



**FEATURE ARTICLE**  
THE IMPORTANCE OF  
TASTE



**CHEF TALKS**  
A series of conversations with Hong Kong's most renowned chefs

**PAST EVENTS**  
CHEF TALKS 2015



**UPCOMING EVENTS**  
SEE PAGE 6



**SIDE BAR**  
SLOW FOOD IN THE  
COMMUNITY

# SLOW FOOD HONG KONG

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TASTE

by *Sandra Hong*

**Slow Food has always emphasized the importance of taste and flavor,** going as far as developing educational programs about our five senses and the link between our sensory system and choosing good, clean, fair food.

From the introduction to a Slow Food education kit called “To the Origins of Taste”: “By reawakening and training the senses, Slow Food’s taste education helps people rediscover the joys of eating and understanding the importance of caring where their food comes from, who makes it, and how it’s made.”

Slow Food also laments over the “blandness” of modern food, and the industrial and commercial practices which have resulted in the tragic loss of “the subtleties and vastness of flavor” in our ingredients today.

So how exactly are our sensory systems for flavor and taste linked to food that is good for us and the environment? What is the significance of flavor and taste?

I recently heard an interview that answered those very questions and made everything click. Christopher Kimball, host of America’s Test Kitchen Radio, sat down with Mark Schatzker to discuss his recently published book “The Dorito Effect: The Surprising New Truth About Food and Flavor”. In less than 20 minutes, Schatzker drove home the vital roles flavor and taste play in our food choices, and their effects



Photo by DaDaAce

**We’ve really mastered  
the art of making  
chicken that taste like  
cardboard.**

— *Mark Schatzker,*  
**author of**  
**“The Dorito Effect: The  
Surprising New Truth  
About Food and Flavor”**

on the health of our selves and our environment. Below I share nuggets of wisdom from this interview.

### ***The Importance of Flavor and Taste***

**“Flavor is really important from an evolutionary point of view. The flavor sensing system that we have takes up more DNA than anything else,** more than your eyes, more than your brain. . . . The reason it’s there is because, prior to the modern age, we faced the task, like all animals, of getting nutrients. We live in this environment with all sorts of possible foods, some of which might be good for us, [some of which] might be poison. How do we know what to eat? Flavor is that system. **Flavor is our way of sensing what’s in food before we eat it.** That’s why we sense flavor in food, and that’s why food emanates flavor.”

### ***Two Sides of the Troubling Coin***

“There’s two parts to what I call the flavor problem:

The first is that everything we grow—**the whole foods that we should be eating—are getting blander and blander and blander.** If you wonder why the chicken soup... or the chicken and dumplings [you make] doesn’t taste quite the way Grandma’s used to taste, it’s because the chicken has changed. So I see that as a huge problem because **the food we should be eating is becoming less and less appealing.**

The other side of the coin is that flavor technology is getting better and better and better. So just **as good food is getting bland, the food that we shouldn’t be eating is getting ever more delicious.** And I think this explains why so many people are making such poor food choices.”

As host Kimball describes, production of food is now **“designed for weight, volume, and speed that produces lower quality and less flavor”**. Chicken, for example, has suffered (in more ways than one) under modern industrial practices. The birds are grown rapidly then butchered at about two months old.

“It’s too young,” says Schatzker. “We eat giant babies. Not only that: the flavor of meat is partly determined by the age of the animal when you kill it, but it’s also determined by what they eat. Chickens now eat a very highly refined diet, generally corn and soybeans. That doesn’t taste like anything so we’ve really mastered the art of making chicken that taste like cardboard.”

### ***The Problem with Fake Flavor***

“In a state of nature, flavor has a nutritional component to it. There was a study published in the journal *Science* a few years ago that found that the 20 flavors we most love in tomatoes, and that’s significant because there’s about 400 different flavor compounds. We ignore about 380, and we completely zone in on 20. [Those 20 compounds]

## *In the Community: Slow Food x Feeding HK x PathFinders*



From late May to early June, Slow Food partnered with fellow non-profits Feeding HK and PathFinders to provide a free 4-part series of cooking and nutrition workshops to underserved members of our community—migrant mothers and their children. Charlene Ho, nutritionist and Slow Food volunteer, taught important lessons and tips on nutritious food choices based on our senses of taste, sight, smell, touch. Professional chefs from Feeding HK’s Chefs in the Community program demonstrated cost-effective and healthy recipes. A full write up will be posted on our website.

are all synthesized from important nutrients like omega 3 fats, vitamin A, carotenoids. Essentially, the flavor we look for in a tomato is a reflection of that tomato's nutrition. So **flavor, on some level, equals nutrition.**

If you then isolate those flavors, then start to put them in soft drinks, and you put them in potato chips, and you put them in chicken nuggets, you're creating the sensation of what your body thinks is nutritious food, but you're not delivering. I think **this technology, as fun as it is and as good as it's been to the bottom line of a lot of snack food makers, is not good for us.**"

### **So what can we do?**

Though it seems that we are caught between a rock and a hard place, we still have the ability and the right to choose what we eat. We make choices every day at markets and grocery stores. If we change the demand, we can change the supply. Choose with your forks! Support your local food producers who make high quality, delicious food with great care and respect. As Schatzker says, **"the path to better health is through better tasting food."**



Chef Olivier Elzer and Moderator Andrew Sun, [Photo by Ashley O'Mahony](#)

## INSPIRATIONS, CHALLENGES, AND MOTIVATIONS

### A RECAP OF OUR FIRST CHEF TALKS

*by Danielle Chin*

It's not often diners are able to have a deep discussion with the chefs of their favorite Michelin-starred restaurants, but from March 3 to May 18, the Chef Talks series presented by Slow Food and The Fringe Club made that dialogue possible. Over seven evenings, eight iconic Hong Kong chefs sat down for an intimate conversation with Andrew Sun, a committee member of Slow Food HK. From those talks, we learned what each renowned chef is like both behind the kitchen and outside of it.

**"I want it to be embedded in their mind forever, full impact, scar them."**

**- Chef Alvin Leung**

Often overshadowed by their Instagram-ed dishes, some of the chefs were not as accustomed to being under a spotlight and the center of attention. Sun soon put them at ease, and the Chefs opened up about their backgrounds, and their inspirations, challenges, and motivations.

"I tried to approach [the talks] as casual conversations and private chats even though we were in front of a full theatre at the Fringe Club," Sun said. "There are a lot of basic things I wanted to ask these chefs so I just pretended we were talking in a pub. The audience also put forth some great questions adding extra color to the discussion."



Chef Vicky Lau at Tate Dining Room and Bar

Chef Vicky Lau revealed that contrary to popular belief, the name of her Michelin-starred restaurant Tate Dining Room and Kitchen has no relation to Tate Modern (the art museum in London). She does take creative inspiration from famous artists like surrealist René Magritte who played with his visual subjects and viewers' expectations. For instance, Lau's visually pleasing amuse-bouche appears to be an elegantly arranged row of five unique bites in concave slots of a narrow platter. Upon closer inspection, a theme emerges—each bite is representative of the Chinese elements water, fire, earth, wood, and

metal. Chef Lau explained that she strives to create more than a fine dining experience. Rather, she offers both a visual and an edible feast; a journey through works of art. And much like art, the experience often defies expectations.

In a similar vein, Chef Alvin Leung also expresses visual creativity and a playful nature in his dishes. But the self-styled “Demon Chef” of Hong Kong, Chef Leung pushes the juncture of food and creativity close to the edge and sometimes towards controversy. While Chef Richard Ekkebus observed that “simplicity is good as long as it is not simplistic”, Chef Leung seems to swing toward the other end of the spectrum when he voiced his mission to take the diner out of his “comfort zone and bring them to the edge—closer and closer to the edge without falling.” While that may sound like a simple task for such a renowned innovator like Chef Leung, he is often challenged by the logistics of executing his creative ideas. Much to the audience's surprise, he assured us that his infamous edible condom was in fact, a step backward from his original idea.

**“Surround yourself with people who push you to the edge.”**

**- Chef Richard Ekkebus**

Many of the chefs touched upon the importance of their team and emphasized that cooking in restaurants was a team effort and not a solo act. To this end, Chef Richard Ekkebus of Amber, notes the necessity to consistently improve, especially to one's own motivator by criticizing oneself. He points to his staff as one part of his success; Chef Ekkebus is surrounded by a team that motivates each other as well as themselves.

Staffing a good team presents its own particular set of challenges for a chef in Hong Kong. Chef Uwe Opocensky, Mandarin Oriental's Executive Chef, observed that being a service staff is not well respected in Asia. This results in a shortage of labor, thereby making it difficult to reduce staff turnovers and maintain consistency.



Chef Richard Ekkebus and Moderator Andrew Sun

In some respects the professional kitchen is still thought of as a male dominated arena; it might be unexpected to see females, especially in management roles. However as Asia's Best Female Chef of 2015, Chef Lau is proving such outdated thinking as outdated—"If you have a huge pot of stock you can't lift, you just lift twice."

The typically reserved Chef Umberto Bombana of 8 1/2 Otto e Mezzo BOMBANA opened up about his experience coming to Hong Kong and adapting to the palette of local diners. He also poked fun at his personal health challenges. "I'm still fat," he joked, prompting a big laugh from the audience.

**"We need to find local food streams, and alternative food streams."**

**- Chef Uwe Opocensky**

All of the chefs voiced the importance of eating locally, sustainably, and according to nature's seasons, but it was Chef Opocensky who perhaps delved deepest into the subject. Not only does Hong Kong need to change its mindset towards being more locally driven, he said, but as a society we need to find "alternative food streams." While he has yet to find an acceptable recipe for the palette, Chef Opocensky used cricket flour as an example for a potential alternative food source.



Chef Nurdin Topham at NUR

Passionate about local products and seasonality in their own cooking, NUR's Chef Nurdin Topham and Neighborhood's Chef David Lai challenged consumers to rethink about the dining habits completely. "Maybe we all need to eat less," he proposed.

Chef Opocensky also stressed the importance of eating in season, according to what nature provides. "Why do we eat strawberries twelve times a year," he questioned. Nature has set ways that we need to follow. "We should only be eating strawberries when they are in season. It took one generation to make the mess, it can take another to fix it all."

Chef Olivier Elzer of Seasons ensures his menu highlights seasonal ingredients in traditional dishes. He is also influenced by nature's seasonal elements and designs his restaurant accordingly. Chef Elzer's 'Greenhouse' room is the type of setting that could lighten up the darkness of Hong Kong's rainy season.

Whether their expertise lies in European or Chinese cuisine, modernist, or traditional styles, each chef clearly displayed his and her raw passion for their craft—passion for their creative product and food values, their dedicated teams, their supportive families, and most of all, their customers' experiences. Their genuine passion serves as a memorable quality in an difficult and often unforgiving industry that consistently pushes beyond boundaries previously set.

We are editing our footage from the series and will make available online video clips and photos soon.

Due to the enthusiastic reception of the Chef Talks series, Slow Food HK is planning another series for 2016. Our committee has put on their thinking caps to come up with another line up of stellar Hong Kong chefs and interesting topics for next year! Stay tuned.

## Upcoming Events



### July 4 & 5 | Green Monday Summer Carnival

Please visit Slow Food HK at the Green Monday Summer Carnival at PMQ. We'll have fun games, activities, and special prizes for the whole family!

### July 8 | A Soy Sauce Tasting & Dinner by Gormeï x Candied Fish

Veronica Yu of eating design collective **Candied Fish** has designed a unique dining experience for Slow Food HK members and friends: a soy sauce tasting workshop and dinner at the beautiful creative space **Plantation** in Sheung Wan on July 8. Brought to you by Gormeï. Space is limited to 16 seats so register soon!

<http://slowfood.com.hk/event/gormeï-soy-sauce-dinner/>

### August 15 & 16 | Gormeï x Slow Food HK Summer Farm Visits & Workshops

One of our corporate partners, Gormeï, and Slow Food HK are organizing a farm visit around the theme of From Farm to Tummy: The Journey of Food. Details to follow on [slowfood.com.hk](http://slowfood.com.hk) and on [gormeï.com](http://gormeï.com).

### September 2015 | Slow Food HK Volunteer Appreciation Night

Slow Food HK volunteers will be invited to a special evening of drinks and aperitivos at Da Via in Wan Chai in honor of their service and dedication to the Slow Food movement.

### Fall 2015 | Slow Food HK Farm Visit!

Details TBD

### Fall 2015 | Slow Food HK Social

All past and present Slow Food HK members and friends are invited to join us for drinks and nibbles. Details to follow on our website.

Keep up with our upcoming events and get full details on our website:

<http://slowfood.com.hk/upcoming-events/>.

Please show your support by liking us on [facebook.com/slowfoodhk](https://www.facebook.com/slowfoodhk) and following us on **Twitter @SlowFoodHK**. We'll also be on Instagram soon!



Photo by Chailey