

China Cojuangco, Chef

by CHECHE MORAL
Inquirer.net



"A few months after I got in, it [culinary studies] boomed. I thought maybe I made the right choice." At CACS, she studied pastry and cuisine. "It was all kitchen work, very hands-on, and that's what I liked. It was thrice a week so it didn't take all of my time." (She still does freelance theater production work.) She finished a two-month internship at Makati Shangri-La.

In June, at the Manila Foods and Beverage Expo, she unveiled Yummy Bunny, Baked by China Cojuangco, a modest repertoire of sweets and a few savorys.

"I'm not a risk taker," she stresses. "As a start, I decided on pastries because it's not as broad as cuisine. I'm working on my own so if I see it grow, I'll expand [the business and menu]."

A CACS classmate with whom she planned to start the business bailed out at the last minute and left to work abroad.

China, however, couldn't complain about shortage of support, professional or otherwise. Her boyfriend is chef Gino Gonzalez, son of chef Gene, whose family runs CACS. They started going out after she graduated. Most of the recipes in China's menu are from Gonzalez.

Her bestsellers are the Callebaut Chocolate with Pecans and Walnut Cookie, made of an expensive brand of dark Belgian chocolate ("which explains the price"), and the Oatmeal with Walnuts and Raisins Cookie, a soft and chewy variety.

"They're his personal recipes, and he wanted me to use them because they're really good and they're tried and tested," she says.

Since she's not a fan of Math, her beau's degree in management has also proved very helpful to China. "I ask him about the price listing, the costing... He tells me to put out more leaflets and join bazaars." Her business' name was coined from the couple's pet name for each other, "Bunny."

Putting the word out about Yummy Bunny has been slow but sure. She bribed the newsboy in their Makati village to insert her leaflets in the morning papers. Her travel agent offered to post her menu in his website. Her mom has occasional orders to give out to acquaintances.

"I know it's kind of cheating, but Gino's mom takes orders from her office [in a major bank], so I deliver it every Thursday night," she says, smiling sheepishly.

I'm very OC (obsessive-compulsive)," she says. "I don't like to make

the pastries ahead and put them in storage. If I do that they're no longer good. I insist on made-to-order."

She's now persuading her parents to allow her to build her own kitchen in the family compound. "You know, for inventory," she explains. She has been doing all the baking in the family kitchen in an oven she bought as a student.

"My dad said maybe later, when I decide I'm serious about this," she says, laughing. ■

Consider this a heads up. Don't be surprised if, in the run-up to the holidays, you find yourself in a weekend bazaar, gingerly popping a morsel of cookie sampler in your mouth from one of the vendors and look up to see it's China Cojuangco holding out the platter for you.

After a long absence from the spotlight, the pretty image model and stage actress is on a comeback, this time as a newly minted chef.

"I've always wanted to study [cooking], but since I'm the only one left with my parents—all her sisters have gotten married—"I didn't want to go through the hassle of asking permission [to study abroad]," says the youngest of five daughters of Peping and Tingting Cojuangco of the political clan. China turned 30 this year.

Instead, she enrolled and recently graduated from a yearlong professional program of the Center for Asian Culinary Studies in San Juan. Three months ago, she began her made-to-order pastry business, her first tentative step to a new career as baker.

China's interest in cooking started at a young age, ironically not at home where she and her sisters grew up "spoiled" (her word) and the strenuous and sweaty kitchen duties were left to the help. (They still are, though now that she's a chef, the family requires her to whip up at least one dish for Sunday dinners.)

It was, she recalls, on a trip to the US after her sister Pin got married. "We, the younger girls, watched them cook dinner for us. She and her husband loved to cook. I helped. I enjoyed the chopping and the preparations. I thought it was something I wanted to get into."

But that was not to be, at least not right away. She went on to get a proper college diploma, on Holistic Human Development and Management at Assumption, and then basic film directing while she did theater productions.

"But when I took advanced classes, that was when I realized it wasn't the field for me," she says.

Her search for a culinary school took two years, a long struggle of indecision.

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