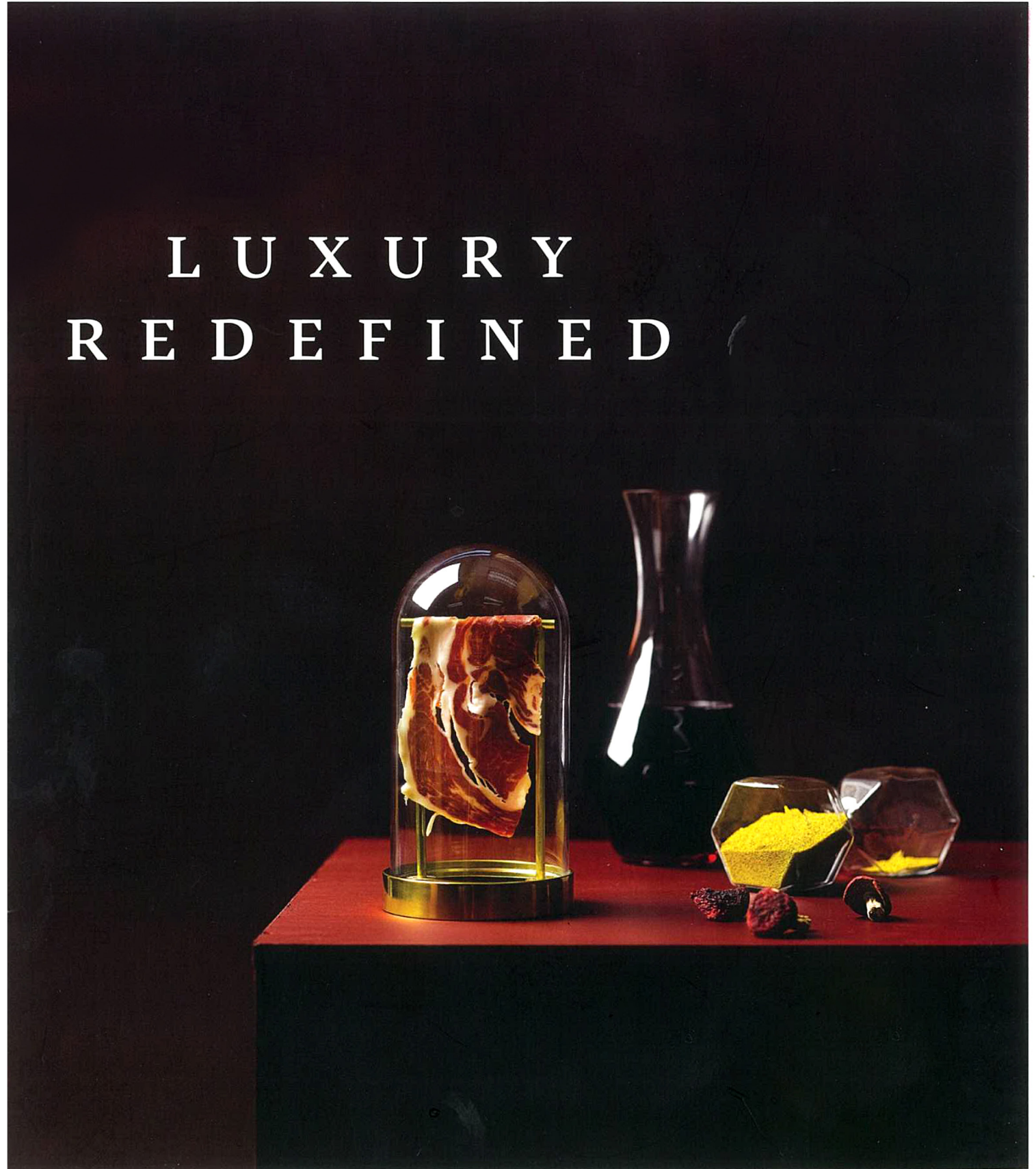


Wine&Dine

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LUXURY REDEFINED



THE LUXE LOOT

Chefs' picks of the most luxurious ingredients
they can't do without

WORDS CHARLENE CHOW



The sensitive and elusive red mushrooms

Dear. Rare. Exclusive. Some or all of the reasons why it's a luxury adding a piece, and sometimes just a sliver, of a precious ingredient to a dish.

An indulgence? Chefs say it is a necessity. They share with us some of their favourites here.

RED MUSHROOM

Red mushrooms from China's Wuyi Mountain in Fujian province are harvested between July and August after the rainy season. Experienced pickers make the arduous trek to reach specific altitudes where this delicate delicacy blooms and withers within the day. The red mushroom shrinks back if there's too much noise, so pickers have to take care to move stealthily. What's more, the deed has to be done at three to four am in the morning when the mushrooms are still small buds with their caps unopened. Extracted carefully this way with their mycelium intact, the red mushroom retains its full nutritional value and taste. Once picked, they are sun-dried and typically used as dried mushrooms.

In a seasonal promotion up to 30 November, Chef Li Wenwu, master chef of PUTIEN Kitchener Road will be using these red mushrooms (\$348 per kg), to make seasonal dishes and beverages such as a very savoury red mushroom tea, double-boiled chicken soup with red mushroom, braised bean curd skin with red mushroom. The red mushrooms are said to be particularly good as a blood tonic, particular for women.

ALBA WHITE TRUFFLES

Blessed with a mesmerising, earthy aroma, Alba white truffles, which also goes by the name tuber magnatum, is mainly grown in Alba, Piedmont Italy and are well-loved by chefs as a decadent finishing touch to a dish. Foraging season between October to November is capped by an International White Truffle Fair, where the prized commodity goes up for auction to the highest bidders. Last year, the average price was around 6000 euros per kg and there was even a sale of 850g of white truffles for 75000 euros.

Chef Lino Sauro of Gattopardo in Singapore and Olio Kensington Street in Sydney gets his truffles from farmers and suppliers in Piedmont such as La Morra and Tartufi Langhe, and sometimes from Eastern Europe if the quality and price are excellent. The current batch he's using comes from Piedmont at \$5400 per kg. He says, "I use it pretty much for egg pasta and cheese ravioli or with white asparagus, nice wagyu grilled or braised, with scrambled eggs or with cod fish, chanterelle mushrooms and bottarga dashi etc. But they're always freshly grated on top just before consumption."

SAFFRON

The saffron spice comes from the stigma or pollen-germinating part of the purple saffron crocus flower. Countries such as Iran, India and Spain produce this prized spice. It is particularly laborious to harvest as the stigmas, only three per flower, have to be removed delicately by hand before they are dried.

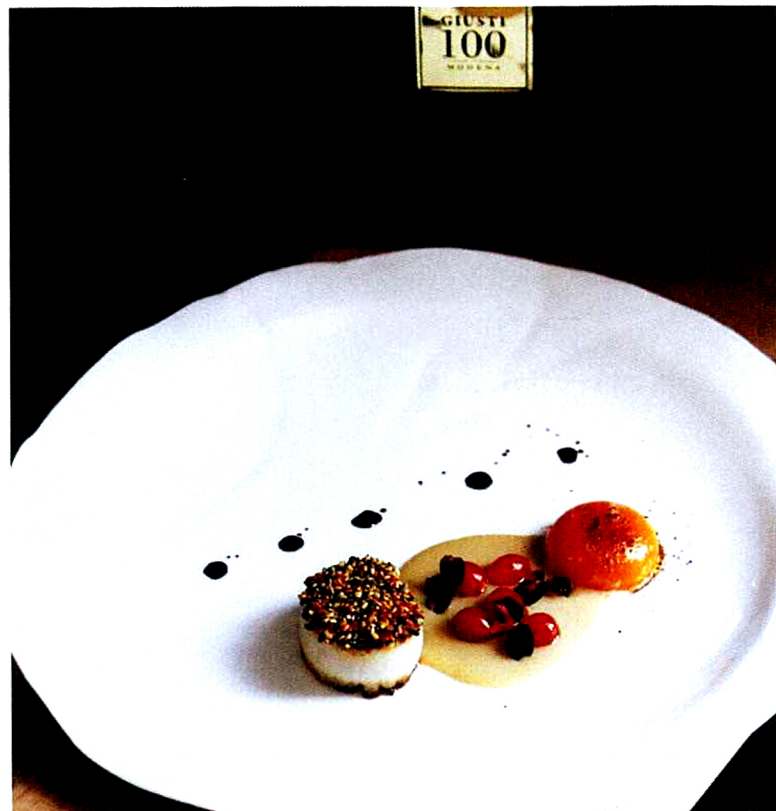


PHOTO: BRACI

Rang Mahal sources their saffron mainly from Kashmir in India (\$4 per g). Chef Milind Sovani says, "In Kashmir, saffron is mostly classified into two categories called "mongra" (stigma alone) or "laccha" (stigmas attached with parts of the style). He says Rang Mahal only uses the highest grade of saffron, which includes the stigma alone and likes the way it is very mild but adds a subtle, elegant fragrance and flavour to a dish. He uses saffron in dishes such as Kesri Murg, a Lucknowi-styled saffron chicken curry from the lunch buffet, in various desserts such as Gulab Jamun, Rasmalai & Jalebi, or in a saffron tea called kahwa served in the degustation menu.

GIUSTI 100-YEAR-OLD BALSAMIC VINEGAR

A product of Modena, Italy, the 100-year-old Balsamic vinegar 'Riserve' (\$700 a bottle) is the jewel in the crown of the Giusti Collection, produced in extremely small quantities per year, extracting from selected casks dating back to the 1700s. Founded in 1606, through the years, the Giusti makers of top-quality balsamic vinegar have been bestowed grand honours such as the Patent of the King of Italy in 1929.

At Braci, chefs Beppe de Vito and Mirko Febbrile use it in the dish hand dived scallop with confit yolk and 100-year-old Balsamic, featured in the restaurant's Gourmand Degustation Menu and Christmas Eve Dinner Menu.

CINCO JOTAS (5J) IBERICO HAM

Cinco Jotas (5J) from the town of Jabugo in Huelva Spain, has been producing top-quality Jamon Iberico

de Bellota for more than 100 years, using free-range 100 per cent purebred Iberico pigs fed on acorns. 5J Iberico ham (\$159 per kg) is one of head chef, Esquina, Carlos Montobbio's favourites.

He says, "I have been incorporating 5J Iberico ham in my cuisine for the past two years at ESQUINA, prizing it for its perfect consistency every time. I also appreciate its nutty flavours, which is more pronounced than other Iberico ham because of the diet of acorn that the pigs are fed with." At Esquina, he serves sliced 5J Iberico ham in the Catalan dish Pan con Tomate. "This dish consists of slices of crystal bread with ripe tomato squeezed on top with a drizzle of extra olive virgin oil. It is also very important that the Iberico ham is served at room temperature, and never cold straight from the fridge or else you might miss the delicious nutty flavours of the ham."

YONEZAWA BEEF

Yonezawa wagyu from Yamagata is among the top-prized wagyu in Japan, derived from young heifers fattened by rice straw grown in the fertile lands of the region. Chef Kenji Yamanaka uses Yonezawa A5 wagyu (\$275 per kg) as he loves the texture, taste and quality of the beef, and its marbling which gives very good flavour.

At béni Singapore, if there is a special occasion, he would use the Yonezawa beef for consommés. Otherwise, he typically pan-sears the beef then roasts it in the oven, serving it with a Madeira wine sauce, potato mash and seasonal vegetables. He would usually pair this dish with full-bodied red wines, or Kaho and Royal Darjeeling cold brewed teas from Royal Blue Tea. **wd**

Top Braci's Hand Dived Scallops, Confit Yolk and 100-year-old Balsamic

Opposite page 5J Iberico ham

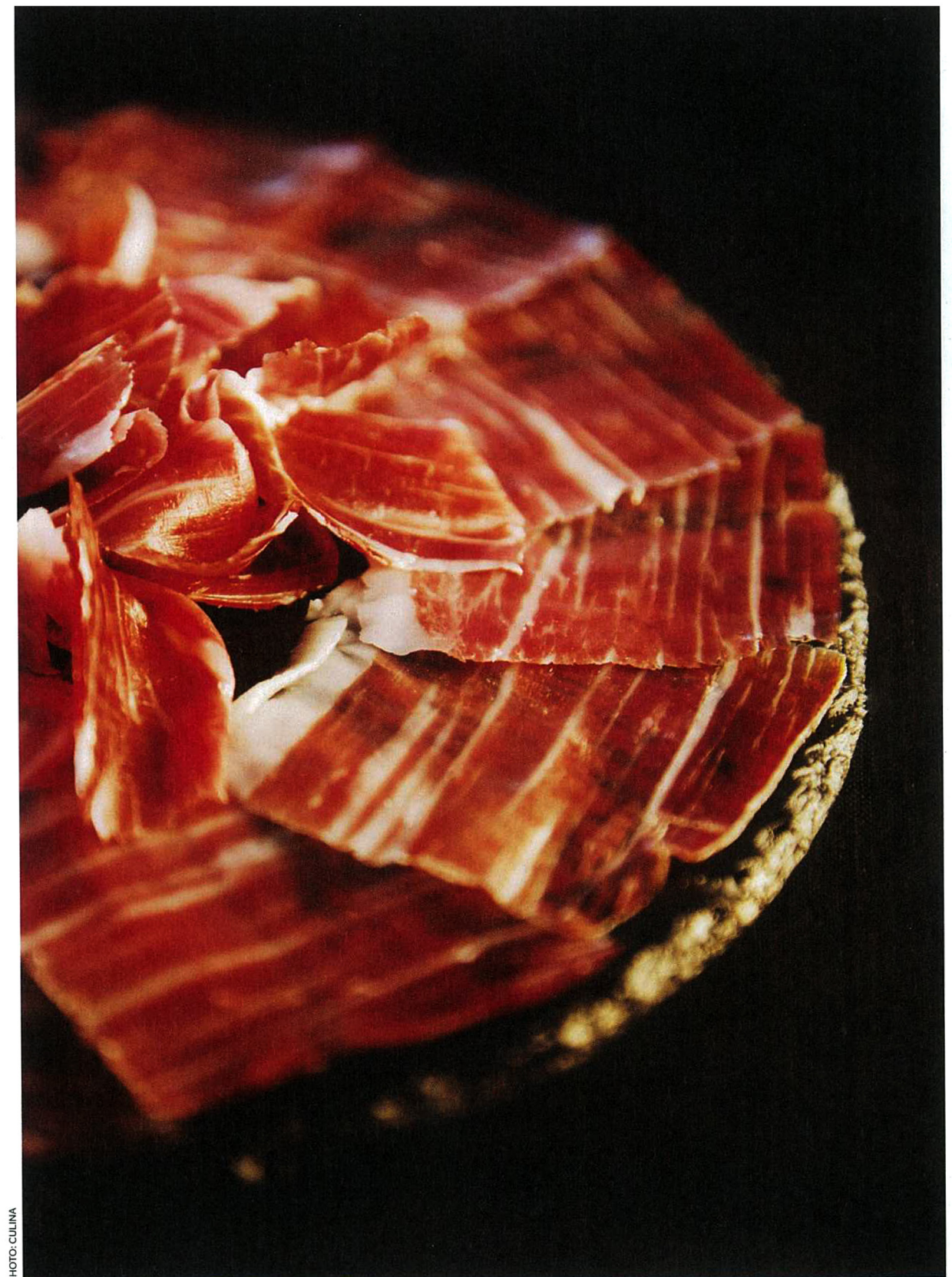


PHOTO: CULINA