

Foodie Confidential

From psychology to cooking

Kenneth Goh

From an early age, Ms Eve Felder knew that cooking would be her forte. She remembers roasting a Peking duck, which was glazed with honey, and making soufflé when she was nine.

She was also inspired to cook by American, Italian and Chinese cookbooks that her parents bought for her. She says: "I knew I wanted to be a cook. Cooking brings me calm and peace."

However, her parents insisted she go to college instead of culinary school. She earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from the College of Charleston in South Carolina.

Yet, she found her way back to food. Now in her 50s, she is managing director of the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), Singapore, at Temasek Polytechnic. It offers a bachelor of professional studies degree in culinary arts management, in partnership with the Singapore Institute of Technology.

She says: "My parents absolutely did not want me to be a chef as they thought I would not be home for the holidays and that cooking was a sweaty and male-dominated job that people have helpers for."

Despite parental objections, the oldest of four children persevered with her cooking aspirations, but knew she had to overcome her shyness before working in a kitchen. To gain confidence, she worked for four years as an actress with a musical theatre company.

She says: "I had difficulty holding conversations. I had to force myself to perform on stage as working in a restaurant is a lot like putting on a show, with the chef as the conductor."

She enrolled in the CIA in New York in her late 20s, after working her way up to executive chef level in five years at French restaurant V.Mertz in Nebraska.

While studying, she worked part time in the now defunct fine-dining restaurant Quilted Giraffe and Abigail Kirsch Catering, both in New York. She was also executive chef of Chez Panisse Restaurant in Berkeley, California, which pioneered the farm-to-table movement in the United States.

After more than 20 years in the kitchen, she returned to her alma mater to teach. In 2010, she came to Singapore with her family to head the CIA's first overseas outpost.

The mother of three girls aged between 11 and 15 says: "I want to be a mentor to aspiring female chefs in a male-dominated world."

What is one advice that you give your students?

Don't go too far too fast. Make sure your skills and knowledge are in place first. It is also important to be confident in your skills.

What was your goal when you entered culinary school?

It was to work in Chez Panisse Restaurant as it focuses on sourcing the best ingredients. I sent more than 15 letters to restaurant owner Alice Waters, begging her to take



Ms Eve Felder, head of the Culinary Institute of America in Singapore, overcame her shyness by working as an actress. ST PHOTO: YEO KAI WEN

me in as an intern. I had to write a paper on local organic food for its former head chef, New York Times food columnist David Tanis. On my first day, I had to remove pine needles from two gigantic boxes of black trumpet mushrooms. I was told I was too slow.

How did you thrive in a male-dominated industry?

I had to work harder to take more of the heat than the rest. There was no complaining or moaning. Wherever there were new opportunities in the kitchen, I raised my hand. I allowed myself to make mistakes and learn from them.

What are your childhood memories of food?

Besides breakfast and supper, my family had our biggest meal, which we called dinner, at 2pm when my grandfather and father came home from work. Dishes included baked fish with caper sauce, avocado and grapefruit salad, and roasts such as beef and chicken.

What are your must-eats when you go back to the US?

I return once a year to work in the CIA in New York and visit my family in South Carolina. I always cook there as we have unbelievable produce. I live in Hudson Valley, New York, and we get ingredients such as corn, cucumber, eggplant and peaches from the farmers' markets. In South Carolina, I always cook shrimp and grits (a shrimp and ground corn dish), and sieva beans mixed with tomatoes and mayonnaise.

What are your favourite Singapore foods and where do you go to eat them?

The chicken rice from Rong Ji Chicken Rice in Joo Chiat Place is to die for. The softness of the rice goes so well with the chilli sauce and the moist meat has the perfect flesh to skin ratio. I also like durian for its multi-layered sensations, such as the pudding-like flesh and pulling the skin off the seed. I also like Indian food, including samosa and

dosai from Udipi Ganesh Vilas in Ceylon Road.

What is one of your eating quirks?

Whenever I am in a fine-dining restaurant, I don't want to talk to anyone. I want to go into the zen of dining and experience every sense of the place, from the food to the texture of the table.

What do you think is the most challenging dish to cook?

Pie crust, as ingredients such as butter and flour, and room temperatures vary across countries and can impact how the pie crust turns out. It needs to be tender, flaky and must not fall apart too easily.

What do you cook at home?

I cook every day for my family. I cook cuisines such as Mexican, Korean, Chinese and Japanese and food from the southern part of America. The dishes include okra (lady's fingers) soup with coleslaw and biscuits, mapo tofu and

steamed wonton dumplings. I discovered that round dining tables in Asia enable the family to have conversations together.

Are your children also into cooking?

My eldest daughter enjoys cooking Japanese food and my second daughter makes buttermilk biscuits from their grandmother's recipe. My youngest daughter makes wonton dumplings. I am writing recipe books for each of them so they can have a book of "mama's cooking" when they are grown up.

kengohsz@sph.com.sg

WHAT WOULD YOUR LAST MEAL BE?

A bowl of warm Japanese rice with raw egg yolk, topped with natto (Japanese fermented soya beans), chiffonade of shiso leaves and pickled ginger.