

Title: Different strokes
Summary Forget the bottom line (well, almost) - these new-wave outlets are approaching the F&B business with different priorities. By Audrey Phoon
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DIFFERENT STROKES

Forget the bottom line (well, almost) – these new-wave outlets are approaching the F&B business with different priorities. **By Audrey Phoon**



BEAN BUSINESS
 'Part of the Third Wave movement is making sure that you source people who are really into coffee and can make it with passion and love, because they are the final link in the chain,' says Harry Grover

40 Hands
 78 Yong Siak Street
 ☎ 6225-8545
www.40handscoffee.com

YOU'VE got to give Harry Grover a hand for what he's trying to do. Wait – make that 40 hands.

The Australian, who moved to Singapore six months ago, has set up a speciality coffee bar here with the aim of getting more people to respect and appreciate coffee, and the work that goes into making a cuppa. "Coffee's got a long history of exploitation – it's mostly made by people in non-developed countries and consumed by people in developed countries," says the Perth native, who calls himself a "massive coffee lover" and has a Masters in Asian Sustainable Development Studies. "I've got a bit of a passion for doing things in a more sustainable, ethical way, so I want to bring that (awareness) to a bigger audience, along with really really good coffee."

Called 40 Hands – the name is a "quiet reminder" that a single cup of coffee involves effort from that many people – Grover's 22-seater cafe opened a week ago in an old Tiong Bahru shophouse. It's supported by the Spa Esprit Group and so is done up in the quirky industrial-chic style that's a signature of the group, with retro looking chairs and loungers set against a backdrop of raw wooden beams and a concrete floor. The walls, meanwhile, are covered with surreal graffiti by a Perth artist – one section features a moustachio'd man, whose head resembles a walnut (or maybe it's a coffee bean) peering at an oversized coffee cup.

Funky decor aside, what the cafe offers customers are four key promises: ultra fresh beans (that are kept for no more than two-and-a-half weeks) from new crops; speciality-blend and single-origin coffee; artisanal roasting methods; and price justice for growers, who get 50 to 800 per cent more for their crops than the usual 2 to 5 per

cent that big coffee companies pay them per cup of the brew.

In the coffee world, this approach is known as the Third Wave, a term that was coined in 2002. It follows the first coffee-drinking surge started by supermarket brand Folgers in the mid 20th century, and subsequently the proliferation of mass-market coffee joints such as Starbucks, which introduced people to coffee types such as decaf lattes and espressos, as well as regionally labelled coffee. The Third Wave movement focuses on coffee connoisseurship, where "there's a lot more coffee knowledge", says Grover. "It's about coffee places understanding the beans and how they're going to behave, rather than just having employees stand at the machine and press a button. It's sort of what happened with barmen, them becoming mixologists."

At 40 Hands, two specially sourced blends of ethically purchased coffee are available daily: a house blend and a

speciality blend that changes on a monthly basis (it's currently a single origin variety from Papua New Guinea). The coffee is made by Grover, who is a trained barista, as well as the cafe's two staff, one of whom is an Asian barista champion. "Part of the Third Wave movement is making sure that you source people who are really into coffee and can make it with passion and love, because they are the final link in the chain," says Grover. "If they do crap coffee, it's such a waste."

Despite the artisanal slant though, prices are reasonable, ranging from \$2.50 for a single shot espresso to \$6.50 for an affogato. Available, too, is a small selection of pastries and sandwiches, while a full menu along with a drive-through service is in the works.

The cafe also aims to work with more local coffee producers. At present, it's getting all its beans ready-roasted from an artisanal roaster in Australia, but Grover intends to not stick with one exclusive distributor. "We want to support the local producers as well, and if there's anyone that does good coffee here and I know the process, I'll buy from them," he says. "That's also good for accountability and keeping suppliers on their toes, so that they give you the best product."

The ultimate goal, he shares, would be to set up "my own relationships with farmers and bring beans in". "I would also like to do roasting – that's a massive art form in itself – as well as start coffee appreciation classes for small groups at a time, because we've already seen some interest in that."

For now though, the coffee advocate is focusing on spreading the Third Wave message in a tasteful – or should that be tasty? – way. "If you're going to do the whole sustainability thing, you can't ram it down people's throats," acknowledges Grover. "You have to let the coffee speak for itself; if it's good, people will come back for it. And that's enough, because it means they're choosing to make a bit of a difference."

aphoon@sph.com.sg



VALUE FOR MONEY

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[] spaesprīt

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PASSIONATE

Christina Crane of Dapao will use ingredients from within a 300km radius in her dishes – all of which have markedly local flavours. The Canadian says her passion for locavorism is fuelled by the way she lived when she was a child in her home country.

Dapao (opening Nov 7)
#01-01 Far East Square
3 Amoy Street
www.dapao-takeaway.com

THERE was a time when the Nordic region was scarcely known for its cuisine and its produce. Ask anyone what sort of food they associated with the area and the answer would perhaps be salted herring or whale meat. But then, in 2004, a young chef named René Redzepi came along and set up a restaurant called Noma, which practised locavorism, the concept of using ingredients from within a certain radius so as to minimise one's carbon footprint and give the cuisine a sense of place. He paired native sorrel with creamed tarragon and juniper, wild pine tree shoots with asparagus grown by one of his chefs... and in doing so catapulted Nordic cuisine onto the world map. This year, Noma was voted top in the annual S Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants awards.

It just goes to show what a place that supposedly doesn't have great local produce can do, and that's exactly what Christina Crane is hoping to showcase with her upcoming Dapao cafe, which will open at the start of November in a Far East Square double unit.

At face value, the 40-seater al fresco space has nothing in common with the sophisticated Noma, but it's at their cores that the two businesses beat as one: they're both strong practitioners of locavorism. In Dapao's case, ingredients from within a 300km radius will be used, as far as possible, in its dishes, all of which have markedly local flavours. There's a mee goreng salad, for one thing, as well as pandan cookies, black pepper and lemon chicken wraps, and breakfast bars made with local bananas, pineapple and sliced ginger. Each is derived from a traditional



Singaporean family recipe – Crane, who is also the founder of the Locavore Singapore website, welcomes contributions and is offering a month's worth of wraps in return for them.

The Canadian, who has been in Singapore for seven years and was formerly from the branding and design industry (she quit to start Dapao), says her passion for locavorism is fuelled by the way she lived when she was a child in her home country.

"When I was growing up, we'd go to the farms on the weekend, my mum would bake and cook, we'd make our own jams and we've always composted," says Crane. "But then I drifted far from what I grew up doing. Here, everyone loves tasty food and we don't think about where it comes from or what goes into it."

Two years ago, she read Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and had a "pulling back". "I started cooking from scratch again; I now have a huge garden where I grow my own tomatoes, pumpkins, brinjals and sweet potatoes; and I do my own compost," Crane shares. "I feel so much better and happier, but I know doing the same is not possible for everyone because they don't have time."

Dapao, then, is her contribution to a society too busy to watch out for what goes into its stomachs. "I have two visions for this – I want to make it easier for people to eat healthy, and I want people to be kinder to the environment," she says.

As such, Dapao's food is baked and grilled as much as possible, and on the oft occasion that things – such as spice paste – need to be fried, it's done with very little oil.

For Dapao's packaging materials – important because it will primarily be a takeaway outlet – Crane has sourced special boxes that are compostable, and its plastic cups are made from yam and corn. "People are going to take away their lunch and be helping the environment at the same time," she says.

Meanwhile, in the outlet's kitchen, no toxic chemicals will be used – natural cleansers such as vinegar and lemon juice will take the place of dishwashing liquid, for example.

Still, the "food will be the attraction", insists Crane. Which is why she's using quality ingredients from local and regional producers such as barn-laid eggs from Freedom Range Eggs; antibiotic-free sakura chicken from Kee Song; and yoghurt from Alvas. Meanwhile, Fireflies Health Farm and Grace Cup are providing the organic vegetables, which include a squash-like variety from Malaysia called choko.

You may not have heard of it, but what's important to Crane is that you're keen to find out more. "I want more people to be interested by these things and maybe over time they'll take a lot more care and be more aware when they go to the supermarket," she says. "I'm not saying that we should eat completely local – just maybe eat locally whenever possible, and ask questions so you can find out who's crafting things and who's just sourcing stuff."

Blu Kouzina
893 Bukit Timah Road
☎ 6875-0872

"EVERYBODY hears about Greece but they don't really know about it – they think it's just a bunch of islands with an economic crisis," laments Effie Tsakiris. "Actually, it's a very cultured country and it's not all fun and games there."

To prove her point, Mrs Tsakiris and her husband have embarked on a very serious mission to educate the public about their home country. The pair have opened a Greek restaurant called Blu Kouzina along Bukit Timah Road, where they're serving up oodles of home-style Greek cooking and products that they've imported directly from Greece.

There's lots of good stuff that can't be found elsewhere here, such as bottled sea salt from the Aegean Sea that's collected from rock crevasses by an old Greek couple and dried naturally in the sun. But the specialty at this two-week-old outlet is no doubt the olive oil, which is from Green Gold, an olive farm in Greece owned by Mr Tsakiris' family. "My husband's family has had it forever but they had never exploited it," says Mrs Tsakiris, who moved here nine years ago with her other half, a regional finance director. "So we thought, why not try and import it into Singapore, because it's so good. I think it's one of the best here – it's 82 per cent unsaturated fats, 0.1 per cent acidity, and first and cold pressed."

The oil is sold in the restaurant's small deli section, but it's also generously used in all Blu Kouzina's food, which includes things like a salad with Cretan rusks and tomato, feta and olives (\$12.80); tasty handmade beef patties called bifteki (\$18.80); and macaroni in butter sauce (\$18.80) with black pepper and mitzithra, a type of unpasteurised cheese made with milk and whey.

Continued on next page >>



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[] spaesprüt

Title: Different strokes

« Continued from previous page

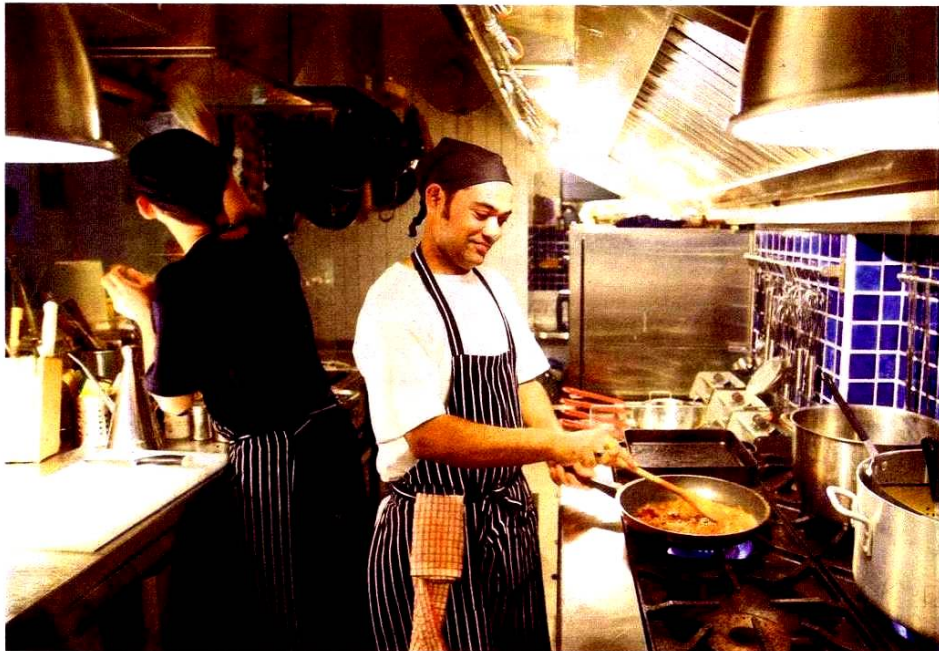
Most dishes are pretty good and every one is made from scratch, because Mrs Tsakiris is a stickler for all things fresh.

In fact, "fresh" is what she goes for when it comes to technology too. In place of paintings on the walls, the sparkling white and cerulean blue themed restaurant has large LCD screens that display images of Greece; even the toilet has one. (These sit interestingly alongside décor pieces such as traditional ceramics from the island of Rhodes and a pair of 400-year-old oil vessels belonging to Mr Tsakiris' family.) And by next week, all the menus will be on iPads that slide neatly into shelves below each table.

How the tablet-menu work is this: you tap on an item on the list to bring up a picture of the dish, along with a wine recommendation. If you wish to have it, you then tap on "add order" and eventually "place order" to finalise your meal choices and send them to the kitchen.

Currently, the Tsakirises are working out how to have the orders sent to the cashier's till as well, before they roll out the iPads, but once that's done, Blu Kouzina should offer an idea of what the restaurant of the future will be like.

The food and décor though, remain the way they have been for years in Greece. And that's exactly how Mrs Tsakiris wants it. "Hopefully when you come here, you'll think that you're in Greece," she says. "You get into a different zone. That's what we try to do."



Veganburg
44 Jalan Eunus
☎ 6844-6868
www.veganburg.com

WHEN it comes to getting your cause noticed, it's more effective to take the animal, rather than the vegetable, approach. That is, roar like a lion or squawk like a chicken instead of, well, just staying rooted. Even if you're vegetarian.

Alex Tan is someone who's realised this. After 12 years of being a "quiet vegetarian", he was spurred into action after a reading a United Nations report from last year's Copenhagen Climate Change Summit. The report was about livestock being a major cause of global warming, and Tan saw that more people had to do something about it, fast. So he decided to make his voice heard by setting up a vegan fast-food joint called Veganburg.

"I thought, what is a fast and efficient way to reduce our carbon footprint? And I came to the conclusion that burgers are the most convenient bites that people can grab to make a difference, because they provide easy access to a plant-based diet," he explains. "Also, I felt that the vegetarian industry was kind of boring, that something was missing. It's usually just about vegetarian bee hoon or organic tasteless stuff, so I felt that this was an opportunity to create a brand new and fun perspective of the vegan lifestyle.

"I couldn't sleep the whole night when I first got the idea, because I was so excited about it!"

He then set about realising his brainwave from the ground-up, having had scarce F&B experience before. "I just Googled and looked at the big fast-food guys. I realised they were all serving more or less the same sort of thing and that there was one key thing missing: nutrition. So I went through many rounds of R&D to develop burgers that were tasty but also healthy. I think what we've come up with is great - all our food is free of genetically modified organisms, which are very common in most other foods. And our organic buns, which we worked with a bakery to develop, incorporate the most important elements that are lacking from a vegan diet: Omega-3 fatty acids and B12 vitamins."

Fast forward half a year and Veganburg is a reality on the local food map. Opened last month, it's a funky joint in a spacious shophouse in Eunus, with an eye-catching glassy and grassy frontage. Inside, a picket fence lines the



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KEEPING IT REAL

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NOT SHORT ON TASTE

Veganburg's menu, of which the full version will be launched this Sunday (coinciding with a worldwide event to celebrate climate solutions), comprises mainly burgers. There's the Smoky BBQ burger (far left), the Hawaiian Pineapple burger and more. They all feature patties made from different proportions of soya beans, shitake mushrooms and other vegetables – a combination which actually provides a rather meaty bite



walls, bordering white recycled wooden tables and benches that Tan had constructed out of wooden pallets from Pasir Panjang Wholesale Market. The general feel is chic and charming and great for chilling out, and the food isn't bad either.

Veganburg's menu, of which the full version will be launched this Sunday (coinciding with a worldwide event to celebrate climate solutions), comprises mainly burgers. There's the Smoky BBQ burger, the Tangy Tartar, the Cracked Pepper Mayo and more, and they all feature patties made from different proportions of soya beans, shitake mushrooms and other vegetables – a combination which actually provides a rather meaty bite. The sauces are tasty, and though the buns (made with raw sugar, natural sea salt and distilled water) are on the dense, almost cakey, side, the balance of textures is pretty good and the overall effect is of eating the "real thing".

Burgers aside, the menu will soon include Veganfranks aka vegan sausages, as well as a range of side dishes such as crispy potato spinach pops and salads. Prices average around \$10 for a combo meal that comprises a burger, seaweed-flavoured fries and a beverage (no sweet soft drinks here, just juices and organic colas).

The outlet's Eunost location may be a bit less central than many would like, but Tan says that it's part of a bigger scheme. This first "concept shop", which already has a call centre in operation on its second floor, will eventually serve as a delivery base from which Veganburg will conduct delivery runs islandwide. And the owner intends to open a couple more centrally located outlets, perhaps in the Resorts World Sentosa and Marina Bay areas, soon, along with smaller Veganburg Express branches in the CBD.

The end goal is to be a global brand, with "eco playgrounds for the kids, and educational sections where people can learn about a responsible diet and how to be more green", he says.

If that sounds a little ambitious, note that Veganburg is already pretty busy on the weekends, and it sees a steady stream of diners even on weekdays. "We've also gotten a lot of interest from all over the world – people from the United States, New Zealand and even Paraguay have gotten in touch with me," says Tan. "They want to link me up with people in their country and really get this going."

Sounds like his roar has been heard.
aphoon@sph.com.sg

wine&dine

with BTWeekend

Chatterbox

Level 5
Mandarin Orchard Singapore
333 Orchard Road
☎ 6831-6288

Home to the signature Mandarin Chicken Rice, Chatterbox is an iconic coffee house renowned for its Asian local delights and Western favourites. Most recently, Chatterbox opened its new premises on Level 5 of the hotel with a refreshing yet down to earth look. Done up in earthy hues of green and beige, the restaurant still retains its emphasis on family dining, remaining dedicated to both its current customers and, at the same time, attracting new ones. Feast on the award-winning Mandarin Chicken Rice, along with other signature favourites such as Mandarin Lobster Laksa, Nasi Lemak, Herbal Bak Kut Teh, Mandarin Coconut Ice Cream and many more!

sashimi and other seafood favourites. On Fridays and Saturdays, savour succulent lobsters prepared from special recipes such as Grilled Lobster and Lobster Thermidor served piping-hot from the kitchen. Available from \$45++ for dinner and \$48++ for Sunday brunch. For reservations, please call 6831-6686 or e-mail eat.sgo@panpacific.com

AquaMarine

Level 4, Marina Mandarin Singapore
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Eat, drink and be merry this October as we turn the spotlight on the culinary delights of Germany. AquaMarine is proud to unveil a sumptuous buffet line-up of authentic German cuisine with an assortment of imported German sausages and other well-loved favourites like Crispy Pork Knuckles with Sauerkraut and Bavarian Beef Goulash, this is a spread of epic proportions that will leave you wanting more. Other must-tries include Bavarian Pretzels and Cucumber Salad with Dill. Buffet prices start from \$40++. For reservations, please call Dining Express at 6845-1111 or e-mail diningexpress.marina@meritus-hotels.com

Golden Peony

Conrad Centennial Singapore
2 Temasek Boulevard
☎ 6432-7482

Conrad Centennial Singapore's award-winning Chinese restaurant, Golden Peony offers an array of impressive contemporary Cantonese dishes and innovative dim sum creations prepared by top Hong Kong chefs. Set menus and customised creations are also available upon request. For exclusive dining, the restaurant features an intimate private dining room for 10 persons. For more details or reservations, please call 6432-7482. Opening Hours: Lunch (Dim Sum and A la carte) Monday to Saturday, 11.30 am to 2.30 pm Sunday, 10.30am to 2.30pm Dinner (A la carte only) Monday to Sunday, 6.30 pm to 10.30 pm.

Pan Pacific Singapore

Hai Tien Lo, Keyaki & Zambuca
7 Raffles Boulevard
☎ 6826-8240

Imperial Wagyu, Signature Style Savour tender and flavourful grade 4 Wagyu as Masterchefs Lai Tong Ping, Hiroshi Kagata and Lucas McMillan from Hai Tien Lo, Keyaki and Zambuca prepare this prized luxury in Cantonese, Japanese and Italian styles. Presented in a five-course dinner (\$88++), guests can indulge in this culinary delicacy, known for its characteristic marbling, resulting in a succulence that heightens the dining experience. For more information or for reservations, please call 6826-8240 or e-mail celebrate.sin@panpacific.com

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Pan Pacific Orchard, Lobby Level
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RAFFLES CONVERSATION
MUTTIAH MURALITHARAN,
THE WICKET WIZARD | 8-9

MOTORING
 The Merc CLS 350
 is a class act | L18



WEALTH
 TDRs are not a
 futile exercise | 33



WEALTH

The wealthy bulge in the middle

ASIA-PACIFIC boasts the largest concentration of the fastest growing chunk of wealth globally – those with relatively modest net wealth of between US\$10,000 and US\$100,000. | 2

US JOBS

Poor numbers raise Fed easing hopes

THE US economy continued to lose jobs as small gains in the private sector failed to offset big cuts in government workers. | 3

SINGAPORE GDP

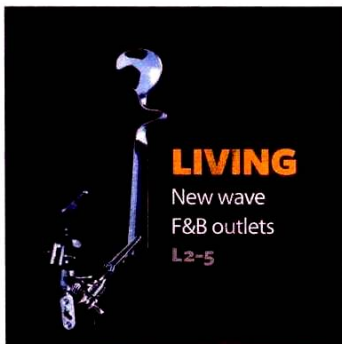
Sharp Q3 slowdown expected

ECONOMISTS expect Singapore's GDP growth to have slowed sharply in the third quarter, advance estimates for which will be released next Thursday. | 5

HUGE IPO

Global Log's \$3.9b issue

GLOBAL Logistics Properties has priced its initial public offering at \$1.96 a share – swelling the issue size to as much as \$3.9 billion. | 11



A shot in the arm for biomed sciences

Boost in government funding for 2011-2015 and a one-stop industry partnership office to help take sector to the next level

By **Chen Huifen**
 xuhifen@sph.com.sg
 Singapore

THE research drive of Singapore's biomedical sciences over the next five years will focus more on achieving economic outcomes and integration of the community, with the creation of a one-stop industry partnership office to kick-start the effort. The direction for the next lap was endorsed by the Biomedical Sciences International Advisory Council (IAC), and comes at the same time that the government announced it will increase its funding for the industry to the tune of \$3.7 billion over the period 2011-2015.

"The setting up of the biomedical sciences industry partnership office is timely and a significant value proposition to the industry," said A*Star chairman Lim Chuan Poh.

"With the shift in demand from Western to Asian markets, global industry players are now eager to tap the abundant opportunities in this region, especially in R&D activities."

The new, multi-agency office will be formed by A*Star, the National Medical Research Council and the Economic Development Board (EDB). Its job will be to link up biomedical firms with the scientific talent and resources available in Singapore, such as A*Star's research institutes, hospitals and universities.

To be headed by EDB biomedical sciences director Beh Kian Teik, the industry partnership office has set itself a target to draw \$150 million worth of R&D commitments from the industry to Singapore's research institutes. This is to be realised by 2015.

According to Mr Beh, the office is likely to start engaging pharmaceutical companies first, as there is a heightened aware-

ness that science is becoming increasingly complex, and collaborations – or an open innovation model – is necessary to take the industry forward. "Once you go into the open innovation model, suddenly countries like ours – where we can integrate – become very interesting and valuable, because we can bring all the disciplines to them," added Mr Beh.

The office will not have to start from scratch, as there are already two instances of such partnerships taking place. Just two days ago, GlaxoSmithKline R&D awarded funding to four new academic tie-ups between Singapore-based scientists and its drug discovery team.

Roche, as well, had approached EDB and shared its intentions to integrate its scientific advances with translational and clinical research. EDB then brought the dialogue back to some of the scientific leaders here, who linked the drug giant with the relevant clinicians and scientific experts. The result is a 100 million Swiss franc (\$136 million) Roche Translational Medicine Hub, which has an alliance with six research institutes here.

Singapore's value proposition is its efficiency in bringing together all the multiple entities required in the whole biomedical research chain, from knowledge creation to a new drug or therapy applicable at the bedside. If it can help drug companies save time and cost to bring a treatment to market, it would have created a significant role for itself.

"The more efficient we are in bringing the different parties together, the more value we create for the industry," added A*Star's Mr Lim.

Continued on page 5 >>

BVLGARI

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 WATCHES OF SWITZERLAND

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Dapao (opening Nov 1)
#01-01 Far East Square
3 Amoy Street
www.dapao-takeaway.com

THERE was a time when the Nordic region was scarcely known for its cuisine and its produce. Ask anyone what sort of food they associated with the area and the answer would perhaps be salted herring or whale meat. But then, in 2004, a young chef named Rene Redzepi came along and set up a restaurant called Noma, which practised locavorism, the concept of using ingredients from within a certain radius so as to minimise one's carbon footprint and give the cuisine a sense of place. He paired native sorrel with creamed tarragon and juniper, wild pine tree shoots with asparagus grown by one of his chefs . . . and in doing so catapulted Nordic cuisine onto the world map. This year, Noma was voted top in the annual S Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurants awards.

It just goes to show what a place that supposedly doesn't have great local produce can do, and that's exactly what Christina Crane is hoping to showcase with her upcoming Dapao cafe, which will open at the start of November in a Far East Square double unit.

At face value, the 40-seater al fresco space has nothing in common with the sophisticated Noma, but it's at their cores that the two businesses beat as one: they're both strong practitioners of locavorism. In Dapao's case, ingredients from within a 300km radius will be used, as far as possible, in its dishes, all of which have markedly local flavours. There's a mee goreng salad, for one thing, as well as pandan cookies, black pepper and lemon chicken wraps, and breakfast bars made with local bananas, pineapple and sliced ginger. Each is derived from a traditional Singaporean family recipe - Crane, who is also the founder of the Locavore Singapore website, welcomes contributions and is offering a month's worth of wraps in return for them.

The Canadian, who has been in Singapore for seven years and was formerly from the branding and design industry (she quit to start Dapao), says her passion for locavorism is fuelled by the way she lived when she was a child in her home country.

'When I was growing up, we'd go to the farms on the weekend, my mum would bake and cook, we'd make our own jams and we've always composted,' says Crane. 'But then I drifted far from what I grew up doing. Here, everyone loves tasty food and we don't think about where it comes from or what goes into it.'

Two years ago, she read Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, and had a 'pulling back'. 'I started cooking from scratch again; I now have a huge garden where I grow my own tomatoes, pumpkins, brinjals and sweet potatoes; and I do my own compost,' Crane shares. 'I feel so much better and happier, but I know doing the same is not possible for everyone because they don't have time.'

Dapao, then, is her contribution to a society too busy to watch out for what goes into its stomachs. 'I have two visions for this - I want to make it easier for people to eat healthy, and I want people to be kinder to the environment,' she says.

As such, Dapao's food is baked and grilled as much as possible, and on the oft occasion that things - such as spice paste - need to be fried, it's done with very little oil.

For Dapao's packaging materials - important because it will primarily be a takeaway outlet - Crane has sourced special boxes that are compostable, and its plastic cups are made from yam and corn. 'People are going to take away their lunch and be helping the environment at the same time,' she says.

Meanwhile, in the outlet's kitchen, no toxic chemicals will be used - natural cleansers such as vinegar and lemon juice will take the place of dishwashing liquid, for example.

Still, the 'food will be the attraction', insists Crane. Which is why she's using quality ingredients from local and regional producers such as barn-laid eggs from Freedom Range Eggs; antibiotic-free sakura chicken from Kee Song; and yoghurt from Alvas. Meanwhile, Fireflies Health Farm and Grace Cup are providing the organic vegetables, which include a squash-like variety from Malaysia called choko.

You may not have heard of it, but what's important to Crane is that you're keen to find out more. 'I want more people to be interested by these things and maybe over time they'll take a lot more care and be more aware when they go to the supermarket,' she says. 'I'm not saying that we should eat completely local - just maybe eat locally whenever possible, and ask questions so you can find out who's crafting things and who's just sourcing stuff.'

Title: Different strokes

Blu Kouzina
893 Bukit Timah Road
Tel: 6875-0872

'EVERYBODY hears about Greece but they don't really know about it - they think it's just a bunch of islands with an economic crisis,' laments Effie Tsakiris. 'Actually, it's a very cultured country and it's not all fun and games there.'

To prove her point, Mrs Tsakiris and her husband have embarked on a very serious mission to educate the public about their home country. The pair have opened a Greek restaurant called Blu Kouzina along Bukit Timah Road, where they're serving up oodles of home-style Greek cooking and products that they've imported directly from Greece.

There's lots of good stuff that can't be found elsewhere here, such as bottled sea salt from the Aegean Sea that's collected from rock crevasses by an old Greek couple and dried naturally in the sun. But the specialty at this two-week-old outlet is no doubt the olive oil, which is from Green Gold, an olive farm in Greece owned by Mr Tsakiris' family. 'My husband's family has had it forever but they had never exploited it,' says Mrs Tsakiris, who moved here nine years ago with her other half, a regional finance director. 'So we thought, why not try and import it into Singapore, because it's so good. I think it's one of the best here - it's 82 per cent unsaturated fats, 0.1 per cent acidity, and first and cold pressed.'

The oil is sold in the restaurant's small deli section, but it's also generously used in all Blu Kouzina's food, which includes things like a salad with Cretan rusks and tomato, feta and olives (\$12.80); tasty handmade beef patties called bifteki (\$18.80); and macaroni in butter sauce (\$18.80) with black pepper and mizithra, a type of unpasteurised cheese made with milk and whey.

Most dishes are pretty good and every one is made from scratch, because Mrs Tsakiris is a stickler for all things fresh.

In fact, 'fresh' is what she goes for when it comes to technology too. In place of paintings on the walls, the sparkling white and cerulean blue themed restaurant has large LCD screens that display images of Greece; even the toilet has one. (These sit interestingly alongside decor pieces such as traditional ceramics from the island of Rhodes and a pair of 400-year-old oil vessels belonging to Mr Tsakiris' family.) And by next week, all the menus will be on iPads that slide neatly into shelves below each table.

How the tablet-menus work is this: you tap on an item on the list to bring up a picture of the dish, along with a wine recommendation. If you wish to have it, you then tap on 'add order' and eventually 'place order' to finalise your meal choices and send them to the kitchen.

Currently, the Tsakirises are working out how to have the orders sent to the cashier's till as well, before they roll out the iPads, but once that's done, Blu Kouzina should offer an idea of what the restaurant of the future will be like.

The food and decor though, remain the way they have been for years in Greece. And that's exactly how Mrs Tsakiris wants it. 'Hopefully when you come here, you'll think that you're in Greece,' she says. 'You get into a different zone. That's what we try to do.'

Title: Different strokes

Veganburg
44 Jalan Eunus
Tel: 6844-6868
www.veganburg.com

WHEN it comes to getting your cause noticed, it's more effective to take the animal, rather than the vegetable, approach. That is, roar like a lion or squawk like a chicken instead of, well, just staying rooted. Even if you're vegetarian.

Alex Tan is someone who's realised this. After 12 years of being a 'quiet vegetarian', he was spurred into action after a reading a United Nations report from last year's Copenhagen Climate Change Summit. The report was about livestock being a major cause of global warming, and Tan saw that more people had to do something about it, fast. So he decided to make his voice heard by setting up a vegan fast-food joint called Veganburg.

'I thought, what is a fast and efficient way to reduce our carbon footprint? And I came to the conclusion that burgers are the most convenient bites that people can grab to make a difference, because they provide easy access to a plant-based diet,' he explains. 'Also, I felt that the vegetarian industry was kind of boring, that something was missing. It's usually just about vegetarian bee hoon or organic tasteless stuff, so I felt that this was an opportunity to create a brand new and fun perspective of the vegan lifestyle.'

'I couldn't sleep the whole night when I first got the idea, because I was so excited about it!'

He then set about realising his brainwave from the ground-up, having had scarce F&B experience before. 'I just Googled and looked at the big fast-food guys. I realised they were all serving more or less the same sort of thing and that there was one key thing missing: nutrition. So I went through many rounds of R&D to develop burgers that were tasty but also healthy. I think what we've come up with is great - all our food is free of genetically modified organisms, which are very common in most other foods. And our organic buns, which we worked with a bakery to develop, incorporate the most important elements that are lacking from a vegan diet: Omega-3 fatty acids and B12 vitamins.'

Fast forward half a year and Veganburg is a reality on the local food map. Opened last month, it's a funky joint in a spacious shophouse in Eunus, with an eye-catching glassy and grassy frontage. Inside, a picket fence lines the walls, bordering white recycled wooden tables and benches that Tan had constructed out of wooden pallets from Pasir Panjang Wholesale Market. The general feel is chic and charming and great for chilling out, and the food isn't bad either.

Veganburg's menu, of which the full version will be launched this Sunday (coinciding with a worldwide event to celebrate climate solutions), comprises mainly burgers. There's the Smoky BBQ burger, the Tangy Tartar, the Cracked Pepper Mayo and more, and they all feature patties made from different proportions of soya beans, shitake mushrooms and other vegetables - a combination which actually provides a rather meaty bite. The sauces are tasty, and though the buns (made with raw sugar, natural sea salt and distilled water) are on the dense, almost cakey, side, the balance of textures is pretty good and the overall effect is of eating the 'real thing'.

Burgers aside, the menu will soon include Veganfranks aka vegan sausages, as well as a range of side dishes such as crispy potato spinach pops and salads. Prices average around \$10 for a combo meal that comprises a burger, seaweed-flavoured fries and a beverage (no sweet soft drinks here, just juices and organic colas).

The outlet's Eunus location may be a bit less central than many would like, but Tan says that it's part of a bigger scheme. This first 'concept shop', which already has a call centre in operation on its second floor, will eventually serve as a delivery base from which Veganburg will conduct delivery runs islandwide. And the owner intends to open a couple more centrally located outlets, perhaps in the Resorts World Sentosa and Marina Bay areas, soon, along with smaller Veganburg Express branches in the CBD.

The end goal is to be a global brand, with 'eco playgrounds for the kids, and educational sections where people can learn about a responsible diet and how to be more green', he says.

If that sounds a little ambitious, note that Veganburg is already pretty busy on the weekends, and it sees a steady stream of diners even on weekdays. 'We've also gotten a lot of interest from all over the world - people from the United States, New Zealand and even Paraguay have gotten in touch with me,' says Tan. 'They want to link me up with people in their country and really get this going.'

Sounds like his roar has been heard.