

HAND-PICKED

Below: Freshly-harvested cherry tomatoes from Hatiku Agrikultur. PHOTO: LEISA TYLER



PICTURE this: an eight-hour journey on a highway. Passing lush countryside and winding uphill on roads that overlook vast farms and tea plantations. The thick fog around you is cool and refreshing – unlike the haze back home – and comes from the clouds that envelope Cameron Highlands.

At least two or three times a year, Anthony Yeoh of rustic French restaurant Cocotte takes this long bus ride to Hatiku Agrikultur – a farm that supplies him 80 per cent of his vegetable needs. As more chefs worldwide adopt locavore practices, chef Yeoh is one of a small but growing band of Singapore chefs who actually walk the talk. He has been working with Hatiku for the past two years, and is firm friends with its eccentric farmer-owner Fung Chee Siang.

While it doesn't have official organic certification, chef Yeoh vouches for its organic philosophy and practice. It's not so much certification that concerns him, but traceability, he says. As a result, Hatiku's reputation has grown to the point that it only has enough produce to supply to six restaurants in Singapore, with another 22 on the waiting list.

What is so special about Hatiku that makes Singapore's top chefs clamour for its crops, even when there are plenty of sources for organic vegetables – and certified ones at that?

Firstly, Hatiku fulfils the romantic notion of being as close to the farm-to-table concept as is practically possible. Urban farming is one thing, commercial organic farming is another, but neither comes close to the idea of a farm out in the unpolluted highlands, where the earth is literally infused with the soul of the farmer who toils it.

Hatiku Agrikultur has been around for nearly 20 years, and its name comes from the Malay words *hati* (heart) and *ku* (my). It translates into the phrase "My Heart", explains Mr Fung. So it makes sense that the most important thing is not production, yield, or fancy technology, but the working relationship that he personally has with nature.

When a newcomer to the farm is taken on a tour by the farmer himself, one of his first instructions is to close your eyes, and tell him what you hear. Crickets, birds – "There's no wrong answer," he offers.

These insects and animals you hear are what Mr Fung calls his "friends", because he believes that they all play a role in his farm. Snails in his cabbages don't faze him at all, as he points out that their shells are a valuable source of calcium fertiliser when they die. And when wild boars recently wiped out his carrots and sweet potatoes (much to chef Yeoh's dismay), Mr Fung's calm response was that the boars need to eat as well. "I'm happy when the animals are not scared of me, because it means they accept me as part of



Friends with nature

A dedicated farmer in Cameron Highlands is making the locavore concept a reality for Singapore restaurants. BT Living finds out what it's all about. **By Rachel Loi**

their environment. After all, this place belonged to the animals first, so what right do we have to chase them out of their territory?" explains the 57-year-old Malaysian, who was born in a small town outside of Ipoh.

Of course, Mr Fung has his strategies for not attracting too many pests in the first place, like companion planting – where different types of crops are grown in the same space and share the same soil. This means insects that feed on a particular type of plant will be less attracted to his farm compared with a conventional farm which practises mono-cropping. Plus, by allowing birds and other predators free access into his farm, pests are naturally more inclined to stay away.

These are elements that can only be understood after personally visiting the farm and interacting with the farmers, which is why chef Yeoh makes it a point to bring new staff up to see the farm whenever he can. Once they understand where the food comes from, then they can pass along this message to the restaurant's guests.

Besides Cocotte, the other five restaurants which currently receive vegetables twice a week are The Provision Shop, Burnt Ends, Meatsmith, Corner House, and Bacchanalia.

For Ivan Brehm, chef of the acclaimed Bacchanalia – which recently moved from its 110-seater space at Coleman Street to a more intimate, 30-something seater in Hong Kong Street – it's all about "a connection between the farmer and the chef". In his new restaurant, the dining room is in the kitchen itself, so chefs prepare food right next to the customers, "so this helps the chef and the front-of-the-house

team to be able to disclose information about ingredients in a way that makes people want to eat it." Chef Brehm, who also makes regular trips to the farm, gets about 40 per cent of his vegetables from Hatiku, while the restaurant grows its own herbs.

While the idea of farm-to-table may sound romantic, it can present quite a challenge for a chef. Not only are the vegetables at the mercy of Mother Nature (and hungry wild boars), chefs working on this project would also have to regularly change their menu according to seasons.

The entire project started about four years ago, when Australian food and travel writer Leisa Tyler was living in Malaysia and spent a lot of time in Singapore. She was alarmed by the number of restaurants serving produce flown in from halfway around the world, leaving a much-larger-than-necessary carbon footprint than a mere eight-hour drive.

Inspired by a friend's similar project in Bali, Ms Tyler and her husband Ewout Kenner drove up to Cameron Highlands and roamed the plains until they came across Mr Fung. The rest is history.

For now, Mr Fung's property spans about 22 acres of land, where only six or seven acres are being used for actual cultivation. The rest of the farm is made up of forested areas where his "friends" live.

The farm also supplies Mr Fung's existing clients in other parts of Malaysia such as Kuala Lumpur, so it's a slow and steady process to grow its reach in Singapore, says Ms Tyler.

There's a "slow takeover" taking place however, adds Ms



HEALTHY COEXISTENCE

Clockwise from left: Companion planting at Hatiku Agrikultur; Mr Fung, the Malaysia-born farmer-owner, believes animals and insects all play a role in his farm; the truth about organic farming is you will sometimes see snails in your cabbages. PHOTOS: RACHEL LOI



INSPECTING THE YIELD

Chef Yeoh of Cocotte (above) and Chef Brehm of Bacchanalia (right) getting their hands dirty on a trip to Hatiku Agrikultur earlier this week. PHOTO: RACHEL LOI



Tyler, with a chuckle. "When he has an issue with an existing client, he always offers the land to us first. Or if there's a client he'd like to get rid of, he asks: 'Do you want the land?', and of course I would say yes!"

Plans for the future are still relatively fuzzy for now, especially since they have a shortage of staff on the farm. But once these issues are sorted out, they intend to try and make use of more land and hopefully allow more restaurants on board the project. So perhaps it may not be long before more chefs in Singapore have their farm-to-table dreams come true.

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PHOTO: LEISA TYLER



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