



CHEFS CONGRESS

The world's most innovative and dedicated chefs share their sustainable practices for the most important gastronomy gathering in Manila

by MICHAELA FENIX
photographs by RICKY LADIA

Above: Gert de Mangeeler of Belgium explains how a lot of work is done to make a dish look simple like the meat dish which is a study in red on the opposite page. He was one of the speakers at the Madrid Fusion Manila 2017 Congress, a stellar lineup of chefs including Pedro Subijana (below), one of the founders of the New Basque Cuisine.

“**T**owards a Sustainable Gastronomic Planet” seems at first glance a rather deep extravagant theme for Madrid Fusion Manila 2017, the most important culinary event in Asia. But the 19 speakers at the Congress, held from April 6 to 8 at the SMX Convention Center in Pasay City, presented very down-to-earth solutions to obtaining sustainability, as well as redefined the role of chefs today. And that made this third year of Madrid Fusion Manila perhaps the best in terms of message quality and practicality.

The speakers who deserved a standing ovation were Danish Kamilla Seidler and Venezuelan Michelangelo Cestari, who represent much more than the restaurant Gustu in La Paz, Bolivia. Gustu is also the name of a program that aims to uplift, educate, and develop local produce and products. The strategy was devised by Karl Meyer, founder

of Noma in Copenhagen, Denmark, whose idea of giving back to Danish society was to educate children about good, nutritious food and to train prison inmates in the culinary arts so they can have work after their prison terms. The program in Bolivia has helped street food workers upgrade their skills and teach them basic hygiene so that tourists can eat at their stalls. Local produce was processed, packaged, and marketed. Culinary schools were created to be accessible to the poorest students, with some now working in the best restaurants in Europe and a graduate now heading the staff at restaurant Gustu.

It was a revelation how some of the chefs devote time and effort to selecting, sometimes growing ingredients themselves, to ensure those adhere to their strict rules of sustainability. And yet their restaurants have been highly rated, awarded with Michelin stars, or considered one of the best restaurants in their region. It just goes to show that chefs are no longer concerned with just the cooking but also with what they use in their kitchens.



Sometimes, this concern may be a bit extreme, making chefs become farmers themselves to ensure top quality ingredients. One such chef is Simon Rogan, whose restaurant in the United Kingdom (L'Enclume) sources what he grows in his own farms. He said chefs have a responsibility to be aware of “the great food conspiracy” of corporate food that grows chemically induced corn, soya, and wheat, and which injects cattle with hormones and gives the animals unnatural diet. “The secret to change,” according to Rogan, “is to focus not on fighting the old but on something to change.” He was encouraged by the fruits and vegetables he saw and sampled at Farmers Market in Cubao. He then made a dish comprised of *lanzones*, *guyabano*, *pakaskas* (sugar obtained from palm), santan flowers, and *pili* nuts. Give him a bit more time and he may just teach Filipino chefs a thing or two.

Magnus Ek of Sweden (Oaxen Krog and Slip restaurants) goes diving with his supplier to get seafood for his new Nordic cuisine menu. He revealed a little known fact that clams can live up to 900 years and that he only will use 60-year-old clams because at that age, they cannot reproduce anymore. He didn't really say



how gatherers are supposed to know that. He advocates using Scandinavian products such as caviar from Finland, clams from Iceland, squid from Denmark, fish from Sweden.

Using local for Indonesian Ray Adriansyah and Dutch Eelke Plasmeijer means buying only from farmers, fishermen, and



Chefs who grow or personally source their ingredients—**(from above)** Gert de Mangeeler of Belgium and his dish, duck stuffed with smoked hay, with slivered beetroots perfumed with licorice; Simon Rogan of the UK, Magnus Ek of Sweden, and Bali Locavore chefs Ray Adriansyah and Eelke Plasmeijer.



artisans in Bali where their restaurant (Locavore) is located, and hiring only locals as staff. And so the title of their talk was “Go Local or Go Home,” not that serious, said the duo, but something eye-catching that Plasmeijer's graphic artist friend suggested. They use heritage rice and the Indonesian invention called *tempeh*, fermented cakes made of soya beans.

Like Simon Rogan of the United Kingdom, Spanish chef Rodrigo de la Calle (Invernadero) is so serious with his research into what he calls “gastrobotanicals,” that he worked establishing green houses with a botanist. He chronicled his studies for years, starting with flowers, citrus, vegetables from the dessert, Mediterranean and Asian, mushrooms, fermentation. His cooking is not considered vegetarian or vegan, but is a plant-based cuisine.

Belgian chef Gert de Mangeeler also has a farm where he grows fruits, vegetables, and flowers. His talk, entitled “Simplicity



isn't Simple," shows how much work is done to make the dishes look simple, such as the fish and vegetables that are made to look like a flower, butternut squash with chopped raw lobster and pickled onion, avocado covered with fermented tomato juice that has been dried and made into powder, mixed with salt and olive oil in the middle. His three kinds of seafood with vanilla involved gray shrimps, langoustine, and lobster with grated cheese, pan-dried rosemary, cream of raspberry, and beetroot. Even without getting a taste of the dishes, imagining the many flavors already makes it exciting, and only a well-seasoned chef can make this work.

Among the chefs whose talk couldn't be missed even if the first day schedule was already an hour delayed for every session, was Pedro Subijana, one of the founders of Nueva Cucina Vasca (New Basque Cuisine) and one of the culinary icons in Spain. His presentation was mainly on his restaurant Akelarre in San Sebastian,



the changes it had gone through in its structure as well as the menu through four decades and his own 50 years of cooking. He endeared himself to the audience because he said he was curious about the Philippines since many Filipino tourists come to eat at the restaurant.

He ended by saying that gatherings like Madrid Fusion have given dignity to his profession, have made a venue for collaboration, and allowed an opportunity to know what other countries are doing, how cuisine has evolved and changed, and most importantly, created gastronomic tourism.

At the welcome dinner the night before the Congress, it was easy to spot one chef who definitely looked Filipino. Sally Camacho Mueller was drinking her *buko* juice, relishing it as one of the things she misses when she is back in the United States. A noted pastry chef and teacher, she includes Asian flavors in the Western pastries she makes, combining savory with sweet such as sea urchin and duck's eggs she created during her presentation.



new place, Test Kitchen, where he cooks for a maximum of 22 people and where the menu changes according to ingredients available. And yet, he entertained the audience with his Brit-like humor,



Camacho was just one of the chefs we should have known was making waves in places where they work. Filipino-French sisters Tatiana and Katya Levha have a highly rated bistro in Paris (*Le Servan*), and their talk included waste management at their restaurant by using vegetable trimmings for broth, leftover creams wrapped in salt and sugar and placed in the oven overnight for one of the sidings. The Levha sisters also include Filipino flavors such as *adobo*, and do a version of their favorite crispy *pata* in their roasted pork belly with crisp skin.

Filipino-Brit Josh Boutwood, on the other hand, is known here because of his former place in Boracay, Alchemy, and his

Left: Fil-Am pastry chef Sally Camacho Mueller puts the finishing touch to her creation.
Below: Sweet Uni by Sally Camacho

Bottom: Korean Tony Yoo gives his version of the Korean classic Seoul Ya Myeok Jeok, barbecued meat with lotus flower.

declaring right away that he won't talk about sustainability and carbon footprint, which he did anyway, mentioning also that his kitchen has zero waste.

Maybe Filipinos like Boutwood and Jordy Navarra (*Toyo Eatery*) returned from living and working abroad because they discovered that Filipino cuisine has a lot to say and show, and gets them in touch with their Filipino identity. The star of Navarra's presentation was the Batanes *mataw* (fisherman) who showed how the *arayu* (dorado) is filleted and then tied for salting and drying.

Opening and closing the Congress were two Filipino chefs. First speaker was Gene Gonzalez (*Café Ysabel*) who did a bit of Filipino culinary history then presented an updated *bringbe*, the yellow rice used in his Pampanga hometown for fiestas but presented as a rice cracker topping. Robby Goco (*Green Pastures*) presented the goat as a healthy meat alternative which is not expensive to maintain because it eats plain grass and is a milk producer as well. He then demonstrated how *caldereta* becomes Filipino with the addition of liver spread, raisins, and cheese.

Art and cuisine were in the talks of two chefs—Josean Aluja whose restaurant, *Nerua*,

is located at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, and Vicky Lau of the *Tate Dining Room and Bar* in Hong Kong. For Aluja, the food should be as creative as the artworks on display at the museum. He also uses the products found in the waters around the place such as vegetables cultured near the sea that makes them salty, and buying squid from retired fishermen. Former graphic artist Lau creates "edible stories" in her menu, such as one based on Pablo Neruda's poetry.

Ancient books on Korean cooking are the basis for Tony Yoo's new interpretation at his restaurant, *Dooreyou* in Seoul, especially for the younger generation. He even produces micro *ginseng* roots. And another Asian restaurant located in Singapore is *Odetta*, whose chef is Julien Royer. Classified as modern French, the restaurant was after his grandmother, but he considers it a tribute also to the people who make the restaurant what it is: the purveyors, the cooks, the servers, and the customers.

Spanish chefs Paco Perez and Kiko Moya both run their family's restaurant. Perez (*Miramar*) said many new things introduced are based on what he learns during family vacations and one

can guess where he learned the combination of a dish that involves sea urchin and *kombu* with water finished in a pressure cooker. Moya's *L'Escaleta* has a menu based on four important ingredients in his home place of Alicante: saffron, mustard, rice, and almond—his tribute to the environment.

The talk of Jordi Roca and his wife, Alejandra Rivas Gomez (*El Celler de Can Roca*), was literally earthshaking because an earthquake occurred right then. It wasn't memorable because of the incident but because it introduced new techniques in pastry-making such as pulled sugar that is like blown glass, which also captures aromas like the smell of an old book. And also because it was the most entertaining featuring popscicles designed like Roca's nose, a finger, Darth Vader, and the likeness of Spain's celebrated male model. It was this "Sweet Anarchy" talk that got the standing ovation.

Those are just capsules of the Congress talks. Like a good long meal that has ended, what was conveyed at Madrid Fusion Manila 2017 takes time to settle down and be absorbed. And while not every detail can be remembered, what is important are the essentials which stay on and can be recalled at will. ☺



Clockwise from above right: Rodrigo de la Calle of Spain is deep into his demonstration of one of his many dishes like the chocolate sweet presented in a cacao pod with beans; Filipino French sisters Tatiana and Katya Levha prepare one of their dishes just before going onstage.





From left: Negros Paella by Chef Margarita Espino; Chef Magnus Ek's cream of sea urchin with apples and seaweed.



Above: Packaged food products at the exhibit hall. Right: The welcome program included a fashion show of Filipino woven textile. Clockwise from below right: Chefs pose with Tourism Secretary Wanda Corazon Teo; Gene Gonzalez and Margarita Fores; a row of chefs including Chele Gonzalez, Tatung Sarthou, Fernando Aracama, J Gamboa, Aaron Khor, and Ray Adriansyah; awardee Glenda Rosales Barretto with Micky Fenix and Claude Tayag; the Bayanihan dancers.



A SHOW OF THE BEST

The welcome dinner may not have been hosted by Malacañang Palace, where it was held, in the first two presentations of Madrid Fusion Manila. But the layout of the event and the ambience were certainly more dramatic at the SMX Convention Center of the Mall of Asia.

Only some of the featured chefs made it because many of them were already introduced to the media at lunch and some were still arriving or were preparing for their talks the next day.

It was an introduction as well to some Filipino cooking—*pancit palabok* with crisp noodles, *tinola* flan, *lechon hamonado*, *dinuguan* cubes speared with *puto*—innovations done by Via Mare. The renowned catering group is headed by Glenda Rosales Barretto, its creative force. She would be given recognition as “culinary icon” by the Les Toques Blanches Philippines Chefs Association on the first day of the Congress, an honor deserved for her contributions to the art and the dissemination of Filipino cooking.

Guests were welcomed by Tourism Secretary Wanda Corazon Teo and director and officer-in-charge for marketing development Verna Buensuceso, who has taken charge of Madrid Fusion Manila since it started in 2015. Spanish ambassador to the Philippines, Luis Calvo, also graced and spoke at the occasion.

A tourism party isn't complete without some regional dances by the Bayanihan Dance Company, flash performances by a bartender, and a fashion show featuring the best of Filipino fabrics made into elegant wear by Renée Salud.



Clockwise from above left: Chefs at the press conference after the talks—Tony Yoo of Korea, Rodrigo de la Calle of Spain, Julien Royer of Singapore, Gert de Mangeleer of Belgium, Michelangelo Cestari, and Kamilla Seidler representing Bolivia; wine-tasting lecture at the exhibit hall; Department of Tourism Secretary Wanda Corazon Teo opens the Exhibit Hall by watering a tableau of herbs and vegetables together with officials of Madrid Fusion and Tourism officials.

