



## Meet Petrina Loh, Chef Owner of Morsels.

*Want to know why this “crazy over-achiever” quit her job as a private banker and broke her bond with MAS to become a chef? Or why she thinks the kitchen is not for the “sissy” and about her humorous encounters with “lobster mushrooms” and “1-litre of vinegar”?*

*Read more in this four-part series as Kühlbarra goes up and personal with four amazing chefs to celebrate Singapore’s culinary stars!*

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**Kühlbarra:** At the age of 30, you quit your banking career, broke your MAS bond and went overseas to study culinary. Why did you make such a drastic decision?

**Petrina:** I guess I just didn’t see myself in banking for the next part of my life. And I’ve always been very fond of cooking. I was taught how to cook by my dad since I was 3 to 4 years old. And for the most part, I like to eat. As a private banker, I got to eat at many nice places and I guess the idea built up from there. Even when I was in banking, I’ve always wanted to become a restaurateur at some point in my life. It was just *when*. Also I started working very early ‘cause I graduated before I was 21.

**Kühlbarra:** Oh, wow!

**Petrina:** Yeah, I started working *very* early. And at that point of time when I left banking, I’d already been working for 8 years. So, I’m sort of the crazy over-achiever kind of person. I rushed through my teenage years and managed to complete a lot of things I wanted to do before I was 30. So it just felt like the right timing.

**Kühlbarra:** What was your time like in San Francisco?

**Petrina:** School was pretty much for 5 hours right. So my whole day kinda consisted of going to school for 5 hours and then after that I’d go work in a restaurant for like, the remaining 10 hours. So that was like a full day for me.

**Kühlbarra:** Whoa!

**Petrina:** I mean, ‘cause I’m a late starter in the kitchen so you need to catch up and you need to put in the hours if you wanna get something out of it. And I didn’t have a lot of time on my hands, you know. So whatever time I had there was very important.

**Kühlbarra:** Why did you come back to Singapore to set up a restaurant even though it’s quite tough here?

**Petrina:** I think ultimately the whole essence of why I went abroad was with the idea of really coming back. Singapore, back then, lacked a lot of local chefs. I mean now still, but now there’s a lot more local chefs because the government’s promoting

local culinary schools and stuff like that. So I think a very natural thing is to come back and provide what I've learnt in the States, which is a very different way of cooking.

**Kühlbarra:** Why do you think Singapore needs our own chefs?

**Petrina:** Singapore is a melting pot, but for many years you have international food, not like local *local* food. And I think foreign chefs don't really understand how our taste buds go? I mean there are some really good foreign chefs whom I'm friends with and I think they do a great job. But in the space where we are promoting all other kinds of local talents, I think culinary is something that's still in its infancy stage.

**Kühlbarra:** To decide to come back, your national identity must also be important to you?

**Petrina:** I didn't use to be patriotic. But now after running a restaurant for the past few years, there's some sort of pride. I went to Copenhagen to cook 2 years ago representing Singapore; Singapore Tourism Board sponsored us. So I think that there's national pride that goes into that.

**Kühlbarra:** What are the unique challenges that you face as a chef in Singapore vs. as a chef in San Francisco?

**Petrina:** I mean in San Francisco, I was just working for someone. I was more of an apprentice than having my own shop. Of course having your own restaurant, it's a lot more than just cooking. The pipe breaks it's your business, if there's a pest problem it's your business. Like, *everything* is your business. You don't have enough funds to hire this department, that department. It's just an unfortunate thing of small businesses, but yeah, we just stay real like that. And of course the staffing situation in Singapore is such a nightmare. Our team has changed three-, four-folds. I'm finally happy with this team right now.

**Kühlbarra:** Running a restaurant, and having to tackle every single problem, like you were saying that when the pipe break you have to settle...

**Petrina:** [laughs] Oh that's just the *start* of the problems.

**Kühlbarra:** Despite all these problems, what has actually kept you going?

**Petrina:** I think the love for cooking, the love for creating food, and of course bringing people together. I'm most satisfied when a guest comes up and says "Hey, I really like this dish. Your dish really made my day." And *that* really makes *my* day.

**Kühlbarra:** What do you think are the necessary qualities to become a chef?

**Petrina:** A kitchen is a space where you have to be tough. You need to be *not* sissy, if you know what I mean. It's not like a nine-to-five sit-down job. You're on your legs 12 hours a day and you have to be very strong mentally and physically. It's not as glamorous as what everybody thinks, but the young generation of cooks that come by... I think they watch too much AFC lah. It's not all rosy.

**Kühlbarra:** What advice would you give to aspiring chefs or restaurateurs?

**Petrina:** I think it's so cliché, but don't give up. The world is really your oyster. If you can think of something, don't let anybody tell you that's not how you should cook. I can tell you most of the dishes that I've come up with, nobody has thought of these kinds of weird combinations. But I'm like who cares, I'm gonna try it. Some dishes just, ugh, it doesn't come out on the menu because it doesn't work. But some dishes are like spot-on and then it becomes my next signature dish. So you'll never know, you just have to keep trying.

Also, don't just do things blindly and always ask. The reason why I think I grew a lot in a very short span of time is because I asked a lot of questions. I remember I had to do a mystery basket for a school competition and my mentor was training me. He just gave me this basket, and half of the ingredients I've never ever seen before. I still remember very vividly there were like, lobster mushrooms...

**Kühlbarra:** Lobster mushrooms?

**Petrina:** Ya! Right! You've never seen it right? I was like what the in the world is this lobster mushroom? He also gave me a weird cut of beef that I'd never seen before. I was staring at it for the longest time, and I'm like, ohkay, let's just like, *think*. And common sense is not a given, that I have learnt. [laughs] But it's very important and can be trained. I recommend all cooks to apply some common sense. If you're a young cook and you're doing a recipe, you're not gonna use 1-litre of vinegar. Probably either you wrote down the wrong recipe, or somebody gave you the wrong recipe to "sabo" you. So you need to think. The reason I brought it up was because somebody did that at my kitchen. And I had to fix the *entire* set! [laughs] But yeah, keep cooking, think, ask questions, and just don't give up.

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