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Perfect pairing

He's a near-vegan chef who meditates. She's a straight-talking businesswoman who loves gaming. Together, Emmanuel Stroobant and Edina Hong have built a multi-million dollar dining brand. They tell *Options* about their personal and professional evolution and their newfound reverence for cryo-extracted flavourings.



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| BY SUNITA SUE LENG |

Emmanuel Stroobant meditates every day for 30 minutes before he goes to sleep. That's his ideal form of winding down after a busy day. In contrast, his bubbly wife Edina Hong's preferred way of de-stressing is to descend into the online world of gaming where she battles evil forces.

Stroobant is a clean-eating chef who has given up meat, dairy and alcohol, except when he has to taste the food he prepares in his restaurants. "I'll taste a glass of wine for a pairing but no more vodka," says the 48-year-old chef, who in his younger days could go through half a bottle of vodka a night. In contrast, Hong eats everything and loves local hawker food such as beef noodles: She especially recommends the Seremban-style beef *kuoh teow* from a stall at the Marine Parade Food Centre. "I am trying to eat more vegetables though," she swiftly adds.

Affable and upfront, 43-year-old Hong has a knack for business and branding. Contemplative and artistic, Stroobant's talent lies in the kitchen, where he started at the age of 16 as a dishwasher. In some ways, they are like chalk and cheese. But

in the ways that count, they are akin to the consummate pairing of food. Their diametric strengths have melded together and taken their Emmanuel Stroobant Group from one fine dining restaurant in 2000 to a spread of nine F&B outlets across Singapore. The group has also expanded into catering and consulting and Stroobant has had a stint as a TV chef on the Asian Food Channel. At last count, the group hauled in between \$10 million and \$12 million in annual revenue with a profit margin that averaged 10%.

During the last 16 years, restaurants have come and gone within the group and the flagship Saint Pierre has changed addresses and reshaped itself, its latest incarnation being a 30-seat alcove on the Marina Bay waterfront. Another upscale restaurant has joined the line up — Japanese restaurant Shoukouwa — while the rest are bistros and delicatessens, namely Brussels Sprouts, Rocks Urban Grill + Bar, Picotin Express, SQUE Rotisserie & Alehouse, and Saint Pierre Market. The group also runs a canteen at an international school, a move spurred by the couple's desire to get children to eat better, now that they have two young daughters, aged six and three.

The menus at Stroobant's dining outlets have also evolved, driven by the chef-owner's personal focus on wellness and vegetables. At Saint Pierre, for example, there is a vegetarian option for the six- and 10-course tasting menus. And while diners who splash out at this temple of gastronomy do by and large still want indulgences such as foie gras and pricey crustaceans, an increasing number of people want to eat more healthily, notes Stroobant. "About 30% of diners opt for the vegetarian menus and not all are vegetarians," adds Hong. Dishes can also be tweaked to cater to those with food sensitivities, for instance, towards gluten or dairy.

Scientific cooking

Stroobant himself has been on a culinary learning curve. Trained in classical French techniques at Michelin-starred restaurants in his native Belgium, he has eased up on dairy, fat and heavy sauces at Saint Pierre, which opened at One Fullerton in mid-March, after two-plus years on Sentosa Island. He has also weaved in Asian herbs and flavours. A dish of avocado *millefeuille*, for example, comes with pickled *bang kwang* (local turnip), young coconut shavings, quinoa *tuile* and *kombu*

(Japanese seaweed) gel.

But the new-new thing that is driving his food these days is "essence-centric" cooking, which revolves around the mechanics of cryo-concentration and cryo-extraction, techniques used to make ice wine. Take any ingredient, Stroobant says, and create a consommé out of it. Then freeze it, which concentrates the tastes, acids and sugars within the ingredient. The icy stock is then spun in a centrifugal machine and the resulting cryo-extract will be purer in taste and higher in minerality.

"You get extremely powerful flavours," says Stroobant, who studied the technique from acclaimed French chef Yannick Alleno, a proponent of essence-centric cuisine. He has also found it to be a more natural way to calibrate his dishes. "If a sauce is too salty, you can use an extract of corn which is slightly sweet," he explains. It is a tangible departure from the culinary rulebooks of before which relied on the liberal use of saturated fat, salt and sugar.

For Stroobant, essence-centric cooking is a culmination of his life's journey as a chef. After opening his own restaurant at age 23 in his hometown Liege, he went on to work in Australia and Kuala Lumpur,

where he met Hong. They tied the knot in 1999 and moved to Singapore where the following year, they opened Saint Pierre at Central Mall. The restaurant quickly garnered a following for its elegant French-based gastronomy.

Six years later, they opened Brussels Sprouts, a prime example of how their divergent strengths work to the benefit of their business. Hong was walking along Robertson Quay when she spotted a space for rent. "I saw the potential. It was by the river, a good catchment area," she recalls. She told Stroobant about it but he didn't think it would work. Undeterred, Hong went ahead. She negotiated with the landlord, set up a company, got the permits, then came to her husband and said, "Here, you have three months to open a restaurant."

He said, "But I said no." She shrugged. Then he said, "Ok, I'm Belgian, let's do mussels, fries, beer, casual food." Brussels Sprouts at Robertson Quay — which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year — broke even in just six weeks, a record to this day for the Emmanuel Stroobant Group. With good-natured deference, Stroobant smiles and says, "She was right."

Expansion picked up pace and the duo opened more bistros, including Picotin in Bukit Timah and Siglap as well as a Brussels Sprouts at East Coast Parkway and another at Sentosa. They also ventured into catering and consulting. However, along the way, they discovered the headaches of running a fleet of restaurants, chief of which is finding the right people for the kitchens and on the service side. There were complaints about food inconsistency, which they attribute solely to manpower issues.

Catering is the money spinner

"We realise that we can do one big Brussels Sprouts but not several," concedes Hong. After cleaving off a number of outlets, they are now moving forward through more intimate partnerships like eight-seater *omakase* restaurant Shoukouwa, which is "easier to get right", says Hong, or through managing partnerships such as at casual eatery SQUE, where they retain a 51% stake for control.

Shoukouwa is a tie-up with Ernie Singer, the founder of three Michelin-starred Sushi Shikon in Hong Kong. Stroobant and Singer's Japanese wife collaborated on the design side while Hong and Singer worked together on the business front. Meantime, SQUE, which has two outlets, is a business they run with former staff Arica Chan, who started as a part-time waitress at Saint Pierre in 2000. The restaurants, particularly Saint



The flagship restaurant has been reincarnated on the Marina Bay waterfront

Pierre, build visibility but it is catering that churns out the revenues and profits. "We don't make a massive amount of money in fine dining," says Stroobant. A big reason for that is the sheer cost of ingredients, which often overtakes even rent and staffing bills. "We have to fly almost everything in, from Japan, Europe," he says. Good organic carrots for instance, can cost \$9 a kg, five times the price of normal ones. Highly-prized Momotaro tomatoes from Japan sell for \$5.60 each. The artisanal sea salt Stroobant uses is sourced from France and costs \$100 a kg.

"Farm to table is a beautiful concept but in Singapore there is not much land," he says, referring to the current move towards local sourcing and restaurants having their own gardens and farms. However, he tries wherever possible and buys cresses from a grower in Jurong and edible flowers, such as cucumber flowers, locally too.



Essence-centric cuisine takes centrestage at the new Saint Pierre

Margins are best in catering, which makes up 70% of revenue. The catering arm offers an array of eats from eye-pleasing canapés by Saint Pierre to cheerful hearty fare from Brussels Sprouts to healthy soups, salads and wraps from Saint Pierre Market. Most of their clients are corporates. "With catering, you don't have wastage," says Stroobant. "You can pull staff from existing teams," Hong chips in, explaining that most catering events are on weekdays, which is when their restaurants typically have 20% to 40% of their headcount available for other duties.

Family friendly

Having children has also shaped the evolution of the Emmanuel Stroobant Group, which has a five-year deal with the Stamford American International School to run its cafeteria. The husband and wife team are trying to persuade kids to look beyond lasagna and burgers and eat brown rice and more greens. Stroobant's approach is to make food playful and to interest youngsters in cooking by letting them prepare their own food such as cutting veggies and rolling fajitas. The new Saint Pierre also offers children's menus, hoping to nurture a respect for the table and for quality, healthy produce in young people. "You'll be amazed at how good their palate is," says Hong.

A health scare and the arrival of their two daughters was a turning point personally for Stroobant. Always fit, he kept his chiselled form in shape by working out at the gym and boxing. However, his lifestyle of late nights, heavy drinking, smoking and his love of shellfish and meat took a toll on his

health, particularly his cholesterol levels. So he began cutting back. Around that time, in 2007, he chanced upon a yoga class in the gym where the teacher was playing acid jazz, which really resonated with him. "I got into it because of music," he recalls with a smile. He now does yoga every day.

By 2009, when his first daughter arrived, he had quit drinking and smoking. Two years later, he went vegetarian. These days, he has even forsaken dairy and deep fried food. "I don't miss the smoking and drinking. Cheese sometimes," says Stroobant, who has also traded in his Harley Davidson for a sedan with booster seats. Last time he checked, his once-alarming cholesterol levels were "very good".

When he is in Singapore, he is in the kitchen every day. However, Stroobant, who has penned two cookbooks, *Cuisine: Unplugged* and *Vine Dining White*, would like to devote more time to teaching. He currently runs cooking camps for children and mentorship programmes for aspiring chefs. Hong, meanwhile, would like to keep growing the business. However, given past staffing challenges, she is looking to expand without a large reliance on manpower. "We'll see where we can simplify processes to be less labour intensive," she says. The group currently has over 150 employees.

On her own, Hong, who hails from Seremban, a 40-minute drive from Kuala Lumpur, would well have foregone on in her original career in public relations. On his own, Stroobant would probably have been content with his pioneering haute cuisine restaurant, which stands to garner at least a mention in the upcoming Michelin guide for Singapore, to be released on July 21. However, when asked if he thinks the restaurant will earn a listing, Stroobant says he is not expecting anything. Just three months old, the relaunched Saint Pierre is too new, he reckons.

Whether he gets an accolade from the foodies' bible, Stroobant — whom Hong says had just RM300 (\$100) in his bank account when she first met him — has had more than a taste of success since he started cooking on Singapore's shores 16 years ago. Together, the husband and wife team has built a multi-million dollar F&B brand, with just their savings and money from Hong's parents at the start and a good dollop of hard work along the way. Did they ever envision they would be where they are today? They reply in unison, shaking their heads. "No. We never expected it."

Sunita Sue Leng, formerly an associate editor at The Edge Singapore, usually finds inspiration after a glass of wine

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