

# From accounting to food

ROZANA SANI  
rsani@nst.com.my

ONE wonders if Masterchef Australia 2017 winner Diana Chan had any inkling of what fate had in store for her when she left Malaysia at 19 to pursue studies in accountancy in the land down under.

A product of Convent Johor Baru who did her A levels at Sunway College in Petaling Jaya, Chan was all set for a career in accountancy after graduating from Deakin University in Melbourne with a bachelor's degree in commerce majoring in accounting and finance.

She worked as an accountant for four years at Deloitte, one of the accounting "Big Four", before she was inspired to compete in Masterchef Australia.

Her unique cooking style, which combines traditional Malaysian dishes with fresh Australian produce and a modern twist, has led to a world of opportunities that got Chan switching to a career in the food and beverage industry.

Asked whether she brings her accounting skills and knowledge to culinary, Chan said: "The best part of studying accountancy is that it gives you a good idea about running a business. As a foundation of business, you need to understand how to manage cash flow. It makes a lot of sense to use what I learnt in my ventures."

She has designed the inflight menu for Malaysian Airlines, creating signature dishes for First and Business Class flights.

Her passion and style has led to many unique partnerships, including with Nestle and Lurpak. Chan has launched her own frozen dumpling range in Australian supermarkets, and recently opened Chan-teen by Diana Chan, a restaurant with an Asian street food concept inspired by Singaporean and Malaysian cuisines in Melbourne.

"The career change took a little bit of adjusting but I think if you turn your

passion into your career, it makes a lot of sense. I love what I do. I do all sorts of food-related activities. I get the opportunity to work with lots of different people and I meet people from all walks of life. It gives me the opportunity to do charitable work with young people like today," she said at the sidelines of a cooking session with refugee students at the social enterprise Eat x Dignity Café in Sentul, Kuala Lumpur, operated by the Dignity For Children Foundation.

With the help of two young talents, the culinary queen had earlier demonstrated how to make nasi ulam as the dish allowed local produce to shine while paying homage to her Peranakan roots.

Chan said ever since she turned her passion into her career, she wakes up happy, proud and excited every day.

On her parents' reaction to her career switch, she said they were fully behind her.

"They are prouder than anyone else."

Chan said she learnt every day to improve her culinary skills.

"I learn about different ingredients, techniques and cuisines. When I travel, I would go to local markets to understand what people eat, what they buy and where they shop. This allows me to grasp what's in season.

"For aspiring chefs, you must constantly innovate, think about food and think about it in a different way. Otherwise you are going to be left behind."

For underprivileged youths who dream of making it in the food industry, Chan said: "No matter what your background is, there is nothing bigger than working hard in the industry that you are in. Don't do it halfheartedly. Go for it. Make sure you dedicate yourself and build relationships with people who want to invest and believe in you."

She plans to expand her frozen dumpling business and bring it to Malaysia one day. She is also working on a cookbook and a show that she hopes will showcase Malaysia as a travel destination.



Azis Fatima (left) helping Diana Chan (centre) with the final touches of the Nasi Ulam along with another student known as Sharina. PIC BY ASWADI ALIAS

"I want to introduce Malaysian food to the world. Compared to other cuisines, Malaysian food is under the radar. But when people taste Malaysian food, they get blown away. It is tasty and reflective of the different cultures in the country."

Azis Fatima, 17, from Myanmar, one of the two who helped Chan prepare nasi ulam, said it was an inspirational and amazing experience.

She is enrolled in Dignity's Skills Training and Education Programme where she spends three days in a week studying IGCSE O-levels subjects and two days picking up skills at Eat x Dignity.

"I want to be a lawyer but I also plan to start a cafe specialising in drinks."

Chan commended the skills training programme organised

by Dignity as learning practical skills in the kitchen could open up opportunities for the children that could lead to studies and employment in culinary.

Chan was in Malaysia from Feb 18 to 21 as part of the public diplomacy programme by the Australian High Commission Kuala Lumpur.

Apart from the cooking session with refugees, her four-day trip included a cooking demo at BIG Supermarket at The Linc, meet-and-greet with fans and two Masterclasses with YTL and Berjaya culinary students.

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