

Headline	Hong Kong's take-home chefs
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Hong Kong's take-home chefs

Mobichef founder Fanny Suen's website can hook you up with a personal chef who will come to your home and prepare a range of dishes – from Egyptian to Sichuan – and, best of all, clean up your kitchen afterwards.

By JULIA HOLLINGSWORTH

BY DAY, Leslie Law Ngai-chun is a graphic designer, but on weekends, he slips on an apron and cooks up a storm in other people's kitchens.

Law is one of the cooks available for hire through new website Mobichef – think Airbnb-for-dinner parties – for Hongkongers looking to privately cater their dinner party.

Hosts pick a menu by one of the chefs, starting at HK\$480 (RM270) per person and spanning a range of cuisines, from Egyptian to Sichuan. The chef takes care of the rest: buying the ingredients, prepping and cooking the food, and cleaning up afterwards.

It's the brainchild of Fanny Suen Hiu-yan, a former Hyatt hotels marketer, who found that the chefs she met through work often had interesting stories behind their dishes, but no chance to talk to diners.

"Many of the chefs have their own creations, they have ideas they want to express, and many of them would like to tell you why they are going to use these ingredients," she says, sitting in Law's sunny Kwun Tong apartment as he bakes mini frittata.

After a casual conversation over dinner with her husband last year, she began setting up the service, hoping to create a one-stop shop to connect clients with chefs. The website was launched in January, and in March they scored their first job: a house-warming dinner party for 10, catered by Brook Wong Chun-pong, a chef de cuisine at the Ritz-Carlton.

Hiring a personal chef has a number of advantages over eating at a restaurant, says Suen.

"You can just open your own wines, you can sit down as long as you feel comfortable, you can talk to the chef, understand what he is making, you can ask the story behind the dish," she says.

The chefs, who take 85% of the profits, have to be screened first in person before

they can sign up to Mobichef, and most are professionals.

Gigi Lee Wing-tsz, an illustrator, used Law in November last year for a friend's birthday, before the website had launched. Law was her high-school friend but she found out about his new culinary services through an advertisement.

She paid about HK\$400 (RM230) per person for several courses, including seared salmon, salad and chocolate fudge cake.

"At home we can take our time," Lee says. "We were playing board games, and then the chef came and prepared dinner for us. Then we continued chatting and playing and enjoying our time."

There's also a benefit for the site's 11 chefs, who take cooking gigs on top of their full-time jobs.

Amateur chef Law, who was the first to sign up to Mobichef, got a taste for cooking as a university student in Melbourne, where his flatmates would bulk-buy chicken wings and he had to be creative to keep it interesting. He often hosts friends at his Kwun Tong apartment, and about three years ago, began building up his private catering experience.

Although he has yet to be booked through Mobichef's site, he's cooked several dinners at people's houses.

"The interaction between a home cook with a table of guests is so much more fun than what you can do in a restaurant," he says. "Most of the time they just come in and talk to me and hand me a glass of wine."

"I find it's very interesting to be there and put out some good food and they laugh and eat. I'm happy to be the backstage person." But it's harder to imagine why a professional chef would want to spend their free moments in another person's kitchen.

"Cooking is my passion, ever since my grandmothers took me into the kitchen to learn the art," says Zurath Kamdin, a Zoroastrian who grew up in India. He has been a professional chef for 26 years and



Even elaborate dishes can be served up by the chefs at the homes of customers. — Mobichef.hk



The chefs for hire often have their own creations and stories to tell about their food. — Mobichef.hk

works up to 120 hours a week as the director of Mjs Catering Services. "Because it's my passion, there is no question about spare time – it's always a pleasure to cook."

Another Mobichef recruit, Tom Samranjit, has worked for 20 years at top hotel restaurants, including the Marco Polo Hongkong Hotel and W Hong Kong.

"I love cooking, but since I'm in a management position, I don't have much time to cook. I think cooking in customers' kitchens can be challenging, and I really love that," says the Thai-Chinese chef, whose father was chef for the late Thai king Bhumibol Adulyadej. "It also helps me practise my cooking skills from time to time."

He hopes to educate and share his knowledge with Mobichef customers, and explain the idea behind each dish.

Limited apartment space has been a concern from some potential clients, Suen says. "If your home can seat four persons, then cooking in a home for four is not very difficult. Just pick a meal that's suitable for you and your own venue."

Users can set the parameters for the meal by equipment – for instance, they can search for menus that don't require an oven, and can ensure they get a chef who speaks English, Cantonese or Putonghua.

As for having a stranger in the house, Suen says clients should not worry about their privacy.

"Of course there must be some privacy issue when you have a stranger coming, that's why we have a platform that you will trust so you know who that chef is, you can see his bio and our company [has met] each chef in person, we have their address, we have their ID. When you hire a chef from Mobichef, you sort of know who he is. He's not someone you just googled, he's not someone from nowhere."

By the end of the year, Suen hopes to have 30 to 40 chefs on board, with each cooking for two clients a month. In the long term, she hopes to develop an app, and add extra features, including a wine-pairing service, and menus for romantic dinners.

Law doesn't eat the frittata with homemade barbecue sauce and scallop salad that he's cooked up for us. Coffee is enough breakfast for him, he says, and the enjoyment is in seeing people's reactions.

"One of the main reasons I love cooking is to see people react when they eat my food. For the past 10 to 12 years of being a designer, I have never seen clients happy with the design that you do. There is no client in the world that will say 'good, I love it,'" he says.

"Cooking and serving food for people – I love to see them enjoying the food." – South China Morning Post

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(From left) Chef Law, Mobichef founder Suen, and client Lee at Law's home in Kowloon Tong. — Photos: South China Morning Post