



Participants of the Certified Specialist of Wine course (right) enjoying a tippie with trainer Lim Hwee Peng (above centre). ST PHOTOS: NG SOR LUAN

# LEARN from the MASTER

Amateurs are taking professional-level courses in subjects such as wine and coffee appreciation and pastry-making



Kezia Toh

A crash course involving sashimi knives might sound like a bad and possibly bloody idea, but that is exactly what the new outpost of a Japanese sushi-making school is offering here.

While it traditionally takes years to learn skills such as making sushi and pairing the right wine with food, these days, amateurs can aim to be proficient in a condensed period – months, weeks or even days.

Tokyo Sushi Academy, from the Japanese capital, will open its first overseas off-shoot at Chinatown Point next Monday. In Japan, its sell-out classes are popular with locals and Europeans, who go home after the eight-week \$37,000 yen (\$310,398) course to start their own sushi restaurants.

Its Singapore branch, however, will be “more accessible”, says director Tom Horiguchi, 37. For starters, its local offering is shorter and cheaper: four weeks from \$2,000.

“Singaporeans want an intensive, but still fun, course, and not many will have two months to spend on classes,” says Mr Horiguchi. So it is not just professionals who may join the course, but serious hobbyists too, he adds.

The large number of Japanese expatriates in Singapore and the spread of restaurants serving the cuisine are prime reasons for setting up shop here, he explains. The curriculum may also focus more on “generic” Japanese food, such as teriyaki and tempura, to please the local palate.

Two Japanese students have signed up so far and will learn under the watchful eye of master instructor Junichi Asano, 46, a former private chef to the Japanese ambassador to Belgium for 11 years before he moved to the sushi academy.

The school joins a growing list of players offering semi-professional classes ranging from the study of wine, coffee-brewing to baking – where amateurs learn alongside trade professionals.

At Singapore Polytechnic’s Professional Adult and Continuing Education Academy, which runs a wine course without pre-requisites, the number of amateurs signing up has been on an upswing – a 10 per cent jump since class started in 2006.

Out of more than 600 students in total, about 300 are beginners, with trade professionals packing at least two years’ experience making up the rest.

Course trainer Malcolm Tham, 53, says “a good number” of these novices intend to move into the wine trade or food and beverage industry. Students pay \$834.60 for the 2½-month course, which is offered four times a year, with about 20 people a batch.

At Temasek Polytechnic, demand from beginners was so high that a basic wine course was adapted from its trade programme in 2008 – three years after its first run – says lecturer Jeremy Sim, 38.

The adapted course is about 16 hours long and slightly cheaper than the 30-hour professional course, which ranges from \$270 to \$800. He says: “Demand is high because wine is a life-style product. More people are serious about learning to carry themselves well in restaurants and choosing the right wine.”

Novice drinkers are getting serious: Wine educator Lim Hwee Peng, 46, started with three amateurs last year and is coaching four this year for his United States-based Certified Specialist in Wines course.

As his is primarily a trade class running since 2009 – where graduates can attach the certification to their professional signature – he interviews novices to make sure they “know what they are in for”.

Students can take up to a year to complete the course, which is structured into twice-weekly tutorials and group study sessions over three months.

This, in effect, means you can learn about wine in as short a time as three months, as opposed to a lifetime of leisurely sipping and spitting.

“It has to make sense to them as an investment,” says Mr Lim of his course, which costs \$2,500. The amateurs, aged 30 and above, come from the legal and financial fields, some of whom have clients who are avid wine collectors.

“There may be a higher chance of clinching a deal if they can talk intelligently about wine and establish rapport,” he adds.

Having amateurs on board expands their tasting experience as trade courses let participants taste as many as 20 wines a day, says owner of six-month-old Taberna Wine Academy Tan Ying Hsien, 52, who hopes to introduce a simpler version of his professional course within a year.

Its basic proficiency course, the first rung of its professional classes, lasts eight sessions of five hours each, at \$2,750. The price and duration of the adapted course are still being worked out.

With more graduates of such courses, the wine industry here will also have to “up its game” when serving educated drinkers, says Mr Tan. “In future, there should be more places doing what I’m trying to do, to build a highly sophisticated wine consumption market.”

Culinary school Shatec has also been offering the Britain-based Wine & Spirit Education Trust certification since 1997. Classes for its first three levels last between 1½ and 4½ days, costing between \$475 and \$1,950.

But the trend is also brewing among aspiring baris-

tas. More amateurs are attending professional courses such as a two-day barista skills and five-day roast-ers course, says instructor Pamela Chng, 37, of Bettr Barista Coffee Academy.

When the academy started offering such courses, certified by the Specialty Coffee Association of Europe and America, in June last year, it saw three amateur students. That number has now gone up by 20 per cent.

Some amateurs take classes to test the waters for a career change, says Ms Chng. She adds: “Taking the courses helps to show that they are serious about acquiring a solid foundation in coffee knowledge and understanding the standards and best practices of the industry.”

Beginner bartenders are also shaking things up by attending cocktail cram school. The Association of Bartenders and Sommeliers Singapore runs a two-week bartending course pitched at “near entry-level”, says its president Michael Cheng, 51.

The \$1,150 course started in 2011 to encourage more people to take up bartending. A Workforce Development Agency subsidy is available but graduates have to complete a three-month work stint in the industry.

Other semi-professional offerings: baking courses run by cooking school Creative Culinaire and those by the Baking Industry Training Centre, which take about three months for a part-time course.

For amateurs, learning alongside the pros is a way to make a hobby more “academic”, says Ms Belinda Tan, 40, an executive director at a financial advisory company.

She is enrolled in the Certified Specialist in Wines programme and has about a month to go before graduating. The course has taken her back to her days as an accounting and finance undergraduate at Murdoch University in Australia, when she had her first taste of wine that “came straight out of a carton,” she says.

From that first tippie, she went on jaunts to near-by wine regions such as Swan Valley and Margaret River, cementing her love of wine.

“But I did not know how to taste the wine properly,” she recalls.

Professional classes give a more complete picture of wine, even if she has no plans to enter the industry.

“After acquiring a taste for wine, it takes on a life of its own and it is fascinating to learn more,” she adds.

Crash courses lay the foundation for beginners to scale more advanced levels later, says Madam Ang Hong Geok, 64, a clerk and avid home baker.

Last year, she took a three-month Asian pastry-making course at the Baking Industry Training Centre. Learning the art of baking a basic flaky pastry in class means she can experiment with a more advanced char siew pastry at home.

“Learning all the baking skills I need in three months is very convenient. I learn these basics so I can go on to challenge myself,” she adds.

✉ keziatoh@sph.com.sg



Tokyo Sushi Academy master instructor Junichi Asano. ST PHOTO: EDWARD TEO

## HOW TO TALK LIKE A PRO

**Green coffee:** This refers to a coffee bean before roasting, when it is first bought by the roasting company.

**First crack:** When the coffee bean is roasted, vapourised moisture escapes while the bean expands to nearly double its size, with a popping sound.

**Highball:** Liquor beverage served with ice and soda in a tumbler.

**Chaser:** A non-alcoholic drink served with a shot.

**Nose:** This refers to the aroma produced by wine in the glass.

**Scoring:** Cutting the surface of a loaf of bread before baking so it does not “break” when it expands in the oven.

**Blind baking:** A double-baking method using paper lining to prevent the bottom of a quiche from going soggy.

**Shari:** Rice used for making sushi.

**Namida:** Another term for wasabi (right), meaning “tears”.



PHOTO: CHRIS TAN

## WINE CLASSES

### Certified Specialist of Wine

**What:** Wine educator Lim Hwee Peng runs this United States-based course under his consultancy, covering wine regions, grape varieties and viticulture – the study of grape cultivation. Classes are conducted twice a week for three months.

Days and timing change from week to week as well as for different cohorts. Mainly for trade professionals; beginners have to sit for an interview before they are accepted.

**Where:** Employment & Employability Institute (e2i), 141 Redhill Road

**Price:** \$2,500

**Info:** Go to [www.winecraftmktg.com](http://www.winecraftmktg.com)

### Singapore Polytechnic

**What:** The Certificate of Performance in Science and Business of Wine covers the science of wine making, vineyard management and wine list design. Classes are conducted on Mondays, 7 to 10pm, over 2½ months. Suitable for wine trade professionals, those who would like to enter the wine trade and service staff from wine bars.

**Where:** 500 Dover Road

**Price:** \$834.60

**Info:** Go to [www.sp.edu.sg](http://www.sp.edu.sg)

### Temasek Polytechnic

**What:** Professional wine studies course divided into separate modules such as professional wine service, wine styles and characteristics, and defining key tasting terms. Each module lasts between two and six days. Suitable for trade professionals; beginners welcome.

**Where:** 21 Tampines Avenue 1

**Price:** From \$270 to \$800

**Info:** Go to [www.tp.edu.sg](http://www.tp.edu.sg)

### Shatec

**What:** Three levels of Britain-based Wine & Spirit Education Trust certification covering the storage of



Ms Pamela Chng (right), founder of Bettr Barista Coffee Academy, with her students during a brewing demonstration. PHOTO: LIM YAOHUI FOR THE STRAITS TIMES

wines, to sparkling and fortified wines. Classes last between 1½ and 4½ days. Suitable for trade professionals; beginners welcome.

**Where:** 21 Bukit Batok Street 22

**Price:** From \$475 to \$1,950

**Info:** Go to [www.shatec-cet.sg](http://www.shatec-cet.sg)

## BARTENDING CLASS

### Association of Bartenders and Sommeliers Singapore

**What:** The two-week bartender training programme covers glassware and machinery used for bartending, how to serve draught beer and the preparation of flambe drinks. A course for trade professionals, but beginners are welcome.

**Where:** 429A River Valley Road

**Price:** \$1,150

**Info:** Go to [www.singaporebartenders.com/ws.q.html](http://www.singaporebartenders.com/ws.q.html)

## COFFEE CLASS

### Bettr Barista Coffee Academy

**What:** Two- to five-day professional barista training with modules ranging from coffee knowledge to milk chemistry and roasting skills.

For both trade professionals and beginners. Days and times vary for different batches of students.

**Where:** 13-04, Trivex, 8 Burn Road

**Price:** From \$75 to \$270 a module

**Info:** Go to [www.bettrbarista.com](http://www.bettrbarista.com)

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