

*The kitchen secrets of
Hong Kong's hotel chefs*

By Scott Murphy



The CUTTING EDGE



FOOD IS THE VERY ESSENCE OF HONG KONG. It is a pervasive, all-powerful, presence overwhelming the senses wherever the resident or visitor turns. There is quite literally something for everyone here; there are estimated to be around 7,000 restaurants, from fine dining hotel outlets to small corner cafés, or approximately one for every 1,000 sets of taste buds.

No matter whether it is an afternoon snack, a buffet brunch, yum cha, dessert, an Italian feast or a Cantonese seafood banquet, the competition is intense. Nowhere is the pressure greater than in a hotel kitchen, where the very best Hong Kong has to offer must be matched or bettered.



PHOTO: HONG

Chefs' special: The men on a mission to please Hong Kong's gourmets palates (from left to right) Roger Luk, Alex Brand, Giancarlo Zoccoletto, Cesare Romani and Lau Chi-kit.

Director (Asia) of Quintessentially, the private members' club with more than 7,000 members worldwide.

"One can expect consistent and high quality food and service. Dining concepts at hotels are becoming more interesting

"About 30-35 per cent of our clients dine at hotels in Hong Kong as the five-star hotel restaurants are of very high quality and people like to go for the fine food," says Emma Sherrard, Managing

Director (Asia) of Quintessentially, the private members' club with more than 7,000 members worldwide.

through innovative menus with new food varieties and ingredients, star chefs, interesting concepts for younger generations and chic décor."

The competition is intense and an army of hotel chefs compete on the culinary battlefields of a city that takes its food very, very seriously. The challenge is to take the gourmet experience to unprecedented heights.

While most hotels in other cities cater to tourists, many Hong Kong establishments must meet the high standards demanded by the local population. This is a clientele with gourmet palates and a see-and-be-seen attitude.

And let's not forget the tourists; an extraordinary 11 million visitors stayed in Hong Kong in the first five months of the year, so it is not surprising that hotels have learnt to place their food and beverage department on a pedestal. According to the Hong Kong Tourism Board, tourists spend the largest part of their holiday budgets on hotel food and refreshment, so hotel chefs need to balance the demands of both local and overseas diners.

And, of course, Hutchison Whampoa Limited is there to help. In Hong Kong, the Hutchison property division operates the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong, The Kowloon Hotel, Harbour Plaza Metropolis, Harbour Plaza North Point, Harbour Plaza Resort City, Rambler Garden Hotel and Rambler Oasis Hotel. The behind-the-scenes expertise is second to none. Many of the chefs, pastry makers and even ice carvers have decades of experience, are winners of international awards and display a passion for their work that goes way above and beyond the call of duty.

We spoke to seven people on Hutchison's front line about how they plan their culinary campaigns and the special dishes that have customers coming back time and time again. Here are their stories.

Lau Chi-kit

Chinese Executive Chef, Harbour Plaza North Point

Chef Lau has worked at a variety of restaurants in Hong Kong as well as a five-star hotel in Shanghai, but the place he feels at home is the Harbour Plaza North Point.

He was cooking by the time he was nine and he has gone on to master the regional cuisines of Shanghai, Beijing, Suzhou and Zhejiang. Yet it was a simple train journey that inspired the dish for which he is best known – Stewed Beef Rib Wrapped with Straw.

"Four years ago, on a train ride from Shenzhen to Guangzhou, I saw someone working in a farm cutting wheat," he says in animated Cantonese. "They would take the wheat and throw away the straw. I remembered that people used to put that straw under steamed dumplings in Shanghai. When I got back to Hong



Kong, I came up with the idea of wrapping beef with straw and gave it to a long-term guest. I was nervous, but he was thrilled. As it turns out, the taste of the straw seeps right into the dish.”

Since then, he has expanded this technique to a range of dishes that keeps customers coming back. “I’m very happy to be here,” he says of his working environment that sees him prepare 25 different dishes and new promotions every month. “I feel most relaxed when I’m strolling in the wet market in the morning, looking for the freshest ingredients to use that night.”

Giancarlo Zoccolotto

Executive Chef, The Kowloon Hotel

There was a point when Giancarlo Zoccolotto thought he would retire. He had just sold his restaurant, Giancarlo, after 21 years in Toronto and stints in Venice, Sardinia, Germany and Paris. But when the opportunity came to head up the kitchen at the



Pizzeria Restaurant in The Kowloon Hotel, he grabbed it.

“The reason I’m still in the business is because I have a lot of passion,” he says. “I work in the kitchen with 10 people. It’s a wonderful place with a good team. We want to see that when a customer comes in and leaves, they have a smile on their face and they have had a memorable evening.”

Northern Italian cuisine is the specialty at the Pizzeria Restaurant, where menus change five times a year and the emphasis is on simple, tasty dishes. “Seafood Linguini and the Veal Tender with Morelle sauce are among our best and most popular dishes,” he says. “The sauces here aren’t like other places. The sauce is made at that moment. When you make a fresh sauce, it gives an extra kick to that particular dish, whether it is veal, pasta or fish.”

These dishes have given the restaurant quite a following among local celebrities and Chef Zoccolotto believes his establishment is going from strength to strength. “We’re successful because we’re a good team,” he says. “And I hope we are going to do even better in the future.”

Roger Luk Kei-kwong

Pastry Chef, Harbour Plaza Hong Kong

Every day, this 11-year Harbour Plaza veteran, along with his 11 staff members, prepare up to 300 items for the eight different outlets under his command, ranging from bread and chocolate to cakes and desserts. “Our white chocolate cheesecake, chocolate cake and fountain are famous,” he says. “We mainly create the items by hand, but have even created chocolate showpieces that have taken over 10 kg of chocolate and a month and a half to make.”

The dedication and enthusiasm he has gained over 30 years as a pastry chef have certainly spilled over to his staff who have risen to every challenge presented to them. Their crowning achievement is making a birthday cake every year for Chairman Li Ka-shing.

“He likes fresh fruit cream cakes,” says Chef Luk. “It’s one of the real pleasures of the job. He always sends us a thank you letter every year.” In turn, the chef is constantly trying to encourage his team to challenge themselves and take pastry making to the next level.

“The Harbour Plaza Hong Kong has given me so many chances to build up my ideas about pastry production,” he says. “It has

A PIECE OF CAKE

ONE THOUSAND pastries and cakes – that’s how many dessert delights Barry Cheung and his team of eight make every day at the Harbour Plaza Metropolis.

“Truffle cakes are the most challenging items as I have to try numerous different flavours to suit my customers’ tastes,” says the pastry chef with a slew of awards to his name. “One time a customer even wanted a foot-high motorcycle cake, which was a tough one.”

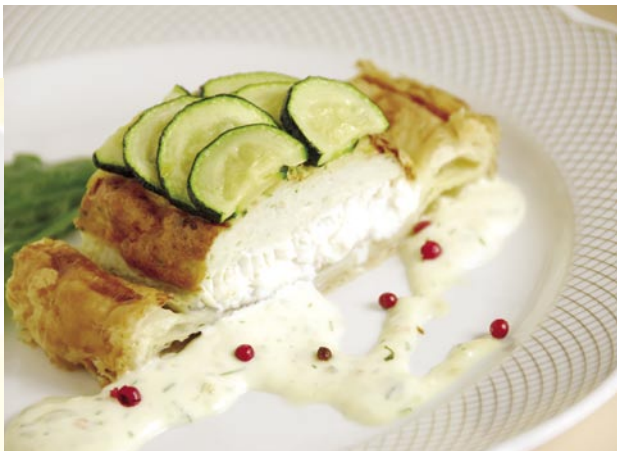
He has already won two gold medals for his Petit Fours but there is no way Chef Cheung is resting on his laurels and he often chats with customers to find out about their ever-changing needs.

“These days I’ve been putting less sugar in the desserts because I’m finding that customers want more of a healthy diet,” he says. “I’ve got to keep in touch with market trends because there are more and more hotels out there. I always have to be prepared.”

It could have all turned out so different. Before being consumed by his passion for pastry, Chef Cheung walked the beat as a Hong Kong police officer. With a family of chefs supporting his decision to change careers, he decided to become a confectioner in a hotel. That was 19 years ago and he hasn’t looked back since.



Pastry chefs Barry Cheung and Roger Luk are asked to make everything from Hermès handbags to Chinese gardens.



Whether it is with superb seafood, delicious desserts or delightful hors d'oeuvres, Hutchison chefs aim to keep diners coming back time and time again.

given me room to be creative in my job and my dream is to rise to the next big challenge.”

Alex Brand

Executive Chef, Harbour Plaza Metropolis
Swiss chef Alex Brand is a busy man. If he’s not ensuring that the “best buffet in Hong Kong” lives up to its name, then he and his staff of 32 are preparing dishes for 500 people at another of the restaurants at the Harbour Plaza Metropolis, the Promenade and Patio. “I make everything”, he says. “As a chef, you have to know all aspects of the kitchen.”

He has called the Harbour Plaza Metropolis home for the past five years. He’s won so many awards that he’s lost track. Favourite dishes? “I could talk about the Lobster with Mango Tropical Sauce, or the French Duck with Goose Liver,” he says. “I mean, we have so many things. It’s great when guests compliment us but if they are complaining, what’s important is that we figure out how to solve the problem.”

Having worked at some of the greatest hotels in the world,

FOOD FACTS *Every year, Hutchison hotels in Hong Kong serve up around*

- 4,000,000 oysters
- 2,500 kg lobsters
- 8,000 kg potatoes

Chef Brand believes that what he’s helped to accomplish at the Metropolis is already an achievement in itself. “It’s good to see this place growing up,” he says. “It’s great to see what this hotel can achieve.”

Cesare Romani

Executive Chef, Harbour Plaza Hong Kong

Cesare Romani has travelled the world of five-star hotels, often working under the tutelage of Michelin star chefs. He was recently handed his biggest ever challenge – running

the kitchens of the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong six restaurants, the Harbour Grill, Waterfront Bar & Terrace, The Promenade, Whampoa Lounge, Robotayaki, and Corner Café.

“I’ve worked in Italy, the West Indies, Dubai, the United Arab Emirates and even Albania, so I know a thing or two about different tastes and palates,” he says. “Hong Kong is a great place to work as standards are very high. I’m really looking forward to the challenge.”



THE ICE MAN

THE ICE SCULPTURES at the Harbour Plaza Hong Kong always look breathtaking but only the artist who created them, Lau Kam-cho, knows how much care and precision is involved.

“Each ice block weighs 300 pounds (about 136 kg),” says Mr Lau who tips the scales at less than half the weight of the ice. “The most challenging aspect is cutting off the right pieces to prevent the ice sculpture from breaking apart.” Ten years after he started learning the craft from his teacher Tam Wai-bong, he has won a gold medal at the prestigious HOFEX event in Hong Kong. Once, he took six days to create an elaborate pair of fish at an elite, invitation-only gathering in Korea.

“Every time I complete one I feel a sense of fulfillment, but since I do it every day, I’d like to be even more creative,” he says. He creates his designs using a small tool on the ice that shaves through the surface in the initial stages. That’s before the chainsaw comes out for the heavy work.

The simple designs for weddings take about half an hour, but special requests for hearts and swans can take several hours – that’s in addition to his other work preparing food in the kitchen. “It’s extremely demanding but prestigious at the same time,” he says. “It’s an honour to sculpt ice.”



PHOTOS: DEBBY HUNG