

# Southern Comfort

CARLOS, MARIQUITA  
AND MARTIN YEUNG  
DELIGHT IN CEBU'S  
HIGHLY-PRAISED  
ABACA RESTAURANT  
WITH MARGE C  
ENRIQUEZ

# ABACA



**I**T FEELS LIKE DINING IN HONG KONG'S Lan Kwai Fong, what with only soft candles glowing in the dark, easy-listening trendy music wafting in the air and a well-trained staff entertaining chi-chi clientele. At Abaca Restaurant in Mactan, Cebu, the food is intricately woven into the environment as one enjoys the meals in a trellised verandah facing the Olango Channel. The languid waters, the fresh sea air, the sun setting on the horizon, the sensuous texture of the walls made from Mactan limestone and ara-al made to look like slate meld with the impressions of the taste of bouillabaisse with mixed sea foods; crispy salad and succulent braised lamb shank.

Since its inception in 2006, the press has praised Abaca's sophisticated and tantalizingly nuanced dishes as a result of its straightforward approach to cooking. This is attributed to the executive chef Jason Hyatt's 25 years of experience. He trained at the New England Culinary Institute in Vermont and worked in the top hotels and restaurants in New York, Philadelphia and Minneapolis, where he was exposed to high-key dining. His stints at the Michelin-rated *Osteau d'Beaumaniere* in Provence, France, and Wolfgang Puck's seaside restaurant *Granita* in Malibu, California, further exposed him to the ultimate, modern dining experience. His last stint was running the California Restaurant and its 16 outlets in Lan Kwai Fong, Hong Kong's tourist district.

Hyatt's style leans towards modern California cuisine: The dishes are ingredients driven and its components come mostly

**FROM TOP**

The trellised verandah, made of Mactan stone, local slate, stained wood and old tree trunks, faces the Olango Channel; braised Australian lamb shanks with roasted carrots and mint jus

**OPPOSITE**

Asia's Diamond King and his Queen of Hearts: Carlos and Mariquita Yeung



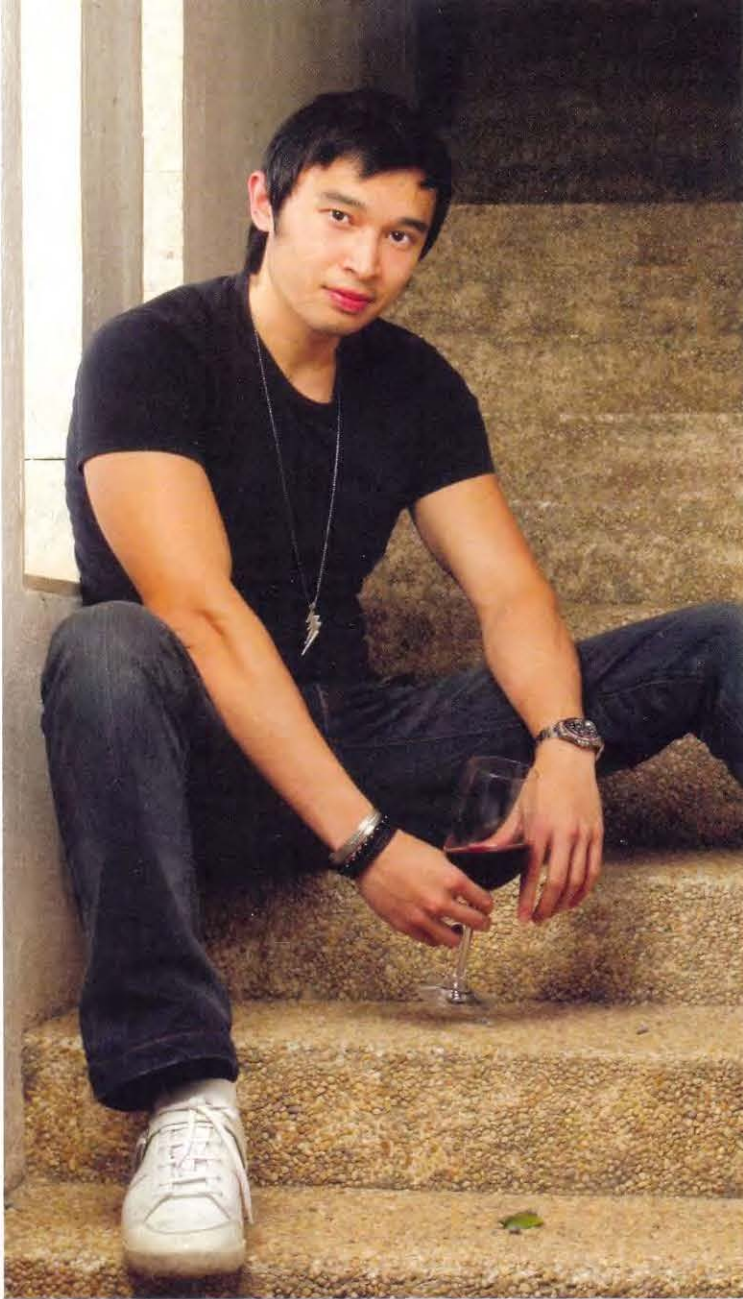
## SOCIAL BITES

In Good Company



### FROM TOP

Martin Yeung, the heir and eligible bachelor; herb papperdelle with wild mushroom braised veal and porcini



from local suppliers or in the resort's backyard. For instance, the local prawn, which the chef praises, is lightly poached in butter with hints of zingy lemon, parsley, coriander, salt and pepper and olive oil just for taste and accompanied with avocado, cucumber and mixed greens.

Unlike in most local restaurants where the ciabatta is softer, Abaca's version is a crusty, artisanal and flavourful loaf. Even the tangy goat cheese used as pizza topping or a salad enhancer is produced by artisan dairies. The salads are made from organic vegetables. Hyatt favours the peppery arugula, lola rosa, a variety of lettuces that range from red-leaf or tender to the heartier kinds such as kale and beet greens that come with the organic sugar beets. The signature Jason's Salad is the island version of mesclun with sherry vinaigrette dressing.

The pastas are made from wheat durum flour in the resort; the most popular are the squid ink linguine with grilled prawns, sautéed squid and tomatoes and the herb pappardelle with wild mushrooms and sided with braised veal and porcini. You won't get dry pastas that have been sealed and stored for months like those on the supermarket shelves.

## *Executive Chef Jason Hyatt's style leans towards modern California cuisine*

Hyatt doesn't compromise the quality of the meats and fish. It's ironic that although the Philippines offers quality lapu-lapu and sea bass that are exported, the Filipino can't avail himself of them. The local supplies are products of dynamite fishing or chemically processed. Abaca uses a lot of imported salmon, fresh tuna from General Santos City, Cagayan de Oro, *tanggigi* and luscious oysters from Bohol. One of Abaca's most popular appetisers is the Crispy Pacific Oyster Cocktail, which uses the freshest catch. They are breaded in homemade bread crumbs and served with a cabbage slaw and a smooth but piquant remoulade.

Abaca takes pride in its dry-aged certified Angus beef. The meat is hung to dry for three weeks at very high temperatures. When moisture fades away from the meat, it becomes tastier. The muscles slacken so they become more tender. "The beef is firmer, not jiggly," explains Hyatt. The excess rib eyes are made into abaca's flavourful burgers, served with Emmental Swiss cheese, smoked bacon and fries spiced with cumin.

The foods are lightly fried just to bring out the flavours of the ingredients. Abaca uses organic herbs and pepper that, says Hyatt, "has



**FROM TOP**

Jason's salad with marinated vegetables; creme brulee, dark chocolate pot, tiramisu, brownies with mint chocolate and chocolate chips and scoops of home made ice cream in rhum raisin, cinnamon and espresso



been grounded in mortar and pestle like the old ladies do.”

The dessert is not to be skipped. The tiramisu and crème brulée are ethereal. The fudgy brownies are laced with mint and chocolate chips. The chocolate pudding uses no less than luscious Belgian chocolates, accompanied by homemade ice cream that uses fresh fruits such as coconut and mango, grown in the resort, passion-fruit pulps, *calamansi* sherbet and strawberries grown in the mountains of Cebu. For a bit of snobbery, the Ethiopian coffee is served in a thermal glass, accompanied by sugar crystals and a chunky cookie for comfort food.

Using local ingredients prodigiously, is the cuisine modern Asian fusion? “The only thing Asian is the cooks. Asian fusion may seem exotic to foreigners but not to the locals,” says Hyatt.

During *Tatler's* visit to Abaca, the philanthropist Mariquita Yeung and her GBF (gay best friend), Guam-based director Benjamin Diola, had an early dinner before Yeung flew to Hong Kong. Mariquita is chairman of the Cebu-based MSY (Mariquita Salimbangon-Yeung) Holdings Corporation, the umbrella company of Salimbangon-Yeung Group of Companies, whose businesses

include properties, ventures and diamonds—many are Hong Kong-based. Every February, Mariquita's foundation spearheads Operations Smile Cebu, an annual charity event attended by the local who's who.

Her husband, Carlos, is, according to Mariquita, “a wholesaler of diamonds” but the local press dubs him the “Diamond King of Asia.” Her son Martin Philip set up his own jewellery line in Hong Kong, Rock Candy, which features diamond jewellery interpreted in punk fashion. When he's in Cebu, he is the chief operating officer of MSY Holdings and is overseeing the construction of a 500-billion-peso six-star boutique hotel named Kandaya in northern Cebu, done by the architect-designer Conrad Onglao.

A light eater, Mariquita loves Abaca's signature flat bread pizza, known for its fine but crisp crust and the organic salads.

“Service here is wonderful. The waiters are very attentive yet unobtrusive!” she exclaimed, as she nibbles a dainty, grilled beef quesadilla. As for, Carlos, he likes being pampered; thus the chef always prepares something new for him—mostly steaks.

Martin arrived later that evening with his young business partners. He praised the restaurant's prime beef short ribs, the Abaca burger, the spice-crusted calamari with coriander and aoli and foie gras. His verdict sums up the essence of Abaca: “The proportions are generous and the ingredients are very rich. The food here is high in quality, even better than those in some restaurants in Hong Kong!” ■

**ABACA** Located at Punta Engano, Mactan, Lapulapu City, Cebu; Tel: 032.3428905 or 032.4958456. For more places to dine in and around the city, get a copy of *The Philippine Tatler's Best Restaurants Guide 2007*.