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Voices

HE DISHED OUT *food* FOR THE SOUL

“On the morning before he passed away, he was writing down recipes for me. You could see he was in great pain. I tried to stop him but he insisted.”

Talk about passion ... that is passion.

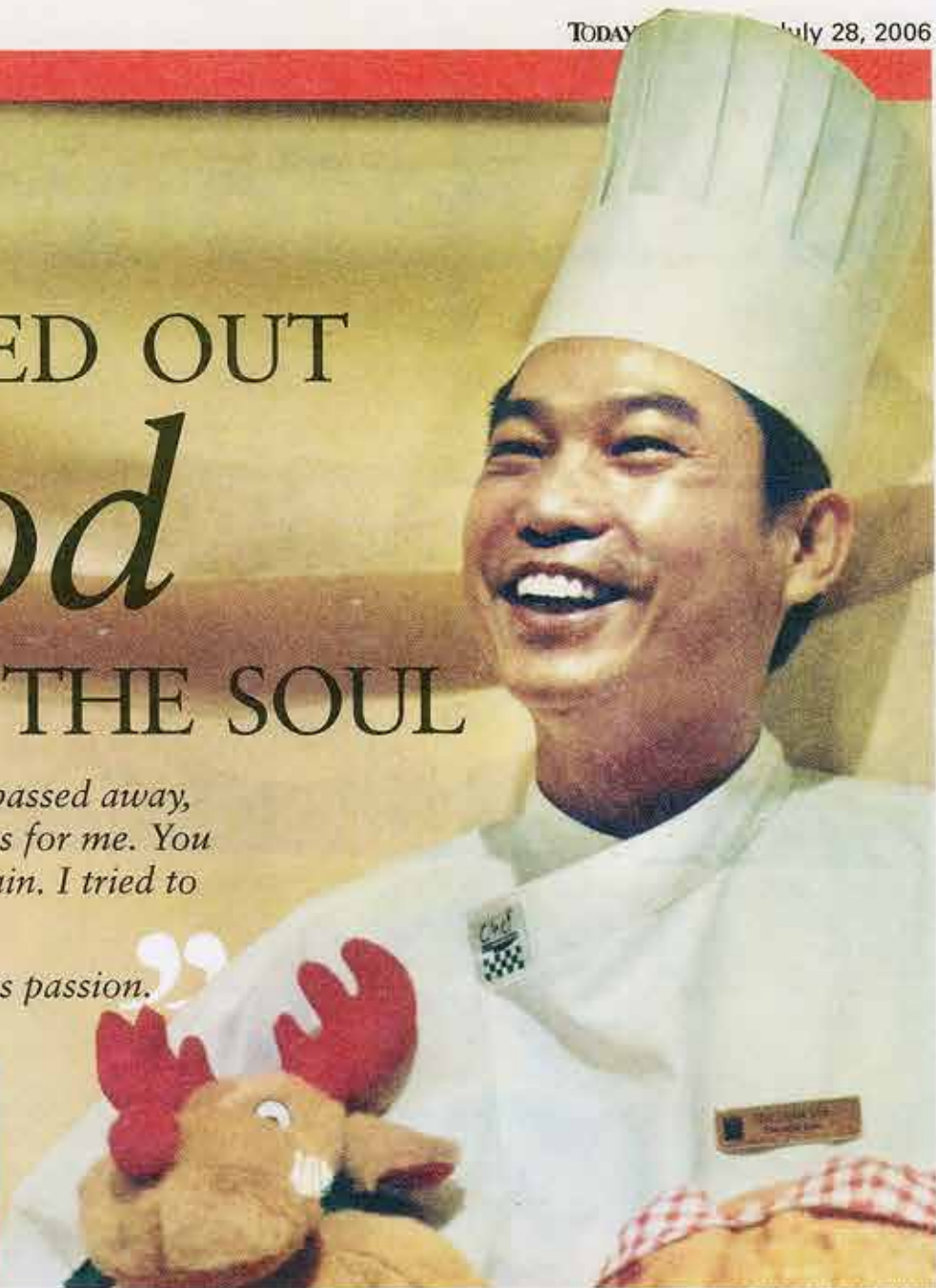


PHOTO COURTESY OF SUSAN TOH

LOH CHEE KONG

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BORN on Teachers' Day some 54 years ago, Mr Toh Thian Ser – a pioneering chef and doyen of the cooking fraternity – succumbed to colon cancer last week, leaving this world as a man fondly remembered as a generous and inspirational mentor.

On Sunday, the same day former Minister Lim Kim San was laid to rest, Mr Toh was also given a heartfelt send-off. His friends turned up in chef's uniforms and volunteered as pallbearers for his final passage.

One of the first few local chefs to make his mark on the global stage, Mr Toh was trained in classic French cuisine and would later represent Singapore as a judge in several international gourmet competitions. He was held in awe as a trailblazer for his ability to fuse Western and local Chinese culinary arts.

But what set “Chef Toh” – as everyone called him – apart from other greats, said Singapore Chefs Association's president Eric Teo, 43, was his willingness to share his cooking secrets.

Mr Teo, who approached Chef Toh to

become his *shifu* (master) 14 years ago, said: “He would give you the original recipe and tell you exactly what to do. I mean, not many chefs do that. At most, they will teach you 80 per cent. The other 20 per cent they'll keep.”

Chef Toh's sister Susan, eight years his junior, added: “He would always say to his superiors, ‘It's okay. They can have all my recipes, but I have the golden hands.’”

“He always taught me to share whatever I know with others – that it is not about the recipes but up to the individual's special touch to bring out the best in the cuisine.”

Madam Toh – who, on her brother's advice, quit her accountancy job five years ago to set up a prawn mee stall – remembers him as a loving, unselfish man. “He cared a lot about others but he never allowed others to worry about him.”

The love for cooking clearly runs in the family, which still runs a *char kway teow* stall in Redhill Close started by their grandfather. Two other siblings are chefs.

Even so, Chef Toh's talent and passion stood out when he was a child, Madam Toh added. “When an adult went into our kitchen, Second Brother (Chef Toh) would get very excited and follow him. He would

observe what the person did and ask all sorts of questions.”

And when the adults were out, he would sneak into the kitchen and whip up dishes for his siblings. “He would fry the *kway teow* and let us eat ... of course, it was nice,” said a laughing Madam Toh.

Born into a humble family with 11 siblings, Chef Toh, who finished his secondary school education, found his first job in his uncle's advertising firm where he did graphic design. He left after a year to enrol in Shatec where he was trained in classic French cuisine.

At 22, he started an apprenticeship at Shangri-La Hotel. He worked there for 21 years, until 1996, when he moved to Traders Hotel. In 2001, his friend Alson Teo, the chief executive officer of Stamford Food Management, prised him away to help in its new catering division after much persistence.

Said Mr Teo, 37: “He was a deeply loyal man. For two months, we had discussions late into the night, which he insisted must be held after 11pm when he finished his work.”

Mr Teo was convinced he was after the right man, when he and his former general manager paid Chef Toh a visit at the hotel. Said Mr Teo: “My ex-general manager kicked up quite a big fuss after Chef Toh refused to write off the \$200-odd meal the two of us had. Chef Toh then explained to him that it was not right for him to do so, that if he wanted to treat us, he would pay from his own pocket, as the lunch had nothing to do with official business.”

The catering arm under Chef Toh handled events such as the *President's Star Charity* show and private functions for the Prime Minister's Office.

In 2003, Chef Toh was diagnosed with colon cancer and underwent chemotherapy. But he insisted on working. In his final months, he devoted his time to researching a local favourite, Hainanese chicken rice, as he attempted to come up with a new recipe, said Mr Teo.

But Chef Toh's condition deteriorated alarmingly in the last two months. In the last week, his speech became slurred and he was bedridden. Even on his deathbed, hours before he drew his last few breaths, Chef Toh was fervently trying to jot down his ideas for the project.

Said Mr Teo: “On the morning before he passed away, he was writing down cooking steps and recipes for me. You could see he was in great pain. I tried to stop him but he insisted.”

“Talk about passion ... *that is passion.*”

At the five-day wake, the family was overwhelmed by the hundreds of people who came to pay their respects. He left behind a wife and three children.

Said Madam Toh: “Many told us how he had helped them. There were chefs from countries like Sri Lanka or the United States who said they wouldn't be where they are now without Second Brother's advice and help decades back.”

“We know he was a very nice man, but we didn't know he had touched so many lives.”

“Seeing this, my friend remarked to me that in life, it is not about the number of years you live – but how much a person makes of it. Second Brother lived a very worthy life indeed.”

Do you know anyone who passed away recently and deserves to have his or her life celebrated? Write to us at news@newstoday.com.sg



IN HONOUR: Chef Toh's coffin-bearers consisted primarily of chefs he'd mentored and influenced.