

Dancing to his own tune

By day, he cooks up a storm. By night, he sets the dance floor alight with his moves. **CHRISTINA KOH** chats with a man who leads an unusual double life.

BY DAY, restaurant owner Choong Je Joo, 55, dons his apron and sells Teo Chew porridge at his shop in Jalan Bandar Timah, Ipoh.

Come night, and the man is transformed. That's when the good-natured Choong slips on a tuxedo and moonlights as a professional dance instructor in his own studio at Jalan Leong Boon Swee.


The 12-time Malaysia Latin

Choong Je Joo tripping the light fantastic with his wife, Alice Hor.

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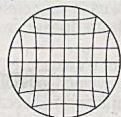


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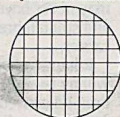
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Dance champion has been leading this "double life" since he got hooked on dancing while practising tai chi to music 15 years ago.

Cooking, however, remains his first love. He picked up cooking skills from his mother, Tan Jiao Siang, 78, when he helped her out at the restaurant after school.

Started 60 years ago by his grandfather Hon Tong, Yew Ming Restaurant has remained a popular choice of Teo Chew porridge lovers in Ipoh. Few things have changed since his grandfather's days – the restaurant even uses the same marble tables Hon Tong had imported from China. Most recipes were also handed down by his grandfather.

Around lunchtime, customers file in and choose from an array of side dishes like stir fried *la la* (clams), *foo yong* omelette, deep fried fish-head stew, and black pomfret with salted vegetables. Another popular order is steamed fish belly, garnished with parsley and shredded chilli. The fried ikan kampung with salted soya bean is another favourite among diners.

"Some customers have been coming here since they were small boys," Choong says.



Choong's restaurant serves up traditional dishes made from recipes handed down from his grandfather's time.

"Sometimes, I try cooking new dishes, using trial and error at first, and then improving on the recipe.

"I used to offer dishes like salted crabs, braised duck and salted pork, but it takes a long time to prepare so I've dropped them from the menu," he said.

Both his mother and wife, Alice Hor, help out at the shop; Hor is also his dance partner when it comes to competitions.

Besides giving lessons at the dance studio, the couple also conducts courses at YMCA Ipoh (on Tuesdays), Perak Han Jang Association (on Thursdays) and the Ipoh Swimming Club (on Fridays).

Choong said it's never too late to take up dancing – he himself was about 40 years old when he first decided to try out the dance floor.

"I wanted to learn and so I would spend my Sundays, which is my day off, travelling to Kuala Lumpur to learn dancing from a master."

The couple's efforts paid off with a string of victories at various competitions, including the Malaysia Open (Penang) International Dancesports where they were named the Latin Champion in 2000.

Evenings would see the husband and wife team teaching students a variety of dances like the samba, paso doble, Viennese waltz, square rumba, merengue, mambo and disco rock.

■ Choong Je Joo can be contacted at