

A passion for cuisine

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By Parani Chitrakorn
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Young Thai chef Pichaya "Pam" Utharntharm heads to Avignon, France to take part in the 'world cup' of cooking competitions

A former communication arts student who discovered a passion for cooking while taking weekend classes at Le Cordon Bleu, Pichaya Utharntharm, or Pam as she's known to family and friends, proved her prowess in the kitchen by winning the Youth Hope Contest 2011 in Shanghai, China in May.

Now, she's busy preparing herself for the next step: the Young Talent Trophy of the Great Escoffier International Competition 2012, also known as the "World Cup" for young talented chefs, which takes place on March 12, as part of the fifth International Disciples of Escoffier meeting at Hotel Mercure in Avignon, France.

In parallel with its annual meeting, the Disciples of Escoffier, the largest association of chefs, organises two competitions. One of these is the Young Talent Trophy, the other is the Trophy Disciple Escoffier International, cooking and service. Both are highly coveted prizes.

"The theme is lamb shoulder as main ingredient," says Pam, 23, of this year's competition. "I can do anything to it, roast or stew, alongside three side dishes. One side dish - stuffed artichokes- is compulsory, one has to be vegetable-based, and another is up to me. Eight portions have to be plated within 3.5 hours.

"I feel this year's theme is more difficult than last year because I have to think of a recipe myself and the time given is longer. Also, I've never worked with a lamb shoulder before so it's going to be a challenge for me."

The competition starts early in the morning. And it is going to be a long day, running until the Award ceremony and the gala dinner.

But Pam, who has interned with Chef Herve Frerard at Le Beaulieu, is taking it in her stride.

"To be honest, with my past experience, I am more confident. However, there is a lot more to learn before going to the competition. Winning this competition, of course, would be a dream come true but I don't expect anything. I see it as a life experience. I want to learn out of it and meet all the famous chefs there. There will be hundreds of great chefs at the competition, some of them tasting my dish! From time to time, I feel nervous and anxious but with support from my family, friends and Chef Herve I feel energised and motivated. I see this not as competition with other candidates but as a competition with myself. I will try my best to represent Thailand and Asia."

The most important thing is preparing. "Since winning the competition in Shanghai last year, I haven't stopped cooking. I went back to study at Le Cordon Bleu because I did not want to lose the rhythm of my cooking skills. I think cooking is like fashion, the trend always changes, and therefore, cooking never ends- chefs have to always learn new things. Ever since the theme of the 2012 competition came out, I've searched through cookbooks and on the Internet for ideas and will be starting to experiment with Chef Herve. We plan to practise every day, because I think that you learn something every time you cook. I have to be more prepared than last year because this year's competition will be more challenging and I believe the other candidates will be well prepared."

Asked about her plans for the future, Pam says, "I'm going to New York on March 21 to study cooking for two years at The Culinary Institute of America. I'm going to be starting from the basics all over again. This

school is one of the most popular culinary institutes in the States and the environment is very nice. Not only I will learn culinary skills in the kitchen, but also the management side such as food cost, food safety, entrepreneurial skills, etc. To open a successful restaurant, it's essential to understand the management side as well as cooking."

So cooking is going to be her career?

"Of course! Though it doesn't mean I'll be spending all my time in the kitchen, as there are several other related jobs such as food critic, TV chef and food stylist. Being a chef requires hard work and commitment. When people take holidays, that's the time you have to work. But I'm 100 per cent into it!

"My dream is to become greatest cook I can be. It doesn't necessarily means that I'm aiming to be the 'best' chef of all but the best I can be."

We wish her luck!