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Sundaram Tagore on Lei Garden

One may see life as a journey to explore new cultural experiences, but there is a greater challenge for curator Sundaram Tagore: he has always had a strong passion for the blending of cultures, whether in contemporary art or gastronomy. While his galleries in New York and now Hong Kong go a long way towards satisfying this desire in the realm of art, few restaurants can satisfy his appetite.

Tagore, a descendant of the influential poet and Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore, says: "I am very excited to be here. I have been visiting Hong Kong for decades and have always felt an affinity with the city because of its stunning location and mix of cultures. It is a truly cosmopolitan place where anyone can immediately feel at home."

His adoration grew when a pilot friend took him on a helicopter ride around Hong Kong. "It lasted almost three hours and we went from overlooking the high-density city to some neighbouring islands, including Lantau and Lamma, where I could clearly see the hiking trails. I'd strongly recommend others to give this a try."

As a high-flier in business as well, he voices his admiration for the people and infrastructure of Hong Kong, which he compares favourably with those of his New York base. "You cannot imagine how fast and efficient Hong Kong is. If it takes two months in New York to get things done, you only need two weeks here, while local people always embrace and welcome you."

"Hong Kong has always been among the world's truly international cities," Tagore continues, "so with our global philosophy and artists who explore intercultural dialogue, it's a perfect fit."

What followed the helicopter ride was Tagore's first visit to Lei Garden at night, which rounded off that particular amazing Hong Kong experience. "I cannot recall what I ate that night but it remains a lovely fine-dining memory for me."

As with contemporary art, Tagore feels that the richness of Asian history provides the depth needed for fine dining in Cantonese cuisine. He also observes that the habit of dining out for most Hong Kong people, due to relatively small homes, has helped the restaurant industry flourish. "The chefs here do not have any problem with direction," Tagore says as the food is presented. "Most of the good chefs are usually resourceful and aspiring. They are curious and will travel worldwide to discover different tastes and spices. This builds the backbone for such an exceptional culinary scene."

In recent years, Lei Garden has been infusing aspects of gourmet dishes from all over China and the world into its Cantonese menu, with dishes like the pan-fried foie gras with beef cubes and Thai basil helping to earn it a reputation as one of the pioneers in fusion cuisine in Hong Kong. For Tagore, this is a synthesis that stems from a rich cultural root. As someone who promotes East-West dialogue through his contributions to numerous exhibitions as well as through his eponymous gallery and its multicultural and multidisciplinary events, the courteous Tagore knows the true meaning of fusion.

While always focusing on developing exhibitions of intellectual rigour, Tagore remains devoted to pursuing a convergence of Western and non-Western cultures. "The fine-dining approach, after all, is the same as that which we attempt in art; it needs to constantly evolve to define a new world."



GROUP SOUS-CHEF TONY WONG

Chef Tony Wong has been with Lei Garden Restaurant Group since 1996, and has amassed great skill and profound knowledge of kitchen operations as Head Chef at Tsim Sha Tsui's Houston Centre branch and at the Central ifc mall branch. Promoted to Group Sous-Chef in 2006, Wong has consistently pushed for innovation, and has made it a rule to have a tasting session every afternoon. The purpose is to maintain standards and make improvements to the existing menu based on customer feedback, and more importantly to help each chef create new dishes, along with their signature steamed soups. Over the last 30 years, more than 1,000 new dishes have been perfected this way, so Wong is hesitant to nominate his favourite dish. It also, perhaps, explains why Chief Executive Donald Tsang and various tycoons have given Wong's culinary expertise the nod.



Clockwise from above: Abalone, Chinese mushrooms, goose liver and asparagus with abalone sauce; gallery owner and curator Sundaram Tagore; grilled lobster steak with Japanese gold leaf



LEI GARDEN
RESERVATIONS: Recommended **DRESS CODE:** Casual **LUNCH HOURS:** 11:30am - 3:15pm **DINNER HOURS:** 6:30pm - 11:00pm
SET MENU: No **BUFFETS:** No **VEGETARIAN DISHES:** 10 **AMENITIES:** Separate bar and 5 private rooms for 12 **CAR VALET:** Yes
CREDIT CARDS: AE, V, MC, DC **YEAR ESTABLISHED:** 2004

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