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RULES**

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**CLASSIC
COLOURS**

Raeesa Sya's
Orkid Cosmetics

**TREND
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for him and her



NEW REALITIES

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Editorial Pick

Tudor's Black Bay Chrono with a leather strap strikes us the perfect accessory for a day of casual fishing, flying or golfing. The striking black dial lends a sophisticated edge to the rugged leather strap in a combination that we find irresistible.



Tudor's Black Bay Chrono

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SAMANTHA JOSEPH SITS DOWN WITH THE CHEF-OWNER OF ENFIN BY JAMES WON

Photography by **Chu YC**

“Everyone in Malaysia still had the stigma of ‘Oh we’re not good enough’ or ‘No one will want to pay that money’,” Chef James Won recalls the culinary environment when he returned to Malaysia five years ago. “We are in a beautiful city, we have one of the oldest rainforests in the world, so bounty is everywhere. We have one of the most unique fusion cultures in the world, and our cuisine is unique. So, why? Why isn’t anyone doing anything?”

‘Not good enough’ are words that don’t exist in James’ own vocabulary. He’s an advocate for the local in fine dining – using local ingredients, drawing from local flavours and training local talents to man the kitchen. Le Cordon Bleu-trained, he’s worked at fine dining restaurants from Paris to Hong Kong before heralding his return to the homeland with the opening of Brasserie Enfin in Ara Damansara. That word, ‘enfin’ is a particular delight; James explains that ‘it could mean ‘alas’ or it could mean ‘to satisfy hunger’ and he intends for it to be the last word in satiety.

He’s under no illusions about the expectations diners have when they walk into a fine dining restaurant – like Enfin, nestle in its green corner on the second level of Menara Hap Seng – especially a fine dining restaurant that identifies itself as modern French with heritage influences. Serving beautiful food is something he does well, but it isn’t enough, not in a country where ‘the best of’ anything can be found at a hawker stall down the road and for a fraction of the price.

“There are a lot of things that look fantastic on camera and then you put it in your mouth...” he trails off with a moue of





Location images courtesy of Enfin by James Won

distaste. “I work on the simplest denominator: satiety. If you aren’t satiated, you walk away angry. Half the time people go for fine dining, they don’t reach satiety. So they leave saying ‘I need *char kway teow*’. I don’t allow my guests to have that moment. I have to make sure that every combination of food you pick here gives you satiety. Nothing is left to chance. It’s a summation of every little good thing put into place.”

If you’ve had the opportunity of a plate at Enfin, the clarity of his vision would be apparent. The ingredients used and where they are sourced from are lovingly detailed, each separate piece on the plate contributing to an entirety that ends on a note of fulfillment. Often they spark a memory – a morsel of well-aged chicken breast recalling *kai fan* without a drop of chilli sauce in sight, or the familiar taste of Penang curry laksa found in the unlikely combination of hazelnut butter, baby octopus, sea urchin and curry oil.

James wants something from you when you step into his restaurant; he’s upfront about it on the website for Enfin Shanghai, where similar words greet the casual browser: “I can’t find anything else that comes close to the satisfaction of stealing a moment in your life and forever engraving it in your tastebuds, in your taste memory, in your palate, in your sight, your hearing. Everything around you, I stole, and that moment belongs to me. Forever.”

ROMANCING THE DINER

The moment we sit down, James tells us: ‘My brands come first’. No doubt he has good reason to be protective – ‘his brands’ include Hennessy, Krug, and more or less the rest of the Moët Hennessy Diageo brands. He is famously the first Malaysian to be announced part of the Krug Ambassade Network, back with Brasserie Enfin, and Enfin by James Won houses the first Krug’s chef table in Asia. Thus far, he’s also the only returning Hennessy Chef Ambassador, and the restaurant is the only one in the world with a Hennessy Salon.



But his brands also includes Enfin, and James himself. He doesn’t want to define exactly what he is – “I’m okay with any title. I don’t need to be hemmed in and say, okay, I’m just a chef” – and he wants you to know that everything, *everything*, at Enfin is done with purpose. “I always tell people that there’s no magic here, it’s all about discipline. It’s all about hard work and passion. Anyone can do it if they put in the work.”

The ‘anyone’ here refers to his team of 12 in the kitchen, a team he has trained to his exacting standards – and they are all Malaysian. Part of the reason why Enfin’s kitchen is glass-walled so that diners can see in is to understand where the food comes from. “I want the guests to know the contents of the kitchen,” he says. “I want them to look in and see, eh there’s no white guy in there. We make the best bread in the country right now; there’s no white guy making it. We make everything from scratch.”

Something in his formula is working because Enfin, and James’ plate, is expanding. He’s the director of cuisine and innovation at the Black Kettle, a café under the Woods Hospitality Group in Penang. “We have a bakery coming, and another restaurant coming up in September. Brasserie Enfin will be coming to Penang next year, a more casual version of this.”

A clear source of pride for James are the discoveries he’s made when exploring local ingredients. Detractors may question why pay fine dining prices for ingredients that come from our land when for the same price they may get Japanese steak, French truffle or New Zealand seafood, but James pooh-poohs them with the claim that is isn’t about whether it’s local or otherwise, but about the quality of the ingredients used. The mindset that resists paying a premium for something that even hints at local is the same mindset that has caused the stagnation of the Malaysian culinary scene, according to James.

“What I serve to my diners, it’s about celebrating the land. Our culture.” He is a true believer, and every month the menu changes at Enfin, reflecting a new inspiration, a new adventure that he came across or a new story that he wants to tell his diners. “Every dish here comes out accompanied by a chef. They will romance you with a story, so you don’t look at a piece of chicken and think that it’s just a piece of chicken.”

It’s a bit startling to hear him speak of food so whimsically, almost lovingly. Other words from other people sum him up differently: difficult, arrogant, hard. He’s known to make his team members cry. But James also refuses to use foie gras and shark’s fin in any of his dishes, and he rescued one of his dogs from a puppy mill. We should then add: principled, exacting.

“People find me intimidating,” he admits, although he doesn’t look particularly upset about it. “I can’t blame them because I’m very exact, I’m very precise. And this is part of the training. The kitchen is not a fun place; it’s a very dangerous space – we are not charging people RM2 for a bowl of noodles. You as a guest of the restaurant have expectations. Your tolerance level coming into the space is totally different; you aren’t forgiving. I have to make sure I meet your expectations.”