

THE STRAITS TIMES







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Singapore chef makes history, wins Young Talent Escoffier Asia competition



Singapore chef Koh Han Jie (above centre, with other winners) and his fish en croute (fish in pastry) platter. PHOTOS: DISCIPLES ESCOFFIER INTERNATIONAL, SINGAPORE DELEGATION

🕒 PUBLISHED SEP 14, 2017, 5:00 AM SGT

Chef de partie Koh Han Jie is the first Singapore chef to win the annual Young Talent Escoffier Asia competition and will join the world finals in March

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A Singapore chef was crowned champion at the annual Young Talent Escoffier Asia culinary competition in Hong Kong last week.

It is the first time a Singapore chef has won the decade-old competition since the Republic started fielding candidates six years ago.

Chef de partie Koh Han Jie, 24, who works at two-Michelin-starred French restaurant Les Amis at Shaw Centre, beat seven other contestants in Asia, including from the Philippines, Macau and Thailand. He will go on to represent Singapore at the world finals in Zurich in March.

The top three in Asia make it to the finals.

The culinary competition for young chefs under the age of 25 is organised by the Disciples Escoffier Asia, a chapter of the non-profit Disciples Escoffier International, an association set up in 1954 to honour the late famed French chef Auguste Escoffier, who is widely recognised as the father of modern culinary arts.

Mr Koh, who has been at Les Amis for 10 months, says: "The competition was very intense, but I told myself to fight on and not to give up."

The competition, which was held at the annual Restaurant & Bar Hong Kong exhibition, comprised two components: to cook an egg dish within one hour on the first day; and to cook a fish en croute (fish in pastry) platter with six portions within three hours on the second day.

While he placed second for the egg dish - a poached egg with asparagus, haricot vert (green beans) and green peas with Bearnaise sauce - he ranked first for his fish en croute served with trio pumpkin, bell pepper chartreuse and cod brandade croquettes and won the overall title.

Mr Koh, a graduate of ITE's culinary arts programme in partnership with French culinary Institut Paul Bocuse, was chosen out of seven candidates at the Singapore selection round in May, which was organised by the Disciples Escoffier International Singapore Delegation.

For the Asia competition, he trained between shifts as well as after dinner service from 11pm to the early hours of the morning, with some guidance from Les Amis' head chefs.

Three weeks before the competition, the delegation roped in chef Khoo Wee Bin, 49, a culinary instructor and mentor chef who was part of Singapore's national culinary team, to hone Mr Koh's competition skills and help him realise his full potential.

For instance, he taught Mr Koh the importance of measuring the temperature of oil in a pan instead of relying on estimation, fine-tuned the sequence of his cooking processes and helped him brush up on his organisation and cooking techniques, among other things.

Chef Khoo says: "Han Jie was the strongest of all the competitors there and was much more organised than everyone else.

"When one takes part in competitions, one has to always try one's best and also think about what can be

learnt.

"If one has a mentality that it is just about winning, one might develop an ego and that is unhealthy."

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