

THE  
NEXT

# Big

THING

Chef John Sloane, Executive Chef, SATS, Singapore and Continental Director Asia for WACS, lets down his guard in conversation with *Gulf Gourmet*



On stage at the WACS Congress, Dubai with the newly elected WACS president Chef Gissur Gudmundsson



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HE MAY HAVE LOST OUT ON THE BID FOR THE WACS PRESIDUM, BUT THE QUIET, DIGNIFIED MANNER IN WHICH HE HANDLED IT,

and his subsequent show of support for the new President won many hearts. Chef John Sloane, Executive Chef, Singapore Airport Terminal Services (SATS) Catering and WACS Continental Director for Asia, is quick to quell rumours that he intends to quit his position. “At the end of the day, our goals remain the same. I will continue working as Continental Director for this region, which, I believe, is the next big thing,” he says.

Born in New Zealand, Chef John grew up on a traditional farm. Part of a large extended family, he knew exactly what he wanted to be at the tender age of seven. “When I told my dad I wanted to be a chef, he tried to convince me otherwise, presenting many options of what I could do,” he smiles. Spending time in the kitchen with his grandmother, cooking for the 50-odd people at the dinner table everyday, he developed a love and flair for cooking. “My mother had about ten brothers and sisters, so there were a lot of people at home. The shepherds would come

tired, looking forward to a hearty meal, made entirely by my grandmother,” he explains.

Another event that drove his decision was the time he spent with a Sikh family. “My parents had split up for a bit, and I was put up with a Sikh family for a while. I got a taste of traditional Indian food, eating parathas for breakfast. That made me more curious about food,” he says.

He was shipped off to boarding school at the age of 12, where, as a junior student, he spent a month on kitchen duty. “That was my first experience in commercial setting.

We have about 3,000 students living there, so it was quite a sizeable operation,” he smiles. But contrary to discouraging him from pursuing this profession, it only reaffirmed his belief that he wanted to be in the kitchen.

A couple of years later, Chef John decided to join the military as an officer. After initial training, he was lucky enough to win a fellowship, so he went to a military camp in the UK for further training. “At the time, there weren’t many hotel schools. So if you wanted to be a good chef, you had to go into the army or navy as they had the best training programmes,” he explains.

Having gained the experience he wanted, he returned to Australia and attached himself to a government house, looking after officer’s meals. He then added to his

education by completing a polytechnic course in a local cooking school.

“This course was a great combination of practical and theory. Only, because it was a Government body, we had

to sign on for at least six years. I left as soon as my time was up though, since I got a good opportunity to work in a tax-free haven,” he smiles.

The sun, sea and sand worked wonders for Chef John, and he honed his skills as a chef, cooking up delicious treats for the many parties at the private Government house. Working as a private chef was an attractive proposition,

and he went on to work in the celebrity circuit. While in Sydney, he made an important move.

“Sometimes,” says Chef John, “you are offered an

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So he joined the Coral Sea hotel in New Guinea in 1982. But his first day on the job was not as he had expected. “I was shocked when I walked into the kitchen. People were in shorts and t-shirts with aprons on. I was used to more discipline and uniforms at least!” he laughs.

He went to work organising the staff, two of whom were particularly interesting. “They were brothers, actually named Sun Up and Sun Down. So I put the former on morning duty and the second one on evening duty,” he smiles.

But on the whole, Chef John admits his experiences there were very exciting. “The place was like paradise, there were over 700 languages spoken there and it was just great,” he says. Besides, the company had their headquarters in Hong Kong, which is where Chef John wanted to go. “Singapore at the time was only just coming into it’s own, much like Dubai today. But Hong Kong was the place to be,” he says.

Unfortunately, that was not to be. Political unrest in the country got worse, and Chef John had to ship out. “I went back to New Zealand with the clothes on my back as everything else was seized. That was in 1987,” he states.



After six months of exploring opportunities, he took on a job in Guam. From there, he moved to a couple of other cities, until he met the girl he was going to marry.

“She is Japanese, so I went to work in Japan to familiarise myself with her culture. Also, it was my way of pleasing my father-in-law-to-be so he would think me worthy of his daughter,” he smiles. Gung-ho at the prospect of learning a new culture and marrying his love, Chef John was in for a surprise when he got there. “It was important to speak Japanese if I wanted to keep my job. And that became a dual sword for me, because if I could not keep my job, my father-in-law-to-be would not be too happy about it. So either way, it was all a loss for me,” he says.

But eventually, Chef John did win it all – he is fluent in Japanese, and he married the girl he loved. On the work front, he moved on to another hotel attached to a major entertainment park in Japan. The prime location of the property meant it had a lot of conferences and that meant an influx of delegates from different countries.

During one such conference, Chef John met up with

the New Zealand Minister for tourism. Unhappy with the fact that not many New Zealanders worked in their own country, he offered Chef John a position with Air New Zealand. But six months down the line, they could not sustain the company, and it was sold to a Canadian company.

“They let go of the entire team, which is normal for a company that wants the organisation to grow. You want to start fresh. And I think that’s what saved me. I was in the company for only six months, so I was not carrying any baggage.

After a little over a year, he was approached by Singapore airlines,

and he joined them in 1999. “I opened a new kitchen in Singapore and got involved with the Singapore Chef’s Association as well. I believe a chef today is more than just a cook. The transition and the choices you make in life shape who you are, and that is true of a chef as well,” he says.

The modern chef, feels Chef John, is seen as a mentor, a strategist of sorts. Cooking is just one part of it, but it’s the vision that decides where you are going to go. “You

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have to decide, do you want to be somebody who leads the people, or do you want to be a follower?" he asks.

Travel and multi-culturally diverse societies have made people more aware about food, and thus demands have changed. Even the image of a chef has changed from someone who does the cooking in the background to someone who is a celebrity in his own right. "Take media chefs for example," says Chef John, "And not that I am endorsing them, but they have changed the way people perceive us. Chefs are now seen as a more professional person, and entrepreneur, even a star. People no longer say that if you drop out of school, you can become a chef."

Along with awareness, there is also an expectation. "When you get on an airplane, you expect the chef to know what you should eat, you expect he has had training and is serving you the right food, taken into consideration the safety, sanitization, and quality of ingredients," he explains

And the responsibility of a chef is much more in the business today as well. "People like to critique. You can be sure you make one mistake, and within a few hours of leaving the restaurant, the word would have spread. People don't talk about great experiences about the food or service," he nods.

Not a fan of the new fangled technology, Chef John feels somewhere we are losing touch with the good things

in life. "We don't want to pick a tomato with a single black spot on it – it has to be red and plump. Even if there is no flavour in that, we will still want that good looking produce," he says, shaking his head. "In fact, I don't even like email. I prefer to speak on the phone because then you can sense the sincerity of the person you are dealing with," he adds.

It is with this sincerity that he handles his position of Continental Director. "It was a surprise for me. I came


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back from a competition and was told my name was put in, and I was chosen. And it was too late for me to do anything," he laughs.

Chef John believes that in the coming years, Asia, Middle East and Africa will be the dominating forces in the culinary world. "There was a time when chefs from here used to travel to Europe to learn and hone their skills. The stream has reversed now," he explains. And he is right here to make the most of it.

On a personal level, Chef John keeps busy with his two sons, 15-year-old Ryoma and 10-year-old Sean. "The first was born in Japan and the second in New Zealand," he smiles, anticipating our next question and adding, "And no, neither of them wants to be a chef. They think chefs are idiots because they never see dad around."

Although his sons complain, his absence makes their heart grow fonder. "And I have my wife to thank. She is one of my biggest strengths. Our industry has a very high divorce rate because of the unsociable hours we keep. And it takes a very special person to understand what you are doing, and the sacrifices you have to make," he says.

At the end of the day, he says, where you go and what you do depends on your own strengths and how hard you want to push yourself. And the world can be yours, he concludes. 

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