

ARCHITECT EDMUND NG loves cooking, and is only too happy to do so, whenever the opportunity arises.

The 44-year-old, who runs his eponymous architecture firm, can whip up a meal of four dishes for 20 people in around an hour.

"I'm a fast cook," he says. His secret? His S\$400 industry-grade kitchen gas stove, where he can create the wok hei fragrance with the intense heat. "If the chef at the zi char stall can cook a chilli crab dish in under 20 minutes, I don't see why I can't do the same," he says.

Most of the heavy cooking is done in the outdoor kitchen. The indoor kitchen is compact but a good enough size, says Mr Ng. Naturally, it is fitted out with top-notch kitchen equipment, as well as smaller accessories, such as a sous vide machine.

Mr Ng enjoys cooking Chinese dishes because he finds them more challenging than other cuisines. His repertoire includes chilli crab, crab bee hoon in both the dry and soup versions, Teochew-style steamed pomfret, Hokkien mee, and orh nee.

He enjoys baking too, especially bread.

And when he cooks, it is usually for a big group of family and friends. He once cooked for 150 people. "It is too difficult to

cook for just two people," he explains.

He cooks about four times a month, and the menu is always different. "Maybe there will be a new dish that I want to try out, but there will always be safe dishes," he says.

It comes as a surprise to hear that Mr Ng only started cooking seriously nearly three years ago, when he and his art gallery owner wife moved into their Siglap home, which allowed him to have an outdoor kitchen.

He didn't have the chance to cook during his childhood days, as the kitchen was his mother's domain. "But since young, I have been a critic of my mum's cooking," he says. He would point out to her how she could improve the dish, after comparing it with what he had eaten outside. "Sometimes she listens, sometimes she doesn't. I was more of a theoretical cook before," he says.

Despite his love for cooking, Mr Ng eats out on most nights, and he is comfortable dining at both hawker stalls and Michelin-starred restaurants.

Dining out, he says, is to stimulate his taste buds. "The only way to improve is to learn from others," he says.

The self-taught cook learns from cookbooks and also from observing the

professionals. "Some restaurant kitchens are open, and I watch how the cooking is done. I even take note of what soy sauce brand is used," he says.

He does his own marketing, and likes going to Tekka and Geylang Serai. "I prefer to pick my own ingredients, and along the way, pick up some seasonal ingredients too." Of course, he makes his own rempah and pastes too.

Even though he plans his menus, Mr Ng is able to cook a new dish on short notice, such as when more guests turn up unexpectedly. "I rummage through the fridge, see what I have and what I can put together," he says.

Cooking is a chance for him to unwind and be creative. He enjoys modifying recipes, sometimes doing away with extra steps or ingredients which he finds unnecessary.

"With food, you can instantly tell whether or not a person likes the dish," he says. So far, he says he has not cooked a bad dish.

He must be doing a good job, as he often gets requests from friends to cook for them. Neighbours are only too happy to come by when Mr Ng cooks. His favourite chef is Heston Blumenthal, "as he breaks cooking down to a science," says Mr Ng. "I like to know the reason behind a certain step."

He finds it annoying when recipe measurements are not accurate. "When someone asks for my recipe, I can give it to them down to precise measurements," he says.

Friends have suggested that he take part in cooking competitions, but Mr Ng dismisses the idea. "I'm not good enough, I just enjoy cooking for friends," he says.

And he won't be leaving his day job either, despite suggestions that he open his own restaurant. "A chef's life is too hard."

(1) Edmund Ng in his kitchen. (2) His signature dish crab bee hoon. (3) Chilli crab.

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