

Straight from the Heart



Susur Lee didn't set out to become Canada's hottest chef.

In fact, as **Jocelyn Zuckerman** learns, the career of this improvisational artist has been about as calculated as his cooking—which is to say, not at all

THREE OF CHARLIE TROTTER'S line cooks are hunkered down in a booth along the far wall of Toronto's Susur restaurant. One of them, a heavyset guy in a dark suit, has just taken a bite of his smoked squab, and a look of something like fear has settled in on his ample face. As he slowly chews, his eyes dart from one to

the other of his colleagues across the table. "This dish is blowing me away," he says finally. "It's herbaceous, it's spicy, it's sweet. It's crisp. It's soft."

The plate—which in addition to the deboned bird features a swath of beef tongue draped delicately over a tiny sweet-potato and roasted pineapple tart, a small mound of braised red cabbage,

and separate pools of miso mustard and foie gras sauces flecked with shards of preserved lemon and *habanero* chile—is just one of seven dishes that he will be served during the course of the night, each of them as multidimensional and improbable as the next.

The man behind this elaborate parade is no stranger to a dining room overcome

BEHIND THE STOVE

with awe. Susur Lee has been making waves in Canada since he opened his first restaurant in 1987. A tiny spot in Toronto's funky Queen Street neighborhood, Lotus was the original showcase for what would become Lee's signature style—a seamless melding of classical European and Chinese techniques and ingredients. "He was a pioneer of fusion," says restaurateur Drew Nieporent.

At Lotus, people booked months in advance for a chance to watch the ponytailed chef in action while sampling such surprisingly cohesive combinations as his rack of lamb with Thai green curry sauce served with an eggplant-onion tart, black and pink peppercorn polenta, orange tomato marmalade, and chile mint chutney. *Toronto Life* called the restaurant "a shrine of serious, complex, highly original cooking" and even ran "Absolut Susur" ads. There

Toronto Life called Lee's first restaurant "a shrine of serious, complex, highly original cooking" and even ran "Absolut Susur" ads.

were guest gigs in Israel and Singapore; appearances on the Food Network; and, eventually, invitations to expand in Toronto and relocate to New York.

But after ten years at Lotus, Lee had begun to feel burned-out. He closed the restaurant in 1997 and dropped out of sight until last August, when he resurfaced with Susur. Twice the size of its 40-seat predecessor, Lee's new place has been packed since day one, and Canadian critics are falling over themselves trying to invent new superlatives to describe the intense flavors and unique combinations turning up on his plates night after night.

Who is this guy that's got everyone in such an uproar? And what is it about his food that has chefs from North America's top kitchens hopping on airplanes to spend a single evening in his dining room?

SUSUR LEE MIGHT QUIBBLE with Nieporent's semantics (he refers to fusion as the F word), but he wouldn't deny that his cooking is all about the disparate cultures that have shaped him. First was Hong Kong, where he was born and lived until the age of 19. Lee's mother, a "tea lady" for the British army who didn't feel much like crafting dinner for six children when she got home at night, cooked bland, boiled food, so his culinary epiphanies tended to take place

outside the home. He remembers one afternoon spent in the shadows of a dim sum restaurant. Before disappearing behind his horse-racing paper, his father had told Lee to order whatever he pleased. Three hours later, Lee senior folded his paper to find a table littered with half-eaten dumplings and buns. "That's how I got my nickname," the 42-year-old chef says with a giggle. "Little Piggy. For a Chinese boy, I was kind of round."

Lee moved out of his parents' cramped and unhappy household when he was just 14 and took a job washing woks at a Pekingese restaurant. Two years later he was hired as an apprentice in the classical European kitchens of the city's renowned Peninsula hotel. Having gone from the youngest in the house to the youngest in the kitchen, he admits that he was "kind of insecure" and went out of his way to

prove himself on the job. He thrived in the grown-up environment and by 19 had risen to *saucier*.

That year he met Marilou Covey, a 29-year-old Toronto native who was teaching in Hong Kong. Although Lee didn't introduce her to his parents right away ("Number one, she was 29. Number two, she was Caucasian"), he decided that they'd spend their lives together. Two years later they left Hong Kong to backpack through Asia, the Middle East and Europe.

After nine months on the road, the couple landed in Toronto, where they spent the next five years with their heads down—Covey studying for her Ph.D. and Lee cooking around the clock. "Everything was about making money, surviving." When she was offered a professorship in Hong Kong, the (now-married) couple decided to move back to Lee's hometown. Covey planned to head over to arrive in time for fall classes, and Lee would follow a few weeks later. But on September 1, 1983, the Korean airliner that Covey had boarded that morning veered from its flight path and was shot down by Soviet fighters. "Oh man," Lee says softly. "She was my best friend. She was my only friend."

THE DINING ROOM at Susur is a study in soothing white. There are cream-colored, mock ostrich-skin chairs and banquettes, and snowy cloths set with bone-colored plates. Pearlescent light glows from behind scrims of pale goatskin, and a lone white orchid droops in each of six arched windows. Everything radiates a Zen-like calm. Everything, that is, but the two boxes on the back wall that keep shifting from one neon color to the next. And the 12 Colonel Sanders dolls lined up like toy soldiers on a shelf that runs the length of the room.

For someone who, for all his culinary prowess, comes off as a guileless innocent, the dolls seem wildly off-key. As do the black velvet paintings in the restaurant's lounge, and the cheeky messages ("WE HOPE YOU CAN COME AGAIN") stencilled on the bathroom walls. These are the imprint of Brenda Bent, Lee's wife and partner for the past 17 years. "Sometimes she does things," he says with a fond smile, "I don't even understand where they're coming from."

Lee met Bent, then a waitress and aspiring fashion designer, not long after the devastating loss of Covey. They didn't hit it off immediately (he thought she was a weird punk, she thought he was gay), but today they have three children, and the bond that connects them seems to inform every aspect of Lee's life. "With him," says Cosimo Mammoliti, one of the chef's closest friends, "it's all about family." Ask Lee what he does to relax: "Spend time with my kids and wife." Why he might write a cookbook: "My kids could show it to their friends." Peek in the office at Susur and you'll see walls plastered with poems to Dad and photos of Bent and the boys.

His family was the reason Lee dropped out of sight in 1997. After a decade at Lotus, the long hours in the tight confines had begun to take a toll on his body. But the Toronto economy suggested it didn't make sense to expand. "I wanted to do something in the big city," Lee says, "but one thing I'm very afraid of..." he trails off for a moment before finishing in his still heavily accented (and grammatically shaky) English, "I hate to be controlled by somebody."

Just before closing Lotus, he had met Andrew Tjioe, the wealthy young president of a group of Singapore restaurants, who was developing a place called Club Chinois. Tjioe

CHEF'S SECRET

From Susur Lee: To get a really meaty-tasting stock that's not heavy, make it the way the Chinese do—without browning the bones.

BEHIND THE STOVE

asked him to come up with the menu and consult on his other establishments, and Lee figured a consulting gig would leave him time for the family. So in 1998, he took his talent abroad.

Club Chinois, modeled on a social club for the Shanghai elite of the 1930s, was an instant success, due in large part to the food Lee came up with—dishes like “three-way French and Chinese foie gras.” “Every time I see a dish over there,” he now says, “right away I would be thinking how it would work with European products.”

AT 8 P.M., THE KITCHEN at Susur is a blur of heat and speed. Four times the size of the Lotus space, it easily accommodates its ten cooks—Lee’s Malaysian-Chinese sous-chef, with him since the Lotus days; a woman he converses with in Cantonese; and eight variously goateed, sideburned, and tattooed Canadian men and women in their twenties and early thirties. Lee is stationed at the pass, under the skylight he was so intent on installing, pouring hot onion oil over halibut fresh from the Chinese steamer (his favorite piece of equipment), making sure the bamboo leaf beneath it is perfectly centered on the plate, then pushing it along—“Careful, this is hot.” Bouncing around in his Birkenstocks, ponytail swinging, he gently calls orders to the staff—“Johnny Boy, you got me a custard?”—and finishes plates with equal parts haste and finesse. “He has the best right hand I’ve ever seen,” manager John Gay remarks later. (In fact, like so many things about Lee, the hands are a total anomaly: Meaty and wide, they seem all wrong on his trim, five-eleven frame.)

Though he says he likes simple food (“Give me a bowl of spinach with sesame oil and soy, I’m very happy”), Lee’s plates are anything but. Choreographed dances of flavor and texture, they pick up where his Lotus creations left off—with an added Southeast Asian twist. His lemongrass chicken wing, for example, an extension of a Thai-flavored entrée he came up with at Club Chinois, gets deboned and stuffed with leg meat, then fried and plated with roasted mango sauce, foie gras terrine, a garlic potato crisp, and a single cayenne-spiked caramelized pistachio. At other times he pairs the wing with both a mustard and a foie gras sauce and plates it with a sesame potato ring and foie gras confit.

Lee’s sauces are the anchor of his cuisine. Based mainly on herbs and Chinese-style stocks (“Dairy just softens food

up”), they turn up everywhere, and in ever-changing ways. During a single dinner at Susur you’re likely to encounter truffle, lobster, and foie gras sauces; black olive, mustard, and miso sauces; a *habanero* and tomato sauce; a Chinese garlic and almond sauce; a burned-butter, soy, and lemon sauce; and something he calls a Thai-ladaise glaze.

Food should challenge people’s perceptions, says Lee, and expose them to new ideas. “Normally when you see a dark sauce with meat, you think it must be a reduction. You know, that same European taste. I want to change all that.” With his Wuxi pork, then, a riff on a slow-cooked dish from northern China, he serves a Chinese red rice wine sauce. He pairs it with any number of sides: an onion and fig confit and a crisp potato soufflé one night; braised rhubarb and cabbage and an apple-stuffed potato croquette the next; an onion and orange marmalade and corn flan yet a third.

“I find that if we’re not focusing on one thing, we’re not getting the most out of something,” Lee says. “That’s what I strongly believe in developing a cuisine: not jumping from pork and then to veal.

What strikes you about the chef is his almost childlike openness, the total lack of calculation that goes into what he says and does.

I want to perfect one dish with different sauces, and present it with different combinations.”

Lee doesn’t just improvise night to night, he does it minute to minute. “If he’s got something in his brain,” says one of his cooks, “whether it’s six or eleven at night, he’s gonna do it.” And like a bunch of seasoned musicians, they’ve learned to follow his lead. “We’ve seen elements of the stuff before,” says another, “and it’s like, ‘Well, okay, I know what that is, I know where he’s coming from.’” Unlike most restaurants, says Gay, which stick to a specific repertoire, “We’re just following whatever emotional moment he’s having in the back.”

Diners at Susur are increasingly doing the same. Less than 20 percent of them order off the menu these days, opting instead to have Lee send out whatever he chooses. And since last winter, they’ve even been letting him do it in reverse. The idea came to him during a snowstorm, when people arrived chilled and primed

for something with heft. He tried following substantive dishes like venison and pork with increasingly lighter and smaller ones, and the diners finished everything put before them. The “inverted pyramid” style has reigned ever since.

SUSUR LEE couldn’t have gotten where he is without a serious amount of determination. At Lotus, he put up the walls himself, rode his bike to the market every morning to pick out ingredients, and spent not a few nights curled up on the kitchen floor as his stocks simmered on the burners above. His friends joke about the lake cottage, bought five years ago and visited exactly twice, and Lee himself admits he was “totally bummed out” when he recently lost out on a chance to compete on *Iron Chef*. Nor does he deny that he has ambitions to open a place in New York. “There’s something about the challenge of it,” he says, “I think, ‘I could do that.’”

At the same time, though, what strikes you about the chef is his almost childlike openness, the total lack of calculation that goes into what he says and does. He freely admits that he doesn’t read books

(“Forget it. I get totally lost”) and he’s at a loss when you ask him about his other interests. (“This is the only thing I know.”) The lack of self-involvement also comes across in Lee’s interactions with the people around him. When an admirer requests a picture with him at New York’s James Beard House, he immediately turns to gather his staff, and he gives them credit every chance he gets.

Having a family has helped him learn to deal with people, says Lee, and to keep things in perspective. Also, he picked up some managerial tips in Singapore, where he had to oversee some 35 chefs. (“They look at me, ‘This North American Chinese with earring gonna tell me how to change my barbecue that I’ve been roasting for thirty years?’”) Whereas in the Lotus days he used to lose his temper, these days when a cook does something wrong, he simply takes him aside for a quiet chat. “Getting to know who they are,” he says, “that’s a big power in running a successful kitchen.”

BEHIND THE STOVE

So while other chefs rant at their line cooks and strategize about the best ways to further their careers, Susur Lee concentrates on what's in front of him and continues to take it slow. "You have to focus on something to make it better and better," he says. "Then you can think about moving on."

SUSUR

601 King Street West
Toronto
416-603-2205

WUXI PORK WITH WINE SAUCE

Serves 8

Active time: 40 min Start to finish: 4 hr

See *Kitchen Notebook*, page 268, and *Shopping List*, page 269, for more about the specialty ingredients called for here.

- 1 (2-lb) piece fresh pork belly (unsmoked bacon) with skin and bones
- 2 (32-oz) bottles club soda
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- 4 garlic cloves
- 3 (1- by ¼-inch) slices fresh ginger, smashed with flat side of a heavy knife
- 3 scallions, trimmed and smashed
- 2 cups Chinese white rice wine, Chinese white rice cooking wine, or Japanese sake
- 3 whole star anise
- 2 whole cloves
- 1 (2- by 2-inch) piece dried tangerine peel
- ½ cup plus 3 tablespoons Chinese sweet red rice wine, Chinese sweet red rice cooking wine, or medium-dry Sherry
- 2 to 3 tablespoons dark soy sauce (also known as superior)
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch

Accompaniments: corn flan and onion and orange marmalade (recipes follow)

Special equipment: a 2-qt heatproof bowl, 9 to 10 inches wide; a 12-inch-wide steamer pot with insert

Cook pork:

► Bring pork belly and club soda to a boil in a 4-quart saucepan, then reduce heat and simmer, uncovered, 20 minutes. Transfer pork to a

cutting board and discard liquid.

► When pork is cool enough to handle, cut into 1-inch (bone-in) pieces with a cleaver. Transfer to heatproof bowl.

► Heat oil in a wok or medium skillet over moderately high heat until hot but not smoking, then stir-fry garlic, ginger, and scallions until browned, about 2 minutes. Transfer to bowl with pork and add white rice wine, star anise, cloves, tangerine peel, 3 tablespoons red rice wine, and 2 tablespoons soy sauce. (If using regular rice wine instead of cooking wine, use 3 tablespoons soy sauce.)

► Heat 2 to 3 inches of water in bottom of steamer pot until simmering, then put bowl with pork mixture onto steamer rack. Cover pot and steam until pork is very tender and falling off bones, about 3 hours. Replenish steamer pot by adding boiling water every hour as necessary. ► Remove bowl from steamer and pour juices through a fine sieve lined with dampened paper towels into a 1-quart saucepan. Discard bones, garlic, ginger, scallions, star anise, tangerine peel, and cloves. Set pork aside and keep warm, covered. (The turned-off steamer is a good place, as it stays hot for a while.)

Make wine sauce:

► Skim fat from juices, then boil over moderately high heat until reduced to about 1 cup, 15 to 20 minutes. Whisk together cornstarch and remaining ½ cup red rice wine in a small bowl until smooth, then whisk into boiling juices. Reduce heat and simmer, whisking frequently, until sauce is slightly thickened, 2 to 3 minutes.

► Serve pork over corn flan, drizzled with wine sauce and topped with onion and orange marmalade.

Cooks' note:

• Pork and wine sauce can be cooked 1 day ahead. Cool meat in sauce, uncovered, then chill, covered. Reheat over low heat.

CORN FLAN

Serves 8 (side dish)

Active time: 30 min Start to finish: 1½ hr

- 7 large eggs
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons pure maple syrup
- 9 slices firm white sandwich bread, crusts discarded and bread cut into 1-inch pieces (4 cups)
- 1½ cups cooked corn (from 3 medium ears)

2 teaspoons finely chopped fresh tarragon

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon freshly ground white pepper

► Preheat oven to 375°F.

► Whisk together eggs, cream, and syrup in a large bowl. Stir in remaining ingredients and let stand 15 minutes.

► Spoon into a buttered 9- by 5- by 3-inch loaf pan (preferably nonstick) and bake in middle of oven until puffed and set in center, 40 to 45 minutes. Cool 10 minutes, then invert flan onto a plate. Cut crosswise into 8 slices.

Cooks' note:

• Flan may be made 1 day ahead. Cool, uncovered, then chill, covered, in pan. Turn out onto a plate and reheat by steaming briefly in a covered steamer pot.

ONION AND ORANGE MARMALADE

Makes about 3 cups

Active time: 45 min Start to finish: 2½ hr

- 2 tablespoons vegetable oil
- 2½ lb white onions, thinly sliced (8 cups)
- 2 bay leaves (not California)
- 1 whole clove
- 2 cups sugar
- 1 large navel orange, thinly sliced
- 3 cups veal stock or chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons red-wine vinegar

► Preheat oven to 400°F.

► Heat oil in a deep 12-inch heavy ovenproof skillet over moderately high heat until hot but not smoking, then sauté onions with bay leaves and clove, stirring frequently, until soft and beginning to brown, 25 to 30 minutes.

► While onions are sautéing, cook sugar and oranges in a 10-inch nonstick skillet over moderate heat, stirring frequently, until sugar is melted and oranges are caramelized, 25 to 30 minutes.

► Add stock and vinegar to onions and bring to a boil, then carefully stir in oranges (mixture will bubble up and steam vigorously). Boil, stirring, until caramel is dissolved, about 3 minutes.

► Carefully transfer skillet to oven and bake, uncovered, stirring occasionally, until most of liquid is evaporated, 1½ to 1¾ hours. Serve warm.

Cooks' note:

• Marmalade may be made 1 week ahead and chilled, covered. ❧