



Ajay LALA

MATRIX HOTEL

During his 35-year career, Lala has pleased the palates of countless thousands, including the likes of David Bowie and Aerosmith.

“And on this evening’s menu we have kangaroo ...,” hesitates Ajay Lala, executive chef of the Matrix Hotel, “and snake.”

Lala’s just pulling our legs, he explains after a heavy pause, but that’s not to say our party of four wasn’t willing to try it. The 43-year-old is a culinary master. While an apprentice, he won a gold and silver at the Calgary Regional Skills Competition in 1988, and during his run as executive chef at Maxine’s Grill in the 1990s, he won a Gold Medal Plates award. So, we’re pretty confident anything his team of 13 chefs puts on our plate will be delicious — snake or no snake.

“My passion [for cooking] drives me to work every morn-

ing,” says Lala, who is rather accepting of the 16-hour workdays the fine dining industry entails. “You commit to this as a lifestyle.”

It’s a lifestyle he readily entered as an apprentice in the ’80s, an exciting time to learn the craft because of the influx of high-end restaurants and hotels in the city. “I’ve even apprenticed under chefs that make chef [Gordon] Ramsay look like a school kid,” jokes Lala, who now leads apprentices of his own at the Matrix Hotel, serving fine cuisine to large galas, weddings and banquets, and to often-prestigious hotel guests through room service.

“I’m a member of my team, I direct them to succeed,” says Lala. “There are no hidden se-

crets, you don’t keep that from your staff or your kitchen.”

With family members from Europe and the Pacific Islands — and kitchen staff from everywhere else on Earth — Lala’s team flexibly blends ingredients to suit the tastes of any continent. It’s a skill he attributes to his parents, Fijian immigrants who utilized “a great melting pot of different cuisines.”

Mark Skelly, the Matrix’s banquet manager, couldn’t be more pleased with Lala’s eclectic menu. “Ajay has taken what most people expect from banquets and created a new and higher expectation,” says Skelly.

Lala is a leader outside the Matrix, too. He’s the presiding officer of the Provincial Apprenticeship Committee, which develops course outlines for Alberta colleges and Red Seal tests for apprentices, as well as

acting as a voice and regulator for the industry. Lala says the standards the committee has set for the Alberta culinary industry are second to none.

His provincial pride is prevalent in his use of regional ingredients, too. “I really believe in Alberta products,” says Lala. “We’re always going to be labelled the ‘meat and potato’ province, but [Alberta has] come a long way.”

During his 25-year career, Lala has pleased the palates of countless thousands, including the likes of David Bowie and Aerosmith. But no matter who is ordering, Lala says: “We are here for one purpose, and that is to serve our guest.” Even if the guest wants snake.

—Lynsey Franks >>

