

From Lo Mein to Laksa

Cooking with Chef Hector Pliego



Chef Hector Pliego

When thinking about kosher cuisine, Hong Kong is not likely the top destination on most people's travel lists for food, but after speaking with Chef Hector Pliego, the Executive Chef at the JW Marriott in Hong Kong, perhaps this is worth a second thought. Chef Pliego, a well travelled and experienced chef, has had the opportunity to work worldwide and he ranks Hong Kong, New York and Bangkok as his top three food cities.

As Pliego enthusiastically offers, "Hong Kong people are really obsessed with food. I have never lived anywhere with such a vibrant restaurant scene." The kosher menus he has coordinated for private events reflect the diversity and vibrancy of the Hong Kong scene.

He has a 'can do' approach to cooking kosher and as he explains, "My perspective is simple. What can I do to make it kosher?" He doesn't see limitations on the type of cuisine that can be made kosher and is "willing to make anything with adaptations."

Pliego's first introduction to kosher cuisine, he explains, was while he was working in the Middle East. He would go from Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt to Eilat. "Dining in Eilat made me realize that kosher food is not boring. Chefs in Israel were doing some really cool stuff. Israel is a place that attracts people from all around the world, from many different cultures and the food reflects that. They have a really modern approach to cuisine."

When asked to cook kosher in Hong Kong, Pliego says, "The first step was really understanding what kosher was, the rules and the 'why' behind them." He worked closely with Chabad's Rabbi Mordechai Avtzon throughout the entire process which he describes as "very hands on and detail orientated."

The challenge was really mastering the learning curve and ensuring that the kitchen staff also understood the importance of the process. Pliego explains that obtaining kosher ingredients in Hong Kong was not a problem. Overall he says that there, "are many suppliers in Hong Kong to bring foods in relative to other markets." For sourcing, he also worked closely with the Jewish Community Center and Chabad and learned that many of the products they were already using were kosher.

He was amazed at the koshering process and jokes that after his kitchen was cleaned with a blowtorch it was no doubt the cleanest kitchen in Hong Kong. For Pliego the process was extremely challenging and rewarding from the initial planning and discussion stage through to implementation. He is amazed at the close supervision required and the attention to detail. "Cooking kosher," he explains, "forces you to really closely examine where the ingredients are coming from... it provides a new appreciation for things often taken for granted." ✡

Chef Pliego's Recommendation

Seared tuna with sumac-black sesame crust

pickled lemon, eggplant, turmeric potatoes and olives

Ingredients:

Serves 4

- 400 gm. Yellow fin tuna loin
- 50 ml. Extra virgin oil
- 50 gm. Toasted sesame seeds
- 50 gm. Sumac powder
- 30 gm. Pickled lemon skin
- 240 gm. Potatoes, peeled and diced
- 1 tsp. Turmeric powder
- 200 gm. Baby eggplant, sliced and grilled
- 20 ea. Sun dried black olives
- 1 pack. Shiso sprouts
- 200 ml. Lemon vinaigrette

Preparation:

- Season tuna loin with salt and pepper, cover with sesame seeds and sumac powder.
- Heat olive oil in a heavy bottom skillet, and quickly sear tuna loin, careful not to cook all the way through, should take only a minute or so.
- In a sauce pot pour enough water to cover potatoes, bring to a boil, add turmeric powder, and potatoes. Cook until potatoes are done. Drain and let potatoes cool.
- In a dinner plate arrange the potatoes, eggplant, olives and sliced tuna.
- Drizzle with lemon vinaigrette and sprinkle with shiso sprouts.

