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20+ DESSERT & FESTIVE RECIPES FOR CHRISTMAS

Q&A



Written in the Will

Much has been penned about the prince of pastry, the sultan of sweet – New York’s wise-cracking Will Goldfarb is now based in Bali, enjoying a more moderate balance of sugar success. By June Lee

Will Goldfarb walked away from a full-time job at El Bulli in 2000 because, as he says, “I wanted to look for something better.” He went on to carve his own niche in the dessert world, chalking up awards such as Pastry Art and Design’s 10 Best Pastry Chefs in America, a Starchef Rising Star Award, and a nomination for a James Beard Award for Best Pastry Chef. Prior to El Bulli, he was an American drifter in France, learning pastry on the job and running away from immigration officers, before landing his year-long stint at El Bulli. Along the way, he also did stints at Cibreo and Tetsuya, and (in New York) Papillon, Morimoto and Cru, eventually setting up the high-profile Room4Dessert from 2005 to 2007.

These days, the devoted dad of a seven-year-old has decamped to Berawa, Bali, where he heads up the pastry programme at Ku Dé Ta, the premier restaurant and party lounge destination. “Delicious” and “happy” are the two words he uses a lot, also peppering his interview with innocuous statements like, “Being older is easier than being anxious.”

In town to hold the inaugural workshop and private dinner at 2am:lab, the acclaimed chef is gently mocking of himself but protective when it comes to Singaporean chef-owner of 2am:dessertbar Janice Wong. “I’m intimidated by Janice,” he says, widening his eyes. “She reminds me of me, except more precocious and talented.” Goldfarb first met Wong when she walked into Room4Dessert, backpack in hand, looking to apprentice. Impressed, he agreed, after which she went on to do stints with Thomas Keller at Per Se, Wylie Dufresne at WD50, and Grant Achatz at Alinea. “I’d always said that one day I’d be working for Janice. But I thought that day was far, far in the future – she should really slow down!” quips Goldfarb. They are both bustling around the 2am:lab at Fusionopolis, a culinary (and non-profit) think-tank that she has set up as a research space for chefs and artists to inspire and further culinary techniques.

We caught up with the willing chef before his final Fables & Flavours seven-course dinner, where he and Wong dished out a degustation of flosses, vegetable cassoulet with ‘magic’ beans, a modern abalone and scallop porridge, and durian with rose-smoked coconut milk, amongst others.

What has the experience at 2am:lab been like?

It’s an unbelievable environment, a joy to work in. For the workshop, we had students from pastry chefs to home cooks, learning the applications of texture, technique and expression of flavour. I’m cooking a lot in Bali, but on a gas stove – it’s pretty raw. If I had a lab like this there, I’d have hundreds of ideas, but I don’t, so I go more slowly.

Are you more inspired now?

I believe I am naturally inspired. Inspiration is how you understand and react based on something. For the dinner, Janice suggested fairy tales, and the dessert ideas just jumped based on that. I’m pretty comfortable making things up.

What was it like to move halfway across the world?

The first two weeks were exhilarating, until the money ran out. Then after two months, they cancel your credit cards... No, I’m kidding. After we (the family including wife Maria and daughter Loulou) arrived in Bali, I applied for a job at Ku Dé Ta in 2008 and I’ve been working there since. I direct the pastry department with 12 people; nice team, good chef, what more could I ask for?

What has changed for Will Goldfarb?

It’s different working for bosses than running your own business. I miss New York, but not living there – it’s not a place for raising restaurants or a family! Bali is unbelievably healthy. It has freedom and beauty, and my tennis game is improving. It’s the best place for me right now. I live 12 minutes from the restaurant and have been busy with projects. This year, we launched

Bourbon and Burgers on the second floor of Ku De Ta – pairings of Prohibition cocktails and mini burgers. The next project will be a private dining room.

Tell us how your cooking has changed between Room4Dessert and now?

The thematic difference is that R4D was spontaneous and exuberant – we worked live over the counter, with a journey of tasting dishes. Now, I’m back to plated desserts, where my techniques, cooking and flavours are better. I feel more measured, and hopefully that’s reflected in the desserts – that they are delicious, satisfying and refined.

Why didn’t you take the route to culinary television fame?

I’ve been told I have a great face for radio. No, really? TV doesn’t suit my personality. I used to be obsessed by (fame). I pitched to Food Network, and now, someone else is making my show. It doesn’t matter. I’m more concerned with balance and cooking well in one place; doing things with quality and content, and not be pushed by sales.

Describe your state of mind right now.

In the kitchen, I’m feeling fresh again after 15 years – just cooking, tasting and finding more respect for the techniques of making desserts. It’s a really dynamic time to be in Asia, working with new chefs and launching new products through my WillPowder (ingredients for home molecular cooking) and WillEquipped (kitchen tools) online businesses, which I still run on the side.

What’s next on the horizon?

I’ve been very lucky to have an amazing career. At the end, I must be interesting to myself. And right now, I’m thinking I need to have a restaurant again. The 40s will be my decade, and I have a few more years to get there. 