

A typical buffet spread



One of the Mandarin's many function rooms

Owen Samonte



it a greater advantage versus the competition. The Mandarin sales team has a reputation of being “easy to deal with.” I myself have personally heard catering sales staff of other hotels who say “not possible” to guest requests more often than “yes, we can” which immediately turns off many clients.

The Mandarin Oriental does outside catering as well. For a standard service fee, The Mandarin can bring its famous food to your tables whether you are a party of 10 or 1,000. “Our German **Executive Chef Rene Ottik** is a hands-on chef who is always on top of all catering functions, many times doing the cooking himself,” states Owen. I was surprised to find out that The Mandarin’s catering prices are not as expensive as I always thought. You can have a full-course menu for as low as P1,300++ and a buffet menu for as low as P1,250++. For a hotel as exclusive as The Mandarin Oriental, that is a steal!

I asked Owen if she has a life besides The Mandarin. “My children who are 18, 12 and 9 years of age understand why their mother spends so much time at the hotel. I make sure I give them all my time at home, and we do many interesting things together always. I am blessed to have their full support,” she says.

As for her future in the hospitality industry, Owen looks forward to being assigned in one of the Mandarin Oriental Hotels which can now be found in 25 cities around the world and in some of the most fascinating such as New York, Barcelona, Geneva, and Tokyo. There are 15 more Mandarin Orientals set to open in the next few years in equally exciting destinations like Marrakech, Abu Dhabi, and Milan. The Mandarin Oriental Manila opened its doors in 1976 when 12 other major chains also opened in the same year.

The amazing thing about this talk I had with Owen was to discover that the first catering director I had placed in 1991, Chaela Canlas, had been responsible for teaching Owen everything she knows about catering, having worked with her at Edsa Shangri-La starting as catering clerk in 1996 and swiftly moving up the ladder to assistant catering director until her move to The Mandarin Oriental this year. Owen considers Chaela her greatest mentor, and soon some others will be considering Owen theirs. ■

DISTINCTIVE CATERING

Learn from The Mandarin Oriental’s own catering director what it takes to excel in this very demanding field.

BY VICTOR FABREGAS ALCUAZ

The first time I placed a catering director was back in 1991 when the first **Shangri-La** hotel in the Philippines, **Edsa Shangri-La**, was preparing to open its doors to the public. That great catering lady was **Chaela Canlas** who at that time was catering director of **The Mandarin Oriental**.

The catering function is one of the most difficult and demanding functions in the hotel industry. It takes a truly passionate individual to be effective in this area. **Owen Samonte**, current **Catering Director** of The Mandarin Oriental, is one of these individuals. “My job is 24/7. After I step out of the hotel, my cell phone is open and clients may call me anytime they wish. Catering requires long working hours and absolute service excellence—no ‘ifs’ or ‘buts’ here,” Owen says. She is proud about her team at The Mandarin—one assistant,

two senior sales managers, five sales managers for social and corporate events, and three coordinators. The Mandarin is also one of the few hotels that employs full-time guest services supervisors to exclusively attend to the needs of its catering and event clients which include some of the biggest companies in the country like **Coca-Cola, Smart, SC Johnson, and Pfizer**. The hotel also has several embassy clients like Mexico, Romania, Libya, and the United States. Owen says 50% of The Mandarin’s business consists of these corporate clients, and the other 50% are socials like weddings and private parties.

Owen considers **The Peninsula, New World, Makati Shangri-La, Dusit Thani**, and the **InterContinental** as The Mandarin’s direct competitors. She says that The Mandarin’s reputation for high-quality food and beverage and impeccable service always gives



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