

FOOD & WINE

Culinary ventures worth the weight

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Harlan Goldstein is not sleeping too well or seeing so much of his wife at the moment. He's also gained a little extra weight.

Even wearing blue jeans and his signature black chef's jacket, he looks a little stressed. These are not the symptoms of depression but the result of putting his efforts into opening two large new restaurants in Causeway Bay.

They happen to be in the same building as Jamie Oliver's new restaurant.

"The difference between me and Jamie Oliver is that I'll be here, he won't," says Goldstein.

Contemporary Japanese venue Sushi To by Harlan Goldstein soft opened last week, while the second venture, Penthouse, is set to open next week.

The openings double the number of Goldstein's restaurants, while a planned fifth restaurant focusing on Italian food has been shelved. The expansion is something of a turn around for the New Yorker. After he fell out with his previous employers and established Gold by Harlan Goldstein, he said it was unlikely he would run multiple restaurants or expand his number of venues quickly as he would find it difficult to maintain quality.

The difference between me and Jamie Oliver is that I'll be here [in Hong Kong], he won't

HARLAN GOLDSTEIN

"The philosophy is still the same. I'm going to lock down right now so I can focus on quality," he says.

The justification for expanding now is that he feels he has trained the teams in his existing outlets to the point that he can rely on them to work to his standards even when he's not there. But he plans to spend time at each venue.

Goldstein is determined to "not just be a name on a door".

The space is contemporary and muted and, as with Penthouse, has impressive views over Causeway Bay, the harbour and Tsim Sha Tsui.

While Sushi To is named for business partner Simon To, who is a big fan of Japanese cuisine, and the menu is the work of Japanese executive chef Norihisa Maeda, dishes definitely have some

Goldstein-esque twists. If you've read a Goldstein menu before you'll recognise the distinct approach to language and food in the BLT maki, which incorporates crispy bacon, tomato, lettuce, cheddar cheese and mustard mayonnaise for an unusual but satisfying piece of sushi. Ditto the Magic Mushrooms roll with its porcini and shiitake mushrooms, tempura flakes and white truffle mayonnaise.

Even the panko crusted deep-fried Hiroshima oyster comes with one of Goldstein's favourite ingredients – a miso sauce infused with black truffle.

Although restaurants in Japan tend to focus on one area of the country's cuisine, Sushi To offers not only the obvious sushi and sashimi but also robata-yaki, teppanyaki, tempura and stone pot rice.

Goldstein stresses that it is Maeda and not he who will be the chef.

"I'm his backbone, his shoulder to lean on. I taught him a few tricks and techniques, and I've been the flavour tester and the ideas man, but he's the chef."

Maeda, from Osaka, has been a chef since 1986, working mainly in Japan but also in Singapore and for the Aqua group here and in London.

Goldstein says the menu prices are friendly, but surely the rent on two 6,800 sq ft premises and a 5,000 sq ft rooftop can't be so friendly?

"Rent's not friendly anywhere, but what I can tell you is that the landlord wanted us here. They headhunted us, they approached us. They wanted my brand. I am probably the number one local chef recognised as a Westerner who is independent, without wanting to blow my own trumpet."

A floor above Sushi To in Soundwill Plaza is Penthouse. The restaurant, which seats 100, will be more recognisably in the Goldstein style, featuring dishes influenced by Spain and Italy.

Goldstein has bought a charcoal-fired Jospier grill for roasting beef, lamb, chicken and fish. There will be three types of paella and Goldstein says the entrance will be dominated by a five-metre-long dessert table piled with European pastries and desserts made with liquid nitrogen.

The space has a New York loft look, with bare walls and muted tones. A "sound designer" has also been brought in to create an ambient soundtrack.

Penthouse's bar, called Harlan Goldstein's Midtown Rooftop Bar, will be smoker friendly and offer cocktails, including the bourbon-based Wall St After 5pm, which sounds like a possible antidote to Goldstein's own tensions.

Baptism of fire

Koh Samui chef Alex Garés wants to spice up your holiday with authentic Thai cuisine, writes Vicki Williams

Alex Garés is not your typical chef. He is so passionate about authentic Thai cuisine that to ensure visitors to Koh Samui get a taste of it, he is offering to be your dining companion for the night.

Dining in inexpensive local eateries chosen for authenticity, this Spanish native orders dishes (at times off-menu) in fluent Thai, and has an in-depth knowledge of the ingredients of every dish.

There is a catch – you need to be a guest at the Four Seasons Resort, Koh Samui, where he is the executive chef, to snag a dinner date with him, if his schedule permits.

"I think that in the three years I have been in Koh Samui, I have eaten everywhere. I eat Thai food the majority of the time, and I only go back to restaurants with true Thai food," says Garés.

He is equally insistent about the authenticity of his own menu at KOH, Thai Kitchen & Bar, which opened at the resort in December 2013.

"I will not compromise on spice. If a dish traditionally has a certain spice level, that is how it comes. If a diner does not want that level of spice I will suggest another Thai dish that is inherently less spicy," says Garés enthusiastically.

When we dined with Garés, it was the evening before a planned dinner at KOH, and we found it a good measure by which to compare and contrast. Were the chef and his Thai team serving true Thai cuisine that catered to the local palate? If so, it was a brave move.

As with many other tourist hot spots, there are many restaurants in Koh Samui catering to the tourist palate, which is sweetened-up, spiced-down versions of Thai cuisine. Our first stop was Haad Bang Po.

This unassuming restaurant has the ambience of a Thai island spot – rustic dining right on the beach, spectacular sunsets, and curved coconut palms jutting out of the sand.

Standout dishes here include wok-fried bindweed (which appears as *pak liang* on menus), and a creeping vine in the same family as morning glory, with a

chewy texture and slightly bitter note, cooked with egg and oyster sauce. The plant is also featured on Garés' menu with egg and garlic.

The use of ingredients that are seasonal and locally sourced, such as bindweed and seaweed, is one way to get an authentic taste, says Garés. Another is spice; he considers southern Thai cuisine the spiciest regional cuisine.

A dish from Haad Bang Po that lit culinary fireworks consisted of blanched prawns fried with roasted chilli paste, lemon grass, tamarind, kaffir lime leaf and fresh chilli. It was spicy, salty, sweet and sour, with a lingering kick.

On Garés' menu, which changes three times a week, spicy signatures include a sensational wagyu beef cheek massaman curry – the cheek itself was fork-tender, deliciously gelatinous in a complex curry with a memorable heat level – and a steamed sea bass with spicy lime sauce (*pla kapong neung manao*).

His team was very involved in the creation of dishes for KOH, including the flavour profile: "I told them I was looking for dishes they would be proud to serve to their family."

They were also asked to come up with dishes they remember their grandparents preparing to see if they could rediscover and revive dishes of the past. Some dishes could be adapted, but others just didn't work: "*Gaeng tai pla*, a fish curry with half fermented fish stomach, heart and intestines, was not for everyone."

Som tam yot maprao, a spicy variant on green papaya salad made with palm heart, and *tom pla meuk yot makaham*, a squid soup with young, sour tamarind leaves, were far more successful. "We went back to the roots of Thai cuisine to offer dishes that feature genuine, clean flavours using top quality local products."

"Many of our recipes have their origins in southern Thailand, and we're excited to bring these dishes to our guests," says Garés.

He and his team also eat out together, to continually explore and understand the cuisine, including at restaurants such as Haad Bang Po, and the nearby



Thai wok-fried clams (above) from Bang Por Seafood restaurant (left), which features traditional Thai cooking. Photos: Vicki Williams



If a diner does not want that level of spice I will suggest another dish

ALEX GARÉS

Bang Por Seafood (Takho). Also by the beach, this restaurant is larger and busier, with a traditional open kitchen where diners can see dishes prepared.

Served here, and at KOH, are sataw, or stink beans, so called

because of the unique, possibly fermented odour that results when you eat them. They have a strong umami intensity, and are cooked using a southern recipe of prawns, chilli and red curry paste.

The star seafood dish is the sautéed clams with roasted chilli paste, and spices that cleverly enhance their flavour. Garés is soon to bring a crab-based version of this dish to KOH.

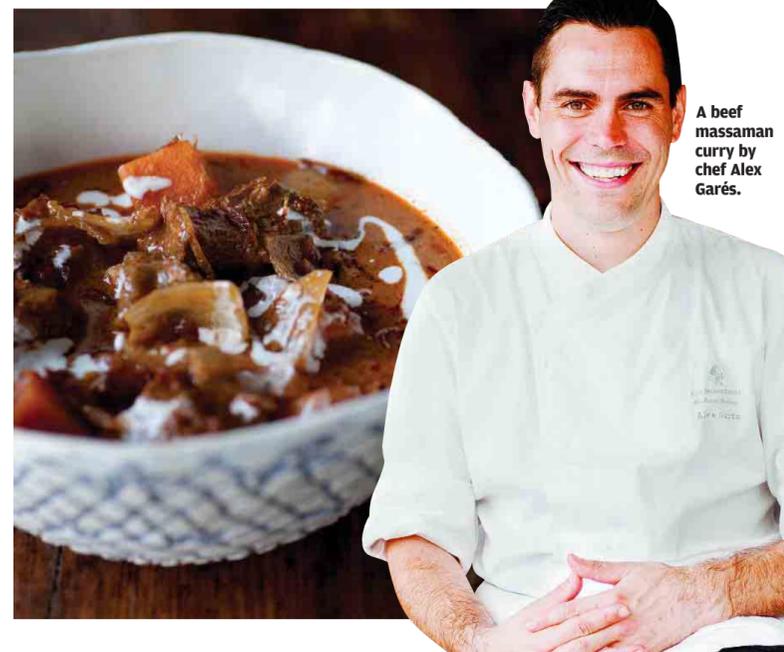
The food at KOH is more refined than these two low-key restaurants (and the setting more breathtaking), but it still serves Thai food with punchy

authentic flavours. The menu features a couple of dishes that you wouldn't normally find on a high-end resort menu, like the seafood dish *tom som pla taling pling*. This is a clear fish soup with a sour flavour that comes from the taling pling and is made from sea bass, finger ginger, kaffir lime, shallots and turmeric.

Taling pling is intensely sour when eaten raw, and still sour when cooked, but with a clean note that distinguishes it from other citrus fruit flavours.

One of the few deviations from southern Thai food on the menu is the *larb* tuna. This has a traditional larb spicing that ignites the palate but doesn't overwhelm the marinated tuna. The addition of cracked rice gives it textural contrast.

It's all part of Garés' commitment to give his guests a true taste of Thailand. life@scmp.com



A beef massaman curry by chef Alex Garés.



Executive chef Norihisa Maeda (left) and Harlan Goldstein at the recently opened Sushi To. Photo: Paul Yeung

Dazed and infused – tea-based cocktails shake up the establishment

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No sooner have I walked into Check-in Taipei, heralded by a few dry coughs courtesy of one of this year's superhuman cold strains, than Shin Chiu serves a hot winter melon tea sweetened with a hint of the house-made sugar syrup he makes fresh daily, and, of course, pearls – Taiwan's famous tapioca balls.

Comforting and soothing, it is made with winter melon-infused cane sugar that comes from the island in rich, dark slabs. "We call this sugar black gold (*hei gin*) in Taiwan," says Chiu, who has spent 20 years in the drinks business.

Along with sugars and teas, Chiu is undoubtedly the most significant Taiwanese ingredient that owner Tom Huang has

imported for his venture, which is located on Hollywood Road in Central. Hong Kong-born executive chef Leung Nga-fung presents a reinvented contemporary Taiwanese cuisine, and Chiu does the same with the cocktails. Chiu's creations are full of surprises, whether or not you are familiar with Taiwanese ingredients.

The Check-in Taipei team have nicknamed the bar owner (who owns Lomi Lomi in Taipei), bartender and bar skills instructor the "drink architect", which initially sounds as highfalutin as "mixologist" did back in the 1990s.

"I want to make drinks with different layers, so they call me the drink architect," he says. "But on my name card, my real title is Chief Drink Officer – CDO. No, that's not a normal title, either."

He presents a tray with a shot-sized cup of smoking liquid, a cup of what looks like milk sprinkled with red bean, and a ceramic frog propping up a wooden spoon.

Deconstructing what he calls his "dessert cocktail" called Tofu of An-Ping, he says the Taiwan Hometown High-Mountain Tea Liqueur (which has more than 30 per cent alcohol) is mixed half and half with High-Mountain Tea and garnished with dry ice.

Sip this first, then taste the cocktail of Baileys, Oolong tea, almond tofu and soya bean milk using the spoon.

"An Ping was the first city to be developed in Taiwan. They make a lot of soya bean milk, tofu and other bean products," he explains, adding, "There are many frogs in the rivers there."



Shin Chiu makes cocktails that are full of surprises.

Introduced after the opening, the menu of non-alcoholic milk and fruit teas is perfect for sipping during the day, or at their just-launched lunch. One of the most popular is the flossy cream tea. For this, he whips the cream into an airy layer and sits it above the tea, sprinkling crushed peanuts on the top, a little salt increasing the sweetness of the tea.

Like a duvet of cream above a chilled fruit tea, it is bizarre but absolutely delicious, giving you the inevitable white moustache as you drink.

Almost all his drinks have an infusion of Taiwanese tea. "I love tea. In Taiwan, we drink lots of kinds of tea, and if you want to be a professional bartender you need to know everything about drinks," he says.

"For the first five years I studied tea and coffee. I went to

the mountains to learn how to pick tea and make tea on a farm. Then I spent five years studying wine and other alcohols."

He's also a member of the World Flair Association, which organises competitions that focus on a bartender's moves. But when I ask for some cocktail shaker acrobatics, he says, "I don't want this to be a circus. My focus is on the drinks here."

Erasing the pictures in my head of a Taiwanese Tom Cruise, I obediently focus on the drinks. But he then confesses his favourite cocktail on the menu is the showy signature shooter 101 Fireworks, made of absinthe, High-Mountain Tea Liqueur, blue Curacao, pineapple juice and Shy jih chuen tea, and served on fire.

"When you drink it you don't feel its strength until after," he says, smiling.