

# THE BLACK BELT CULINARIAN

The athlete, writer, chef, instructor, husband, and father—  
few of the many faces and triumphs of one Chef Gene Gonzalez

**C**hef Gene Gonzalez is known for his great passion for food and wine, but not very many know he once taught martial arts and was a black belter in this field. The black belt is the highest belt color used and denotes a degree of competence. Little did Chef Gene imagine that in the culinary field, which he happily chose to be a part of, he would continually be receiving many "black belts" for his great contributions to the F&B industry.

## STARTING YOUNG

Chef Gene started his passion for cooking at the very early age of five. He vividly remembers growing up in a family of gourmands. His grandmother's house was always a beehive of busy cooks, preparing food from morning until evening for the steady stream of visitors and family. The kitchen was sufficiently stuffed and staffed! The hand-me-down recipes were strictly "kapangpangan" and the cooks included a full-time *manglelechon*, a hot kitchen cook, a cold kitchen cook, and a baker. Part of his early apprenticeship included the delivery of baked goodies and cakes to many of their patrons that started as early as five in the morning. He did this before he ran to school at Ateneo de Manila. He did this not as an obligation, but because of his passion!

Before Chef Gene started his career in the culinary field, he was a banker, bonds dealer, and money market trader. He was always the guy in-charge of his company's events and parties, writing up menus, and planning every detail. On weekends, he would have his officemates in the house for parties, while he took charge of all food and beverage requirements, which he truly enjoyed doing.

## THE CULINARY PATH

It was in 1981 when Chef Gene and his mother opened the now iconic **Café Ysabel** in San Juan. During this time, Chef Gene decided to go to Paris for his culinary training and apprenticeships, and became the youngest member of Paris' *Chaine Des Rotisseurs* at the age of 23.

Upon returning from Paris in 1983, Chef Gene was all fired up and decided to bring Café Ysabel to the next level, so to speak. Chef Gene began re-designing the menus,

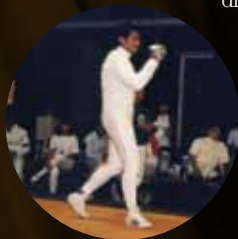
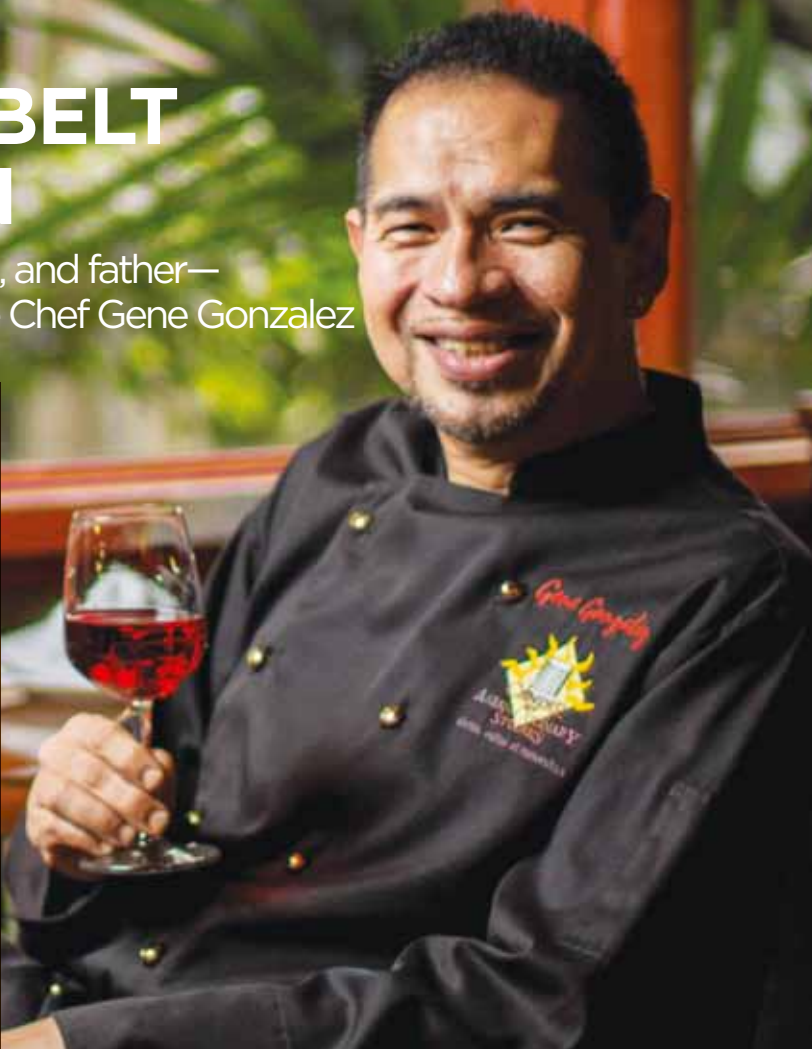
introduced more personalized dining and "degustacion" dinners. One of his first avid supporters and partners was **Susan Roces**, who allowed the conversion of her house on Wilson street in San Juan into an eleven-table restaurant called **Tratoria de Gino**,

with a matching fruit stand outside the tratoria.

By this time, Chef Gene had grown his business to nine outlets in San Juan and Quezon City. His restaurants and chefs were also gaining fame with the numerous awards from different organizations and competitions. Café Ysabel continues to draw crowds from breakfast to dinner, 30 years after it first opened. Not very many restaurants can claim this distinction.

## THE PASSION FOR FILIPINO CUISINE

After all the accolades and successes, Chef Gene realized that there was something amiss in everything he was doing. He was completely neglecting the wonderful potential of Filipino cuisine, having concentrated on European cuisine and molecular gastronomy. He believes that "with 7,100 islands, we do not need to discover Filipino cuisine because this cuisine is already here. All we need



to collectively do is to popularize our cuisine. We should learn to sell the Philippines, not only for its destinations but for its divergent cuisine as well."

Chef Gene, who is known to be the "Prince" of Filipino cook books, is president of the Center for Asian Culinary Studies with campuses in San Juan, Davao, and Cavite and soon to open in Cebu. His son **Gino**, who is the first Filipino graduate of **Alain**

**Ducasse**, trains all the instructors who are all active chefs in the industry. His school has graduated close to 1,000 chefs, many of them successful in their chosen fields.

Chef Gene Gonzalez considers himself primarily a mentor. He loves the creative research and development aspect of his lifetime passion. I shall refer to Chef Gene from here on as the industry's blackbelt culinarian!



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