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FINGER-LICKING FUSION

Filipino-Australian chef Ross Magnaye, of Melbourne's Rice Paper Scissors, taps into his Davao roots to deliver modern Asian finger food.

Words **Michele Koh Morollo**

"Everyone knows that if you go to Rice Paper Scissors, you're going to get dirty," says chef Ross Magnaye, who runs the kitchen at one of Melbourne's hottest Asian fusion restaurants, where most people eat with their hands. Owned by Magnaye's friend, Rahmie Clowes, Rice Paper Scissors brings small plates of Southeast Asian hawker-style dining to two comfortable and convivial establishments in Melbourne, on Liverpool Street in the city centre and Brunswick Street in Fitzroy.

"It's modern Asian street food with Australian ingredients. We have 10 things on a menu, so two people can share five dishes at a really good price. People come in, sit on stools and chow down. It's nothing too fancy and we encourage everyone to tuck in with their hands," Magnaye says. "People want variety and fine dining doesn't allow that as much as menus with sharing portions. We're lucky that, here in Melbourne, there are lots of wine bars and tapas places, so people are accustomed to relaxed meals with shared plates."

He grew up enjoying casual family feasts in Davao City, Philippines, where he was born and lived until age 15, when he moved to Melbourne. At his childhood birthday parties, his mother and grandmother would whip up large celebratory meals for family and friends. "The presents and games were fun, of course, but the best part of these parties for me was being in the kitchen watching mum and grandma cook. When I was about six years old, I decided that cooking was what made me happiest," he says.

His grandmother, a chef and restaurateur at popular eatery Carol's in Cagayan de Oro City, told him to go to cooking school. Magnaye followed her advice and never looked back.

His first job was at the venerable Italian restaurant Society on Bourke Street, in Melbourne, which has since closed. He trained as a pastry chef with Darren Purchese at Burch & Purchese in South Yarra, and an apprenticeship completed at D.O.M in São Paulo, under Michelin-starred Brazilian chef Alex Atala. Then he went on to award-winning Aziamendi in Phuket, where he worked under another Michelin-starred chef, Eneko Atxa.

As head chef of the award-winning Rice Paper Scissors, Magnaye combines his culinary training with the flavours of his childhood to create dishes such as Filipino-style caldereta – slow-cooked goat shoulder in a rich tomato sauce with local vegetables and truffles; pinakbet stew with okra, pumpkin, snake beans and pork belly cooked with Filipino shrimp paste; and squid in its own ink with garlic and coconut vinegar.

"Filipino cuisine has really bold flavours," Magnaye says. One of his signature dishes – Davao-style barbecue chicken, marinated for three days in garlic, ginger, lemongrass, coriander, kaffir lime, turmeric, oyster sauce, fish sauce, banana ketchup, Coca-Cola and brown sugar – is testament to how he makes such stimulating flavours work without overwhelming the palate.

"Southern Filipino cuisine is much sweeter than northern Filipino cuisine. In Davao, we also have lots of fresh seafood, which I love working with," he says. One of his bestsellers is a grilled seafood platter with a dipping sauce made with »

pinakurat, a coconut sap vinegar popular in the Philippines.

When it comes to Asian cooking, Magnaye believes technique isn't as important as instinct. "With Asian cooking, you can't just follow a recipe, you must constantly taste everything, because some ingredients, such as chillies, taste different when you buy them from different places or during different times of the year. I think some chefs overcomplicate things. I prefer to trust my taste buds rather than just follow the rules," he says.

Besides managing the Rice Paper Scissors kitchen, Magnaye has also headlined pop-up events in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore and, most recently, Test Kitchen in Hong Kong.

His first experience with pop-up dining was five years ago when he helped a friend raise money for her cancer-stricken mother by cooking for guests at another friend's small cafe in a Melbourne suburb. He's also done pop-up events to raise money for Australian charities such as Beyond Blue, which helps people with depression, anxiety and related mental disorders, and Chef It In A Dress, which helps fund education for girls in Sierra Leone.

What he loves best about pop-ups is how they encourage spontaneity and partnership. Some visiting chefs bring all their ingredients when they cook in another chef's kitchen, but not Magnaye. He likes to use whatever the local chef has on offer. "Pop-ups are all about collaboration, spontaneity and having an open mind. It's not my kitchen. I'm working in a local chef's kitchen, so I'm going to trust their ingredients. I like how pop-ups allow me to cook in a reactive, responsive way."

In September, he ran a pop-up at modern Malaysian fine-dining restaurant Dewakan in Kuala Lumpur. Magnaye received the green light from the Dewakan team to go casual. He removed the tablecloths, put on party music and wore a T-shirt rather than his chef's jacket to serve diners. "Dewakan is a fine-dining establishment, so the guests were pleasantly surprised by the experience. They must have enjoyed it, because we were fully booked for the three days I was there," he says.

Though Magnaye likes pop-ups, for the next few months he'll be hunkering down in Melbourne to focus on Rice Paper Scissors' sister restaurant, Rice Paper Sister, which opened in June, on Hardware Lane in Melbourne's city centre. ∎

Clockwise from top left:

"Babi Guling" Balinese-style slow roasted pork belly; "Forest Floor" dessert; "Sister Style" wagyu beef with Filipino burnt coconut sauce

MY FAVOURITE THINGS WITH
ROSS MAGNAYE

1
If you weren't a chef, what would you be?

If I wasn't a chef, I would have been a journalist. I really enjoy writing and loved English in school. Journalists seem so fearless and adventurous, and I love that.

2
What's your favourite Filipino dish?

Chicken adobo is something my mum always cooked for me when I was growing up. I'm pretty sure it's the best-known Filipino dish in the world.

3
Most underappreciated ingredient?

Pork hock.

4
What's your favourite weekend activity?

I love going to eat at new restaurants or visiting friends' restaurants. I also like spending time with my parents.

5
Which famous person would you like to cook for?

Hugh Hefner, so I can hangout with all the Playboy housemates! Unfortunately, Hefner just passed away, may he rest in peace, so I won't get the chance.

6
What's your favourite movie?

Meet Joe Black – the acting and dialogue are just superb.

7
What's your favourite snack or comfort food?

Besides my parents' cooking, fried chicken at Belles Hot Chicken is the best in Melbourne.

8
What would your super power be?

Teleportation, so I can be anywhere, any time.