

THE PEAK

SINGAPORE

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NOV 2016

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BLACK MAGIC

Beyond its usual appearance in Nonya stews, buah keluak is proving to be a delicious complement to the likes of foie gras and grass-fed beef.

Up until recently, buah keluak was found mainly in Peranakan restaurants. Known for being poisonous if not prepared properly, the seeds of the ripe fruit are usually boiled and fermented before its black oily meat is mixed with spices and cooked with chicken or pork in traditional Nonya cuisine.

Now, the paste is claiming a spot on menus of local fine-dining restaurants like one Michelin star The Kitchen at Bacchanalia. “I first learnt of it while eating ayam (chicken) keluak with

a couple of friends some time back,” says Ivan Brehm, executive head chef of Bacchanalia. “The nuances of cocoa and dried fruit were delicious. I thought it was a great ingredient to showcase; it’s also grown close by and people are familiar with it.” After three months of R&D, he and his team have come up with a walnut and buah keluak pesto to match grass-fed beef, as flavours of the black nut and beef share similar earthy characteristics.

At Saint Pierre, chef-owner Emmanuel Stroobant and executive chef Mathieu Escoffier did their own take on babi (pork) buah keluak for a special National Day menu this year. The combination of ginger and curry leaves is familiar, but the dish gets a fancy update with a slab

of Iberico pork belly and diced foie gras sauteed with the buah keluak mixture. Escoffier also included pear and parsley in the buah keluak filling to balance out its richness.

“Taste-wise, it’s a bit like bitter chocolate at first, followed by earthy notes,” says Stroobant.

So it is little wonder why Malcolm Lee, chef-owner of one Michelin star modern Peranakan restaurant Candlenut, has used the ingredient – typically added to savoury dishes – in a dessert. He combines the mushroom-y meat with Valrhona chocolate to make ice cream.

The dessert, paired with salted caramel crumb, has fast become an anticipated sweet ending by many of his diners. ☺