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Ep 4: Shen Tan – The chef’s recommendation

(Intro music begins)

Hi, I'm Siew Hoon and I love to travel. More than that, I'm in love with the power of travel to change lives. Welcome to A Life in Travel. This season is brought to you by Expedia Group – Bringing the world within reach.

In this episode, find out why Shen Tan, a young media executive working in travel, gave it all up to sell Nasi Lemak at a hawker centre and now runs her own culinary business, Ownself Make Chef.

(Music fades)

SHY: Hi Shen –

Shen: Hi –

SHY: Welcome to the studio.

Shen: Hi, sorry to interrupt [laughs].

SHY: [Laughs] So tell me, how would you describe Nasi Lemak to people who don't know, and why did you choose to sell Nasi Lemak in the first place?

Shen: Well, Nasi Lemak is quite a ubiquitous dish in Southeast Asia, and (in) Singapore and Malaysia especially. It typically was a breakfast dish, and it is this aromatic coconut milk-cooked rice infused with some spices and herbs. You could have it really lux (sic) by pairing it with lobster versions, right now, or prawns, or being as simple and homespun as fried anchovies, a fried egg and some sambal.

When I was giving it all up, I wanted to put forth a dish that kind of spoke to my roots of being Singaporean and having a dish that you could eat anytime of the day and reminded me of myself growing up.

SHY: Before we get really hungry and because actually all I want to do is talk about food, I think we want to talk a little bit about your life as well [laughs]. It is interesting to me – I've watched your career and it's interesting how our paths have kind of diverged and yet converged. Because we first worked together in the '80s in a travel publishing company. What were you doing exactly? I never knew, you know [laughs].



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- Shen: I joined as a management trainee fresh out of university and it was a great programme as a management trainee. For a year, we were rotated through the company.
- I spent time learning the editorial side, going through the event business side, as well as ad sales and even circulation and publishing operations. So, I ended up in the events side being in exhibitions and project management.
- SHY: Clearly, that didn't keep your interest, but let's not go there first. I remember a trip that you and I did to Geneva once, I think it was for a travel exhibition, incentive and meetings exhibition. What did you think of Swiss food, incidentally and did you find Geneva really boring?
- Shen: [Laughs] I'm going to have a lot of Geneva, Genevians and Swiss people who will be cross with me. But I remember being taken to a restaurant by David Hall, I don't know if you remember him. He used to be with the Jakarta Convention Bureau.
- SHY: Oh yes, yes. Australian.
- Shen: Yes, Australian.
- SHY: Yes, yes.
- Shen: He said, "Oh, we should have the famous signature dish," and it was fondue. When I had it, I was just like, "Dude, it's cheese dipped in bread, like bread dipped in cheese." That's it! [laughs] What's the fuss, honestly? [Laughs] I'm definitely going to be shot after I say this, but yeah. And it was just very expensive, the food, and everything was cold – breakfast was cold, lunch was cold. The only hot thing was the fondue. For dinner.
- SHY: Maybe that's why it's the signature dish [laughs]. Anyway, the job didn't keep your interest, or the event and all that. Then you gave it up to sell Nasi Lemak at Maxwell Food Market. How did that experience go?
- Shen: That was wow, eye-opening. It was unbelievable, very steep learning curve and probably the best thing I ever did in my life.
- SHY: In those days when you did it, and, giving away our age and all that, being a hawker was not glamorous. Like today, they got sexy hawkers and guys who are doing food undressed, showing their abs and all that. Hawker is sexy now, but in those days, it wasn't, but you chose to do that. Tell me why you chose to become a hawker.



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Shen: Very simply, it was an economic decision. The F&B option available to me that had a lower, start-up cost, barriers to entry aren't that high. So, for me who had just left my safe corporate job in 2008, that was the only viable option without having to sink like \$200,000 into the pot. So, it was a sink or swing moment – is this what I'm going to be doing for the rest of my life? Get off the pot. Yeah, so I took the plunge.

SHY: How many years did you run that stall? It was called Madam Tan's, wasn't it?

Shen: Yes, Madam Tan's Nasi Lemak. I did it for about a year and a little bit. Yeah, a year and two months.

SHY: Would you consider it successful? How many packets did you sell a day and what were customers like?

Shen: Being a hawker, you really get to see every kind of Singaporean. It's literally a microcosm of Singaporean society because everybody eats at hawker centres – the rich person, the poor person and the middle class. I learned a lot about human behaviour, about pricing, managing customer's expectations, marketing and PR on zero budget [chuckles].

Also, just learning the good in people. It was there that I really – people, my neighbours, my fellow hawkers/colleagues were so kind in helping me. For a noob like me, I knew nothing. Also, people who come and frequented the stall who bought food from me.

(Music break)

SHY: It must have been frustrating because people always say, "Oh, you know, Singaporeans always say this thing is not cheap enough." You want it cheap, cheap, cheap, right? At the same time, they want it good? Yet, the amount of hours that you put to prepare your food. Is that disappointing to you or frustrating when somebody say you're not cheap enough.

Shen: That's where you learn about pricing and managing customer expectations. Because I think in any business, you're going to have that same parrot cry. You're not cheap enough. It's not good enough blah, blah, blah. And if you can manage that in a hawker situation where that is amplified, you're going to be alright. You just have to really stick to your guns. Be confident in your niche that you've carved out, that you're good, and stay the course. It may be tough at



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times, but then, how do you term success? Is success having the extra \$10,000 or \$20,000, that you made a bunch of money from this venture? Or that you learned a tonne that you otherwise would not have learnt? I also learn how to take better care of myself physically. So, I think all these led me to believe that yes, it was a success, although maybe financially, not so much a success.

SHY: [Laughs] Clearly it gave you the courage and the confidence as well. You learned a tonne and then you went on to open your own restaurant called Wok & Barrel.

Shen: That's right.

SHY: I went a few times. What was that experience like, running your own restaurant? That's a higher risk, definitely.

Shen: Well, that was very challenging. That was the first time I really had imposter syndrome. I really felt that imposter syndrome because I thought, "Oh my God, how am I going to pull this off?" It's not a hawker stall only, anymore. With hawker food, it's just put the food out there, price it reasonably, people will come. Now –

SHY: – and there's always foot traffic at the Maxwell Food Market, right? I mean, it is one of the most popular –

Shen: Actually, not really. It's really quiet at night. With Wok & Barrel, it was about a dining experience. You had to train front-of-house staff, you had to manage reservations, all these things. Customers whose expectations were different as well, from a hawker stall's. That was another steep learning curve. Also, then managing partners, that's also another conversation that –

SHY: In a way, actually you invested in your own learning. By running a business, yes, there's an outcome. But you are actually investing in your own learning to become who you are today, to become the chef that you want to be. I know it's a tough life, even though from the outside, we see it's glamorous. All those TV shows showing how glamorous chef... but I know it's a tough, tough life.

When did you first fall in love with cooking? When did you decide, okay, this is what I want to do?

Shen: I don't ever think there was an "Aha" moment. When I was still working in the corporate life that when I was really stressed, I would go to the kitchen and tinker around. I think there are a lot of people now facing that midlife crisis thing, I think especially lawyers [laughs]. Of which my good friend, Willin Low, was a lawyer as well and he had that same crisis. Woo Wai Leong from MasterChef as well. But it was I think 2008 when financial crisis again (sic). And I just thought, I want to



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follow this through and see where it will take me. And I love it, I think I have a talent for it, and we'll see.

(Music break)

SHY: Most chefs when they (are) asked, “Who are the earliest influences?”, they always say, “My grandmother or my mother.” [laughs] What about you? Who are your earliest influences?

Shen: I have to be cliché and say my grandmother as well. I was this very picky eater, I was very skinny up to about the age of eight. When my parents got divorced, we went to live with my grandmother – my maternal grandmother – and every morning she would wake up and say, “What would you like to eat today?”, and she would go to the wet market and buy whatever I wanted to eat and cook it for me.

SHY: What would we do without grandmothers? [Laughs] If all the chefs in the world –

Shen: [Laughs] – yes, precisely.

SHY: – were influenced by grandmothers. My gosh, we have a lot to thank grandmother's fault. I told you I was listening to a(n) interview with Marcus Wareing, the British chef. He worked with Gordon Ramsey in Aubergine; I think he got his training there. It must be tough training.

Anyway, what I thought was interesting was that he said cooking was all about precision, and down to the details and all that. For me from the outside, I always think chef, wah very glamorous la, and [laughs] swanning around. Do you get really precise with your cooking or do you just kind of throw a few stuff and whip up some magic?

Shen: Well, I think there are two elements. If you are just creating and you're just cooking for yourself, you go to the market and you see some amazing aubergines, then yeah, I'll bring that back and I'll cook with that. But, if you're talking about a commercial kitchen setting where you are producing that dish, now, the devil's in the details, isn't it? It's the consistency. If you Siew Hoon came today and you ate this dish that I had cooked, and you come back a week later, you want it to taste exactly the same.

So how do we do that? By putting in place processes, by putting in place details, by putting in place recipes down to the 0.5 gram. We all use digital scales. We



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don't even use teaspoons and cups because – is that a level spoon? Is it a heap spoon?

SHY: I bet grandmothers only used a pinch here, a pinch there [laughs]. They didn't have digital scales then.

Shen: They didn't. I even had recipes that said 50 cents worth of shallots [laughs].

SHY: [Laughs] What does that even mean?

Shen: Yeah, what does that mean? So, if you want to replicate and have the same dish every day, yes, you do need to be detail oriented. Even down to the cooking of the meat, for example. So now people can buy a meat thermometer for \$15 / \$20, and it's the best thing ever. I totally recommend it as a chef.

SHY: I'm going to try that. You've also travelled extensively, because I follow your social media post, and I see you cooking in Australia, Italy, Spain. You've just come back from Norway. How do these travels influence what you cook, even though you say your roots are in Singapore and Southeast Asian cuisine? How do you bring these travel influences into the roots of your cuisine?

Shen: Well, I think the basic core of it is that it's the creative process. You have an open mind, you go to a country and then you see how they treat a product and just like, "Huh, I never thought about doing it that way."

In Spain for example, I was there in February during Chinese New Year. I was in Madrid and had the most amazing flan. It was mind blowing for me. We have the same thing, but it's like an egg tart, so you can understand kind of how that came about. So, then I take that idea and then I extrapolate and I just create menus off of that.

SHY: Would you say that your cooking you're (sic) Southeast Asian cuisine – because I've tasted your food – has a bit of Western influences in it?

Shen: How do we draw the line in the sand and say East versus West? If you look at –

SHY: – I mean there was a time when fusion was a dirty word. But now it's fusion everything, (it) does that matter anymore.

Shen: But, fusion in cuisine does not exist. When was the tomato introduced to Italy? In the 14th century. When were chillies brought into Asia? Where were they from? They're not from Asia. Where do we draw the line? Tempura and Japan – Portuguese. So, is it fusion? It's not – there is no line. There is no such thing as fusion. Peranakan food is fusion.



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I think to be relevant as a chef, in any field actually, we have to keep an open mind, that we constantly look ahead whilst remembering the past and being in the present. How is this going to evolve? How do we stay relevant? In anything, whether it's travel, whether it's technology, whether doctor in medicine, whether it's cooking.

(Music break)

SHY: You'll always have customers who go, "Aiya, I don't want to go to that place because it's tartered up and it's a bit not authentic anymore." I guess those customers would not be the kind of customers that you'd want.

Shen: I think when someone says that, I understand where they're coming from, because it's not that it's not authentic. It's just that it doesn't taste good. What is food? Food is just – come on guys – it's not rocket science. It just has to taste good. So, if I'm too clever about anything, like (with) a lot of bells and whistles. Then you tell a big story and everything, but when I eat it, it doesn't taste good. Then I'll just be like, you know what –

SHY: [Laughs] You raise all the expectations and then it's flat.

Shen: Precisely, so it comes back to managing expectations. At the end of the day, we just need to deliver a product that tastes good. That's it. It's so simple. This authenticity debate, it's raging throughout the world. Like Mexican food, can you get authentic Mexican food in New York? It's not going to be like the ceviche in Mexico City where the fish – it was alive two hours ago.

Same thing in Singapore. But it's authentic to here. And what I feel is very important is about the authenticity of your story. What is cooking? What is the culinary arts? It's telling a story. I'm telling a story and it's authentic to me, and if I'm inauthentic, if I'm not real and true to myself, it shows. I think that's what people pick up on when they eat something and go like, "Yeah, that's not authentic." It doesn't taste right. It's rubbish –

SHY: – it's out of place.

Shen: Correct, yes.

SHY: Context is important. I have also asked you to bring three objects from your travel that have somehow influenced your creation. Let's go through the three objects. I see an egg [laughs].



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Shen: [Laughs].

SHY: Ok, I can boil an egg [laughs].

Shen: [Laughs] Yeah. If you think about it, an egg is the most amazing thing. It can be used to make so many delicious things. You can poach it, you can make sauces out of it like a gribiche mayonnaise, hollandaise, béarnaise. You could make cakes out on (sic) them. You can steam them. You can make custard. There's so many applications, so much so that this inspired a full-on menu, which I'm doing on Saturday, and it is seven courses of eggs.

SHY: Wow, you gotta love eggs, man.

Shen: It's not only hen egg. We're exploring bottarga which is mullet roe. We also have uni, we have quails eggs. Just different kinds of eggs that you don't –

SHY: Hmm...interesting.

Shen: – and mentaiko, which is also another form of egg.

SHY: Okay, and the next one is from Italy. I recognise that.

Shen: Yes. It's (an) aged Balsamico from Modena, and it's a beautiful ingredient. It's thick, syrupy, sweet, a little bit tart; savoury and sweet applications as well. You can use it so simply – pork chop, drizzle a little bit on it. Divine.

SHY: I would have expected you to bring soy sauce. Because that is like the underlying ingredient.

Shen: [Laughs] I'm actually allergic to soy.

SHY: [Laughs] Ok, alright. So, we got a balsamic vinegar. And then the last one, what's that?

Shen: That's red peppercorns from Cambodia, from Kampot specifically. They're beautiful. They are, again, so aromatic, and they are so complex that they can be used in savoury and sweet applications as well.

SHY: You reckon that that's even better than the black pepper from Sarawak that everybody talks about?

Shen: Yes. I'm going to get stoned by the Sarawakians, but yes [laughs].

SHY: You said that this was the reason why you think the British and the Dutch – when they came out to colonise our part of the world. I mean, they absolutely fell in love with this spices like red pepper.



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Shen: Yes. So, pepper is actually from India, right? The British actually got hold of it and then they went nuts. If you look at basically every cuisine, pepper is used. Especially what we would term, I'm using air quotes now, 'Western cuisine'. Pepper, black pepper, they are crazy for it. So, the French, the English and the Dutch went nuts for it and basically went around the world trying to find the same climate to grow peppercorns.

(Music break)

SHY: If I were to ask you to take these three ingredients and then create lunch for me, what would you create?

Shen: Oh, that's simple. I would scramble the eggs with cream and butter. So, really rich, and I would sprinkle a little bit of those peppercorns on top and then a little bit of the Balsamico. So, you get that savoury, rich, creamy – the richness is cut through with the Balsamico, and then you have the aromatic peppercorns.

SHY: I can't wait for my lunch now [laughs]. What about chefs that have inspired you? Have there been chefs that you followed – that you admire them and they inspire you?

Shen: When I was just starting out, I was a voracious reader of any content that Heston Blumenthal put up. I really love his approach. He's very scientific, it's all about the science of it. Why does this work? Why doesn't this work?

SHY: So again, precision.

Shen: Yes. But he is also very creative and he recognises this sense of nostalgia that is important to people when we eat. Food is through scent, through sound, through the textures.

SHY: Multi-sensory.

Shen: Yes, he was the first one to really pin that down. You can see that at Fat Duck, which is his restaurant where you put on the earphones and the iPod, et cetera, et cetera. I think you also have to fill in a questionnaire before you go for dinner there. And then April Bloomfield. She's a very creative chef, she does amazing things with vegetables. It's not easy to cook with vegetables. Meat is easy, and tremendous grit hard work.



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- SHY: Do you think local chefs stand a chance against Western chefs? Because it seems to be dominated by Western chefs.
- Shen: Of course we do. Of course they do. I mean, I won't consider myself a local chef because I've taken myself out of that equation with what I do. But I see many young stars rising. They're doing amazing work.
- SHY: We're seeing more women too –
- Shen: Yes.
- SHY: – coming into the profession.
- Shen: Not just pastry chefs [laughs], but working the line. Yes.
- SHY: I was thinking that there's been so much glamourising of the chef profession, there's so many TV shows now and all the cooking shows. I actually don't know how many more food programmes or competitions I can watch. How do you feel about this trend? This sort of over-commercialising of food, and people hardly cook at home. Everybody delivers these days.
- Shen: So that was interesting. I think somebody did some research and I think people are cooking even less than they did before. You're right, and that they are just watching those TV shows as entertainment. I think it cuts both ways. It's a good thing even if we get one person to maybe cook on the weekend, and cook a nice meal with good quality ingredients. Then, slowly they might just sort of get into cooking more and doing more meal prep. Why not? It's one step at a time. It's not going to happen overnight.
- Then, coming back to that, I think the next revolution is really about sustainability. Not only for the growth of the food. Like growing it, not in the industrial farming complex system, but also the sustainability of our bodies, where we really need to think about what we put into our bodies is going to result in – good or bad health.

(Music break)

- SHY: Meat is now being grown in the laboratory. They reckon in two years' time, the process will be so efficient that it will be commercialised enough that we would have burgers made of meat that's grown in laboratory and milk without cows. What do you think of that trend? Is that gonna definitely happen – a meatless future?



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Shen: I think those are two separate things though. A meatless future is definitely going to happen. Not (to) say definitely, but I think there'll be more options for people who want to be meatless, and that's a good thing. As to the growing of meats, et cetera, in a lab based situation, I don't know. I am conflicted about it because we don't know enough about how organisms function. We still don't even really know how life form came about Earth.

A hundred years ago – I was just listening to a podcast – where President Garfield was shot. He was basically killed by his doctors because they kept trying to remove the bullet, and their grubby dirty hands caused sepsis and he died of blood poisoning, basically, infection. So that was only a hundred years ago. Who's to say in a hundred years' time, we will look back and go, "Oh my God, that meat growing experiment was a terrible idea," because there are so many other processes that we don't understand enough about, that may contribute to good health. It's only recently, I think in the last year, that they've talked about probiotics and gut health, that it affects neurological function and mental health.

SHY: I guess somehow the idea for a chef, like cooking with meat that's grown in a laboratory would not be as romantic as cooking with – I just came back from Japan and they give you a chart that shows what each slab of meat is, and which farmer has grown it and all that. So, there's a story attached to the beef that you're eating. Like you were talking about the story.

Shen: Of course, it's not as romantic. But, if it's better for our environment, hey we'll make it work [laughs]. We'll make it work if it tastes just as good. But I am coming from a point of view where I don't think we understand enough about processes – the biological processes, the chemical processes, to be messing about with it. There are things that we used to do that we don't do anymore because we have technology. For example, we used to hang carcasses of meat and they tasted better when we did that. We stopped doing that once we had refrigeration because, "Oh, this is the newer, better way." But what we didn't realise was that we lost a whole raft of flavour when we stopped hanging carcasses.

Now we're starting to do that again with dry ageing. So coming back to that, how do we know that if we grow the meat, we're not going to have the cow who's walked through the fields, who's pasture fed, who's eating flowers, who's going to be eating other things that is making the flesh delicious. How do you grow that in a piece of meat? I don't know. Maybe they can. But this is just on my very rudimentary biochemistry level, like O' Level kind of stuff.

SHY: I guess with everything; it needs to evolve with time –

Shen: Correct. Yes.



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SHY: – and then we just kind of have to adapt to ourselves. Talking about adapting, you talked about how at the end, all food needs to do is taste good. But we live in a world of social media and Instagram. Food now needs to look good.

Shen: Yup.

SHY: Do you sometimes cook with that intention too, to make it Instagrammable? Because that's what everybody does now.

Shen: No, no. I don't. I think I'm notoriously bad [laughs]. I really couldn't care less what it looks like. I will cook what I want to cook to taste the way it does. I mean, if I need to plate it in a certain way, yes, I'll plate it. But I will never ever cook something just so that it looks good on the 'gram. Yeah, no way.

SHY: What do you think of this trend, though? You know, there's a hashtag food porn. I think it's got like millions and millions of posts on that [laughs].

Shen: As with all things, I think it will pass [laughs].

SHY: [Laughs] Thankfully. Let's go for some rapid fire questions. Your favourite hawker food?

Shen: Bak chor mee.

SHY: Three top places to go for foodies?

Shen: Old Airport Road Hawker Centre, Tekka Market and Ghim Moh Wet Market.

SHY: What is the most overrated food?

Shen: Caviar.

SHY: Most underrated food?

Shen: Rice.

SHY: Your signature dish? Because you said in Switzerland, it was fondue. What is your signature dish, what is the one that people know you for?

Shen: Nasi lemak, can't run away from that [laughs].

SHY: If you were stranded on a desert island and you could only take three ingredients with you, and not this three, what would they be?

Shen: Chilli, salt, fish sauce.

SHY: Interesting. I can see like a big steamed fish happening there [laughs]. What would be your last meal?



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- Shen: Durian, on its own. Nothing made from durian, but just Mao Shan Wang durian. That's it.
- SHY: I guess it wouldn't matter to your health anymore because at that point, it's the last meal that you might as well gorge on all the durians [laughs].
- Shen: Hey, durian is a health food you know [laughs]?
- SHY: Everybody talks about how bad durians are for your health.
- Shen: No, actually the Orang Asli used to eat it before they went on long journeys. It's full of vitamin B complex. It's got vitamin C, it's got good fats, and it's got sugars. So, it's actually a health food. I don't know if you've ever had this, but if you have durian late at night, you can't sleep, because it's full of vitamin B.
- SHY: I love that you're making me see durians in a new light. I'm actually flying to Penang.
- Shen: [Laughs] Oh, lucky you! [laughs] I'm very, very envious.
- SHY: [Laughs] And I am so going to eat durians.
- Shen: You should. You should.
- SHY: Well, thank you Shen. Happy travels. Happy cooking and happy eating. Please come and cook lunch for me with those ingredients. Thank you.
- Shen: [Laughs] Thank you.

(Music begins)

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