Morsels owners Petrina Loh and Bryan Chia are hot-headed but have learnt to work together

Tan Hsueh Yun

S

it at the counter in front of the kitchen at Morsels, a small plates restaurant in Mayo Street, and the drama may unfold over dinner.

Sometimes, co-owners Petrina Loh and Bryan Chia, both 31, exchange heated words.

She is exacting, he is more laidback.

Both say they are hot-headed.

"It's not a bed of roses working as a couple in a heated kitchen. Usually, one works in the kitchen, the other in the front of the house," says Loh, the only child of a businessman and housewife.

"Bryan is not used to having a routine, he's free-spirited; but routine is what's required in the kitchen."

Looking contemplative, Chia says:

"When we first started, it was like a nightmare. But we understand each other's strengths and weaknesses now."

That two hot heads with different personalities have managed to work together to make the menu stand out for nine months in a competitive restaurant scene is credit to their determination.

They met in 2010 through mutual friends. Asked about marriage and kids, Chia says: "The restaurant is our baby right now."

That nine-month-old, 48-seat restaurant on the fringe of Little India has a menu that reflects their culinary training in California in the United States.

They grow some of the herbs used in their dishes, make stock and sauces from scratch, and work with seasonal produce.

The food also reflects their Singapore roots, and their love of Japanese cuisine and ingredients. A squid ink risotto has been a hit.

"We're learning and growing," says Loh.

They graduated last year and had planned to quit their jobs to find a place first, go do the training so they would never be held back.

"It's not the easiest thing," Loh says. "But I think it's not the easiest location, but people come by word of mouth."

What is your favourite ingredient to cook with?

Chia: Pork. There is so much you can do with it. The head, ears, trotters, ribs, shoulder; you can cook every part.

While I was working at Del Dotto Vineyards in Napa, the chef, Tony Incontro taught me how to butcher a whole hog and remove the silver skin, the blood vessels.

I want to do it here, on my own, and use the pork for a range of things, but it is hard to get a whole pig.

Loh: Something new that I've discovered is hilio koi (steamed rice inoculated with mold and fermented with water and salt). I have been fermenting my own. It adds a roundness to food. I mix it with fresh wasabi for a beef dish or use it as part of a marinade.

Where do you eat after work?

Loh: We finish at 12.30am or 1am, and I cannot go to bed hungry, so I'll have supper, but he thinks it's unhealthy. I like the Hokkien mee at Syed Abi Road. Sometimes, I have Indomie instant noodles topped with ikura.

Chia: One of our customers told us about Nagomi at Cuppage Plaza and we went, but it was an expensive supper and so it's an occasional treat. Sometimes, I go to bed hungry.

What are some memorable meals you have had?

Chia: Wood-fired margherita pizza at Pizzetta Tr Vigne in Napa. It was so simple and the crust was so perfect. I like simple stuff.

Loh: Eleven Madison Park in New York. It was five years ago. The chef, Daniel Humm, is outstanding. I'm always intrigued by vegetables and the plating of the vegetables attracted me.

You both work in close proximity. What do you do on your days off?

Loh: On Sundays, we go to church in the morning and then, if Bryan's grandmother is making lunch, we spend some time there. Otherwise, I do paper work, invoices, payroll. I go to Jones The Grocer at Dempsey, eat cheese and work.

Chia: I play soccer, take my pit doberman for walks or to the beach.