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## Banquet Revolution: To Tech or not to Tech – A discussion with Chef Richmond Lim

Technology is changing the entire experience of the hospitality industry. From automated check-ins, to smart rooms, to biometric authentication, to AR based experiences, the hospitality sector is embracing new technology to improve customer satisfaction. Not just that, even at the back end sales and operations are leveraging new age CRM systems, analytics tools, and systems for energy management, safety and surveillance to increase overall efficiency and productivity. When technology adoption is happening at such rapid pace in the industry, can banqueting be far behind? We spoke to Chef Richmond Lim to understand how he sees the future of F&B transformation shaping up.



Chef Lim is known for his extraordinary dining experiences, and in his 33 years of experience, he has seen the industry undergo dramatic change. “Today, manpower is a challenge” he says, “It’s difficult to find talented people, people who are willing to put in the hard work, the long hours, and the almost army like regimen needed to run a great kitchen”. The immediate benefits of technology he sees are one that will boost efficiency and productivity. Technology is making us “rethink, experience, and explore the processes to make them better and more efficient”. According to Lim, “A chef must look at things very differently – instead of looking at a piece of meat he must look through it. How can technology be put in place, how food reacts in front of our naked eyes, and how can we capture and understand the data of the cooking process? It’s not just technology it’s also science. If you were to understand these two and marry them together, it will help you deliver efficiency and productivity”.

### The Challenges of Banqueting

His own motivation to incorporate technology such as IoT in creating his food adventures has been the challenge. As all chefs, he is passionate about his work and wanted to explore avenues to improve the existing systems, processes, and experiences. “Banqueting is different from a normal restaurant” he declares, “You have to cater to thousands of people at the same time. How do you ensure consistent quality and on time delivery?” This is where he sees technology playing a major role. “As humans, we cannot ensure that every step in cooking is the same, but with technology, there is almost 100% consistency”.



Chef Lim sees data from the connected food experience being critical in establishing customer confidence in banqueting. “If a customer asks you, how will you ensure food safety and quality for my 3000 guests, you can use data to convince them”, he points out. Customer confidence is key to success for hospitality as a whole, and with data, you can assure them that you are doing the right thing. Asked about data security he’s not very worried, but says that we must have contingency plans in place.

While there is a lot to gain from a deployment of technology he sees a small roadblock. Most experienced chefs do not find technology easy. They are not as fast as the millennial generation when it comes to technology, but they have more experience, and they are masters of trendy food. However, things are changing. “The Millennials are clearly the trendsetters”, he says, “Millennial chefs are working with the generation X and baby boomers to deliver the best of both worlds. They are spending time learning about the cooking process, figuring out how it can be simplified and brought to another level”. There are also government initiatives helping people learn and adopt new technology.

Another challenge is the difficulty in “lift and shift”. “Food and people are very different world over. Food goes with lifestyle and mindset. Different food in different countries is served differently. So applying western technology and process as is in South East Asia is not really possible. You have to reconstruct everything”. Citing an example, he says, “In SE Asia food is either preferred really hot or really cold. The cooking technique is different from let’s say our European counterparts. The serving time is important – you cannot let the temperature change”. He feels that there is still a lot of work around needed before different technologies can be integrated into the regionally different cuisines. Technology must be realigned to the nature of food serving.

And finally, he mentions the scale of operations requires different technologies. Taking the example of sous vide machine for precision cooking he says “it’s effortless to cook with sous vide machine because it quickly tenderises the meat. And you will see a lot of restaurants and cafés using it. But can you use it in the convention space? Not until you have a baby pool to sous vide in”! The challenge is

the scale; to cook for thousands of people leveraging technology needs an understanding of non-conventional and conventional couture. “You need to plan, do R&D, put safety mechanisms in place, work things backwards, capture all the data” he adds.

## The Industry Creates Many Opportunities for Technology Providers

However, he says, “the industry is learning. Food science is becoming important. There is a lot of communication. We are now talking to people, to professors and engineers who have a lot of interesting insights. People are becoming interested in data and technology”. As a new market for new professions opens up (F&B process data analysts, F&B process engineers, high scale strategic kitchen planners), the traditional ‘potato peelers’ must up skill. But that’s becoming easier due to the new openness in the industry. As food tech, food sciences, and chefs come together, creativity is flourishing, and there is a lot to learn. The key is to collaborate to overcome challenges.



In his book “The Stainless Steel Kitchen”, Chef Lim outlines the kitchen of the 21st century. “I’ve given a new star rating to kitchens – based on safety, efficiency, productivity, technology etc. These are the basics. As the culinary industry changes, we must have the basics right to take the next step”. His vision for future production kitchens is a clean, organised space where chefs are cool and focused on what they are doing instead of worrying about smaller things. “Future kitchens have to be different,” he says, “well equipped, well prepared, and set up so that last minute changes can be worked backwards and reprogrammed”.

In terms of technology adoption, he says the industry is still in phase one. Most of the advancement has happened at the manufacturing side and that’s mostly about engineering – speed, production levels, shelf life, labelling etc. “Phase one is essentially a value added product. The next stage is now do we understand this technology – the non-conventional couture – and move it out to be a conventional couture application” he adds. This is engineering the food and food processing in a different way – finding the right equipment, the right application, and delivering the highest quality.

“In the end what matters is that cooking should be simple. Using what’s at its disposal to retain the umami of the dishes is the mark of a great chef”.

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<https://www.facebook.com/interchange.network/videos/726740001018639/> and reach out to Chef Richmond Lim at Interchange <https://interchange.network/page/richmond-lim>.

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