

Emily Loo

MasterChef's Spice Queen

In the past few years, a number of Malaysians have graced our TV screens on MasterChef Australia, including Emily Loo from Sabah in this year's season. Despite being recently eliminated from the top 24, it was just the beginning of her journey of discovery to pursue her true dream.

WRITES **JOYCE NG**
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MASTERCHEF AUSTRALIA



It is Episode 13 of the sixth season of MasterChef Australia and Emily Loo is flustered during the final stage of elimination that day.

There are only 10 minutes to make a dish. The previous challenges, on the same day, had been 30 minutes, down to 20 minutes, and now 10 minutes. It is tough.

Emily quickly grabs some bananas, thinking of making banana fritters. But there are no eggs. So she grabs sweetened condensed milk and breadcrumbs. A clever idea. Banana fritters in 10 minutes, not a problem.

However the voices of the judges are clouding her mind. Emily lost the previous challenges that day, including with a crab/apricot jam/honey combo. Now being in the final elimination stage, her mind is racing and she has no time to calm and regain confidence herself.

Being sleep deprived and not be able to think straight, she places the sliced banana straight into the hot oil without any coating at all.

She shakes her head a few times, trying to adjust herself; trying to think. But it is too late, and the failed fritters send her home.

"I have never done banana fritters this way before. I don't know what I was doing," she laments.

"The greatest challenge was losing confidence," she tells us, adding that keeping calm is very important for a chef.

But she has no regrets about entering the show. In fact the MasterChef show was a wake up call for her.

"I learned to stay true to myself," says Emily about what MasterChef has taught her.

The Lady Chef-To-Be

Emily grew up a typical Asian child with strict parents who had set ideas of what she should be. Despite dreaming of being a chef and learn to become one in France since she was 17, Emily followed her parents' wishes and studied a Bachelor of Medical Engineering before working as an engineering then a sales coordinator in Queensland.

She eventually took her first step toward her dream when she entered Masterchef Australia, at the age of 31 early this year.

"It's time to do something about my dream, which is quitting my job and becoming a chef," she recalls thinking as she filled in the MasterChef contestant's form.

"I decided to join MasterChef because it is one of the best ways to connect with Australian renowned chefs."

After keeping her dream hidden for almost 15 years, and getting married three years ago, Emily realised her passion continued to burn and that she would never change.



“**Stay true to yourself, because TV cameras can show a lot of things – who is fake, who is not. Be humble.**”

She remembers watching the first season of MasterChef Australia, and being intrigued by seeing so many people out there, like herself, shared the same food dream even though from different backgrounds.

"Although I was doing engineering, my mind was elsewhere. I kept thinking that maybe one day, I can be a chef," she recalls, adding that Poh was one of the person who has inspired her to chase after her dream.

"I guess that's in my blood. I just love cooking."

Until today, however, she tells us that her parents do not know she already has both feet in the food and beverage industry.

"It's not the right time yet to tell them," says Emily, youngest of three in their family, adding that her parents worked really hard to raise her and to support her education; yet now she works long hours with low pay.

"No one would want to hurt their parents' feelings, I guess, especially in Asian culture."



Emily came from a rural countryside town called Kampung Penampang in Sabah, born to a Chinese born Father, an engineer, and a Sabahan born Mother, a teacher. Recalling her time growing there, she remembers living surrounded by the indigenous people.

"I always played with the indigenous people, the Kadazans," she reminisces. She was often amused by the scenes of Kadazan mothers chasing after chickens to slaughter them just for a dinner.

"They are all organic, very organic. We pretty much grow most of the vegetables ourselves, including pineapples and corn. We don't have to go to the market because we have our own produce."

"My memory about Sabahan food – organic, fresh and full of laughter," she recalls of the times when food was shared among the Kadazan neighbours at the table, memories which shaped her early impressions of what good food meant. Though her family was poor, Emily remembers that her parents often had to barter for kitchen ingredients and utensils.

As a kid born in a Chinese family, her first involvement in cooking was during the eve of Chinese New Year when

women would gather and make man tou (Chinese buns) and dumplings. She was intrigued by the determination of those women to get up in the middle of the night to make the food, and had learnt techniques by observing those women in the kitchen.

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Joining MasterChef is all about staying true to who you are, and to find what you really want to do in the future especially in your food dream.

A person in particular that inspired her to become a chef was one of those women, her great aunt, who took care of her most of the time during the day when she was a kid. It was her great aunt, a Catholic nun, who saved to buy her a cookbook and an oven.

"She opened my eyes to the culinary world." She tells us that her great aunt was a versatile cook and she was able to bake and cook various food.

Partly due to her father being Chinese born and both parents not being able to speak English fluently, she didn't speak English at home and many English teachers during her schooling years were incompetent in the language. She only started mastering English when she came to Australia and took a half year course in English. That is why in the MasterChef show, it was not difficult to notice her distinct accent. When asked if having an Asian face with not-so-great English was a barrier or a challenge at the show, she says:

"I don't want to give myself a limitation. If you never try, you will never know."

"The biggest step, the biggest achievement I have done so far is to challenge my limitation and get out of my box."

The Future Ahead

Despite some contestants going back to their previous jobs after being eliminated from MasterChef Australia, Emily says that she is now even more determined to pursue a career as a chef.

"Once you have made up your mind, you just don't want to look back anymore," she says.

After the show, Emily quit her full time, high-paid job and took up an apprenticeship at Black Bird Bar and Grill, whilst also teaching Malaysian traditional cooking classes at Vanilla Zulu Cooking School in Brisbane. She is a strong believer in keeping to traditional cooking in traditional recipes. When it has got to be spicy, she will not alter the recipe to suit the 'local taste', as a form of respect for the traditional and authenticity. Her approach however has gained popularity at the school and she has been requested to constantly teach traditional Malaysian cuisine.

However, despite all her progress she notices her shortcomings.

"What my skills are lacking of are basic French techniques, and my cooking is pretty much too traditional."

"If I really want to be in that industry, there are a lot of things I need to change."

But she is determined not to let this limit her, and continues to follow her philosophy:

"Stay true to yourself, but at the same time try to discover your weakness and what is your strength. From there, find a solution to that."

Emily's ultimate dream is to have her own signature



restaurant with Asian fusion cooking in Australia. This is why she is now at Black Bird Bar and Grill, mastering western techniques to become a versatile chef.

"What I want to achieve in cooking, is to become a very good chef. I am looking forward to opening a restaurant, specialising in Asian fusion food," adding that Kylie Kwong is among her idols, as she is a lady, Asian fusion chef.

"I am also looking forward to become consultant chef to China and Southeast Asia for Australian products."

We asked Emily if she has any advice for Malaysians who would want to take up the MasterChef challenge in future, she offers the following advice:

"Stay true to yourself, because TV cameras can show a lot of things – who is fake, who is not. Be humble."

"Joining MasterChef is all about staying true to who you are, and to find what you really want to do in the future especially in your food dream. "

"Show our Malaysian spirit, which is we are very friendly, food lovers, and we really want to share good food that can make everyone happy."

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P/S: Check out Emily's Sarawak laksa recipe on page 54!





Recipe:

Sarawak Laksa

by Emily Loo

Ingredients

Serves 3-4

Laksa Paste

10 shallots, chopped
4 single bulb garlics, chopped
1 large knob of galangal chopped
10 long red chillies, cut into chunks
5 Eagle Eye Chillies
5 lemongrass (white parts only), chopped
1 cup of dried chillies, soaked in hot water for 20 minutes
8 candlenuts
2tbs deep fried shallot
50 g of cumin seeds, dry toasted and pound with mortar
100 g of coriander seeds, dry toasted and pound with mortar
6 star anise, dry toasted and pound with mortar
7 cloves, dry toasted and
2 nutmegs, pound with mortar
10 cardamoms, pound with mortar
1 tbsp of salt
4 cups of peanut oil

Laksa Stock

1 knob of palm sugar (Gula Melaka)
2 tamarin skin, soaked in hot water for 3 minutes
1 cup of dried shrimps, soak in hot water for 3 minutes
1 knob of shrimp paste (belacan), bake for 10 minutes or until dried
3 tbsps of fish sauce
1 tbsp of Dai Pai Dong brand free range chicken stock powder (Can be replaced with Maggie anchovy stock powder or cube)
½ chicken and 1 whole chicken bones
½ kg of tiger prawn – remove shell and deveined, prawn flesh reserve for garnish
1 x 400g of coconut cream and 1 x 400g coconut milk – must be Ayam brand
1 tsb of white pepper powder
2 tbsps red chilli powder
1 cup of sesame seeds, toasted
1.5 cups of roasted peanut

Garnish

100g of squid- white part only
1 tsb of deep fried shallot
Fresh coriander leaves
Fresh Mint leaves
2 eggs –beaten
1 tsb soy sauce
Tofu puffs
Bean sprouts
Rice vermicelli
1 lime wedges

Method

Please number your steps and remember to include temperatures and times

Serves 4, prep time - 35 minutes, cook time including boiling stock - 50 mins

- 1) Bring 3L of water to boil and add the 1/2 chicken and bone.
- 2) Return to boil then cover and turn it down to a simmer for 20 minutes.
- 3) Remove chicken and submerge in cold water. This is a great way of poaching a whole chicken, tender juicy flesh every time!
- 4) Add in the chicken stock powder or anchovy stock powder and continue to boil the chicken stock. In the meantime, heat up 2 tbs of vegetable oil. Stir fry dried shrimps until fragrant. Put half of the fried dried shrimps into the boiling chicken stock and reserve the other half.
- 5) Stir fry chilli (fresh and dried all together) until fragrant or until you can hear people start sneezing around you, then put aside. Same goes with shallots, garlic, and lemon grass.
- 6) Put all the laksa paste ingredients including ingredient from step 4 and 5 to food processor and process till smooth.
- 7) Add ½ cup of oil to a wok or a large pot and cook spice paste on medium heat, stirring constantly.
- 8) When oil starts to separate, add in salt and palm sugar and continue cooking until sugar melted then put the laksa paste straight into the chicken and shrimp stock together with tamarin skin and prawn shells.
- 9) Remove skin and hand shred chicken into bite size pieces, discharge skin and keep bones for stock (If using whole chicken).
- 10) Grind the toasted sesame seeds and peanuts in a grinder and add into the laksa stock.
- 11) By this time the laksa stock has already turned thick and red. Add in coconut milk, fish sauce and shrimp paste. Boiled till the coconut milk oil separated or red colour oil appear on top of the boiling stock.
- 12) Heat oil in the wok until very hot. Deep fried the prawn till cooked (roughly 3 mins only) then set aside for the prawn to self-cook. Do the same on the squid but when the squid start curling remove from wok and set aside. Season with salt.
- 13) Take out 3 tbs of the oil that had been used in deep frying prawns and squid on a clean saucepan and heat till very hot. Add in beaten egg and make omelette. Cut

cooked omelette into strips and set aside for garnish.

14) In another pot of boiling water- put in the vermicelli and boil for 2 mins. Strain the vermicelli and run under cold water to prevent further cooking. Set aside.

15) In a deep bowl, place rice vermicelli, blanched bean sprouts, chicken, prawns and omelette then ladle some broth over. Top with cut chillies and coriander and mint leaves, sprinkle deep fried shallots and serve with a wedge of lime.

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It's important to respect the person behind who developed the recipe. If you respect the recipe, you are respecting all the ingredients, the person behind and your future career.

