

# Double act of culinary mastery

Stylish marriage of French cuisine and Japanese artistry excites palates

By ESTHER CHANDRAN  
estherc@thestar.com.my

MAKING the focal point of a dish stand out involves a chef's expertise in portion control and cooking techniques to achieve the desired results.

What more when the main item on a plate calls for two ways of cooking – which is something Sage Restaurant & Wine Bar head chef Don John Sta Maria seems to excel at.

In bringing together French haute cuisine and artistry of Japanese cooking, Sta Maria has the knack of exciting taste buds by presenting two ways of cooking proteins or vegetables, which is a joy to discover on the restaurant's new menu.

We start off by delighting in *ciabatta* made in house by the kitchen crew before experiencing the a la carte options.

An appetising start to dinner came in the form of a pretty pink disc that looked too good to eat.

Dotted with *aioli*, *tapenade* and



EATING OUT

sun-dried tomato as well as truffle shavings and a light drizzle of truffle oil, the cold Kobe Carpaccio with Black Truffle and Condiments (RM118) is a culinary work of art – a delight for the eyes and palate.

For a contrast of cold and hot, the entree of Smoked Octopus with Brandy Aioli and Caviar (RM98) gives the Kobe beef some competition.

The octopus is cooked two ways for textural contrast.

Sta Maria uses Sakura wood chips, for the sweet flavour it imparts, to smoke the octopus and slow-cooks another batch of cephalopod for three hours.

Avruga caviar, parsley oil, Italian parsley and interestingly,

*ulam raja* alongside aubergine puree are accompaniments for this double octopus act which I enjoyed every bit of.

The *ulam raja*, he said, is sourced from local farmers in line with the restaurant's shift towards sustainability and local sourcing.

"Previously, we focused on Japanese and French ingredients. However, now it is more about sustainability and supporting our local farmers and fishermen."

Sta Maria's Roasted Free-Range Chicken with Cep Cream and Truffle (RM128) presents slow-cooked breast and roasted thigh confit with beautiful caramelised crispy skin. Another double-act!

Knowing that chicken and fungi go well together, Sta Maria throws in an earthy contrast of cep, morel and oyster mushrooms in this recipe.

A sauce with red wine reduction comprising morel and cep is glazed onto the chicken while the oyster mushrooms are deep-fried and served alongside.

Besides mushrooms, red amaranth and deep-fried chervil are other ingredients perfecting this savoury treat.

The Aged Cod Fish and Spiced Cauliflower (RM138) is next.

The appetising fish goes well with curry cauliflower puree and roasted cauliflower, deep-fried ladies' finger, curry leaves and dill.

Once again, he employs two cooking styles, this time for the cruciferous vegetable.

The Mango Granita is refreshing as it helps prepare the palate for bolder flavours.

In the Grilled Wagyu with Black Garlic and Chitose Corn (RM188), Sta Maria cleverly incorporates the pungent bulb with natural beef jus.

He said the garlic is cooked on low temperature for a week to dehydrate the bulb for a more pronounced taste.

Paired together, the melt-in-the-mouth Wagyu is lovely, with nasturtium, pickled tomato and snow peas adding a pop of colour to the presentation.

A dash of *yuzu kosho* lends slight tart and citrusy flavours

to the beef.

Closing dinner on a high note is Sage's Signature Souffle (RM58) and Vanilla Ice Cream with Ardoino Olive Oil (RM18).

Sta Maria draws inspiration for the menu from various sources including his travels.

"A trip to Singapore last year exposed me to very modern cuisine and interesting flavour pairings," said the chef whose training is in classic French cuisine.

"Bali provided another eye-opener for the flavours and seafood we use."

**SAGE Restaurant & Wine Bar, Level 6, The Gardens Residences, The Gardens Mall, Mid Valley City, Kuala Lumpur. (Tel: 03-2268 1328 /016-775 7160). Business hours: noon to 3pm (Monday to Friday); 6pm to 10pm (Monday to Saturday). Closed on Sunday.**

This is the writer's personal observation and is not an endorsement by StarMetro.



Grilled Wagyu with Black Garlic and Chitose Corn.



(From left) Smoked Octopus with Brandy Aioli and Caviar, and Kobe Carpaccio with Black Truffle and Condiments are Sta Maria's creations (below).



For a Sage dessert, there is Signature Souffle and Vanilla Ice Cream with Ardoino Olive Oil.