Corey Lee has flown to Hong Kong—where he has trawled more than a dozen times to source his sea cucumber spines, among other delicacies—to learn how they wanted to transmit their knowledge. Daniel Boulud emailed back with page numbers from one of his books a section detailing his Black Tie Scallops, a dish that goes back to New Year’s Eve 1986, at Le Cirque, and features truffles and brillions en croute. (Boulud says it’s a tough dish to pull off so he sent a shrimp and grits dish, if the grits are made of shrimp) from his late, great Manhattan restaurant Cirque, and features truffles and bivalves en croûte. Still, asking creative talents in any discipline to reveal secrets of their signature works, with the intention of re-creating them, is no small request. But cooking isn’t exactly like painting or sculpture or music, where replicating a work is considered forgery or a breach of copyright. Chefs publish recipes for others to try. Instructions are available. It’s terribly understood, however, that any efforts at mimicry are meant to happen in private, at home. Let’s desire to replicate other chefs’ dishes publicly may open him up to criticism—not necessarily that he’s stealing, but that he hasn’t managed to pull off what one of his peers could. He’s already guarding himself against that possibility, though, putting in the hours, and the focus, to master each dish as if it were his own.

Walking down a long, brightly lit industrial hallway at the Landmark Mandarin Oriental, Lee shakes hands with a chain of cooks. At the heart of the hotel’s kitchen, he is met by the Dutch-born chef Richard Ekkebus: tall and lean, with a red goatee and wearing all white, including a kerchief tied around his neck. He looks ready to go running with the bulls. For the past 10 years, Ekkebus, 48, has worked to establish the property’s fine-dining flagship, Amber, earning two Michelin stars for seven consecutive years. Lee had stopped in at Amber during a recent book tour to cook for its discerning customers, a mix of local and international gastronomes and tycoons—terminology being a word used in Hong Kong with frequency and little irony. It’s the kind of crowd where VIP guests with private jets offer to fly Ekkebus home with them to cook a meal before sending him back to Hong Kong in a sky suite, all expenses paid. While here, Lee found himself moved by Ekkebus’s sense of community. “Richard has this great reputation for hosting his food, he’d be right at the top. He’s an amazing talent.” Ekkebus points out that camaraderie influences his cooking more than Lee, declined participation entirely. In his mind, “I’ll be in Japan.” In Osaka, the 43-year-old chef Hidetsugu Tada, of restaurant Higrama, will be teaching Lee a lotus leaf, grapefruit, sake and yuzu summer roll. He’s already guarding himself against the possibility, though, putting in the hours, and the focus, to master each dish as if it were his own. Boulud says it’s a tough dish to pull off so he sent a shrimp and grits dish, if the grits are made of shrimp) from his late, great Manhattan restaurant Cirque, and features truffles and bivalves en croûte. Still, asking creative talents in any discipline to reveal secrets of their signature works, with the intention of re-creating them, is no small request. 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Food festivals and fêtes have attempted to do the same thing, but with obvious limitations. Typically lasting only a couple of days, they’re often overcrowded, despite high ticket prices. More problematically, cooking in a temporary setting often lacks the precision of work done in a permanent kitchen. Lee has sought such opportunities. “Five years ago, I made the decision to turn out interna- tional trends, to step away from cooking conferences and events, all to create an identity for Benu that isn’t easily identifiable,” he says. “Now it’s the opposite. It’s all about immersion, building relationships and working with chefs from around the world in a deep and lasting way.”

As Lee visits up in his Benu whites and denim apron, “I’m feeling very dangerous,” Ekkebus jokes, removing a pallet of Japanese uni from refri- geration. A gaggle of Mandarin Oriental publicists, clad in black, collectively gasp and begin to snap pictures. Ekkebus places a morsel of sea urchin on the flesh bridging his thumb and forefinger. He does the same for Lee, to taste, as they discuss their collabora- tion. Lee explains that in Zen will effectively become the guardian of Amber’s signature dish: sea urchin in a lobster gelatin with cathedral juice, a crisp seasoned noodle on the side. The more benefits both restaurants. “Because of this dish, I can’t do anything else with uni,” says Ekkebus. It’s complex but creativity.

Amber regulars have joked about starting an Occupy Amber group—named after the political group—should Ekkebus pull the item from the menu. Lee, on the other hand, will be providing a culinary service by presenting the dish—a chef’s talk—meditation on coolness and creaminess—in the cover of Wilco’s Yankee Hotel Foxtrot. Ekkebus tells him about his recent vacation near Phuket, Thailand, scuba diving and practicing Muay Thai fencing. “I’m feeling very dangerous,” Ekkebus jokes, removing a pallet of Japanese uni from refrigeration. A gaggle of Mandarin Oriental publicists, clad in black, collectively gasp and begin to snap pictures. Ekkebus places a morsel of sea urchin on the flesh bridging his thumb and forefinger. He does the same for Lee, to taste, as they discuss their collaboration. Lee explains that in Zen will effectively become the guardian of Amber’s signature dish: sea urchin in a lobster gelatin with cathedral juice, a crisp seasoned noodle on the side. The more benefits both restaurants. “Because of this dish, I can’t do anything else with uni,” says Ekkebus. It’s complex but creativity.

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