

artichoke

Recipes & Stories from
Singapore's Most Rebellious Kitchen

BJORN SHEN

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**Recipes & Stories from
Singapore's Most Rebellious Kitchen
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Edited by Samantha Lee;
designed by Yong Wen Yeu;
Artichoke identity by Shoon Teoh.

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Singapore by Epigram Books.
www.epigrambooks.sg

National Library Board, Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Shen, Bjorn, 1982-
Artichoke : recipes & stories from
Singapore's most rebellious kitchen
/ Bjorn Shen. Singapore : Epigram
Books, [2014]
pages cm
ISBN: 978-981-07-9773-7 (paperback)
ISBN: 978-981-4615-01-3 (ebook)

1. Artichoke (Restaurant)
2. Restaurants – Singapore.
3. Cooking, Middle Eastern. I. Title.

TX945.4
647.955957-- dc23 OCN 882976804

First Edition
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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A Forward Foreword

* FOREWORD *

Like the most predictable of love stories between foodies, ours began with food. Well, hawflakes, to be specific.

It all began innocently enough. I was Facebook stalking a hot female friend of mine who commented on some competition on some page of some restaurant called Artichoke.

The competition went something like "submit a random ingredient if chef Bjorn chooses to cook with it, it's on da house!" I looked at the pic of this "Bjorn" dude and thought, man, what a douchebag.

And being the shameless freeloader, competition taker parter and self-acclaimed trash talker that I am, I responded with:

HAWFLAKES!!!

and then 30 seconds later:

HAWFLAKES!!!

and then 30 seconds later:

"ARE YOU MAN ENUFF OR NOT!! ARE YOU!! MUAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"


Intimately aware of the ego of chefs, I knew that any self-respecting chef was gonna bite down hard on this bait.

AND so he did - he graciously accepted the challenge.

AND like a high-functioning flavour terrorist, armed with a cornucopia of crazed ideas, he went on and created one magnificently fine dish out of the unlikely threesome of OxTongue, HawFlakes and Nachos!

It was then that I knew this was gonna be one helluva love story.

And then, there are times I want to beat him. Like go all Buffalo Bill batshit crazy on him to the tune of Goodbye Horses and properly wishing upon him all kinds of venereal diseases and inopportune disasters which i mostly reserve for people who end up doing things which make me smack my forehead and go "WTFOMFGWHYDIDNT I THINK OF THAT DAMN YOU!"



Like when he created this mad super-fresh salad and topped it with an oldskool childhood crispy ramen snack, Mance roundhouse kicking your tastebuds with seven shades of u-mance (pun intended).

Or God knows what went through his mind when he took lobster, added ebiko, topped it with chunks of tuna (raw no less), micro greens and a handful of fried chicken skins. I still get all kinds of dirty thoughts at the mere mention of this.

Or how he manages to pimp up just a simple maple glazed bacon chop to some super next level shiz. And, that bacon. I'm not sure I could describe it here without relegating this book to the Adult Reference section and going all 50 shades of Mills and Boon on ya.


And then, just when u thought he couldn't top his last crazy ass creation, he goes pulls a fatality move and creates a mac & cheese but.... using....

wait...for...it....

BEE. TAI. MAK.

So it became, Beetai:MAK&CHEESE.

BOOM. DINGDINGDING. FLAWLESS VICTORY.



SO BRACE YOURSELVES, KIDS.
STRAP YOURSELF IN,
TURN THE LIGHTS DOWN,
PUT IN SOME 80'S ROCK & ROLL,
AND GET READY
FOR A DELICIOUSLY HARRY
RIDE THROUGH THE ZANY
WORLD
OF
BTORN &
TEAM ARTICHOKE.

~~LOVE~~ DAMN YOU,
goz.

Goz Lee

Author of *Plusfive: A Singaporean Supper Club Cookbook*

Notes from an Artichoke Stalker

It was a late-ish evening in June 2011, and I was looking for a non-Asian joint that didn't serve the standard 'Western' fare of cream of mushroom soup and braised beef cheeks. Then I found a spot for 'modern Moorish cuisine... inspired by the fascinating flavours and smells of Turkey, Lebanon, Greece and Morocco.' At the time in Singapore, outside of Kampong Glam, this was akin to uncovering chwee kuay in Warsaw. I was hot off an assignment in Turkey and pining for legitimate mezzes. When the Forgotten Grain Salad—a tumble of quinoa, bulgur, wild rice, capers, seeds, nuts, fruits and herbs crowned with labneh—hit the table, my heart set sail on the Bosphorous. I prayed that Artichoke would never choke.

"I'm not an overly religious man!" Bjorn once declared to me. So, in effect, he never needed my prayers. His maverick ways about the kitchen, doing unthinkable yet completely logical things to ingredients from kale to quail, were enough. I've seen fennel and Tahitian vanilla salad; sticky duck in pomegranate molasses and pistachios; and the climax of any evening—the Lambgasm, a massive boner of meat-stasy. And then there was brunch. What started innocently as ful medames and lamb shakshouka morphed into taste bud throwdowns where fried chicken was crowned with marshmallows and a sausage-and-bacon pie floated in a popcorn-and-corn puree. You won't find anything like this in Singapore or beyond, just as you'd never expect bak chor mee in Denmark. Unless you invite Bjorn to the vaunted Copenhagen Cooking food

festival and he ensconces our national noodle dish within a pillowy soft bun for the occasion.

A Singaporean can lose his or her appetite futzing over who will continue our hawker legacies, or over the indigestible reality that more and more of our heritage food arrives pre-made in a factory for someone to reheat at a stall. But Bjorn is part of a new chef's revolution, creating a brand of Singaporean cooking that we should be just as proud of. With his trademark stubbornness, Bjorn has committed at least 30 per cent of Artichoke's menu to local ingredients, after hours spent haranguing small local farms to sell him their best produce. So the incredibly fresh flavours that explode in your mouth are not simply the result of Bjorn's 'dude food' wit that seasons all his creations. They are also the result of an agricultural awakening. I never knew how massive abalone mushrooms could get in Kranji.

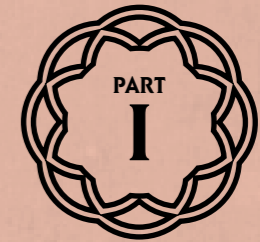
Artichoke no longer goes by that polite 'modern Moorish cuisine' tagline, but a cheeky 'deviant Middle Eastern food.' Thank heavens, because dessert then was malabi topped with chilled sliced grapes. (???) Yeah. These days, it's bodacious baklava and a seriously sick Snickers tart, among other things (like a custom-made Kit Kat fortress masquerading as cake). If this is what the future of food looks like here, let's chow down the New Wok Order.

Desiree Koh

Writer



Why Write This Book?



While choosing a name for my restaurant, I tried every possible method. I brainstormed for nights on end, thinking up words and all their possible connotations. I eventually arrived at a shortlist of eight; some of which were good, some less so.

There was Squid Inc. The Common Room. Grub. The Mole Hole. Three Black Moles (because there is a perfect equilateral triangle on my noggin that is formed by exactly that). I ran these names through my family and close friends. There was no unanimous agreement on which name sounded right; everyone had his or her own opinion. After all the hard work put in, it started to get frustrating. I realised that even amongst the people closest to me, there was no one name that would please them all.

So I said what has since become my three-word strategic business motto—fuck this shit—and went off the beaten path. I grabbed *Food: The Definitive Guide* off the shelf, flipped to a random page, closed my eyes, and poked at it with my index finger. The word it landed on would be the name of my restaurant.

I opened my eyes. BEGINNING. Whaaaaaat? Hell, no—‘beginning’? Ok, try again. I shut my eyes again, flipped the pages, and hoped for fuck’s sake I wouldn’t get another dumb word... Boom. ARTICHOKE. Ok, that wasn’t so bad. And that was that.

This pretty much sums up the story and ethos behind my restaurant. I’d always try to plan something in a tried-and-true, organised and responsible way; I’d run it by people to get their

So I said what has since become my three-word strategic business motto—fuck this shit—and went off the beaten path.

But what little we did know, we brandished wildly like cavemen's clubs, slinging out stuff we felt tasted good. That was as intricate as our game plan ever was—to make food that tasted good.

responses; they'd all give me different answers; the whole exercise would start to go nowhere; I'd eventually say "fuck this shit" and do it my way; it would all work out in the end. These days, I just skip straight to that last step.

So Artichoke was a restaurant borne out of impulse and recklessness. Four years on, it's also a testament to how an enterprise started on such a fucked up approach can actually succeed. Here's what I mean.

We started out trying to be a contemporary Middle Eastern restaurant. I chose this particular cuisine because a) I wanted to try something different, b) I had a few Arab, Iranian, and Turkish mates back in Australia where I lived previously, and c) I enjoyed the food they ate at home when I went to visit. No other reasons apart from these.

We didn't want to appear too 'ethnic', so we steered away from doner kebabs and Turkish tea. No shisha, no belly dancers. Operating a Middle Eastern restaurant in Singapore without the all-expected shawarma and shisha was like signing a death sentence, but we did it anyway. We never had staff from the region; none of us had Middle Eastern grandmas or grew up eating hummus and lavash. Damn, I'd never been there myself, and here I was, throwing together a motley crew of cooks who themselves had almost no experience in Middle Eastern cooking. (Till today, customers are shocked to find out the head chef is not Middle Eastern, but a Singaporean dude with a **pervert moustache**.) But what little we did know, we brandished wildly like cavemen's clubs, slinging out stuff we felt tasted good. That was as intricate as our game plan ever was—to make food that tasted good.

Everything we rolled out from the kitchen, we were doing for the absolute first time. And we served it to members of the paying public whose evaluations had the power to make or break us. Everything about it was wrong. **IT SHOULD NOT HAVE WORKED.**

But somehow it did. Yeah, the food was (and is) good, but somehow, **we also ended up in the right place at the right time, with the right people supporting us.** And I don't know how much longer this wave of dumb luck will last.



So, Artichoke isn't just a book of gnarly recipes that have made an appearance at the restaurant at some time or other. It's also a document of the true story of utterly unforeseen success, complete with foul language, cuts, scrapes, burns, tattoos, bad customers, great customers, brunch slams, street punks, and bacon. Lots of bacon. (See Chapter 13: Bacon is Evil, We Must Destroy it with Our Teeth.)

It's a chance to relish every last inch of this crazy journey while I can, and I'd like to invite you to come along with me and rock out with your fork out.





The Little Place with No Signboard



May 2010. I was wiped out. I had spent the past few months jobless and looking for a space to open my very first restaurant. Months had gone by without any luck; I almost threw in the towel on the project several times and was starting to seriously consider accepting that head chef job offer at a boutique hotel in Chinatown.

Then came along this gorgeous little space at 161 Middle Road. As it is with these things, the father of a friend knew someone who knew someone who managed the property. I knew the place—then, a café called My Secret Garden occupied the premises. In fact, I'd been there on several dates in previous years (none of which worked out, by the way). Before places like Rochester Park and Dempsey Hill—with their colonial black and white houses—were converted into dining enclaves, My Secret Garden was probably one of the first restaurant spots in the CBD built like a home, with its private cobblestone courtyard, sunroom and all. It was such a welcome oasis in the middle of town. Each time I visited, I'd always thought how killer it would be to have a place like that one day.

I suddenly found myself talking to management. Apparently, My Secret Garden was vacating in a month. I told them about my idea for Artichoke. A month later, they handed me the keys.

I opened with close to nothing. There were no big investors to back me up. I was in this on my own—it was make it or break it. I took a small loan from my granddad and just went in balls first. The starting budget was laughable, and I could barely afford

I'd always thought how killer it would be to have a place like that one day.





Pots, pans and \$1 plates were bargained for at run down repo shops in secluded industrial estates. Fancy was frivolous.

many things. I bought second-hand kitchen equipment with dodgy 1-month warranties. I crammed my grandma's little Honda Jazz with furniture as I shuttled back and forth between my restaurant-to-be and the Salvation Army thrift store. Pots, pans and \$1 plates were bargained for at run down repo shops in secluded industrial estates. Fancy was frivolous; I just needed enough to get the restaurant up and running.

And that was the case with pretty much everything else. My Uncle Daniel gave me mates' rates on the renovation, promising to rip me off on my next project if I were successful on this one. While discussing the budget, he asked me how much money I could set aside for wall fittings and design—things like shelves, panelling, interior artwork and such.

"Nada," I said, "Just paint everything black and I'll write on it like a chalkboard."

Next, he asked me about signage.

"Fuck it, I'll write that in chalk too."

So here we were, August 2010. Artichoke opened with zero pre-launch hype or marketing. A small restaurant opened by a nobody, with no proper signage, no frills and no turning back.

For a while that kinda sucked. Besides my family and friends, no one knew we existed. The only other people who came were old patrons looking for My Secret Garden. Ronny, my restaurant manager, would smoke on Waterloo Street and hustle passers-by like a hardworking strip club promoter. When they came in and saw our menu, most turned and walked away.

After a month of this, we were getting nervous. Antsy. Why was no one coming? We were, I figured, being too cheffy. Trying to introduce an updated, sexy take on Middle Eastern cuisine, with dishes like pearl barley tabbouleh and lamb ribs with date molasses, was perhaps too far ahead of the curve at the time. What was worse, we had no existing brand credibility.

We put our egos aside and took the menu down a coupla notches. Ambitious, overly fancy shit just wouldn't cut it right now. Dishes had to be approachable and familiar enough to a local market and palate.

So we hooked our dishes back to recognizable reference points—training wheels for Middle Eastern fare, if you will.



People like French toast: they got baklava French toast with pistachios and rose yoghurt. Everyone knows what meatballs are: we served them in spiced tomato sauce and labneh. Boston clam chowder was Arabicized as a fish and mussel chowder with a drizzle of za'atar oil.

We had somehow cornered ourselves into a strange hybrid of Middle Eastern-inspired food and mainstream café fare. I wasn't entirely happy with the new direction, but time was ticking, money was walking and we needed to get butts on seats, pronto.

Time was ticking, money was walking and we needed to get butts on seats, pronto.

“ I was in this on my own—it was make it or break it. ”

artistic choke
style = beat



MEATBALLS

Vegetable oil, for frying
½ medium white onion,
finely chopped
1 tsp fennel powder
2 tsp cumin powder
2 tsp black pepper
400 g minced beef
1 egg, beaten
4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
1 tbsp breadcrumbs
1 tbsp milk
Pinch of salt

SPICED TOMATO SAUCE

½ cup olive oil
2 tsp cumin powder
2 tsp fennel powder
2 tsp smoked paprika
1 tsp black pepper
1 cinnamon stick
1 medium white onion,
finely chopped
3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
4 cups finely chopped tomatoes
1 bay leaf
1 tsp honey
Salt and pepper

3 tbsp salted butter
1 cup breadcrumbs
4 tbsp vegetable oil
½ cup labneh (page 260)
1 handful fresh herbs (such as
parsley, coriander and mint)
Extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling

MEATBALLS

IN SPICED TOMATO SAUCE AND LABNEH

Meatballs have this ability to transcend cultural boundaries. This was one of the dishes that we put on our menu in the early days to give new customers a familiar and comforting reference point. Labneh, a thick yoghurt cheese, rounds out the acidity of the tomato sauce and adds a lovely richness to the dish.



To make the meatballs, heat the vegetable oil over medium heat in a frying pan. Add the onions and sauté till translucent and sweet. Add the fennel, cumin, and pepper, and toast for about a minute, till fragrant. Let cool. Combine this onion-spice mix lightly with the rest of the meatball ingredients. Season with salt. Cook a small portion in a frying pan for a taste test. Add more salt if necessary. Shape into golf ball-sized balls and refrigerate to firm them up slightly.

To make the sauce, heat up the olive oil over medium heat in a heavy-based saucepan and cook the spices, onion, and garlic for 2 to 3 minutes till the onions are soft. Add the tomatoes, bay leaf and honey. Bring to a simmer for 20 to 30 minutes, until the tomatoes start to break down and the onions get really sweet. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Heat the butter in a frying pan over medium heat. Add the breadcrumbs and toast until they turn crisp. Drain on kitchen paper. Heat the vegetable oil in a frying pan over medium-high heat, and sear the meatballs on all sides for 3 minutes, or until golden-brown. Add the meatballs to the sauce and simmer for 6 to 8 minutes, until they are cooked 80 per cent through. Serve on a platter with dollops of labneh, a scattering of breadcrumbs, some fresh herbs and a generous splash of extra virgin olive oil.



FISH AND MUSSEL CHOWDER

WITH TURKISH CROUTONS AND ZA'ATAR OIL

SOUP

2 tbsp olive oil
3 tbsp unsalted butter
4 medium shallots, chopped
4 cloves garlic, chopped
½ cup chopped carrot
½ cup chopped celery
3 tbsp plain flour
1 sprig thyme
2 cups fish stock (feel free to use a good quality store-bought stock)
½ cup white wine
3 cups milk
1 cup heavy cream
1 large russet potato, chopped
Salt and pepper
400 g mussels, scrubbed

CROUTONS

2 tbsp olive oil
1 handful torn or cubed Turkish bread
Sea salt
Pinch of za'atar

2 tbsp unsalted butter
1 tbsp olive oil
400 g white fish fillets (such as snapper, cod or sea bass)
Salt and pepper
2 tbsp za'atar
4 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
1 tbsp chopped chives
A few pieces oil-packed semi- or sun-dried tomatoes (optional)

Another one of the dishes we served in our first months of trade to get butts on seats. We hoped the unthreatening idea of a chowder—as seen at joints like Mos Burger and Fish & Co.—would act as ‘training wheels’ in our effort to expose locals to za’atar, an intoxicatingly fragrant mixture of dried wild thyme and other herbs, sumac and sesame seeds. You’ll be able to find za’atar at gourmet grocers in Singapore.



To make the soup, heat the olive oil and butter in a heavy-based stockpot over medium heat. Add in the shallots, garlic, carrot and celery and sweat them for 4 to 5 minutes, until translucent and sweet. Add the flour and stir constantly to form a roux. Add the thyme, fish stock and wine, bring to a boil and whisk out all visible lumps. Once smooth, add the milk, cream and potatoes and simmer for 20 minutes. Season well with salt and pepper. Add the mussels and cook for 3 to 4 minutes, just until the shells open up. Discard any mussels whose shells refuse to open. Turn off the heat and keep warm.

While the soup is cooking, prepare the croutons. In a frying pan, heat up the olive oil over medium heat and add the bread. Toast till the croutons are golden and crispy throughout. Season to taste with sea salt and a pinch of za’atar, then drain on kitchen paper. Set aside.

Heat up the butter and olive oil over medium-high heat in a non-stick frying pan. Add the fish fillets and cook for 2 to 3 minutes on each side, until the fillets are cooked through. Season the fillets well with salt and pepper. Divide the soup across four serving bowls and top each with a piece of fish and a scattering of croutons. Mix the za’atar with the extra virgin olive oil and drizzle some of the mixture over each bowl. Finish each bowl with a sprinkle of chives and a few pieces of dried tomatoes.



- 4 pieces flatbread (page 18)
- Extra virgin olive oil, for drizzling
- 4 large eggs
- Vegetable oil, for frying
- 4 tbsp hummus
(‘Cheaterbug’ Hummus page 254,
or store-bought hummus)
- A few thin slices of red onion,
to garnish
- 4 thick slices of a good,
crunchy tomato
- Sea salt
- Dukka, to garnish (page 252)
- ½ handful fresh mint
or basil, shredded

OPEN SANDWICH OF

HUMMUS, DUKKA AND FRIED EGG

We wanted a clean, fresh dish on the brunch menu—and this flavourful vegetarian option was a winner. The combination of dukka and fried egg is one I cannot stress enough, and one that is completely undersold everywhere else. The contrast of nutty, crumbly dukka with the rich smoothness of a fried egg is phenomenal. I honestly don’t know of any other chef who exalts this pairing as much as I do.



To warm up the flatbread, spray each piece with a little water and warm over medium heat in a pan for 1 minute on each side. Drizzle immediately with extra virgin olive oil.

While the bread is warming up, fry the four eggs sunny-side up. Heat up the vegetable oil over high heat in a non-stick frying pan. Crack in one egg and cook to the point where the whites get crispy around the edges but the yolks are still runny. Remove and repeat with the other three eggs, adding more oil as necessary.

Spread each slice of toasted bread with a heaped tablespoon of hummus, then top with the onions and a slice of tomato. Sprinkle sea salt on the tomato to really make its flavour pop. Slide a sunny-side up egg over each tomato and scatter a pinch of dukka over each yolk. Sprinkle the top of each egg with the herbs and add a final drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.

The contrast of nutty, crumbly dukka with the rich smoothness of a fried egg is phenomenal.



No Doner Kebabs, No Persian Carpets



Potential customer: What kind of food do you serve?

Us: Hi there, we serve modern Middle Eastern food!

Potential customer: *(Studies the menu for a minute)*

Why don't you have kebabs?

Us: Oh, good question. We don't consider ourselves traditional, and we offer something a little different from what you get at other Middle Eastern restaurants. We have really good meat dishes though, like our 7-spice meatballs with labneh, and our garlic prawns with ras el hanout. Wanna grab a seat and try us out?

Potential customer: *(Obviously not listening to a word we're saying)* So you don't have falafel?

Us: No, sorry. Not at the moment.

Potential customer: Let me guess—no Turkish coffee.

Us: Nope, but we do have other nice drinks. Here, have a look at our drink lis....

Potential customer: What kind of a Middle Eastern restaurant are you?

Us: Well, we're...

Potential customer-no-more: Forget it. *(Walks away)*

This; this was the soundtrack of our first 6 months. People calling us out on every Middle Eastern food cliché we didn't have. Doner kebabs, falafel, rice pilaf, Persian carpets, shisha, Arabic music, belly



dancers. On the other end of the spectrum, we had people mouthing us off for not having steak, pasta, pizza, balsamic vinegar, ketchup or smoothies. On more than one occasion, customers would look at our menu and ask: **“Where’s your real food?”**

At first, my crew and I were stymied. As it sank in, we were slightly bemused. When it really sunk in, we were deeply perturbed. Trying to balance what we wanted to be with what people expected us to be was truly mind-bending.

Finally, we said, “SCREW IT”.

As Eddie Huang, the very inspirational OG of NYC’s BaoHaus, said at the Big Omaha 2012 conference: “If people don’t get it, I don’t care. I just do what I do; they can catch up... If I make a big enough impact, Wikipedia will explain that shit to them.”

I listened to those wise words of validation with awe in my gaze and wood in my pants. I’d only found the video on YouTube two years after Artichoke had gone through its trying phase. Bruised and battered, we had unwittingly stumbled upon the Eddie Huang Culinary Nirvana on our own, where we stopped giving a fuck about ticking people’s boxes. I was a man on the edge, and I was prepared to lose it all. If Artichoke crashed and burned because of this decision, then at least we went down on our own bloody terms.

From that day on, we stopped trying to figure people out and started cooking whatever the hell we wanted to. We returned to base zero. No more pandering to demands for kid’s menus, truffle fries and eggs Benedict. No more ‘Middle Eastern’ chickpea-battered fish and chips or Middle Eastern-inspired meatballs. They were good, but woefully transparent. Unexciting. Instead, we were bringing sexy back with full-on creative shit, just like how we meant to at the beginning: contemporary, sexy, progressive versions of Middle Eastern food. There were kisirs, tabbouleh, yoghurt soups. Merguez, shakshouka and harira. But we took them one step further by injecting an artisanal approach. Quinoa and raw corn kernels made an appearance in tabbouleh. Our version of chilled yoghurt soup—traditionally a watered-down cucumber tzatziki—infused yoghurt with a ton of fresh market veggies. Never mind that some customers had problems pronouncing the names of dishes—it was high time the crew stormed the cockpit, regained the controls, and steered the plane back on its intended path.



I was a man on the edge, and I was prepared to lose it all.

Guess what? Our gamble worked. We realised we’d been too impatient before, with too little conviction in our brand. People started trickling in, swelling to a steady flow by the end of six months. A couple of good reviews in the press helped tremendously. People actually liked us! With a solidly deepening customer base, we could afford to take chances—reckless chances—with our food. The menu took on a slightly schizophrenic vibe. Four years on, we still have ‘serious’, pimped up interpretations of Middle Eastern dishes, like **Lebanese smoked chicken** with toum (page 64) and slow-roasted lamb shoulder. But on the other end of the spectrum, we can now indulge our sickest fantasies and foist deviant, so-bad-it’s-good wonders upon our willing guests: falafel-battered fish nuggets with potato chip tabbouleh, for one, or bacon hotdog pie floaters with Tiger Beer cheese soup. I mean, with a crazy mofo—yours truly—at the helm, it was bound to happen sooner or later. That’s one of the perks of owning your own restaurant, clichés be damned.

We are not a "western" restaurant. Please do not ask us why we do not serve eggs benedict, waffles, ketchup, tobasco, pizza & hamburgers
Thank u. Stay awesome



DRESSING

1 tbsp lemon juice
½ clove garlic, finely chopped
½ tsp allspice
½ tsp cinnamon powder
1 tsp sumac (page 17)
½ cup extra virgin olive oil
Salt and pepper

120 g rocket, washed, dried and coarsely chopped
1 corn ear's worth of fresh, raw kernels
2 large tomatoes, de-seeded, drained of excess juices, finely chopped
¼ red onion, finely chopped
1 stalk spring onion, finely chopped
1 handful fresh mint, finely chopped
½ cup fine bulgur or coarse bulgur, soaked and air-dried (page 17)
Salt and pepper

ROCKET AND SWEET CORN TABBOULEH



'Tabbouleh' was another exotic word we threw in there to pique people's interest. The dish hails from the Levantine region, which today spans Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Turkey and the islands of Cyprus. To tweak the dish for a local palate, we replaced parsley—always a polarizing herb—with the less assertive rocket. We also used raw corn for their surprising pops of sweetness and texture, and to show off how wonderful the raw vegetable can taste.



To make the dressing, place all the ingredients into a mixing bowl and whisk till well combined. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Combine the rocket and the rest of the vegetables in a large bowl. Add in the bulgur and fluff everything up with your hands, then pour in the dressing bit by bit until the vegetables are just coated. You may or may not use up all the dressing. Mix well, and season to taste further with salt and pepper. Serve this salad in a communal salad dish for guests to pass round the table.



“ We stopped trying to figure people out and started cooking whatever the hell we wanted to. ”



HADI'S COLD YOGHURT SOUP

WITH FRESH HERBS AND FLOWERS

- 1 handful fresh coriander
- 1 handful fresh dill
- 2 cloves garlic, peeled
- Zest of 1 lemon, finely grated
- 1 green capsicum, cored and finely chopped
- 3 sticks celery, finely chopped
- 2 large Japanese cucumbers, peeled and finely chopped
- 2 large tomatoes, finely chopped
- 350 g Greek yogurt
- 200 ml cold vegetable stock or plain water
- 150 ml extra virgin olive oil, plus additional for drizzling
- 1 tbsp lemon juice
- Salt and pepper
- Fresh, finely chopped herbs and flowers (basil, dill, mint, chives, and flowers*), to garnish

When I was living in Brisbane as a student, I had a Persian housemate named Hadi. He'd always cook and feed me tons of stuff, half of which I'd hate and half of which I'd love. One of the dishes that grew on me was a chilled Persian yoghurt soup, typically made by whisking Greek yoghurt with ice water, cucumber and assorted herbs. At Artichoke, I decided to tweak the recipe by using a gazpacho-style approach—blending tons of fresh veggies like celery, capsicum, and tomatoes with yoghurt, then brightening it up with extra virgin olive oil and some pretty flowers from our herb patch. This is an elegant dish (not a word you'll hear much more of in the rest of the book).



Place all the ingredients except for the lemon juice and garnishing herbs into a blender and blend till very smooth. You may need to do this in two or more batches, depending on the size of your blender. Season to taste with the lemon juice, salt and pepper. Chill overnight, or for at least 6 hours. Strain the soup through a fine sieve and discard the solids. If you like your soup to have more texture, withhold a quarter of the strained solids and mix them back into your soup. To serve, divide among individual bowls and garnish with the herbs, flowers and a final drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.

*You can find packs of colourful, ready-to-eat edible flowers at gourmet grocers.



SMOKED OYSTER TARAMASALATA

- 1 medium green chilli, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 2 small shallots, finely chopped
- 150 g smoked oysters, finely chopped
- 250 g cream cheese
- 1 tbsp lemon juice
- ½ tsp smoked paprika
- 1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- Salt and pepper
- 2 to 3 tbsp heavy cream (optional)

Taramasalata is a thick, creamy Greek and Turkish meze made with fish roe, olive oil, breadcrumbs and seasonings. I liked the word because it created mystery, a sense of appeal. To adapt to the lack of suitable cod roe in Singapore at the time, we substituted it with smoked oyster. Apart from adding a similar brininess to the dish, the oysters' smokiness confers yet another flavour dimension. Use as a dip for anything from pita bread to raw vegetables, serve as a crostini for a great little snack, or toss with charred broccoli (as a substitute for anchovy sauce, page 213).



Combine all ingredients in a mixing bowl and whisk till thick and creamy, but not stiff. Season to taste with salt and pepper. If you find the mixture too stiff, thin it with some heavy cream—use your judgment here. Allow to sit for at least an hour to allow the flavours to mingle before serving.

Apart from adding a similar brininess to the dish, the oysters' smokiness confers yet another flavour dimension.



- ½ cup Israeli couscous (may be substituted with orzo or fregola)
- Water, for boiling
- Salt and pepper
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 2 shallots, finely chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- ½ stick celery, chopped
- 250 g lamb merguez sausage, casing removed and sausage crumbled
- 1 tsp ras el hanout (page 30)
- 1 tsp preserved lemon, finely chopped or zest of ½ a lemon, finely grated
- ½ cup cherry tomatoes, halved
- 500 g mussels, scrubbed
- 1 cup white wine (such as Sauvignon Blanc or Pinot Gris)
- 2 to 3 tbsp smen (page 254)
- 1 handful fresh coriander and/or parsley, chopped
- Salt and pepper
- Crusty bread (such as Turkish bread, sourdough, ciabatta, etc.) to serve

MUSSELS

WITH MERGUEZ SAUSAGE,
ISRAELI COUSCOUS AND SMEN

I've always found surf and turf dishes decadent and sexy. To diverge from the common marriages of beef and lobster or pork and scallops, I decided to go with lamb merguez and mussels. Like the other dishes in this chapter, this isn't a 'traditional' Middle Eastern dish—we took the common culinary trope of pairing a meat with a shellfish, and interpreted it within the parameters of Artichoke's 'deviant' Middle Eastern philosophy. To nudge the dish into coherence, we took the Moroccan origins of merguez and ran with it, including other typically Moroccan ingredients like preserved lemon, ras el hanout and smen.



To cook the couscous, follow the manufacturer's instructions on the packet. Make sure to boil the couscous in heavily salted water (it should be as salty as sea water), and for only half the time specified on the packaging. You only want to par-cook the couscous. Every manufacturer will stipulate a different cooking time, so just cut the time you see in the packet by half.

Heat the olive oil over medium heat in a large, heavy-based saucepan. Add the shallots, garlic and celery and cook for 2 minutes. Add the merguez to the saucepan, stirring every once in a while to keep the pieces separated. Cook for 2 minutes till the pieces are browned and 'sealed' on all sides. Add the ras el hanout, preserved lemon and tomatoes. Cook for 1 minute more, then throw in the mussels, wine and smen. Use as much smen as you like—I like my mussels buttery so I usually go the full 3 tablespoons. Place a lid over the saucepan and cook on high heat for 2 minutes. Add in the couscous to the saucepan and cover with the lid again. Cook for 2 minutes more, or till the mussels open; discard any mussels that do not open. Stir in the chopped herbs and season to taste with salt and pepper. (The mussels, merguez, preserved lemon and smen are all salty as it is, so keep that in mind when adding extra salt).

Serve this dish in a large communal bowl. Pass around the bread to dunk into the delicious buttery, lemony, spicy broth.



What's So Difficult About That?



So you've heard me go on about how some customers get it while some others just don't. If we had a dollar for every time someone's said "What's so difficult about that?" to us, we'd all have retired by now. Check out some of the things we've been grilled with:

The busy dude: "I've been waiting 10 minutes for my coffee. Does it really take that long to make a latte?"

The demanding lady: "Why can't you just make some poached eggs for me? How hard can it be to just boil some water and put two eggs in?"

The shouty schmuck: "Why do you keep saying you're fully booked? I see so many empty tables around... What the hell are you guys talking about?"

The group-who-shares-together-stays-together: "Why can't you cut our lamb burger into seven pieces for us to share? What's so difficult about that?"

We get these sorts of questions all the time. No kidding. Here're our replies, real and imagined.

To the busy dude

What we say as professionals:

“I’m so sorry, sir. Let us check on that for you. If there’s any way I can speed it up, I’ll do it. My apologies.”

What we really wanna say as human beings:

“Seriously, dude, if you were the only person in here, you’d have received your coffee seven lifetimes ago. But if you’d take your eyes off my waitress’ boobs for one second, you’ll notice the other 45 people waiting for their hot drinks. It’s a busy day, there’s a queue, and you’re somewhere in it. Chill out.”

To the demanding lady

What we say as professionals:

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but we really can’t do that. I hope you understand. Please, can I offer you something else?”

What we really wanna say as human beings:

“C’mon, lady, we’re not stupid. We do know how to poach an egg. But there’re 15 other tables’ worth of nice people waiting patiently for their food right now, and we’re busting our balls trying to feed everyone in decent time. There’s no way we can pull one line cook off his station, dedicate another stove in the kitchen to simmering a pot of water, and deprive another six customers of their scrambled eggs in the meantime. Please order from the menu; it’s there for a reason.”

To the shouty schmuck

What we say as professionals:

“We’re sorry, but those empty tables have been reserved. If you want, you are welcome to wait in our courtyard and we’ll inform you once a table frees up. Please, sir, you don’t have to raise your voice, we can hear you.”

What we really wanna say as human beings:

“Dude, ever heard of reservations? And please calm the hell down if you even want to be served at all.”

And to the group-who-shares-together-stays-together... »





LAMB BURGER

This is what happens when you attempt to slice something taller than it is wide into seven pieces. We were smacked with an online complaint for this, even after we acceded to their request. That said, do not be deceived by appearances. This burger is a simple and popular dish we served during Artichoke's teething, café-leaning stage.



Divide the lamb mince into four balls. Do not knead or mix the lamb mixture. Kneading it will only make it tough. Press these balls into flat rounds and sprinkle with the ras el hanout, salt and pepper on both sides. Heat up a grill or non-stick frying pan over medium-high heat and grease with the olive oil. Cook the lamb patties for several minutes on both sides till done to your liking. Again, this depends on many variables: how thick you like your patties, or whether you're cooking on a gas or induction stove. So don't be afraid to adjust as you go. I like my patties about 2cm thick and medium; that'll take roughly 2 minutes on each side plus 2 minutes of rest. However if you prefer thicker patties (3cm or more), cook them about 4 to 5 minutes on each side. When the patties are done, rest them in a warm place. In the meantime, toast your burger buns on the cut side in the same grill or pan you cooked your patties in.

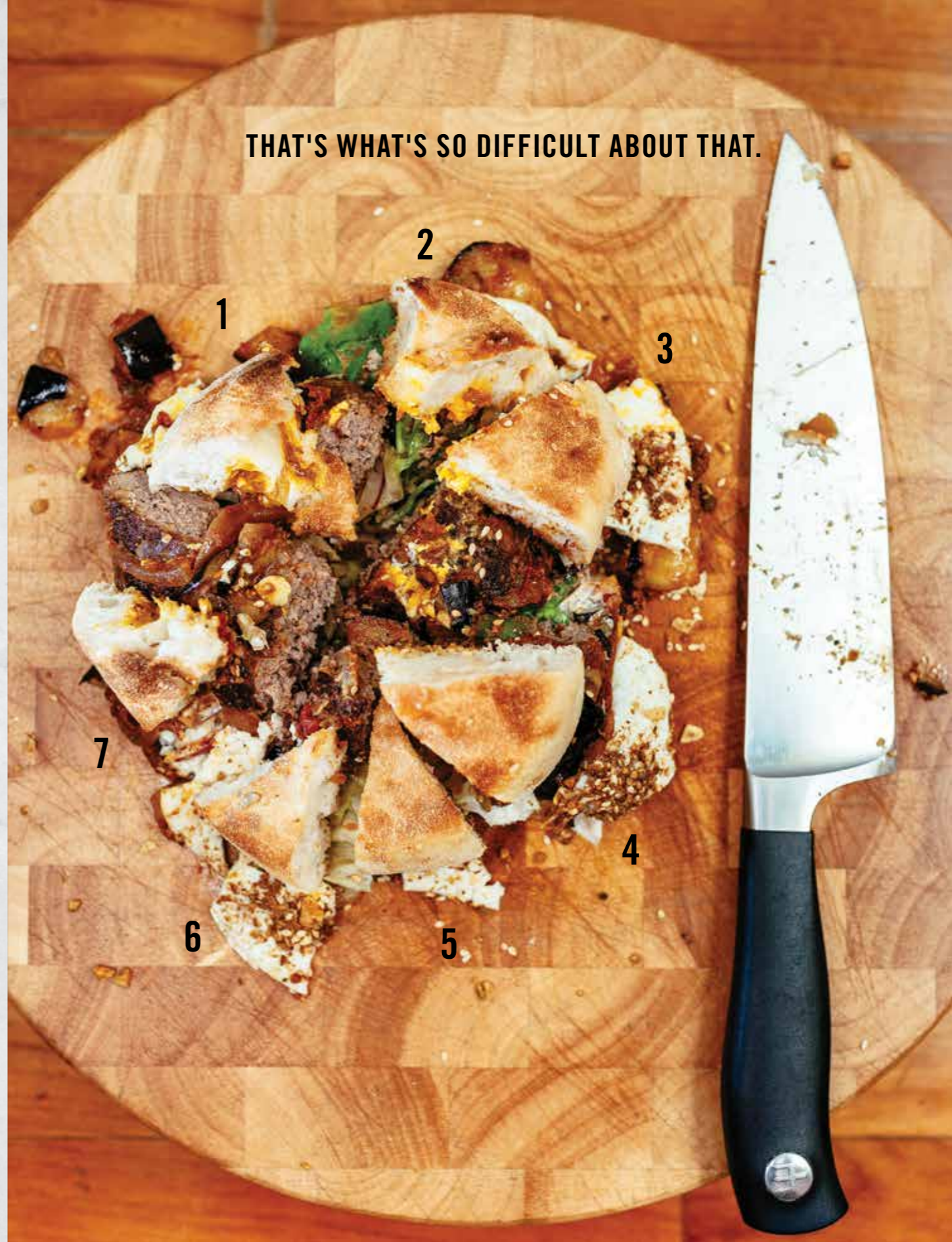
If you feel that you can multi-task well, fry up the eggs sunny-side up while you toast the buns. Heat up the vegetable oil over high heat in a non-stick frying pan. Crack one egg in and cook till the whites get crispy around the edges but the yolk is still runny. Remove and repeat with the other eggs. Add more oil along the way if necessary.

Place the buns cut side up and smear on enough labneh ranch to satisfy you. Divide the lettuce and onion across the four burgers and top each with a lamb patty. Spoon some eggplant relish onto each patty and top with a fried egg. Sprinkle a little dukka over each egg and enclose the burger with the top half of the bun.

If you're a real burger guy like I am, you'll know that the only legit way to eat a burger is to squash it first. So get on it with your whole palm and press the shit out of the little bugger before you attempt to take a bite.

600 g minced lamb
2 tbsp ras el hanout (page 30)
Salt and pepper
Olive oil, for frying
4 burger buns, each split in half
Vegetable oil, for frying
4 large eggs
Labneh Ranch Dressing,
to garnish (page 262)
½ butter lettuce
¼ red onion, thinly sliced
Roasted Eggplant Relish,
to garnish (page 263)
Dukka, to garnish (page 252)

THAT'S WHAT'S SO DIFFICULT ABOUT THAT.





Handwritten graffiti on the wall, including the words "dry", "Gion", and "noke".



Wanna hold an Artichoke-style party?

Here are some recipe groupings that will make your next brunch/dinner/pig out party a memorable face-stuffing fest...

The bestest, most balls-out and OTT dinner party:

Beetroot Tzatziki with Labneh and Dukka (page 80)
Forgotten Grain Salad (page 81)
Deep-fried Cauliflower with Almonds and Labneh Ranch Dressing (page 175)
Charred Broccoli with Anchovy Sauce and Pickled Garlic (page 213)
The Lambgasm: Artichoke-style Slow-Roasted Lamb Shoulder (page 119)
Artichoke-style Pickles (page 257)
Toum (page 253)
Dessert Smash-up (page 239)

The patriotic dinner party:

Singapore Raw Fish Salad 2013 (page 211)
Bak Chor Mee Sandwich (page 208) / You Tiao Hotdog (page 197) / Bacon Hotdog Pie with Tiger Beer Cheese Soup (page 107) / Char Siew Bao Grilled Cheese Sandwiches (page 110)

The kickass, gut-busting breakfast/brunch party:

Rocket and Sweet Corn Tabbouleh (page 39)
Mushrooms Fried in Smen (page 143)
Butter-whipped Scrambled Eggs (page 194)
Shakshouka with Whatever You Wanna Put In (page 48)
Smoked Salmon Pancakes with Bourbon Sour Cream, Wasabi Pea Dukka and Honey (page 69)
Baklava French Toast with Poached Apricots, Pistachios and Rose Yoghurt (page 31)
Arabic Lemonade (page 56)

The romantic night in for two:

Roasted Pumpkin with Marmite Honey, Pumpkin Seed Dukka and Feta (page 125)
Mussels with Merguez Sausage, Israeli Couscous and Smen (page 45)
Dessert Smash-up (page 239)

The supper club menu for advanced food geeks:

Fried Baby Corn with Avocado Smoothie, Nuoc Cham and Mint (page 217)
Basturma-style Tuna with Pomelo, Onions and Roasted Sesame (page 157)
BBQ Calamari with Zhoug, Saffron Mayo and Rice Krispies (page 109)
Beef Tongue Steaks with Haw Flake Molasses, Nachos and Braised Cabbage (page 102)
Chermoula BBQ Fish with Preserved Lemon Butter (page 64)
Smoked Chicken with Pickles and Toum

The casual, easy-to-pull-off dinner party:

Cheaterbug Hummus (page 254)
Basturma and Minted Pea Flatbreads with Labneh (page 126)
Tzatziki of Local Greens with Roasted Sesame Seeds (page 146)
Tuna Tartare with Pork Crackling, Ebiko Labneh and Spicy Nori Cucumber (page 169)
Deep-fried Brussels Sprouts with Honey, Whipped Feta and Hazelnuts (page 179)
Garlicky Prawns with Ras El Hanout and Lime (page 30)

The testosterone-filled dudes' night in (McDelivery not allowed):

Mamee Salad with Spam and Egg (page 201)
Fish Fries with Saffron Mayo and Pomegranate Ketchup (page 99)
Breakfast Smash-up (page 153)
Bacon Sweet Potato Hash with Fried Eggs and Bourbon Butter (page 161)
Fried Chicken Wings with Nori Harissa (page 231)
Donuts of Your Wildest Imagination (page 251)

The sweet tooth sleepover:

Grilled Haloumi with Moorish Tomato Salad and Crispy Vine Leaves (page 145)
Cookie Pie (page 71)
Oreo 'Pancakes' (page 234)
Banana Blueberry Muffin with Marshmallow Crumble and Salted Dulce de Leche (page 245)
Turkish Cheaterbug Apple Crumble with Kataifi Almond Crunch (page 135)



Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank one very important person: my granddad, Sim Miah Kian. Grandpa Sim was the one human being who made Artichoke possible. He was the guy who believed in me when most others thought I was crazy. He's gone home to the Lord, but I'm glad he got to see Artichoke booming during our first four years. Without him, none of this would be here. I also want to thank God for making him my granddad.

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Principal photography by Shaun Tan.

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ISBN-13: 978-9810797737



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