

Kitchen confidential:

LMKK's Executive Chef Ken Yeong

Le Meridien Kota Kinabalu's Executive Chef Yeong Kian Kong, better known as Chef Ken, has his hands full being in charge of a kitchen staff of 49 people. An executive chef's responsibilities are many and varied, and Ken kindly gives us a glimpse of his activities in this piece.

"I've been a chef for 22 years, but I've been in the industry for about 25 years," Ken shares. Curiously enough, his career started out in a different direction. Ken began work in the hotel food and beverage line as a bartender in Kuala Lumpur. "I sacrificed quite a lot of money and made a transfer to the kitchen," he recalls fondly.

"It wasn't a planned thing, since it was quite difficult to get a job at the time. I actually got in because of tennis. I played with someone who was a bar manager, so that's how I got in. I found it more interesting to be in the kitchen, though, so I volunteered to train in my own time.

"That went for about six months, and I sacrificed around RM1,600 of my salary by working in the kitchen for just RM300 a month." Some may consider this change somewhat extreme, but it's truly impressive how far people will go to realise their dreams. "I can still remember all the cocktail concoctions until today."

Ken reveals that work as an executive chef is far from simple. "The most challenging thing is getting raw products in on time, preparing whatever you planned for. Menu planning is easy, since it's just based on the place you're looking at. You look at the surroundings, and you build the menu around that."

His work started out the way most careers in the kitchen begin: rough and repetitive. "When I first started, I was made to peel 500 kilograms of prawns. I don't think any



newcomers would want to do that nowadays. Of course I learned quite a few things from peeling all those prawns... I learned the technique of how to peel prawns," Ken says, laughing.

In an interesting twist, Ken shares that while it's good for new employees in the F&B line to work their way from the ground up, it's also possible to skip a few of those steps. "In this generation, everything is made easy for them. If you expect a young candidate to come in and go through what I did, they'd think it's stupid, they think it's a waste of time.

"I think it's stupid, having to peel potatoes, something like that. A lot of these items are already available as finished products anyway. It's a matter of teaching them how to prepare that finished product."

He believes that many students studying in the hotel line, and even potential new hires, will still need to learn quite a few things on the job. "I would sit down with a new guy, go briefly through what he learned theoretically, in school. I'll say, that's what you learned in school, but in real life, that's not what you get. I think it's important to prepare them mentally, to prepare them in advance."

Methods of management and discipline in the kitchen have also changed over time, it seems. "In those days you could take a ladle and knock them on the head. Nowadays it'll kill you." On the subject of newcomers to the hotel line, Ken says, "If he or she is not prepared to sacrifice some of their own time, that doesn't do it. By nature, the industry's tough." And this shouldn't be seen as discouragement, but a point of inspiration, or a call to coming forth to accept a challenge. As the saying goes, no pain, no gain, but in this line of work, dedication can take you to amazing places, and the rewards are always well worth it.



Executive Chef Ken Yeong and LMKK Food and Beverage Director Krishnan Mogan pose with the Chief Minister

WHERE TO STAY

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Hotel Deleton
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Fax: 60 088 267999

Best Western Kinabalu Daya Hotel
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Fax: 60 088 263909

The Palace Hotel
Phone: 60 088 211911
Fax: 60 088 211600

Hotel Shangri-La
Phone: 60 088 212800
Fax: 60 088 212078

Likas Square Business Suites
Phone: 60 088 252233
Fax: 60 088 251122

Tang Dynasty Hotel
Phone: 60 088 263389 / 251155
Fax: 60 088 263989 / 265566

Beverly Hotel
Phone: 60 088 258998
Fax: 60 088 258778

Promenade Hotel
Phone: 60 088 265555
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Hyatt Regency Kinabalu
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Fax: 60 088 322223

Nexus Resort Karambunai
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Fax: 6 088 317777

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Phone: 6 088 380390
Fax: 6 088 381390
Email: www.gayana-eco-resort.com

Novotel Kota Kinabalu
1BorneoTB-00-01, 1Borneo Hypermall,
Jalan UMS,
88450 Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, Malaysia
Phone: 6 088 529888
Fax: 6 088 529889
Email: info@novotel1borneo.com

Megah D' Aru Hotel
No. 2, Jalan Kinabalu, Tanjung
Aru Township, 88100 Kota Kinabalu,
Sabah
Phone: 6 088 239666
Fax: 6 088 239777