

Sho Shaun Hergatt

Asian-accented, modern French and a Michelin star

By Kristopher Carpenter



Tucked away in the second floor of the Setai, a luxury residence in downtown Manhattan—is a cordoned-off section of the world with no screaming ambulances, no huge crowds hurrying by the windows, and no passersby craning their necks over your meal in an attempt to judge its quality. When it first opened, this semi-seclusion made Sho Shaun Hergatt a well-kept secret, but that was before critics started mentioning it in their selections of where to eat, Esquire named it the best new restaurant of 2009, and it received a Michelin Star - all in its first six months of existence. A dinner-time meal from Shaun Hergatt, the Australian born Chef/Proprietor is recommended as a \$69 three-course prix fixe, while lunch (also three-courses) is a steal at \$30. The gleaming kitchen, visible through a huge glass wall is Chef Hergatt's well-oiled machine turning out creations like a deconstructed duck à l'orange, with red hibiscus gelée, that are truly almost too pretty to eat. While others, like the slow-poached egg with sunchoke and berkshire pork cheek, beg to be tousled, mixed up, and devoured from a heaping fork or spoon.

Q. How did this restaurant come about?

I had worked in New York for four years, and I felt like it was a great city to open my own place. I had left New York to open the restaurant at the the Setai in Miami as the chef there and at that point, I won't say that I was sick and tired of working for people but I knew that the next step in my career was doing something for myself. The opportunity came along to open this restaurant here and I was ready. I really set out to build the restaurant that I wanted to build, and everything that you see here, including the design, has flowed from my vision of Asian-accented modern French cuisine, which is the style that I've come to call my own through my travels and my last 20 years in the kitchen. I absolutely feel like getting this restaurant to the point that it's at now, is the biggest accomplishment of my career. Achieving the level of success that we have in six months, starting from scratch in a tough economy has been a testament to the restaurant, the food, and to all of the people - the hands and minds - that have helped me get here.

Q. How did you get into cooking?

I was always curious about the kitchen. My father was a professional chef for a while, and I started venturing in when I was about five or six to check it, out so I guess that's basically where it spawned. From there I was planning to go to University, but I got offered an apprenticeship in a kitchen at a hotel in my hometown [Cannes, Australia]. I was there for four years and once I started, since I had learned a lot just from being around my father in the kitchen, I picked it up pretty quick. Next, I got sent to Sydney, to a restaurant called Garden Court which is at the Sofitel. I got promoted quickly over the year I was there and it was great to see another iteration of fine dining at Garden Court, which was different than what I'd already learned. All of that was about 20 years ago, so both of those were a very old-school style of fine dining but they were definitely big influences.

Q. How do you think fine dining has changed today?

I think it's evolved. When you look at what old-school fine dining was about, it was very opulent but it was also inaccessible. Now, because travel is much more affordable and such a large number of people are educated about dining I think that the cuisine has become easier on the palate - it's not quite so, stiff. It's also relatively affordable, the spectrum of fine dining these days both in the cuisine and the patrons has grown considerably from what it was, and it's grown in an international, eclectic way.

Q. What's been the biggest obstacle to overcome?

The biggest obstacle was definitely...um... moving to the United States. You see, when you migrate from one country to another, the culture is completely different - so what you think it is, is not necessarily what it is. It takes a lot of adjustment to figure out the systems and the people here, how they work, how they think, and I really had to adjust the dynamic of how I operate to fit into the culture. Not only in the patrons, but in the way I interact with my employees. I think Americans are a little more politically correct and more process driven so I have to keep that in mind in the way that I interact with people. But now that I'm over that hump and I have made those adjustments, it's actually quite pleasurable being here in New York.

