

http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/food/article_food/afc-celebrity-chef-won-not-by-best-but-the-brightest/

AFC Celebrity Chef won, not by best, but the brightest

By Joan Lau



Always smiling... Dino's sunny personality came through and made him the winner of the contest.

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 22 — Eight weeks, five countries, many broken plates, one winner: Dino Ferrari! The E&O Search for AFC's Next Celebrity Chef finally came to an end after eight episodes last night and the winner is the cheery private chef from the Philippines who had not impressed in previous episodes with his food... but his smiley good attitude.

In fact, in one earlier episode, he was singled out — rather unfairly I thought — by another contestant for turning out average food. Restaurateur Christian from Hong Kong said something to the effect that he would like to see Dino cook something better than what he himself would do on an average weekend at home.

A rather sour grapes comment as Dino had been judged one of the winners in that particular week's challenge!

Early in the season, it was hard to relate to any of the 12 contestants and most viewers zoned in on the rather temperamental behaviour of judge Chef Bruce Lim instead. Unlike his fellow judge, Michael Saxon of the E&O, Bruce who has his own AFC shows like "Tablescapes" and "The Boss" was quite the Gordon Ramsay throughout the contest.

Viewers (and I am sure contestants) were quite taken aback when he threw a plate of one contestant's food on the floor in Episode 1. And mind you that was not the first and only time he did that.

As we got to the second half of the season, though, it became clearer why he chose to behave that way (apparently Chef Bruce is nothing like the short-tempered angry bear we see on the show!). He wanted to push the contestants to see how they would react under pressure... after all, one of the prizes for winning the competition is a year-long contract with the E&O Group (yes, the people behind those lovely hotels we saw in the show and, of course, the Delicious group of restaurants among many others).



Judge Michael Saxon observing Dino as he plates up his food in the final challenge.

The two-hour season finale last night showed the last four contestants — Stanley, Shinith, Diane and Dino — tested on not just creativity, but also personality. The last three episodes saw more and more of the emphasis on the last.

Although Chef Stanley from Hong Kong was and is one of my favourite contestants, I knew from Episode 6 onwards he was on thin ice. That episode — one of the best in the season — saw the contestants presenting their own TV show.

This was obviously a test to see if they were good celebrity chef material. And that was the episode when I knew Stanley was not going to make it... unless he pulled something remarkable out of the bag. And it was also that episode that showed us — the viewers — that it was Dino who was most comfortable in front of the cameras.

So the finale wasn't that surprising, but was still fun to watch for the kind of challenges the final four had to face: mentoring kids, cooking for private clients, and being in charge of a gala dinner. Great fun.

Still, I could not but feel a little crushed when Chef Stanley was eliminated. The judges publicly acknowledged he was the best chef in the contest and judge Michael Saxon said he would "pay good money to eat at his restaurant." Even better, the usually critical Chef Bruce took off his chef's jacket and asked Stanley to sign it.

At the end of it all, I felt there was more than one winner in the show. While all attention (and rightly so) is on Dino, the E&O properties featured throughout the show were also winners. The storied E&O Hotel in Penang looked stunning — like the grand dame she is — and Lone Pine Hotel... oh my, be still my beating heart.

The next question, of course, is whether there will be a second season. It would be a shame if this were a one-off series. With a little tweaking, I think this show can only get better in Season 2.