

THE BRIEF



**RAINFOREST
CUISINE**
A new niche
movement
aims to seduce
discriminating
palates

WILD AMBITION

TEXT JENNIFER CHEN PHOTOGRAPHY VEE CHIN ART DIRECTION SITI NURFAIZAH

What celebrated chef Andre Chiang is recently exploring in his 30-seater in Bukit Pasoh is far from the firmament of molecular gastronomy. But his culinary philosophy, backed by his stellar reputation in both Singapore and global circles – not to mention a heightened sense of environmental responsibility worldwide – sure has the legs to travel a long way.

Chiang – whose eponymous restaurant consistently tops Singapore and Asian honour rolls and was 68th in this year's S. Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants list – is the pioneer chef for rainforest cuisine. An idea promoted by Singapore-based social enterprise incubator Qi Global, it adopts a more pragmatic approach to preventing deforestation in Borneo than the usual calls for altruistic action. By spotlighting the income-generating potential of the rainforest, Qi hopes a case can be made to conserve it. But first, awareness of rainforest products must be created and that's where Andre Chiang comes in.

The movement gelled with the 35-year-old's increasing awareness that something is off-kilter with the planet and his subsequent desire to do his bit. "As chefs, we deal with natural produce every day and we see the seasons change and the produce change. Sometimes you notice, the tomatoes are less sweet than last year's, or we have poor quality of shellfish because the seawater is too warm, or the algae grows too fast," Chiang says.

"This year, winter was extremely long, so spring produce is just coming out. But now it's June, it should be the peak of spring! The system is not right anymore, the planet is not healthy. With this project, I feel like we can do something. Even if we are just a small restaurant, we want to raise awareness, let people know that we are concerned."

He has a fresh palette of ingredients to communicate this. "Borneo's rainforest has so many untapped resources in terms of taste experiences that should be tasted and not cut away," says Mette Kristine Oustrup, founder of Qi. "We are very lucky to work with Andre. He's one of the most creative chefs around. We wanted to work with a real expert to develop this further before launching it. We are focusing on special and often wild ingredients from the forest, so it's not a mass market possibility. We want to start very small, very focused. Andre is the pioneer in terms of putting it together."

Thus it is that *The Peak* finds him in the kitchen with a pair of tweezers, masterfully assembling a rainforest salad made of a dozen different greens, most of which were gathered from Borneo and delivered that very morning by returning volunteers of Deforestation, a community outreach programme involving animal rescue, reforestation, education and mapping of land.

The salad is a simple dish compared to the dinner Andre will serve that night – an ode to the forest that trumpets its entrance with a burst of wild herb juice from a quail-egg-sized capsule and includes delicate baby barracuda, a wild fish, wrapped in spices, roots and aromatic leaves, and baked in tree bark. Oustrup calls rainforest cuisine conservational gastronomy and hopes the idea will catch

on. "So far, a lot of food trends tend to start in Europe and move out here. With this, we are looking at starting it here and spilling it to other parts of the world with rainforests."

Chiang, who credits his culinary approach to a decade spent in France, says: "A cuisine is not a fancy technique; it's a message." By throwing his considerable stature and scintillating talent behind rainforest cuisine, the message is clear – if not readily edible. Green creations at Restaurant Andre rely on the delivery of fresh products, the supply of which is presently inconsistent. Rainforest cuisine's role is to research and establish a supply chain that is sustainable.

When that happens, the social ingredients are arguably in the mix for some very special alchemy to occur. And if conservational gastronomy takes off, you can say it started right here, in a small kitchen in Singapore. ♡

RAINFOREST SALAD

1. **The bowl:** Handmade by Chiang to showcase the greens. "I want to give it a rustic look. So, it's almost like a slate of rock that you eat from in the jungle when you don't have proper crockery."
2. **The ingredients:** The salad contains about a dozen items. They are cooked simply in light oil, with a bit of stock and a pinch of salt, to bring out the flavour of each green. Says Chiang: "For me, all the wild, edible plants are versatile, whether it's layer of flavours or textures, or different depths of green. It looks like a simple dish, but when you taste it, you taste every single wild plant separately. Mixed with the mushroom sauce, it has a really earthy, robust flavour."
3. **The taste:** It's not every day that one can munch on the food of orangutans for lunch. The tea-like leaf is bitter, one of the many layers of flavours that Chiang infuses into the Wild Plants salad. The fiddlehead fern is slippery waxy, while other vegetables are by turns crunchy, soft, mild and grassy. The delight comes from not knowing what to expect yet being confident that a masterful hand is guiding you to a brave, new world of greens.

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ZILLI COTTON SHIRT, BRIONI COTTON
CHECKED BLAZER, PAL ZILERI
TROUSER & UOMO LUXURY SILK
POCKET SQUARE; ALL FROM UOMO
COLLEZIONI. LEATHER SHOES; FROM
FENDI HOMME. GIORGIO ARMANI
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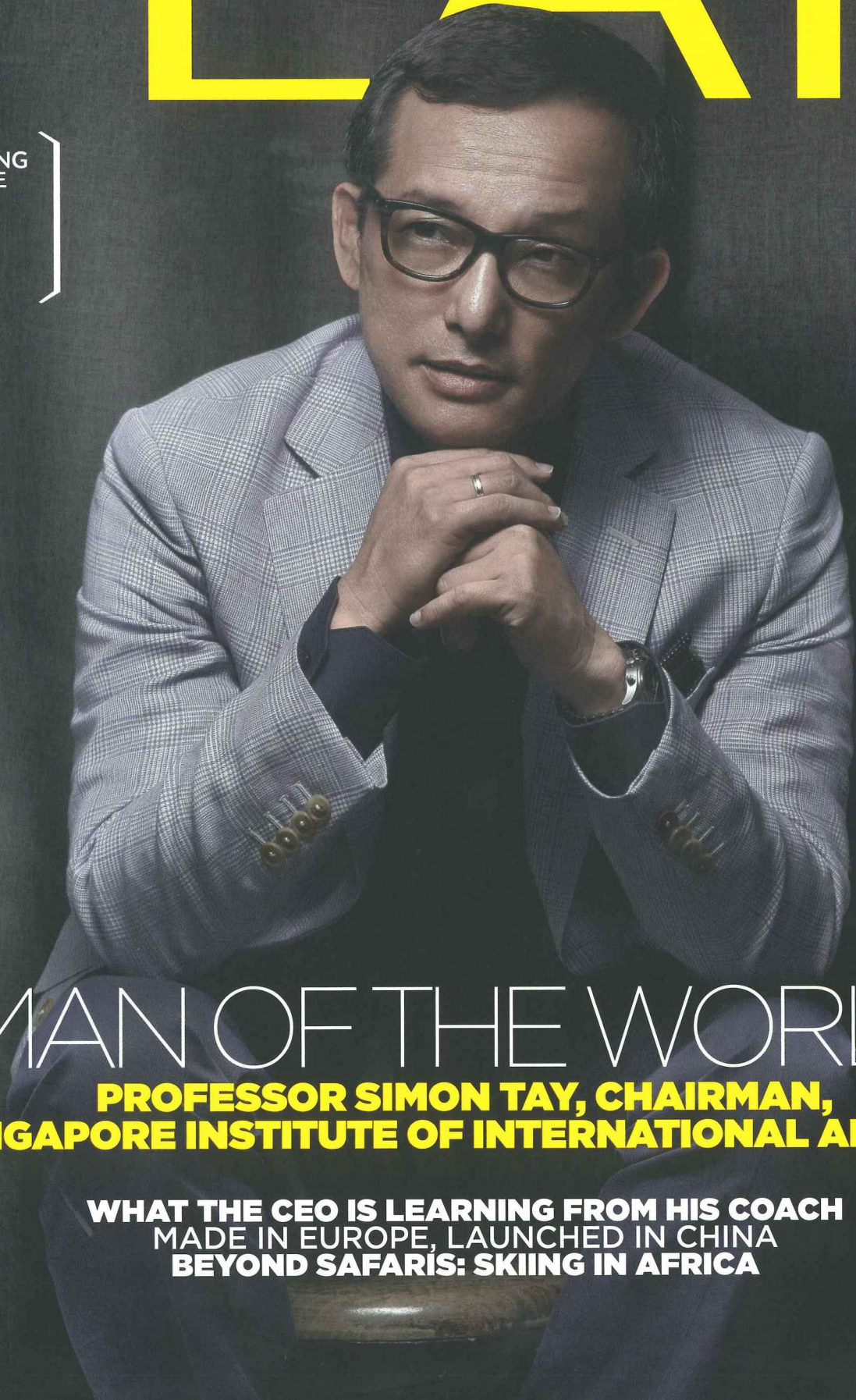
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SINGAPORE

THE PEAK

JULY 2012

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