
BACK OF THE HOUSE

BY MARY LUZ MEJIA

CLOSE TO HOME ASIAN INSPIRED AND LOCALLY GROWN



The old adage, “like mother, like daughter,” is almost true of Chef Winlai Wong. From as early as she can remember, Winlai has been developing her sophisticated palate and love of food thanks to her father’s “phenomenal” culinary abilities.

Born in Hong Kong, Winlai grew up in downtown Toronto, watching her father as he cooked at home and later helping him at his restaurant at Spadina and College. “It was called The Great Wall,” she relates, smiling timidly before asserting, “Cooking is in my blood.” One of Winlai’s fondest childhood memories revolves around her father teaching her how to wrap dumplings – in some twenty-odd different ways.

The frenetic pace of the restaurant kitchen, not to mention the flames and the heat, the dangerously sharp knives, the hot oil and the occasional hot temper, would have scared off most young girls, but not Winlai. “I was just so fascinated by the woks and the flames, the food being tossed, the sound of the sizzle. I loved that sizzle! I remember the ‘whoosh’ sound as the cooks cleaned out [the hot woks] with water and these special brooms. It was amazing!”

Winlai’s enthusiasm for things culinary was no doubt inherited from her father, a trained chef from Mainland China who was a stickler for seasonal, market-fresh fare. Winlai recalls her father coming home with live squabs or frogs for the evening meals. She would watch, with a mixture of fascination and horror, the live animals being expertly butchered by her father for the family’s meals.

In Chinese cooking, it is critical that the freshest of ingredients be used in order to produce the best possible dishes, explains Winlai. If you’ve butchered the animal yourself, chances are you know where that animal came from, how it was raised and, certainly, how it was killed. Asking her dad, “What’s for dinner?” would irk Mr. Wong, who would consistently answer, “I have to see what’s fresh at the market.” Winlai pauses and adds, “It was crucial to him, and now it’s crucial to me.”

Winlai has recently returned to the award-winning Monsoon Restau-

rant and Bar following a maternity leave. She is certainly doing her father proud. Five years after assuming the position of Executive Chef at the pan-Asian restaurant in Toronto’s entertainment district, Chef Wong specializes in engaging diners in a cross-continental tour of clean, sophisticated Asian flavours using the freshest ingredients available.

The path that led her to the helm of a bustling big city restaurant kitchen was not a very straight one. After high school, Winlai enrolled in the hotel management program at Centennial College, aiming towards a hospitality career working the front, rather than the back, of the house. “I’ve always

loved food but I never got to see my father unless I went to the restaurant. That’s why I never really wanted to pursue a career in cooking.”

The gnawing feeling that she was denying her true passion eventually propelled her back into restaurant kitchens by way of the Stratford Chefs School. The tipping point came when her mentor, Chef Chris Klugman, pulled her aside and told her, “I think you’ve got what it takes.” When asked what exactly “it” refers to, Winlai smiles and replies, unequivocally, “Love, passion, excitement, and stamina,” adding, “Yeah, no kidding – my back is about to crack!”

Balancing life and work is no easy feat for the busy mother of two. “Being a woman,” says Winlai, “working in this profession and having a personal life means your children need you, the business needs you. I’m physically on my feet for long hours and you have to learn to work smart. It’s challenging to find the balance and I can see why a lot of women at thirty-five stop doing this and go corporate – I can totally understand them.”

During our conversation, a plate of organically raised Arctic char is placed on the table. It’s from Ted the Fisherman (“That’s just what we call him!” explains Winlai), who feeds the fish organic herring and raises them free of drugs in the pristine springs around Creemore. A popular feature on Monsoon’s menu, the fillet is perfect – delicate and flavourful.

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.