

Sweet Victory

Chef Miko Aspiras shares his experiences in his journey toward greatness

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Additional Photos Courtesy of **Chef Miko Aspiras**

MULTI-AWARDED PASTRY CHEF MIKO ASPIRAS CANDIDLY ADMITS THAT HE DID NOT JOIN INTERNATIONAL COMPETITIONS FOR GLORY. More than the medal itself, what he is after the most are the lessons that he acquires along the way. "Of course, a part of me also wants to win all the time!" he quickly adds with a laugh. "*Pero siyempre, hindi naman puwede 'yon.* I'm just really lucky right now that I'm winning. But I'm really after the things that I learn there, which I don't get to learn anywhere else."

As Chef Miko puts it, he started experimenting with food at the tender age of six. He shares, "I was cooking hotdog *tapos ang ginawa ko*, I coated the Knorr Savor and flour *doon sa hotdog.* *Naging* super favorite *ko 'yon!* Then *sa* OB Montessori, it was my Food Technology classes that gave me a deeper appreciation and understanding *sa pagluluto.*"

Thinking that his calling was in the hot kitchen, Chef Miko decided to take up BS Hotel and Restaurant Management Major in Culinary Arts at De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde. But things only started to get interesting in his sophomore year, when he joined the "Best Cheesecake Competition" in his school.

"I didn't know anything about baking back then!" Chef Miko reveals with a laugh. "*Wala pa kaming* cooking and baking classes that time but I still wanted to try, anyway. So what I did was just get a random cheesecake recipe *tapos* I tweaked it when it wasn't working for me. Then I

won. Then I joined and won again the next term. All in all, I joined 16 baking competitions back in college and, fortunately, I won in 12 of them."

Winning and his undying love for sweets pushed him to focus on the art of concocting desserts. He says, "I love sweets so much that I can't have a meal without it. Sometimes, *nagre-reserve talaga ako ng* space for it *sa tiyan ko!*"

Chef Miko began competing professionally when he started working for Resorts World Manila. Initially, it was just all about giving the Philippine Culinary Cup a try. There he competed against his college professor and the sous chef from his previous work, who did the mistake of underestimating him. "*Pinagtatawanan nila ako* while I was preparing my plates," he says of his contenders. "*Pero ang saya kasi nanalo ako.*"

It was also the moment when the Pastry Alliance of the Philippines took notice of his work and mentored him to compete in the Hong Kong Food Expo in 2011, where he won gold with



Above: Chef Miko believes that competing is really healthy, especially because he gets to learn a lot of things that are too advanced for this stage in his life as a pastry chef

an over-all rating of 97% for his two plates of corn field and lemon garden. That was the competition where, admittedly, he had the most difficult time trying to come up with what he would present to the judges. "I poured all my ideas in one dish," he says. "When it came to the second one, I was already drained. Then *tinawagan ko pa 'yong* friend *ko sa* Singapore to ask for suggestions *kaso wala rin siyang mabigay.* So what I did was to draw inspiration

from my loved ones. Eventually, I was able to come up with something!"

It might not have been all rainbows and butterflies during that time, but in the end it all paid off, especially when the most difficult to please judge approached him to commend his work. "*Talagang hagulgol ako noon,*" he muses. "*Sobrang happy ako* not just for myself but for the Philippines as well. *Nakakatuwa kasi* when I got back here,



Corn Caramel and Peccans



Black Garlic



Salted Egg and Almonds

parang Manny Pacquiao homecoming *ang pagwe-welcome ng mga tao sa akin!* I was really overwhelmed."

The toughest competition that he joined would be the World Association of Chefs Society Congress (WACS) because as he says, "It's more international. I came up against really competitive countries, including the US, Australia, Singapore and Thailand.

Hands down, Singapore is the best in Asia. And *hindi rin nagpapahuli ang Thailand*. Actually, *katabi kong nagpe-prepare 'yong representative nila and nakita kong magaling talaga siya*. *Tapos 'yong mentor pa niya, premier din na chef, that's why kinabahan din ako.*"

Then Chef Miko laughingly recounts how he almost thought that he wouldn't win. "*Kasi 'di ba kapag judging time na,*

bawal na kaming mag-stay sa sidelines. So *'yong ibang contestants bumalik na sa hotel*. *Pero siyempre bilang mga Pinoy na naturally born usisero, doon kami pumuwesto sa gilid noong akin na 'yong nakasalang to hear criticisms first hand*. *Tapos 'yong isang judge tumingin sa akin! Tinanong niya ako kung mga entries ko ang nakalatag sa table*. *Siyempre at first dineadma ko kasi I didn't want any biases*. But when they

asked again, *umamin na ako*. To my surprise, they congratulated me and said, "Beautiful work!" For me, *kahit wala nang gold, sobrang saya na ako sa sinabi nila*." Overall, Chef Miko garnered a whopping 98% and bagged the gold medal after preparing fruits and waffle, salted egg and almonds, corn caramel pecans and black garlic.

For all his achievements, Chef Miko counts himself lucky that he has his Pastry Alliance of the Philippines family to back him up in all his endeavors. He might have had a hard time when they were training him but in the end, everything paid off in more ways that he could ever imagine. "I didn't take it personally *kapag napapagalitan nila ako dahil pangit or hindi masarap ang gawa ko*. I know that they were only doing it because they saw potential and wanted me to succeed. They teach us to be better. And also, what's great about our mentors is that they push us to teach others also. They don't tolerate crab mentality. *Lagi nilang sinasabi na we should teach others and help them become achievers themselves.*"

Chef Miko was the only gold medallist among all the contestants in the WACS competition.

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