'd hardly be making a sauce.”



TATUNG SARTHOU

TAKAW EATERY

IN 2017, CHEF TATUNG SARTHOU'S COOKBOOK, *PHILIPPINE COOKERY: FROM HEART TO PLATTER* WAS AWARDED AT THE GOURMAND WORLD COOKBOOK AWARDS. WE CATCH HIM IN THE MIDDLE OF RESEARCH FOR A NEW ONE, *DISHKARTE SA KUSINA*, IN ONE OF HIS RESTAURANTS, TAKAW EATERY—TWO OF HIS VENTURES INTO MAKING THE JOY OF FILIPINO COOKING MORE ACCESSIBLE.



“Even in the world of gastronomy, wala na ang molecular-molecular, [the] fancy-fancy stuff. It’s really breaking things down to the basic, going back to the basics. The world is changing.”

“I want to be able to cook food, wherein more people will be able to eat. I think if you’re a Filipino chef, and you’re conscious of that, you should be able to cook food that other Filipinos can eat, or that other Filipinos can follow and cook at home. Why are people going hungry? Is it because talagang poor tayo? It’s also because we lack the knowledge. We don’t know how to utilize the resources that are available to us. If I’m able to teach something that helps a household eat better, I’ve done more than creating a signature dish.

It’s really [about] innovation, re-educating. It’s [about] making sensible decisions. Is there a way that we can eat more efficiently? That’s the question. [A chef] is supposed to be managing resources. You’re supposed to be thinking about it. You’re supposed to be a conduit of life. Your work is enabling people to nurture and live more. If you cut yourself off from that part of your job, then you’re a machine.

A lot of chefs go to the province and teach people: ‘Ay, kailangan kong magdala ng ganito kasi wala kasi yan diyan’ or ‘Ay, wala akong mabiling truffle oil sa probinsiya.’ But it defeats the purpose from learning from people who have adapted to what is available and make their lives sustainable. That is what we should be more interested in.

How do you change the way that Filipinos cook? By offering access to more resources, and access to more knowledge. Kasi kung hindi naman marunong, kahit bigyan mo ng steak, kahit first class pa yan na wagyu, kung hindi naman marunong [magluto] yan, wala rin mangyayari. The thing you can do is use education, to provide them with the tools to be able to maximize what they have, pero hindi ko naman kayang ibigay.

Most Filipino dishes as we know it evolved from old kitchens, where mothers had to innovate based on what was available to them. They did not follow recipes. They had to make do with what was available. So, if a mother were to feed a family of five, and runs out of carrots—but we tell her: “mali ang caldereta mo,” kasi walang carrots, and lagyan ng hashtag na “preserve Filipino food,”—among sinasabi mo, ‘di ba?

Cooking is a skill of the palate. If they don’t know what tastes good, how do they know what’s good? ‘Yun ang irony, kasi, ‘yun ang context nila. ‘Yun ang kinamulaan na nila. So you educate them? Hindi pwedeng lecture—papakainin mo.

Everybody has to eat better. For me, Filipino food is what people eat at home. Kung ang kinakain ng kapitbahay ko ay instant noodles with malunggay with matching inasal na sardinas—that is Filipino food. Let’s not deny it. So, we have to raise that level of eating, before we can claim that Filipino food is recently better.”







MIKO ASPIRAS & KRISTINE LOTILLA

LE PETIT SOUFFLÉ

THIS DUO OF PASTRY CHEFS WENT FROM COOKING IN THE CITY'S TOUGHEST HOTELS TO PUTTING UP NINE OF THEIR OWN RESTAURANT CONCEPTS, INCLUDING LE PETIT SOUFFLÉ AND POISON DOUGHNUTS. NOWADAYS, RUNNING THE BUSINESS IS WHAT GETS THEM GUNNING; THE PASTRIES HELP THEM SIT STILL.



A

As they put the finishing décor on their chocolate, slim brushes in hand, Chefs Miko Aspiras and Kristine Lotilla are unmoving, apart from the precise brush strokes that they make and the scrutiny that sometimes washes over their facial expressions. It is just as they said—they are basically one mind (“We’ve been one brain for maybe four years,” she says), sometimes glancing over at one another’s work with a quick nod or a comment. The business of the rest of the kitchen, staff moving in and out, is lost on them.

But once the chocolate treats are done, the collective scrutiny stops, and they are able to enjoy what they’ve created; almost little works of art on a plate. No one fusses over the plate harder than Chef Miko, both in admiration and criticism (“I’m self-aware to a fault,” he says as he takes his phone out to capture photos, but takes another few minutes to move pieces around. “But it also helps me [as a chef].”) The design for one of his plates features several tiny triangles in an intricate design, which he says came to him the other day.

They’re also able to enjoy the chocolates on their palette—both of them being avid dessert-lovers. “I think we have the best chocolate cake,” Miko declares. “I think we kind of introduced the next Polly’s [chocolate cake]. Do you know about Polly’s Chocolate Cake? When I was in high school, you would hear about it talaga—yung mga matatanda, tito, tita—oh, Polly’s is the best! But it’s basically cocoa powder and condensed milk.”

According to the duo, Filipinos are still used to a particular quality of chocolate that has made their jobs as pastry chefs a little trying. “I think [some people are] more open now to dark chocolate,” Kristine says. “Our 17-layer cake is dark chocolate talaga. This is the cake we’re most proud of. It’s very approachable. It’s something my parents would like. Even my nephews who are one-digit ages like it. For the longest time, we try to test the market to see how far they would take our creativity but we knew, at the end of the day, the market would still go to relatability. And this was the product that we knew could relate to the market but still have the quality we wanted.”

The job of a pastry chef is no easy task—it’s quality and finesse, a kind of precision that Miko and Kristine couldn’t release even as business partners. Now having opened nine restaurant concepts since they first started out, they say that they’ve developed a kind of business sense that works for them. “Kristine would always say na with the 9 restaurant concepts that we opened, nine times na kami nag-MBA. From scratch talaga lahat, so you have to make it work.”

“What we’re passionate about is culinary. Kami ni Miko, we’re really hands-on. From purchasing, makikita mo kami sa Divisoria. Even when we started, I was thinking of taking an MBA ‘cause wala kaming alam ni Miko how to do business. But someone told me: you don’t need an MBA. You’re surrounded with businessmen.”



A photograph of a restaurant interior, likely a Japanese izakaya. In the background, a large chalkboard menu is visible with various food and drink items and prices written in white chalk. To the right, a neon sign with a blue and white design is partially visible. In the foreground, there are dark wooden stools and a dark metal railing. The lighting is warm and ambient.

CHRISTINE ZARANDIN

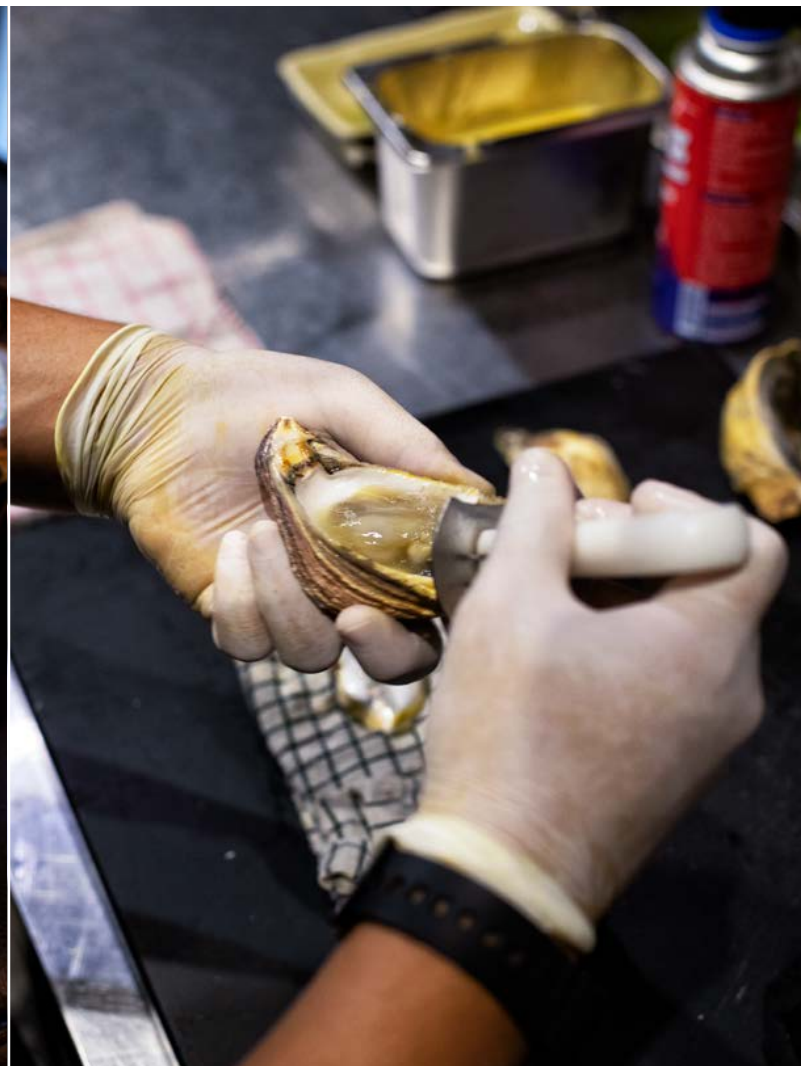
WANTUSAWA

FROM WORKING IN THE KITCHEN WITH WOLFGANG PUCK TO THE DEMANDING DINERS OF LAS VEGAS, THERE IS HARDLY ANYTHING THAT HAS FAZED CHRISTINE ZARANDIN. LATELY, YOU CAN FIND HER IN HER NEW HOME, WANTUSAWA, WHERE SHE TAKES THE LEAD EVEN OUT OF THE KITCHEN.



Christine Zarandin is the kind of chef that can part a sea of cooks. In her former profession of working the hotels, her tough exterior and no-nonsense attitude earned her a few cries of, “wow, what a bitch,” which she tells us about in the same no-nonsense tone. “That’s how it is. You want to stay in the kitchen, you can’t cry. Or, if you want to cry, go cry inside your car or when you get home.”

Even now in the dining area of her first and latest restaurant venture, Wantusawa, as she sits on a chair, out of the chef’s uniform, she commands attention. “I’m not a *chef chef* anymore,” is one of the first things she tells us, even as she directs the kitchen staff. “A chef heads a team. A chef is a leader in the kitchen.” Christine claims she’s much more relaxed now that she’s primarily stayed out of the kitchen, focusing on running her oyster and wine bar, a hit in the neighborhood of Poblacion.



"I used to drink cans of Red Bull when I was in Vegas. Crazy. Before, I could do three cans a night with six shots of espresso. I would wake up at four in the morning, practice for competition at five in the morning; we'd practice 'til, like, eight and then I'd go to work, I'd sleep a little bit again, I'd sleep in my car in the parking lot, and then by ten or eleven, I'd be in the kitchen.

I didn't see anything else other than the kitchen. Well, the bars. At the end of the night. I worked in Vegas for eight years. Never in a casino, but all the restaurants were fine dining and they were all by celebrity chefs. It is the craziest environment, to live in Vegas where at the end of the night all the chefs are driving me to the strip club and I was the only girl—I was always the only girl. The kitchen is [comprised of] maybe 95% boys. I always push the girls and I take care of them a little bit more. I always tell them: If you want to stay in the kitchen, you have to deal with this. When I was growing up in the kitchen, it was always all-boys. Even in my first years here in Manila—my entire staff was all-boys. Some were in their 50s, I had to deal with that. Imagine, they're that old and they're thinking: 'Sino ba 'tong babae na 'to?' So, I worked harder than them. That's how I get their respect: I work harder than them, I stay super late nights, I do everything that they all do and more—because I can."

"I want [my guests] to have something that makes them think: 'Tomorrow, I wanna eat that again.' Food should really be like that: comfortable. Not aloof and not intimidating. I make food that way and we add more experience to it; it's ambience, we'll match it."

