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Singapore Chef Tries New Way to Save Rain Forest

By Kaylene Hong



Restaurant Andre

Chef Andre Chiang puts the finishing touches on his dishes in his restaurant, located within Singapore's Chinatown district.

Singapore-based chef Andre Chiang is on a mission to save a rain forest and he's planning to start by serving what an orangutan eats—wild ferns, orchid leaves and durian flowers, among other plants.

The Taiwan-born, French-trained chef's concept is simple: Diners who tuck into his "Orangutan Salad," he hopes, will also think about saving the creature behind the dish's name.

"If they (orangutans) don't have a rain forest, they don't have these ingredients, and they have nothing to eat," he said.

The "Orangutan Salad" will feature between five to eight plants—including wild ferns, wild tree mushrooms, wild figs, tree berries, orchid leaves and durian flowers—said the 35-year-old behind Restaurant Andre, one of San Pellegrino's top 100 restaurants in the world this year.

The restaurant was voted onto the list within a year of its opening, and Mr. Chiang recommends that diners book a month in advance to secure a table.

Mr. Chiang is not only promoting a message through this new sustainable-produce project, named the Rainforest Kitchen. He also intends to source ingredients from Sintang, West Kalimantan on Borneo, by roping in villagers to help, hoping it will stop them from aiding wanton deforestation.

By giving villagers the chance to export ingredients such as dried wild mushrooms, edible plants and even honey, they would be able to generate revenue that gives them a lifeline to help keep the rain forest alive. That revenue may be small in comparison with the profits that can be made participating in forest-clearing, but every bit helps, he reasons, and at the very least it should help reinforce the idea that the forest is valuable.

"I use a lot of edible plants that you don't really see, all the rare edible plants. For them it's just five minutes' walk into the jungle to pick (the plants), but they don't see the value of it," Mr. Chiang said in an interview at his restaurant.

"They say this is everywhere, but for us it's fantastic."

Mr. Chiang hopes that Restaurant Andre will help raise awareness about deforestation and spur people to take action.

"A lot of people say 'Oh, Andre where do you get this fish, where do you get this salt?' Sometimes my suppliers will go to other restaurants and say, 'Oh you know what, Restaurant Andre uses this,'" he said.

"So it's just a token for us to start out with something, (and) eventually there will be more people who are interested."

It's not the first time Mr. Chiang has used a dish as a vehicle for an environmental message. When he first arrived in Singapore three years ago, he created a dish called "Forgotten Vegetables" at his previous restaurant, Jaan Par Andre.

The dish aimed to raise awareness about vegetables seldom used in cooking that also needed to be protected as part of the environment.

"Maybe in the next five to 10 years, you will not see these vegetables anymore because people are no longer using them, or people forget about them. For example ancient cauliflower, purple cauliflower, black tomato, yellow carrot, a lot of little vegetables," he said.

"Forgotten Vegetables" was just the start. The Rainforest Kitchen will be Mr. Chiang's long-term sustainable produce project.

Still, will those willing to wait a month and fork out as much as \$200 to dine at Restaurant Andre be willing to pay premium prices for jungle plants?

Mr. Chiang doesn't doubt it.

"It's from the wild rainforest, how many cities or how many restaurants in the world would be able to use wild jungle edible plants? That is so, so rare," he said.

"People catch the intention of what you're trying to do, and they understand. I think it will come slowly. We have to plant the first seed and see how it grows," he added.

The Rainforest Kitchen project will only kick off after March, when Mr. Chiang makes another visit to Sintang.

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