

Ye Htut Win: More than a MasterChef

By **Tom Sanders** - October 15, 2019

Photo by Gerhard Joren.

Two hours after meeting Mr Sharky in the restaurant that shares his name, I find myself nose deep in a barrel of half fermented fish guts. Behind me, the man himself moves from shelf to shelf, snatching down jars of wheat grain and honey like a Burmese Willie Wonka, waxing lyrical about the fermentation processes that set his restaurant chain apart from the rest.

An hour earlier, we had been discussing the coming environmental crisis, ethnic tensions in Myanmar, and his plans for a future political career, but right now there is only one topic: the many uses of fermented fish guts. Obsession has always been his defining characteristic.

Mr Sharky's biography is a matter of public record. Sharky, whose real name is U Ye Htut Win, was born into a wealthy Myanmar family. The son of a diplomat, he lived the life of a global citizen, living in Israel and England, Sri Lanka and Italy. It was this international upbringing that gifted him both his love of food and his cosmopolitan approach to life, and he grows nostalgic as he reminisces about the Israeli falafels and English puddings that defined his childhood.

He was to make his fortune in Switzerland, running cocktail bars and nightclub The Underground. It was here that he earned his nickname; a testament to his focus, drive and head for business, and where he eventually amassed enough money to return to his homeland, with his wife and daughter in tow. Now, he spends ten months of the year in Myanmar, where he is the owner of the Sharky's restaurant chain and one of the judges on the Burmese Masterchef.

Photo by Gerhard Joren.

The rise of the Sharky's restaurant chain is another well-worn yarn: the smuggled ingredients from Thailand, the obsessive experimentation with agriculture to allow the production of fleur de sel and buffalo cheeses, the efforts to recreate western cuisine on the hearts of the steamy tropics that evoke nothing so much as Herzog's Fitzcarraldo, and even Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's demands for Sharky's goat cheese during her stint in house arrest. It's a compelling fable, and today Sharky's is a household name,

with branches in Yangon, Bagan and Ngapoli. But what's next for Mr Sharky? Sharks, after all, face a stark choice: keep moving, or die.

How does one man go from world traveller to nightclub manager, restaurateur, to aspiring politician? The answer is simple – obsession. To Mr Sharky, the business of restaurant owning is fractal, composed of infinitely deep parts, each of which deserves obsessive attention. And today, his mind is not on his chain of restaurants, but on his country, its politics and its future.

“Let's not talk about Sharky's” he exclaims. Instead, we begin our conversation with his recent role as a celebrity judge on Masterchef Myanmar. Here, Mr Sharky saw an opportunity to use the national stage as a pulpit for his personal values – hygiene, respect for food, and stewardship. In a country where government institutions and schools often fail to adequately educate the public on such matters, he stands firm that even “entertainment” shows can become sources of knowledge for the public. He decided to wear only longyi while on television, consciously demonstrating the beauty and quality of Myanmar fabric, and his criticism of the food is tempered with an agricultural and ecological awareness.

A sticking point for him seems to be Myanmar's cuisine's lowly place in the global food hierarchy. While other cuisines (like Thai and Vietnamese) have had their moments in the sun, Burmese cuisine has not – yet. But he speaks with utter confidence: “The next wave in Asian food will be Myanmar food. It comes in cycles, like fashion. Every country will have its time.” For him, Masterchef is part of a personal quest to find the next superstar, the Burmese chef who will bring the food to the world, vindicating his personal passion for the cuisine of his homeland.

Asked what he thinks of Burma's present day relationship to food, he wrinkles his nose. “Bad! The quality is decreasing! We are on the same diet but the lifestyles have not changed. Children from rural areas have moved to urban. Instead of walking and taking the bike, they play with mobile phones. So you can see them getting unhealthy. Myanmar is one of the highest consumers of edible oil in the world.”

Photo by Gerhard Joren.

I ask him if he believes that bad, lazy or inferior food is an insult to the innate value of natural resources, and his answer was immediate – “Yes! We have lost the connection between man and meat. The moment you cook something, you take the life from it.”

All this is tied to a deeply ecological conception of food value. To him, the

food, the land, the country are one and the same. "One day we will all go back to the land," he intones. It's this that explains the link between his culinary background and his aspirations towards politics. To him, Sharky's is Myanmar – the food that he serves a demonstration of the quality of his home soil. Food, and how we produce and grow it, is therefore inseparable from values, ethics and national pride. The only moment in the interview when his anger breaks through is when he speaks of Bagan, and seeing plastic bags and used condoms ("I'm sorry to use such language!") on the floor of the historic Buddhist capital.

Credit: MasterChef Myanmar

His politics are deeply linked to his understanding of agriculture – food, water, scarce resources and self-sufficiency. "I'm not interested in the tomato. I am interested in the tomato skin. How to use the rind of a lemon – taking food waste ... trash food. Even in a poor country like Myanmar we waste a lot."

He also sees problems for the global hegemony in the near future – such as mass migration from climate-affected countries like Bangladesh, where he spent three years of his life. In his view, "food will be the weapon of the future – something that technology can not recreate." Breadbasket countries like Myanmar, he believes, will become critical as global overpopulation causes a decline in access to food and freshwater. It's this urgency, he explains, that has caused his increased interest in politics – a role which he sees not as a bid for power, but a sort of civic duty to his home country, a change to use his wisdom and accumulated knowledge to benefit his country.

I ask when he expects his transition into politics to take place, expecting a nebulous answer. Instead, he speaks confidently – in the next year, perhaps. In a time when political leaders increasingly come from backgrounds such as reality TV, Mr Sharky's recognizable face and track record of success may yet catapult him to political victory.

As our conversation windows down, we reflect on the many challenges facing Myanmar and the world over the next twenty years. Disease, starvation, drought, and ethnic tension. I ask him if he is an optimist in the face of this future of uncertainty. He pauses for a long second. "One does one's part," he replies. "Human beings are hunters. We are not the hunted. We want to survive. It's in our DNA. One does one's part. We have to try."

For a moment, he stares past me, past his bustling army of staff, and past the tables of smiling customers, into the middle distance. But then his eyes light up, and he turns back to me with a beaming smile. "Come! I have to

show you our wheat!" This shark is still swimming, and this man is not finished with Myanmar yet.

Tom Sanders

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