

# The model chef

Tough but tender, Esther Sham is cooking up some ambitious plans, writes **Nora Tong**



Photo: Lau Wai

## GAME-CHANGERS

**M**odel-turned-chef Esther Sham had to put aside her femininity while being trained at two Michelin star restaurants in France in 2011.

"During those few months, I forgot I was a woman," says Sham, executive chef of Ta Pantry, a private kitchen in Tin Hau. "Being a woman is a disadvantage if you limit yourself by saying things like 'these [tasks] are not for me', or 'that's too heavy', or 'there's too much blood'. It's a world of natural selection in the kitchen. If you can't make it, you'll be eliminated. You can't be too precious."

Sham is known for bringing flavours from different cultures to French dishes. An admirer of the precision and the variety of techniques in French cooking, she says her three-month training in France was an inspiring experience, as she learned how to cook meat, make good sauces, combine different tastes and present a dish innovatively.

Whenever she couldn't understand the chefs, she would write down the words – and there could be many during the day – and looked them up online. She would spend hours searching for vocabulary and phrases on the internet in order to make sure she was able to convey her ideas accurately. Neither would she shy away from "men's work", such as carrying copper pots and pans around the kitchens.

Growing up in a food-loving Shanghaiese family in Hong Kong, Sham developed a nose for good food at a young age and would experiment by mixing different kinds of food with her brother.

But, she says, it wasn't until she started dating, and hoped to use cooking as a tool to impress boys, that she started to take cooking seriously. "The more I cooked, the more I realised it was very enjoyable when people appreciated your cooking."

After graduating from college in the US, Sham moved back to Hong

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ESTHER SHAM, MODEL-TURNED-CHEF

Kong and started modelling.

She began to harbour the thought of becoming a professional chef when one day, after not cooking for five months as a result of a hectic modelling schedule, she realised she had been miserable because she had not been cooking. It was also when she met her then boyfriend, now her husband, which made Sham decide to give up modelling and the frequent travelling.

Sham applied to work in L'Atelier de Joël Robuchon, a Michelin three-

star French restaurant in Central. After a few months, her brother had the idea of opening a wine storage and drinking spot. Sham suggested that she would cook and provide food to go with the wine. Ta Pantry opened on Star Street, Wan Chai, as a one-table, private kitchen in 2008.

Food sourcing was one of the initial challenges Sham faced, given the low consumption and an unstable supply of premium food-stuff and ingredients. Not having enough fridge space also hindered Sham from flexing her culinary muscles. Despite the odds, Ta Pantry has become a popular diner, and Sham decided to expand her business by moving to a bigger space in Tin Hau, which officially opened at end-April.



For the full interview, go to [www.classifiedpost.com/gamechangers](http://www.classifiedpost.com/gamechangers)

## CAREER GUIDE

### Follow-up is vital

**T**he business of following up after a job interview should begin before you leave the interview, by asking the company when they expect to make a hiring decision. This gives you a time-frame for further follow-ups. After each interview, you should send a note within 24-48 hours, while things are still fresh in your mind. How you follow up is as critical as following up in the first place.

Address a tailored note, usually an e-mail, to the person or people you met. Spell everyone's name correctly, including the company name. Errors here can be a game-changing embarrassment. Start by thanking them for the opportunity to meet and acknowledge that they took time out of their day to do so.

Next, express enthusiasm for the role and outline why you think you would be a good fit – you should focus on what the hiring manager is looking for. Something along these lines: "I listened, I understand your needs and your challenges, and here's how I can help you address those." In your conclusion, highlight the fact that you remain interested in the position and outline that you will follow up with them within the specified time frame.

Lastly, thank them again. Keep things relatively brief and to the point – anything requiring the reader to scroll down the page is too lengthy. If you are using a recruiter, they should do most of



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this on your behalf and follow up in the time frame agreed. Even so, it is still worth sending a note – just copy in the recruiter so they are kept in the communication loop. Push a recruiter to get you feedback on the interview and update you on the time frame regularly.

**Walter Ellicott, managing director, Ellicott Long Limited, recruiting professionals for the property and construction industries in Asia**

## CAREER TRACKER

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**Johnny Chan**  
Manulife (International)

Chan has been promoted to senior regional director. He joined Manulife in 2009 and was the regional director of the year with top growth and productivity in 2011. Chan is a frequent qualifier of the General Agents and Managers Association (GAMA), in particular attaining the Master Agency Award (MAA) qualification for three consecutive years from 2011 to 2013.



**Frank Lau**  
Manulife (International)

Lau has been promoted to regional director. He was the senior branch manager of the year in 2006 with top production and recruitment, and was promoted to district manager the following year. In 2012, Lau was named the senior district director of the year with top recruitment and his district was qualified for both the company's Million Dollar Round Table's District and financial planning district.



**Agassi Wang**  
Manulife (International)

Wang's achievements have been rewarded with promotion to regional director. Since joining Manulife in 2009, she has been highly productive in personal sales. She is a frequent Million Dollar Round Table (MDRT) qualifier, being top of the table for three years in a row from 2011 to 2013, and the company's three-time top adviser from 2010 to 2012.

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## CAREER DOCTORS

### Am I too old for the job market?

**I am a Chinese woman in my late 20s, born overseas, who is considering starting a career in Hong Kong. I've heard that older women are more likely to face discrimination while job-hunting and in the workplace. Aside from the age factor, I'm also worried about my**

**chances due to limited work experience revolving only around administration and customer service. I can speak Cantonese and possess average reading and writings skills and speak basic Putonghua. Would this boost my chances of finding a job or am I being unrealistic?** Chess.K

A good positive attitude and belief in yourself is 90 per cent of the battle. Age is not a factor in your situation.

Use your network of friends and colleagues to make contact with people working in fields you want to explore. Travel to Hong Kong during your annual leave. Look online through [classifiedpost.com](http://classifiedpost.com) or [smartjob.com](http://smartjob.com) and see if there are positions that interest you. Try and set up some exploratory interviews during your trip and arrange some meetings. Try and get a feel for the environment and where you may fit best.

Do you speak English? Can you conduct a customer service-related conversation in Putonghua? Do you like working on the front line, or would you prefer an office job? After you answer some of these questions, I would consider a few possible sectors depending on your preferences.

If you like front line customer service, you may want to look into a receptionist or customer relations position in a serviced office or a shopping area. You could also consider an entry-level secretarial position. If you enjoy working with people and selling, many brands look for store staff and behind-the-scenes operating staff for the many retail outlets.

**Debbie Matson is managing director of Links International. With a strong regional presence in China, Hong Kong, Singapore and Macau, Links International provides recruitment, payroll and HR services.**



For the full story, go to [www.classifiedpost.com/careersdoctors](http://www.classifiedpost.com/careersdoctors)

### Find out your true direction

**I have worked as a permanent civil servant for four years, earning about 30K per month, with an annual salary rise. It sounds nice but I see myself as a business person. I have a BBA from HKUST and have been accepted to an MBA course in Canada. I would like a management career in an MNC but is it worth the risk to quit my job, especially as an MBA costs a lot? Or is there another way to realise my aspirations?** Vic

I assume that this is your first job after graduating from university. You realise that, except the salary, you would be happier to work in a more dynamic fast-paced business world.

Write down what you have learned during the time with your job so far, and map this learning to what you will do differently in another context. If you learned about negotiating, how would this skill be useful in a business environment? You also need to understand what truly motivates you to be happy. What can the private sector offer you that your current job can't? In other words, how committed are you to stepping out of your comfort zone?

You do not need an MBA to get a management career with a multinational company. MNCs are not looking for MBAs, they are recruiting talent who can contribute to their goals; that may be sales, marketing, operations, logistics, finance, HR. You need to understand what they need, then you need to be specific on what you can do and want. Which position are you looking for? What

value would you bring? What is your vision? When you said you are more of a business person, what do you mean? Would you take a position with less salary in order to change your career? Who is your dream employer? And why?

These questions are meant to explore your "true north". Once you have a clear direction, then you stand a better chance of achieving your goals.

**Sidney Yuen, chairman and CEO, HBC, is an expert in the human resources outsourcing, technology and consulting fields**



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