

Ken Hom reminds me of a slim Laughing Buddha with a cheerful countenance, twinkling eyes and the auspicious “Buddha long ear lobes” which the Chinese believe are a symbol of prosperity and good fortune. He has often been mistaken for the Dalai Lama. I met him at Asia House in London during Chinese New Year. Dressed in dark traditional Chinese garb, he exuded an air of serenity and wisdom like a monk with a Zen-like aura. I have been a fan of Ken Hom since his first foray on the BBC as a young television chef in 1984 in his “Ken Hom’s Chinese Cookery” programme. It was an honour to meet my culinary hero at last.

Ken Hom

THE MAN WITH THE MAGIC WOK

By Helen Oon

Despite his fame and celebrity status, he was friendly and humble and mingled quite freely with the guests at the event. This celebrated chef, author, television presenter, restaurateur and patron of charity

organisations was at Asia House to talk about the future of Chinatowns around the world. He also related briefly about his childhood in Chicago.

A HUMBLE BEGINNING

Ken Hom was born in Tucson, Arizona to immigrant Chinese

parents. Sadly, his father passed away when he was only eight months old and his widowed mother moved to Chicago to be with relatives. Being a single mother with a young baby, she struggled to make a living and they lived in abject poverty. She eked out a living working in a factory and could barely support herself and the baby, but in a typical Chinese clan culture, she had the support of her relatives.

Ken Hom recalled his childhood, “It was difficult because we were so poor yet wonderful because I was wrapped and felt loved in a totally Chinese (Cantonese) community. And we always eat well.” His mother was a wonderful cook who could conjure up great food from very basic ingredients.

Growing up in such hardship as a child led Ken Hom to be a wanton boy and he related that he



used to shoplift stuff from shops and was eventually caught. He brought disgrace to his mother, and said with a hint of regret, “Instead of punishing me, she gave me the silent treatment and would sit in the corner of our room and cried for two weeks.” This affected him more as a ten-year old boy to see his mother in distress. In true Chinese disciplinary tradition, Ken Hom was made to perform the “tea ceremony” of forgiveness by offering tea to his mother and humbly uttering these words, “Mother, I have made tea for you. Please take the tea and forgive me,” in front of his family and neighbours.

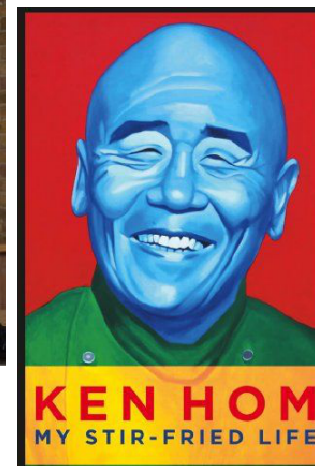
For fear of losing face among the Chinese community, his uncle stepped in and made Ken Hom work in his restaurant, King Wah, to keep him out of mischief when he was 11 years old. Ken Hom said, “I am the only Chinese chef who actually grew

up in Chinatown. I never thought about being a chef but started to work at my uncle Paul’s restaurant, which was one of the best and most successful in Chicago’s Chinatown. He was not a chef but was highly sophisticated about Chinese food.”

STIR-FRYING FROM RAGS TO RICHES

At the age of 20, Ken Hom left for California to study history and French history. Even at that young age, he showed his entrepreneurial skills by giving cookery lessons to pay for his university fee, first at his home and then at the California Culinary Academy. He also embarked on catering for private clients. Was it a challenge to promote Chinese cuisine in America at the time, I asked? He replied, “You must remember my age... born in 1949 and growing up in America in the 50’s and 60’s when Americans knew nothing about China, even less its cuisine.

“Writing my first book in 1981 about Chinese cookery techniques showed America that Chinese food was not only very delicious but on par with French cuisine if not better!” He published his first book on Chinese cooking techniques in 1981, which received much acclaim and led to the New York Times running a major profile on him. He considered that



was the turning point in his career.

The God of Good Fortune must have been smiling on Ken Hom the day he met Madhur Jaffrey in New York. He said, “Madhur Jaffrey, the famous Indian actress and BBC TV presenter on Indian food suggested to BBC that I could be the right person to teach Britain about Chinese food. The rest is history.” When Ken Hom first appeared on the culinary scene in Britain, the British exposure to Chinese food was very limited and he opened their eyes to a new culinary adventure.

His accompanying book of the same title as the series was the best-selling publication by BBC and many considered it the “Bible” of Chinese cookery, demystifying the art of cooking Chinese food. It sold 1.5 million copies worldwide. Today, he has authored 37 books that have been translated into different languages. He is notably well-known for his **Ken Hom Wok** which sold over 8 million units in 59 countries. BBC’s Saturday Kitchen programme once endearingly dubbed him as “half man half wok.”

One of the reasons why he strikes a chord with his audience is his simple easy-to-follow recipes and his useful kitchen tips. In one of his cookery programmes, he explained that the wok and cleaver are the two essential utensils in Chinese cookery and he



The Ken Hom Performance Wok has sold over 8 million units in 59 countries.

even demonstrated the art of using chopsticks. “A cook cannot cook Chinese food without a good wok,” he advised. But he always makes sure that his audience can use alternative equipment or ingredients if these items are not available.

He is passionate about sharing not just Chinese food but Chinese culture, as he declared, “My aim is to share my food and culture with everyone. The only way we will survive in today’s world is to learn and to be tolerant. Acceptance of others, whether through food, art, music or language will make this a better planet.” He continued, “China’s rise comes from acceptance of foreigners and learning from their cultures. This sharing helps us to be richer. Chinese food like China must evolve, so we learn to accept different tastes, flavours and ingredients. Why not? If it tastes good. Lots of people are unaware that I wrote the first book on modern fusion Chinese cuisine – East Meets West Cuisine in 1986.”

Ken Hom has a vast gastronomic repertoire to his name, but his signature dishes are Crispy Sun-dried Tomato Spring Rolls, Crackling Cantonese Pork Belly and Peking Duck as he quipped, “I have perhaps made at least 900+ ducks in my lifetime!” These happen to be most people’s favourite, but I still have not nailed the art of cooking the Crackling Cantonese Pork Belly. I must learn the Ken Hom technique. Ken Hom’s accolades and awards are in the legions, including being awarded an OBE by the Queen for his “services to the culinary arts”, cooking for presidents, prime ministers and A-list celebrities including Tina Turner, Elton John, Alex Ferguson and the Manchester United Football Team in which he met the teenaged David Beckham who was about fourteen at the time. He has cooked for a plethora of other glitterati in show business, in the world of sports and the movers and shakers of the corporate world.

So, what is the greatest achievement in his career that he is most proud of, I enquire. His answer was most touching and so typical of

a Chinese son’s answer. “Making my mum proud who struggled to raise me without a father who passed away when I was 8 months old. She gave me the values to which I owe my success. I am proud to have made her proud.” If that is not filial piety, I don’t know what is. One of the principle tenets of Confucius’ teaching is filial piety, the respect for your parents and elders. Born in the year of the Ox with Earth element in both heavenly stem and earthly branch, his natal chart is characteristic of a very grounded person who is industrious, persistent,

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with a steadfast conviction in his goals, and has an honest and straightforward attitude in life. There is also a trait of stubbornness, which can sometimes get in the way of good judgement. The compatible industries in this sign are the fields of property, consultancy, hotels and leadership.

Ken Hom has been chef consultant to many luxury hotels including The Peninsula Hotel in Hong Kong, Burj al Arab in Dubai, and Sandy Lane in Barbados among others, as well as top end restaurants. He is the Executive Consultant Chef in the Michelin-star MEE Restaurant in Copacabana in Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, one of the first restaurants to be awarded the prestigious accolade in South America. Ken Hom’s Earth element is excellent for his Wok merchandise, as Earth produces Metal in the productive cycle of the Five Elements. The Wok is one of his top cash cows. Ken Hom is very much entrenched in his Chinese culture and when asked if he uses Feng Shui, he said, “Perhaps unconsciously, the way I place certain furniture in my homes. I regard wind and water as very important. I divide

my time between Paris and southwest France, Bangkok and Rio de Janeiro where I have an ongoing restaurant project.”

MEMOIR OF A CHINESE CHEF

Ken Hom published his memoir **My Stir-Fried Life** in September last year. It has been described as “A high-spirited, life-enriching feast in an ever-sunny world, where the chopsticks never stop clattering, the platters are always abundant, and dreams – no matter how ridiculously unbelievable – can and do come true.” His story is a heart-warming tale of rags to riches told from the core of his very Chinese roots. It is a highly enjoyable read as Ken Hom takes the reader on his touching life journey through his gastronomic adventure packed with wit and humour, his family values, his deep respect and love for his mother, and his gratitude to those who mentored and supported him on his road to success. He doles out gems of culinary wisdom and advice while sharing his favourite recipes.

He said, “My memoir, *My Stir-fried Life*, is being translated into Chinese as a screenplay. We shall see where that leads.” I wonder who will play him. “Not Jackie Chan. He is too old”, he quipped cheekily. It would be an inspiring and fun movie to watch and would probably be akin to the very entertaining Ang Lee’s “Eat, Drink, Man, Woman” film in 1995 that made people want to rush out to eat Chinese food. Ken Hom is also making a documentary on Chinatowns of the world.

I particularly love his quote that sums up his stir-fried life, “Now, see, you can’t just sit on your ass and expect things to come. I don’t care how talented you are, you’ve just got to go out there and you’ve got to work for it.” Well, he did and his remarkable accomplishment has elevated him to one of the most celebrated chefs in the world. His Wok will always be sizzling with all the good chi in life.

My Stir-Fried Life by Ken Hom is available on Amazon.com and on Kindle. ■