

Use your imagination

From scallops with chocolate to an all-red wine braise, cooking starts in Jeremy Nguee's head

Singapore Cooks

Huang Lijie



What do you do when you find yourself with half-drunk bottles of red wine?

Avid home cook Jeremy Nguee, 29, uses them to make braised beef cheeks.

Unlike most recipes that call for beef or chicken stock to be added to the braising liquid, however, his version uses only red wine.

He stumbled upon the idea after an oenophile friend with an overcrowded wine collection gave him eight partially drunk bottles of red wine.

He says: "An all-red wine braise is a good way to use up leftover inexpensive red wine and the dish tastes richer too."

His version boasts another unusual touch: He sears the meat before serving it.

He says: "It gives the tender beef cheeks a crisp, caramelised exterior."

His braised beef cheeks recipe, which he shares below, is an example of how he comes up with new concoctions through improvisation.

The business development executive also enjoys imagining new dishes and testing them out in the kitchen.

A recent experiment was seared scallops with grated chocolate.

The marriage of flavours was perfect in his head – the briny taste of seafood, the subtle sweetness of the scallops and chocolate, and a faint bitterness from the cocoa.

Unfortunately, his attempt was marred by the type of chocolate he used.

He says: "I used unsweetened chocolate and the dish turned out to be too bitter and not sweet enough, so I will have to try again."

He has no lack of practice though, dreaming up new recipes in his head.

As a child, he would read his housewife mother's collection of cookbooks and visualise the dishes stewing away in pots or sizzling in pans.

His mother encouraged him to realise those daydreams by helping her cook and bake. He is the eldest of three siblings and his father works as a mooring master.

He says: "By the time I was seven, my younger



ST PHOTOS: SAMUEL HE

Too much red wine left over? Use it to braise beef cheeks, says Jeremy Nguee.

brother and I would compete to see who could cook better fried rice."

Keen to better his culinary skills, he worked as a chef's assistant in an Italian restaurant before he started National Service.

The two-month experience was an eye-opener and he learnt many culinary tips and recipes.

One such recipe was an easy-to-make tomato sauce, which he continues to use at home for pastas and pizzas.

The stint also inspired him to start cooking individually plated, multi-course meals for friends and family.

His first attempt was a six-course Italian dinner for eight people and the menu featured dishes such as seafood pasta and roast chicken.

He recalls: "The food was good but the dinner, scheduled for 7.30pm, did not start till 9pm because I underestimated the time needed."

With practice, however, he no longer needs more than half a day to whip up such dinner parties, which he hosts every three months.

His love for food extends to food photography.

The mouth-watering food pictures in the cookbook, *Sharing From Our Hearts* (2007) by the YWCA were shot by him using a Canon DSLR camera.

He also photographed the food in a recipe booklet that he published last year with his wife, Shumin, 27, an advertising accounts manager.

The booklet was their wedding favour and among the eight recipes featured were his family's Japanese hotpot, which his wife relishes, and her orange Cointreau butter cake, which was one of the first things she made for his family.

He says: "We both enjoy eating and cooking so we wanted to share with our guests recipes that defined our courtship."

He is sharing his fondness for cooking by teaching culinary classes at the YWCA too.

He says: "I like to connect and bond with people through my cooking, and I hope to help others do the same."

lijie@sph.com.sg

Mr Jeremy Nguee is conducting two cooking classes at the YWCA Fort Canning Lodge, one on Saturday, of a three-course Italian meal, and another on July 24, of Peranakan dishes. Each class costs \$10 (YWCA member) or \$15 (non-member). For more information, call 6223-1227.

MAKE IT YOURSELF: BRAISED BEEF CHEEKS

INGREDIENTS

1 tsp dried parsley flakes
1/2 tsp dried thyme
2 bay leaves, coarsely chopped
1.25 litres red wine
130g carrots, diced
150g yellow onions, diced
50g celery, diced
4 cloves garlic, crushed with skin on
2 beef cheeks, 450g each
salt to taste
pepper to taste
flour for dusting
1 Tbs canola oil
10g butter

METHOD

1. The day before, put the parsley flakes, dried thyme and bay leaves in a muslin sachet. Place the herb sachet in a large pot together with 750ml red wine, carrots, yellow onions, celery and garlic. Bring the mixture to a boil with the lid off, then cool to room temperature.
2. Place the beef cheeks in a large resealable plastic bag, add the red wine marinade and leave in the chiller overnight for up to 24 hours.
3. Remove the beef cheeks and set aside. Strain the marinade into a bowl and set aside. Reserve the herb sachet and vegetables.
4. Season the beef cheeks with salt and pepper, then flour it lightly, dusting off any excess.
5. Heat a heavy skillet, add canola oil and evenly



brown the cheeks on all sides on medium heat. Set aside.

6. Pour away excess beef fat rendered in the pan and use the pan to saute the vegetables.

7. Place the sauteed vegetables, beef cheeks and herb sachet in a casserole dish and add the red wine sauce and remaining red wine. Bring to a simmer and skim off surface scum.

8. Transfer to a pre-heated oven at 140 deg C and braise for between 3.5 and 4 hours.

Alternatively, continue simmering the beef over the stove for the same duration and skim off surface scum regularly.

9. Remove the beef cheeks and set aside. Strain



the sauce into a small saucepan and skim off the layer of oil. Discard the vegetables and herb sachet.

10. Reduce the sauce over low heat until it thickens and skim off any surface scum. Season with salt and pepper.

11. While waiting for the sauce to reduce, slice the beef cheeks into about 2cm-thick slices (above left). Season with salt and pepper, then sear in a hot pan oiled with butter. By now, the meat is fork tender so flip it just once when searing. To serve, drizzle the sauce over the beef cheeks.

Serves four