

REAL LOVE *works*

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MENU FOR A MARRIAGE

Forest & Sam Leong's Ingredients
For A Solid Partnership In Love

real life

Recipe for love

Like the perfect dish, chefs Sam and Forest Leong know that a successful partnership takes preparation, practice and patience.

By Desiree Koh



PHOTO: SHANEY HO; STYLIST: VERENA YEE; ASSISTENT: JAMES TSE; HAIR: A HANG CLOUTIER; MAKEUP: HATTI SATTI; SHOES: MARISSA MALLOTT; JEWELRY: LUCY LEATHER SHOES; ACCESSORIES: L'ETIENNE LAURENT; LOCATION: POH HSIANG AT RESORTS WORLD SINGAPORE

Popular restaurant-related reality TV shows reveal that life in a professional kitchen comprises long hours of hard work, but for well-known Singapore-based chefs Sam and Forest Leong, such a scenario was the perfect setting for cooking up a romance.

Fast forward two decades, and at their lavish new restaurant at Resorts World Sentosa, a showcase for Sam's innovative modern Cantonese cuisine, the couple are teasing each other and finishing one another's sentences. Sam, 46, opened the restaurant — also called Forest — in March this year after taking a two-year break from a three decade-long career highlighted by executive chef positions at the Four Seasons' Jiang Nan Chun restaurant and the Tung Lok Group to host TV shows. Forest, 42, a native of Bangkok, teaches Thai cooking classes at sam.leong@forest Cooking School at Craig Road.

The couple, who are now both Singapore Citizens, seem to have achieved an enviable blend in work and marriage. As Forest puts it, "Although we specialise in different cuisines, we love to help each other." Indeed, discerning diners at Sam's restaurant will note Thai herbs and spices in the tasting menus, which are executed in an open-concept kitchen designed by Forest. Over at sam.leong@forest, Sam occasionally pops by to tag-team on demonstrations and share his experiences.

One marvels at how far both have come since their beginnings at Lok Wah Hin at the Novotel Bangkok on Siam Square, one of Bangkok's top Chinese restaurants. It was there that Sam — who is originally from Kuala Lumpur — was second in command to his father, having worked his way up from the *zhi char* kitchens in the Malaysian capital since he was 16. One day in 1989, Forest showed up looking for a job, fresh out of training at the

Thai Hotel and Tourism Institute.

The 19 year-old landed a position as an apprentice under Sam. The only woman in the kitchen, she stood out for her hard work and gentle ways, and for being the only local staffer who could speak English. Sam quickly tapped on her to serve as his translator and "secretary".

That laid the foundation of their 23 year-strong partnership: Sam the extrovert, who made coffee ribs and wasabi prawns part of culinary pop culture, complemented by Forest who worked quietly behind the scenes.

DOING THE PREP

The Leongs' recipe to get to where they are now — professionally and as husband and wife — has seen lots of practice to make perfect.

"It wasn't love at first sight; we saw

"It wasn't love at first sight; we saw each other's ugly sides first, and we were comfortable with that" Forest

each other's ugly sides first, and we were comfortable with that," says Forest (whose name is an anglicised translation of her Thai name, Aranya) of those long days in the kitchen with a chef who "just explodes and doesn't keep anything in the heart".

Sam adds: "There were no signs of falling in love, but things came..." and as his voice trails off wistfully, Forest interjects: "Naturally!"

It was during a staff holiday to Pattaya, Thailand that the couple decided to get together. But things had to be kept quiet. For Sam — a disciplined chef who stuck to hotel rules, including a policy that disallowed married couples from working together — dating was "problematic".

"To talk, I had to go to the kitchen to make a phone call to her, and disguise my voice. And when we announced our wedding [in 1990], we shocked the hotel," he relates.

As a young married couple — Forest was 20 and Sam 24 — who soon had two sons, the first thing they did was to agree on their roles,

no different from being in the restaurant kitchen. Forest was the sous chef to Sam's executive chef, raising their children while he spent 14-hour days building his career. In 1993, the Leongs came to Singapore and shared a three-bedroom Bukit Merah rental flat with Sam's mother, sister and brother, the senior Chef Leong having passed on shortly after their wedding. To support his family, Sam worked for months without a day off, leaving Forest at home with their sons and struggling to communicate with friends and neighbours because she couldn't speak Mandarin or any Chinese dialect.

Forest's understanding of the nature of her husband's job was key to making it work. "Since he was working hard, I focused on the role of mother and wife," she says.

"It was a very 'traditional' arrangement," adds Sam with a laugh. "I fulfilled my responsibilities as a husband and father, and she took care of the family. Even now, she does the accounts and gives me an allowance every month!"

TWO CHEFS ARE BETTER THAN ONE

Two years ago, with his sons serving or about to enter National Service (they are now 21 and 19 years old), Sam quit the high-stress lifestyle of a professional chef to devote time to his personal life, and to take a back seat to Forest's dreams. For years, she had wanted to share her culinary skills, a passion kindled by cooking showcases at the family's Jurong penthouse and as a People's Association cooking class trainer in recent years.

This inspired sam.leong@forest, where classes take place four times a week. "Now we do things together and travel a lot," says Sam, who calls his current schedule "relax time". He points out that he's now Forest's assistant when she is invited to guest-chef in exotic locations like Papua New Guinea. Their experiences and skills as chefs fed into their first joint cookbook, *Home Cooking With Sam & Forest*, published in 2011. They recently completed a second book, which is being prepped for release.

At the crux of their relationship is the ability to keep things professional at work. "I respect him as a chef; if I do something wrong, I get it very hard. I don't get any privileges just because I'm his wife," Forest reveals.

Sam continues: "I always speak my mind, but if she tells me what I've done wrong, I listen, and we move on. She's the relaxed sort and I'm hot-tempered and impulsive. But if neither of us have a temper, how would we make things happen? And if we both have a temper, we're dead! Balance is a gift."

Part of that balance is also derived from leaving work woes, well, at work. "You don't carry what has happened at work back home," Forest says. "Otherwise, you won't survive." ●

SAM'S MENU FOR MASTERING MARRIAGE

→ **OPEN DOOR POLICY** "Share the good things as well as the bad. When the foundation for communication is good, you don't have to only show your best side."

→ **KEEP IT REAL** "The real me emerged before we got married when she saw me in the kitchen scolding my staff — that's my true character."

→ **PACK FOR THE LONG HAUL** "Marriage is a journey. You have to accept everything along the way — happiness, jealousy, temper outbursts..."

FOREST'S INGREDIENTS FOR BLISS AND BONDING

→ **TRUST** "He likes to look at pretty women but I trust that it will not go beyond an admiring look because I do likewise when it comes to a handsome man!"

→ **PATIENCE** "Don't push each other to the limit. Listen, digest, then decide how to proceed in an open conversation."