

Career profile

Name: Saipin Lee

Job title: Regional Manager UK and Europe for S&P Restaurants



London's gracious lady goes camping



Saipin Lee is the Regional Manager UK and Europe for S&P Restaurants. She is responsible for the network of London Patara fine dining Thai restaurants, rated as offering the top Thai cuisine by Zagat and Hardens in 2005 and 2006. She was named in the 2011 'Women 1st Top 100 Most Influential Women' and is dedicated to the happiness of her staff and customers. Saipin has been involved in the development of the Asian & Oriental Centres of Excellence - an initiative led by the Hospitality Guild and People 1st working in partnership with colleges and Asian and Oriental industry bodies.

What do you enjoy the most about your job?

I enjoy every single day of my work. Every day is challenging and every day is different.

How did you begin your career in hospitality?

I worked as a property fund manager in Thailand, where my job was to take over and turn around distressed hotels and restaurants. I found working closely with general managers and with food and beverage managers of each establishment very interesting and exciting. I have always loved the challenge.

What's your best career moment?

There have been so many great moments that I have enjoyed but one of them is organising the catering at the Palace of Monaco for the Formula 1 reception. It was a challenge doing this from London and I brought over a team of three – two chefs and one senior manager. We did it well the first time three years ago, and have been doing it for the Formula 1 reception ever since.

The highlight for us was that Prince Albert came into the kitchens and thanked us in Thai, whilst Richard Branson was present at the function. This was a fantastic moment for my staff. The event needed a lot of organisation but we received a lot of support. Another highlight is that we have been contacted to provide catering of PATARA food at Nigella Lawson's home, as our restaurant is in her neighbourhood. One of her favourite dishes – lamb shank – now features in Nigella's cookbook.

If you could travel back in time would you choose a different career?

I wouldn't change my career as whatever I have done in life I have always plunged in and always committed to do my best.

What would your dream job be?

I have never had a dream job. I take whatever comes along and break it into projects and tackle it. I did my homework before I ran the restaurant including talking to as many restaurateurs and reading all the books about running a restaurant that I could, especially one by Professor Foskett from Thames Valley University. I also took an NVQ in Professional Cookery, as I needed to understand the principles of cooking.

Who is your idol?

I have two. The first is the founder of the company, Patara Sila-on, who is now 65. Patara has so much passion and loves what she does. She has great attention to detail; she is very elegant and beautiful and enjoys what she does. I am inspired by her and learn a lot from her and still have more to learn.

The second is Richard Branson because of his vision and passion, yet he looks a simple man. Everything about him is very inspiring.

What's your favourite food?

My favourite food is Thai of course, but also anything that contains carbohydrates and is in noodle form. I also enjoy eels cooked in red curry, one of my father's favourite meals.

What's the weirdest thing you have ever eaten?

Some might say eels.

What did you want to do when you were in school?

I didn't know what I wanted to do but have always tried to excel in any subject that I took.

Tell us an interesting fact about yourself

In my spare time, I like to go camping in the forest and really enjoy camping when it's misty. My interest in camping stems from my experience of doing an army survival-training course, this included cooking with basic natural ingredients available in the forest and shooting practice with a powerful M16 with real bullets!

Do you have any unusual hobbies or talents?

I am a real foodie myself - my hobby is going to all best and highly recommended restaurants all over the world be it "French Laundry" in Napa Valley or "Fresh Cream" in Monterey

What's the secret to your success?

Passion. Love what you're doing. This will spread out to your staff and your customers and will show itself in your outcomes, it should also significantly reduce stress. If you do something that you love you naturally do it well.

What advice would you give to other people who want to work in hospitality?

Apart from the financial reward, it's an enjoyable job. You meet lots of people and you never know who will walk through the door. It makes me very happy to make our customers and our staff happy.

How does the immigration cap affect you and the Asian and Oriental cuisine industry?

The immigration cap has affected our business but you always find a way around this. The Asian and Oriental apprenticeships should help a lot. We took an apprentice on last year and it's working. I recommend that everyone in hospitality should take on an apprentice, they have passion and love to learn, and we enjoy seeing them grow. Take your people (staff) with you and encourage them to bring out their full potential.

Further information

For further information on career opportunities in hospitality visit www.hospitalityguild.co.uk