



Eyvind Hellstrøm Bagatelle, Norway

WORDS ALISA CHOPARD

Standing taller than most, Eyvind Hellstrøm's commanding presence and quiet assurance underscore his wealth of experience in the kitchen. In Singapore as the second guest chef in St. Regis Singapore's 'Culinary Home of World Renowned Chefs', Eyvind shares that hard work and perseverance are two qualities that contributed to his success. He entered the industry at the tender age of 16 and apprenticed at restaurants in Oslo for five years, before he moved to France. According to Eyvind, falling in love with French culture and cuisine was easy, and after spending four years in the country, he brought his love for everything French back to Oslo. Today, he is the owner and head chef of the celebrated French restaurant, Bagatelle in Norway, which he opened in 1982.

Although much in his life has changed over the years, one thing remains constant. 'Throughout my career, I have been very demanding of myself. Today, I see the results of that.' Perhaps the biggest pay-off was when Bagatelle received two Michelin stars in 1986, the first restaurant in Scandinavia to do so. But despite his tremendous success, Eyvind remains modest. 'No matter how much we want to be perfect, it is impossible,' he says. 'The best we can do is to continue striving for it.'

Eyvind's lifelong passion for the culinary arts is to be expected — it's all in the blood. He grew up watching his mother serve classic Norwegian dishes at several family-owned cafes, and nurtured his passion from young. No surprise then that he believes strongly in cultivating young talent. In

1993, Eyvind was named president of the Norwegian arm of Bocuse d'Or, the bi-yearly culinary competition that brings together young, unknown talents from around the world in a rigorous test of their culinary abilities. 'Each competing chef has a chance to make a name for themselves during this competition. It showcases their individuality and creativity,' Eyvind remarks.

But he cautions his young charges against complacency. 'Winning [competitions] should open doors, but that does not exempt a young chef from hard work. That is the main thing in the long run.'

What are some of the challenges you face when serving French food in Norway?

Cooking French food in Norway is much easier now than it was 20 years ago. Back then, we did not have the same fresh, outstanding products that we have now. We relied mostly on frozen food, which greatly compromised the quality of the dishes.

What was it like to head up the first Scandinavian restaurant to receive two Michelin stars? It was a great honour, but today, I am not very concerned with the stars. However, I will admit that having Michelin stars draws people to the restaurant. That is always good because we are nothing without our guests.

What is the hardest thing about running a restaurant? Keeping the pace. Also, it is difficult when customers expect me to be there all the time. I love to travel because I gain inspiration from different countries and cultures. My cuisine is influenced by Asia, France and Italy.

Where would you like to visit next? I would love to visit Japan. The Japanese have cooking down to an art. They are most precise.

Name one of your favourite countries. I love Singapore! I would be most happy if I got a chance to visit twice a year. The people here are very friendly and warm, and it's a huge change from what I'm used to in Europe.

You have written a few cookbooks. Why did you decide to do that? It is good to share my experiences with people. Of course, it is always good to learn cooking first-hand, but that does not mean you cannot find your own style through literature.

What are the qualities of a good chef? Patience and hard labour. It is also about the assistants you have — they have to be excellent because running a kitchen is about teamwork. When you have customers paying for their meals, it becomes serious — you need to be top notch, and that means working with good people.

What makes a good meal? Good company, and of course, good wine! Every chef should appreciate the importance of enjoying a good meal. I have met many accomplished self-taught chefs who all have one thing in common — their fascination with good food. They all seem to have learnt how to eat from their childhood!

What is your New Year's resolution? I wish for good health, above everything else. I would also love more good meals with good company. **a**