

It is accompanied by Winlai's kimchi spätzle with uni-wasabi-duxelle butter, locally grown patty pan squash, Candy Cane beets and Chinese broccoli – exotic comfort food.

"It's nothing fancy, but this is how I like to eat," explains Winlai almost apologetically, "and it's what I would serve guests at home. My food philosophy is simple: fresh, local and organic. You get better flavour and better quality this way." She goes on to say, "Food is about the soul. You need to nurture and take care of the soul, so if you help do that with healthy, nutritious, flavourful food, it's like you're taking care of yourself from the inside out."

Helping nurture and feed a demanding Toronto clientele includes sourcing the choicest product based on seasonality, much like her father used to do. "I always start out by seeing what's available and what I can get consistently. I start with the product, and that influences my menu; it lays my foundation."

Apart from Ted the Fisherman, who Winlai tells me takes tremendous pride and passion in his product, she's also a big fan of Ben and Jessie Sosnicki, who grow some of the most flavourful produce around. The meat used in the restaurant's organic lamb lollipops on lemongrass skewers comes from The Healthy Butcher, while the Vietnamese pork tenderloin with mirin tamari glaze hails from Beretta Organic Farms in King City.

When shopping for her family, Winlai scours the stalls at the St. Lawrence and Dufferin Grove markets to see what's fresh, local and mouth-watering. "When you buy organic and local you're getting the best flavour, the best price and you're not feeding your body chemicals it doesn't want or need. Helping the environment out by buying this way is another bonus," says Winlai.

Given that her two little girls are developing palates as sophisticated as those of their parents, it's no wonder that Winlai strives to buy seasonally fresh fare for the young gourmands. "My children eat what we're having. I keep introducing them to new flavours so that they expand their tastes. I've tried giving my oldest girl a sandwich at lunch and she won't eat it!" says Winlai. There's no such thing as kiddie-only meals at Winlai's table; she thinks that's a mistake many parents make. "How's a child supposed to know if she likes a particular food if Mom or Dad say 'Oh, she won't like this' for them?"

Down the road, Winlai and husband Sam Chao, who has worked as sous-chef alongside her at Monsoon, would like to move the family to the country. Their dream is to open up a small place, working out of the downstairs and living upstairs. Winlai describes the little farm she'd have on the property where her girls could run and play. "I never thought I'd be saying this," she admits, "but in three or four years, that's exactly what I'd like to do." And if her daughters have cooking in their blood too, perhaps the family's country retreat will become a dining destination for all of us for many years to come. □

*Born in Colombia, South America, Mary Luz Mejia, has worked as a journalist, television producer/researcher/director/writer and freelance writer in three languages (English, Spanish, French). A devout follower of all things food, Mary Luz loves immersing herself in other cultures, learning about food, who makes or grows it, and best of all, eating and writing about it. Her work has appeared in the Globe and Mail, 24 Hours Toronto, Asian Gourmet Magazine, as well as online as www.suite101.com's Food Trend's feature writer.*

## BEEF PAN STICKERS WITH GINGERED RICE VINEGAR

From Chef Winlai Wong

*These pan stickers are reminiscent of the dumplings Winlai Wong learned to make as a young girl at her father's side. She's come a long way since then, but dishes like these continue to "nourish and take care of [her] soul."*

4 servings

### Dipping Sauce

2 tbs red rice or white rice vinegar (unseasoned)  
1 tsp finely grated ginger

### Pan Stickers

1/2 lb lean ground beef, preferably organic  
1 cup finely chopped Napa cabbage  
1 bunch green onion, minced  
2 tbsp soy sauce  
1 tbsp oyster sauce  
1/4 cup finely chopped spinach  
1 tsp freshly grated ginger  
1 tsp ground white pepper  
1 pkg fresh round gyoza or wonton wrappers  
1 tbsp grapeseed or canola oil, plus more if required

**Dipping Sauce** In small bowl, combine the vinegar and ginger; set aside.

**Filling** In medium bowl, add the ground beef, Napa cabbage, green onion, soy sauce, oyster sauce, spinach, ginger and white pepper. Mix well.

**To Wrap** Place 1 tsp of meat mixture on centre of one wrap. With fingertip, moisten the edges and fold to make a half-moon. Press edges to seal tightly. Repeat until meat mixture is used up.

**To Steam** In large saucepan or stockpot, bring water to a boil. Meanwhile, place 1 piece of parchment paper (or 2 cabbage leaves) on bottom of bamboo steamer. Place a few of the dumplings 1-inch apart in steamer. Cover and steam until wrappers are translucent and meat is cooked through, about 5 minutes. Repeat with remaining dumplings.

**To Pan Fry** In large skillet, heat oil over medium heat. Place a few of the dumplings in pan, about 2 inches apart. Do not overcrowd or they will steam rather than turn golden crisp. Cook until golden brown, turning once, about 3 minutes. Repeat with remaining dumplings. Serve with dipping sauce.