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Kausmo: Thoughtfulness as Antidote to our Wasteful Ways



Kausmo's co-founders Lisa Tang (the chef) and Kuah Chew Shian (restaurant manager)

When it comes to sustainability, most restaurants throw up their hands in despair. Amidst rising overheads, manpower struggles and challenges thrown by the COVID-19 pandemic, sustainability typically does not rank high on most restaurant owners' list of concerns. And, even if the will were present how does a business go about approaching this behemoth of an

present, how does a business go about approaching this behemoth of an issue in a way that matters?

To put things into context, Singapore generated some 744 million kg of food waste in 2019 — approximately 40 per cent of which came from commercial or industrial premises, including F&B outlets. Food waste is generated at various stages: produce may be filtered by importers and retailers due to cosmetic imperfections, and restaurants discard overstock, kitchen food scraps and leftovers at the table. Beyond waste, there is also the carbon footprint to contend with — an estimated one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions come from our food systems. This includes emissions from the agriculture process, to transporting the produce and finally processing and consumption.

How does a business go about approaching this behemoth of an issue in a way that matters?

Co-founders Lisa Tang (the chef) and Kuah Chew Shian (restaurant manager) derived their name Kausmo from the word *cosmos* — a system of thought — to reflect their emphasis on thoughtfulness. They shy away from the label “sustainable” because “it sounds daunting and hyped up”, preferring to call themselves “thoughtful” instead. Chew explains:

“We don’t need everyone to be perfect purists; what we need is more people to take small steps to do what they can.”





Kausmo's array of ongoing infusions and ferments, ready to be incorporated into new dishes!

Stepping into Kausmo, one is immediately greeted by jars and jars of ferments and preserves that line their shelves — a first indication of their waste-less mindset. Here, herb stems are infused in oil and citrus peels preserved in salt, ready for a second lease of life as condiments.

Most of Kausmo's proteins are sourced regionally to minimize its carbon footprint, and from ethically conscious, carbon-neutral farms where possible. They choose to serve underrated cuts of meat (over the usual prime cuts) that may otherwise be wasted, and use marination and cooking techniques to bring out the best in their flavour. You will also find local produce starring on the menu — from soft-shell crabs and barramundi farmed off our coast, to fresh oysters from Pulau Ubin.



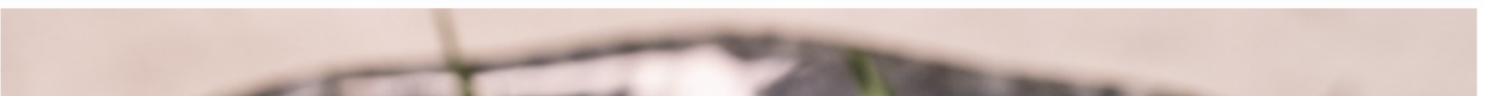


Locally-farmed golden pompano, bisque buerre blanc and pickled melon rind.

Produce used in the restaurant are what Kausmo terms to be “aesthetically filtered”: fruits and veggies which are of shapes, sizes or ripeness which do not fit retailers’ specifications and would thus typically be disposed of by importers, despite being perfectly good to eat. This means that, while their 6-course Carte Blanche menu changes every 3 months, one can expect weekly variations as Lisa adapts the menu at short notice depending on the produce received.

“We’ve learnt to embrace the volatility of our ingredients, because Mother Nature is just as beautifully unpredictable! Much more operational planning and preservation of produce has to be in place to better utilise our ingredients — a challenge that we willingly welcome.” — Lisa

Their food combines European techniques with Asian Influences; the menu on the day of our interview featured unexpected fusions such as a nonnette (French gingerbread cake) with curry leaf, and tamarind gindara with sunchoke. And, you may not be familiar with seeing tonkin jasmine, begonia or ulam raja on your plates — or even heard of them before — but Kausmo hopes to change that. As Chew explains: “We showcase native edibles because we want Singaporeans to know them and to preserve our biodiversity. These grow effortlessly in our climate and need little additional resources. Some wet markets still sell them, but if there’s less and less demand, they will fade out.”







Ulam raja, Mexican tarragon, begonia flowers and tonkin jasmine: a sampling of native edibles incorporated into Kausmo's menu on the day of our interview.


Ultimately, the duo hopes that they can nudge their diners to become better consumers, and inspire other restaurants to be more thoughtful about their impact too. While no one individual or restaurant can solve the climate crisis, a little effort on everyone's part is sure to make a difference. Chew muses: "There is a reason for us to exist right now. But who knows, in the future, as Singapore gets more sustainable, Kausmo may not need to exist. That would be ideal."

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