



Alan Wong's Farm To Table Approach

Chef Alan Wong of Hawaii took some time to talk with *Asian Restaurant News'* Culinary Consultant Robert Danhi, while the two of them attending a foodservice conference, the World Gourmet Summit this summer in Singapore, the food-obsessed nation. The talk revolved around Chef Wong's holistic approach to running his successful Asian Restaurants!

• **Tell me about the Alan Wong "empire" in Hawaii and now Japan?**

Currently Chef Alan Wong's culinary empire includes not only his flagship restaurant *Alan Wong's* in Honolulu but also its sister restaurant affectionately called the *Pineapple Room*. Chef Wong has also entered into a licensing agreement for locations on the Big Island and across the pacific in Tokyo. He also helps develop the food that is served on Aloha Airlines.

• **What brought you to focus on Asian cuisine?**

Chef Wong's place in Asian cuisine began from birth as his mom is Japanese and father a Chinese Hawaiian and around his home his grandfather cooked all the meals. The flavors of their family meals were drawn from their Japanese and Chinese heritage so you will still see on his menus today there is a harmonious blend of these two Asian cultures.

• **What is the toughest challenge that you face running your restaurants and how do you overcome them?**

"People. People are your greatest joy and can also be your biggest frustration". Chef Wong went on to tell me that he has developed a philosophy that you simply need "to go with it and realize humans will be humans". He has surrounded himself with talented chefs that are given the autonomy to create foods that they dream up. He might cook about 20% of his time while at the restaurants now, Chef Wong likes to "coach them on their food" and he encourages them to "cook and taste any ingredient they want". About 75% of the menu goes through Chef Wong. He wants his cooks and chef to eat their own food and always strive to learn "not only what to do but how and

why" it is done that way. He needs his staff to be inspired and evolve as he tries to develop the next generation of chefs that he has taught "how to think". Like him he wants them to "Eat, live and breathe food".

• **If you were to give one piece of advice to a young culinarian in order to be successful in the Asian Restaurant scene, what would it be?**

Chef Wong was quick to respond with "Be curious and ask questions". He also encourages "Don't be afraid. Get out that spoon and taste it, even if it's the dregs of the pan". Chef Wong said he gets very enthusiastic when he sees the cooks tasting what they create throughout the day keeping in touch with their guest's food. "When you have that passion, it works; it is so physically demanding it can eat you alive".

• **What about formal culinary education for today's aspiring chefs?**

Chef Wong went through two years and Kapiolani Community College and then two years at the Greenbrier formal apprenticeship program, this established his base education, what the chef referred to as "the concrete slab. The more time you build a base the more room you have to grow". He does recommend going to a school but he did make sure to point out that "one of the most important things one can learn is to have a good attitude and how to work well with others".

• **Tell me about the Farm to Table philosophy. Why can you implement it successfully?**

When people go to his restaurants his goal is to provide them with a "Tour of Hawaii". He incorporates at least 1 -2 ingredients from local sources – many restaurants use the 80/20 model – eighty percent of imported items, he opt for the 20/80 version – using eighty percent local ingredients and fortifying that local farmer, fisherman and rancher supply with imported foodstuff. Chef Wong establishes the relationship with his supplier himself to build a robust agriculture network.

• **What is your largest selling item on your menu? Why?**

The Ginger Crusted Onaga with Miso Sesame Vinaigrette, Shiitake & Enoki Mushrooms with Corn that has a Japanese and Chinese flavor combination. I have been getting the fresh red snapper, Onaga, from the same purveyor for 10 years. The freshness of the fish and the familiar flavors for locals is what makes this a successful dish.

• **What has your experience been like working with the Tung Luk Restaurant Group in Singapore for the World Gourmet Summit?**

When traveling to foreign lands he wants to ensure that both teams learn something from the experience – it is not only a culinary exchange yet they "learn our lifestyle from us". Chef Wong makes sure not to lose his cool as he wants it to be "a good experience for the local staff and the visiting team". He was impressed with the front and back of the house operation at My Humble House, one of 17 Tung Luk Group restaurants in Singapore. "I stay flexible and change to local taste as we get feedback from the guests. They printed their menu in-house so we were able to change menus for the next event that same day.

• **What are the keys to success for doing guest chef events?**

Bring enough people with you, for this trip he brought eight people from his team – they cooked several menus a day for the week. Chef Wong brings the crew not only to help execute great food but to "expose them so they see what I see and taste the whole experience. Then they can compare the food we create to the rest of the world". He indicated that is important to help grow them as people and as culinarians. He also feels it is very important to select the right dishes to serve he called them "foolproof dishes" – that is those that have elements that can be cooked ahead. The Alan Wong team shipped twenty boxes over with key ingredients "using a different sesame or soy sauce will make the dish taste different". A