

Sweet victory for MasterChef winner Johnathan Chew

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Johnathan Chew may have won the latest season of MasterChef Singapore, but the 23-year-old is not quitting dentistry school any time soon.

The National University of Singapore student took a leave of absence for one term to take part in the competition.

He tells *The Straits Times* over the phone on Monday: "I will finish school since I have only two years left, but I plan to continue pursuing my passion for food on the weekends.

"I felt quite a bit of pressure to explain my next moves since the previous winner Derek Cheong started a chocolate bon bon business, while the first season's runner-up Genevieve Lee started a sourdough doughnut business.

"But everyone does things at his own pace. I'm going to do what works for me, but I'll definitely continue on my journey of food."

Chew was one of three finalists in the Season 3 finale of the cooking competition which aired on Channel 5 on Sunday night.

He beat visual arts instructor Azwandi Robani and car sale adviser S Nareskanna.

He won \$100,000 worth of cash

and items, including \$17,000 in cash, a book publishing deal and an internship with acclaimed chef Gaggan Anand's culinary team.

Chew impressed the judges, chefs Audra Morrice, Bjorn Shen and Damian D'Silva, with his three-course meal – an appetiser of savoury tang yuan served in a mushroom dashi broth, a seared grouper main dish with lemon-grass beurre blanc and charred kailan, and a lemongrass meringue tart with kumquat compote.

"The three finalists were from different ethnic groups and I thought I should pay homage to my heritage and the diversity of the finalists with my dishes.

"For example, my savoury tang yuan was inspired by Fuzhou fishballs stuffed with filling.

"It's similar to flavours that I grew up with, but elevated for MasterChef."

He says he did not expect too much going into the finale, especially after reading comments from netizens who did not like him.

"I can understand why people might not find me likeable on the show because I do get frustrated sometimes.

"And in the team challenges, I was also shown mostly working alone instead of helping my teammates.



MasterChef Singapore winner Johnathan Chew making lemongrass meringue tart with kumquat compote (above and far right) on the show.

PHOTOS: MEDIACORP

"From my perspective, it doesn't make sense to help out with the other dishes if I haven't done what I'm supposed to do. But I can see where fans of the show are coming from."

He was also initially "intimidated" when he joined the competition. Chew, who began cooking at seven – his first dish was an omelette his family refused to eat – has been an avid fan of the United States edition of MasterChef since he was 12.

"There are so many contestants this season who are in their 40s or 50s, and I thought I couldn't possibly have the same amount of cooking experience that they have," he recalls.

But a raspberry masala pound cake he made for episode two of the show won rave reviews and gained him some confidence. It also made him discover his strength.

"I realised that when everyone was making savoury dishes, mak-

ing dessert could be a strategic move that can help me to stand out."

His affinity with desserts is primarily pragmatic.

"My family doesn't cook much because my brother is doing national service and I'm staying on campus, so we don't have a well-stocked fridge.

"Desserts, on the other hand, use a lot of non-perishable ingredients like butter or flour that are kitchen staples. It's easier for me to practise baking at home."

Chew runs a home baking business on Instagram (@thebattered-boy), something he plans to keep doing while attending school.

He is also working on a cookbook and will be trying his hand at a private chef gig in a few weeks' time.

"I'm not very confident about it, but I'll see how the reviews go and if they are good, then that can be something I can consider doing," he says.

