

Posh Spice



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Seasoning with salt and pepper has taken on new meaning in recent years — for professional and home cooks alike. For this we might have a former accountant in California to thank. Traveling the world with a suitcase filled with spices and gadgets, Jing Tio is something of a spice whisperer, introducing chefs, and diners, to new flavors. He turned Wylie Dufresne at New York’s WD-50 on to wild hops, which recently made their debut in a savory pudding, and the pastry chef at Joël Robuchon at the Mansion in Las Vegas now makes ice cream with the herbal coffee substitute teccino. Hops and teccino: coming soon to a spice rack near you.

A second-generation Indonesian spice trader and a passionate home cook, Tio, 33, was an accountant and property manager in Southern California until his frustration with the lack of high-end culinary equipment and ingredients led him to sell his cars — all six of them — to open Le Sanctuaire in Santa Monica. The Barneys of cooking stores, it sells everything from Hermès porcelain to Pacojet ice-cream makers, Ferran Adrià’s Texturas-brand agar to \$125 cooking chopsticks. Beach-bound Angelenos have been stumped by the boutique’s rarefied offerings since it opened in 2003, but chefs realized that Tio was a kindred spirit, someone who, when asked what he cooks with eucalyptus leaves, shrugs and says, “Usually just a foam.”

Chefs also realized that Tio’s spices were different. His mother supplied him with peppercorns — black, white, red, cubeb, Sichuan, long pepper, four grades of tellicherry — that were still bright and round, not the dusty, desiccated fruits you usually see. “Spices can last maybe two or three years, depending on how well you store them,” Tio says in accented English. “But most of the spice that the consumer gets is already two, three years old.” So he made arrangements with Indonesian spice growers and began selling directly to chefs.

“The spice trade is really tricky,” Tio says with a laugh. “People want the money quick. Sometimes they harvest too fast, and the black pepper’s not dry enough, and mold starts growing. And then they cover it — you know when you cut the battery? The black dust? You don’t wanna know!” Now Tio and his mother have a 50-50 partnership with farmers on Java, Sumatra and Banda islands. Tio also uses sources in India, China and Malaysia, changing suppliers whenever quality dips. He is already on his fourth Sichuan-pepper grower on Sumatra.

Tio says that he is less interested in novelty, but many of the spices that he imports are still exotic to the American palate, like yarrow flower, cypress nuts and kola-nut powder, all of which sit in large glass jars in a back room of his shop. Asked about the pretty buds in one, Tio says they are pistachio flowers but doesn't know what to do with them yet. "I just got excited," he says. Chefs get excited, too, seeing spices that are so fresh as to be unrecognizable: bright green fennel seeds, plump black cardamom pods, still-spiky cloves, curled cinnamon sticks as thick as a cigar.

These items make their way into Tio's suitcase, and to the plates of restaurantgoers around the world. He currently works with about 500 chefs, including Adrià, Corey Lee at the French Laundry, David Kinch at Manresa and Daniel Humm at Eleven Madison Park. The spice-driven menu at the Dining Room at the Ritz-Carlton in San Francisco, with its eight-course salt-and-pepper tasting, makes the chef Ron Siegel's relationship with Tio clear. "He makes it easy to want to do new stuff," says Siegel, who recently introduced a line of flavored salts created with Tio.

"It's word of mouth," Tio says of his expanding clientele. "If somebody likes your products, they just call all their buddies and say, 'Hey, you ought to check out this spice dude.'" He begins by eating at the restaurant he has been summoned to, then packs his suitcase accordingly on the next visit. "I always come up with new stuff, depending on what I think will get the chef excited," he says. "Really, I'm a muse to them. Not only spice. I bring them books, plates — not all of them, but. . . ." His dream, he says, is to find his "soulmate chef" to work with exclusively, followed by opening his own restaurant. In addition to a new San Francisco location, Tio plans to roll out chef-centric Le Sanctuaires in New York, Chicago and Spain in the next five years.

Tio is already an off-site chef of sorts, making spice mixes, like his take on vadouvan, a heady blast of garlic, onion, shallot, curry and other spices (for Kinch, he added a floral element), or a four-pepper blend for Humm. "This year I come up with the ool-timate spice," he says. He has discovered a top-secret salt source in Africa and is considering importing the South American dried ant heads he tasted at the recent Slow Food conference ("Really, really lemony"). Capitalizing on the trend toward sci-fi cuisine, Tio now distributes xanthan and other gums through a leading hydrocolloid company.

But thanks to Tio, nature's bells and whistles still seduce: "It's not just about introducing me to new spices," Humm says. "He's constantly reminding me of all the spices that are out there."