

TEXT JOSEPH REANEY

In global cities around the world, the pop-up trend continues unabated. Collaboration and exchange programmes among leading celebrity chefs is the latest twist in this urban phenomenon, giving gourmands a range of cooking styles and menus to choose from.

THE BIG SWITCH

IT'S A REGULAR EVENING. YOU TURN UP AT YOUR REGULAR RESTAURANT, GREET YOUR REGULAR WAITER AND ARE SHOWN TO YOUR REGULAR TABLE. THEN YOU'RE HANDED YOUR MENU, WHICH BEARS ABSOLUTELY NO RESEMBLANCE TO THE REGULAR ONE. THE MISO SOUP HAS BECOME BOUILLABAISSÉ; THE SUSHI HAS BEEN SWAPPED FOR STEAK FRITES. YOU WONDER IF YOUR REGULAR CHEF HAS GONE. INDEED, HE HAS – AND ANOTHER CHEF IS IN THE KITCHEN, ALBEIT FOR A LIMITED TIME ONLY.

This is a chef exchange, in which two renowned chefs temporarily swap restaurants. Each chef transports their cherished culinary creations to a new kitchen. Then, on the other side of the same trend, there's chef collaboration, where one chef invites another into his diner to cooperate on a joint culinary feast. This is commonly a single tasting menu, for which the resident chef and the visitor cook alternate dishes.

These two new twists on the restaurant pop-up trend are rapidly growing in popularity around the world. The benefit for global gastronomes is abundantly clear, as it allows them to taste creations from unfamiliar celebrity chefs in familiar settings.

Recently, two of America's most renowned chefs, Daniel Humm at Eleven Madison Park in New York and Grant Achatz at Alinea in Chicago, struck an agreement to swap kitchens for a week. With both establishments being three Michelin star restaurants, the project was an inevitable success; the residencies at both restaurants soon sold out, in spite of a cost of US\$500 (plus tax and tip; \$625) per head.

Similarly, chef Homaro Cantu at iNG Restaurant and Curtis Gamble at Bread & Wine – both in Chicago – traded for two nights in March 2013. Yet, for some chefs, switching neighbourhoods or even states simply isn't enough.

RIGHT
 Chef Dave Pynt of Burnt Ends, Singapore, believes that chef exchange and collaboration programmes benefit both the chefs and the diners.

BELOW
 Daniel Humm of Eleven Madison Park, New York and Grant Achatz of Alinea restaurant in Chicago swapped their kitchens for a week.

OPPOSITE PAGE,
 CLOCKWISE FROM TOP
 Singapore-based Iggy's is known for its original recipes such as this starter made of Kohada (Japanese fish variety), tomatoes, clementine, mango, toasted quinoa and beets; scallop and cuttlefish dish seasoned with mint and caraway is part of the tasting menu at one-Michelin star restaurant Alyn Williams at The Westbury in London; celebrity chef Alyn Williams loves to work with other talented chefs.



Earlier in 2013, chef Dave Pynt of Burnt Ends in Singapore's Teck Lim Road, organised a "London Exchange". He and his team set up shop for a week in the kitchen of E5 Bakehouse in London, while E5 did exactly the same at his premises in Singapore.

"Burnt Ends actually started as a summer residence in East London," reveals Pynt – although he is quick to explain the chef exchange was about more than simply reclaiming his old ovens. It was, he asserts, "a great opportunity to do something fun and exciting with Ben [Mackinnon] from E5."

In recent years, Pynt has also hosted chef Chris Wolff of London restaurant Viajante at Burnt Ends, as well as the ex-Noma chef Sam Miller. So why does he

believe chef collaborations and exchanges have taken off in such a big way recently?

"Chef exchanges are generally driven by the chefs for their personal satisfaction," he says, as he believes having a new clientele challenges a chef to be innovative. "But they are also great for customers; they provide a new experience for the diner in a familiar setting."

In reality, the reasons for such swaps extend far beyond chef satisfaction and customer experience; they are also good business. Taking your food to a new clientele is an ideal way to market your "brand" and get the name out there, and is also a cost-effective way to see if your enterprise has the potential to expand.

During October 2013,



"COLLABORATIONS EXPOSE CHEFS TO A DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENT, CULTURE, INGREDIENTS AND GUEST PROFILE. THEY'RE A SOURCE OF INSPIRATION AND A TANK OF CREATIVITY."

CHEF IGNATIUS CHAN OF IGGY'S RESTAURANT IN SINGAPORE.

chef Alyn Williams hosted a roll-call of renowned chefs at his restaurant Alyn Williams at The Westbury in London at an event called CHEFStock. It was a personal ambition – "There are so many great chefs from all over the world who I admire and would love to work with, so I thought why not invite some of those guys in to join me" – but he mostly had his customers in mind.

"We wanted to showcase the latest and greatest culinary talent and give Londoners the opportunity to sample some of their signature dishes," he says. "Diners can enjoy the benefits of being cooked for by not one Michelin-star chef, but two or three in one sitting!"

One of the participants, chef Ignatius Chan of award-winning establishment Iggy's in Singapore, agrees that the collaborations "offer diners new experiences and diversity in styles, flavours, techniques of cooking and

culinary execution," but also highlights the benefits for the chef.

"Collaborations expose chefs to a different environment, culture, ingredients and guest profile," he says. "They're a source of inspiration and a tank of creativity. CHEFStock also provided a platform for us to meet UK diners, as well as the media."

The trend seems to be catching on in Asia too. While four renowned Singapore chefs introduced Scandinavia to their cuisine at the event Copenhagen Cooking in August 2013, Inagiku Japanese restaurant in Hong Kong welcomed

chef Hisato Nakahigashi to create a 10-course meal in September 2013.

The same benefits come up again and again, even when collaborations are rather less orthodox. Celebrity chef Willin Low at Wild Rocket in Singapore has recently opened a diner in collaboration with coffee company Papa Palheta – a part of the pop-up retail project Temporium in Little India.

"Leon of Papa Palheta and I talked about collaborating," Low reveals, "and then this opportunity presented itself. There is also another layer of collaboration with pastry

chefs like Gwen Lim of Patisserie." He believes that bringing everyone together makes for a better experience all round.

"Each of the parties is great in our field, but when we collaborate – different people with different strengths, but a similar vision – the results are magical. It is motivating to work outside of your comfort zone and learn, and it's refreshing for the customers as well."

The reasons given by chefs are manifold – some use them as marketing campaigns while others make them charitable fundraisers; some hope to

broaden their own horizons while others aim to lay the foundations for future expansion – yet at the end of the day, the thing that sustains this trend is the desire of diners. Williams sums up this desire when he says, "I love going to a restaurant that will disappear shortly – I like the exclusive feeling they portray."

With chef exchanges, foodies are always delighted to see great cooks gracing their favourite restaurants; while with chef collaborations, diners are gladly disproving the age-old adage. No kitchen can have too many cooks.

