

After Conquering Bali, Chef Will Meyrick Lands in Jakarta to Open E&O Restaurant *)

by Laksmi Pamuntjak

* This article appeared in *The Jakarta Globe*, 2013

Across a table in the middle of a sleek room sit five people enjoying their cocktail, including an excellent Bangkok fizz, a pleasantly unkitschy pineapple coriander margarita, and a pandan old-fashioned, with the pandan notes catching up with you like a distant bell.

They are talking in happy adjectives. Someone points at the large steel-framed windows, the semi-open bar. Another points at the red Persian carpet underneath the table, which reminds her of home.

The sommelier suggests a Chenin Blanc and a Pinot Noir to go with the starters, a few small plates, the flavors succulent and surprising.

Two versions of betel leaf beauties, one chicken and one salmon, are packed with fresh herbs with an extra crunch.

Dainty parcels of crab and ocean trout roe are sparked by kaffir lime, roasted coconut and coriander; the waitstaff informs them that these are “ma hors”—a tiny fistful of minced sweet duck, prawns, crushed peanuts and tamarind palm sugar caramel on a pillow of local mandarin orange.

That last detail, as I would find out later, is as lovely as it is crucial — instead of a citrus zing, it imparts an unexpectedly elegant, neutralizing finish.

More adjectives. Folksy but superfine, one person says. Classy but not precious, says another.

A muted but focused overhead light sugars the table, against the flickering candlelight.

Shreds of pulled pork belly are wrapped around a sheet of Lumpia Semarang, along with fresh herbs, bean sprouts and a daub of plum sauce. Somebody says he prefers the effect of nam prik num and pork crackling on the Chiang Mai and Yunnan sausage. But no one is arguing.

They sip more wine and scan the menu.

Soft shell crab salad with rose apple, shredded coconut, chili jam... Braised beef soup with roasted chili powder, mint and coriander... Isaan Larb Ped with crispy duck, minced liver, shallots, mint and roasted rice...

You think sunny, spicy, sweet; hues of bronze, scarlet, gold. You think familiar but not quite.

And now it's time for a glass of Gamay — a stylish, versatile Beaujolais. It's time for the mains.

Welcome to the world of Will Meyrick.

E&O (Eastern + Oriental), his latest venture, is also his first restaurant in Jakarta.

Jakartans no longer have to fly to Bali for the chance to sample the fruits of his vigorous culinary travels around the region, and Jakarta has never had a great Thai-Vietnamese restaurant until now.

Meyrick has teamed up with the folks behind Loewy and Union, whose trademark modern brasserie style is meant to counterbalance his spicy, vibrant food with a clean, contemporary aesthetic.

As with Sarong and Mamasan, Meyrick's two iconic Bali temples of Asian street food, E&O thrives on his relationship with the food of the locals.

"I'm not looking to create new dishes," he often says, "I'm more interested in finding old recipes, and unearthing the story behind them."

And this bears repeating, not least because of his unflinching commitment to his own crusade.

So you see him sourcing his own herbs and choosing his produce directly — a process that often sees him in the market at 4 a.m., haggling with an old lady vendor over the price of chillies.

"Not only do I want to control the process," he says, "But I also want the people I work with — my family — to know where our food comes from. Respect what you eat, and it will respect you."

And his cooking just gets better and better.

Even seasoned Meyrick fans find themselves as transported by slightly modified signature Sarong dishes such as the Penang beef cheek curry, a street stall staple that Meyrick has elevated into a taste-memory benchmark.

A crispy, twice-cooked variation of his legendary pork hock also sparks renewed interest, as with a simple yet dazzling starter of crispy tempura vegetables to dip into a robust trio of Northern Thai nam prik, and a classic, so beautifully-executed, as the steamed fish in soy sauce.

Or that most satisfying of standbys: the roti canai.

Similarly, when you tuck into something as tried-and-true as a roasted duck curry with lychee, or a choo chee prawn curry, he still won't let you settle.

Neither does the twist come quite in the way you expected: instead of upping the aromatics, he gives it extra heat.

It is a decisive — and not necessarily democratic — touch, but therein also lies the Scotsman's true gift: he wears the courage of his own wit.

Not all the dishes register as strongly: the Gaeng Gai village chicken soup takes the notion of rustic a little too far by retaining the bones in the broth, and the pomelo and prawn salad is a tad underwhelming.

Neither is an average of Rp 400,000 (\$41) per person (including wine) cheap, but that's what you pay at most serious Thai restaurants.

What is truly startling is how brilliant the desserts are.

How often can you say that about a Southeast Asian restaurant, where you often happily skip sweets?

Meyrick can lament all he likes about his one big regret — that of not having had proper pastry training, because “I became head chef too fast.”

Yet the facts on the ground speak otherwise. Durian panna cotta with sticky rice is a triumph; so is the ginger ice cream and the sublime duck's egg custard.

I know it's early days still, but with an opening week this solid, E&O has every reason to soar.

E&O

*Menara Rajawali, 1st Floor, Jl. DR Ide Anak Agung Gde Agung
Lot#5.1, Kawasan Mega Kuningan, South Jakarta*

Tel. 021 2902 3418

www.eandojakarta.com

Open for dinner only, 6 p.m. onwards

Photo by Will Meyrick