

INTERVIEW WITH RITA, CHEF OF TERRA

# Dancing with Flavours

**R**ita is originally from Kazakhstan. Her first career was as a dancer and dance teacher. She loves food, and knows better than most the importance of eating a healthy diet. She's still involved in teaching – educating customers' palates about how to combine 'tasty, healthy and satisfying' in a predominantly raw and vegan diet. Rita is the chef at *Terra*, a new vegan restaurant in Kuta. She spoke with *My Lombok* about her career change.



## When did you first become interested in food?

When I first came to Bali it was to have a holiday. I had been working in Macau, in the circus, and I had a few weeks' break. I decided to go to Ubud, where it was relaxing and quiet. But I wanted to do something more. So I took a 2-week course: 'Open Your Eyes More'. It made me ask myself why I was doing a job I didn't really like any more. I have always loved to cook and experiment with food. So when I went home to Kazakhstan I cooked everyday, for my family and friends, using vegan and raw ingredients. I wanted to show them it was possible to eat food that is delicious and also really good for you. I just kept on practising what I had learned, and waited for an opportunity.

## What is the one dish you love and remember from your mother's kitchen?

I remember my mother making *syrniki* – Russian pancakes made from cottage cheese. I love them because they are buttery and cheesy, and always remind me of when I was younger. My mother would make them for me, with jam on top. I love them!

Another thing I love is my Grandfather's mustard. He still makes it for me and the flavour is unreal. When I try to make it, it's just not the same.

## How did your family react when you told them you wanted to become a chef?

They were perfectly happy. My family has always given me freedom to do what I want to do, and what I like. They had no doubts. They were happy for me and said, 'Go for it!'

## Tell us about your training, and your career so far.

I wanted to learn more about food, and at the time I was dancing in Italy, so I participated in an online course for two months. That gave me the confidence to cook for other people.

Then I heard they were looking for someone to help with one of the courses at the school in Bali where I had originally studied. While I was there, my friend, who was working as a volunteer at Ashtari Kitchen & Lounge, told me they were planning to open a new restaurant and were

looking for a Raw Vegan Chef. They asked me to help, so I came to Kuta. I decided it would be a good experience to be involved from the beginning as we would be part of the whole process – design, concept, menu etc. The restaurant was named Terra.

**Tell us about the concept for your menu at Terra.**

*Terra* is a Raw Vegan restaurant – with 90% raw and 10% cooked food. We try to educate people to eat healthy food and show them that healthy food can be beautiful. The meal should also be filling, so the customers will come back. For the surfers, for example, who come with empty stomachs, we serve a meal that is healthy but fills them up.

**Which dishes would you say are favourites?**

For me, it's always hard to pick a favourite, but I really enjoy cooking desserts – all sweet things and especially those with chocolate. I like to use raw cocoa.

For the guests, it's still too early to say, as we have only just opened.

**Are there any ingredients you particularly like to cook with?**

At the moment my favourite ingredient is miso. I recently had a chef who had been working in Japan and he taught me all about miso and how to cook with it. It has such an intense flavour and it really brings a certain 'something' to the dish. It makes it feel rich and yummy but you can't tell exactly what is making it like that, because it doesn't have a distinct flavour. It mixes in and plays nicely with all the other ingredients.

**Which is your 'must have' kitchen gadget?**

The blender. You can make so many things with a blender – sauces, smoothies, and cakes.... You just blend salad leaves for sauces, or blend nuts to add flavour to dishes. It is a great gadget!

**What do you like most about your job?**

Eating.

**What is the biggest challenge?**

It's sometimes difficult to find the ingredients I need here in Lombok. Most of them have to come from Bali.

**What do you like most about Lombok?**

I like the people, because they are 'real'.

**What do you like to do in your spare time?**

I like to go to the beach. It's good to explore all the different islands here. I also like to practise yoga.

**What foods do you really love to eat? Anything you would never eat?**

I love to eat anything – well almost. I would never eat meat now. I haven't eaten meat for three years.

**Are you the cook at home?**

Yes, I do cook at home. I especially like to eat vegetarian curries and vegan cakes.

**If you hadn't become a chef, what do you think you would be doing right now?**

I was actually thinking about that in the last few days. When I was a kid I always wanted to work as an airline cabin crew. I might have just gone for it if I hadn't fallen so much in love with cooking.

**Other than creating great food, what are the most important qualities that make a successful chef?**

First of all, you have to love what you are doing. That's the secret of any success.

It's also important not to put any limits on yourself when you are creating. Basically, 'Don't be afraid'

**Who is your favourite celebrity chef?**

Matthieu Kenney. He started off as a traditional chef, but he was the first chef to take raw food to a high level and has really transformed this type of eating. He has taught people that flavour is more important than anything.

**Any tips for budding chefs?**

Don't be afraid, and don't let fear get to you. Just keep going and keep learning. Don't have a closed mind. And always be willing to try new things and new techniques.