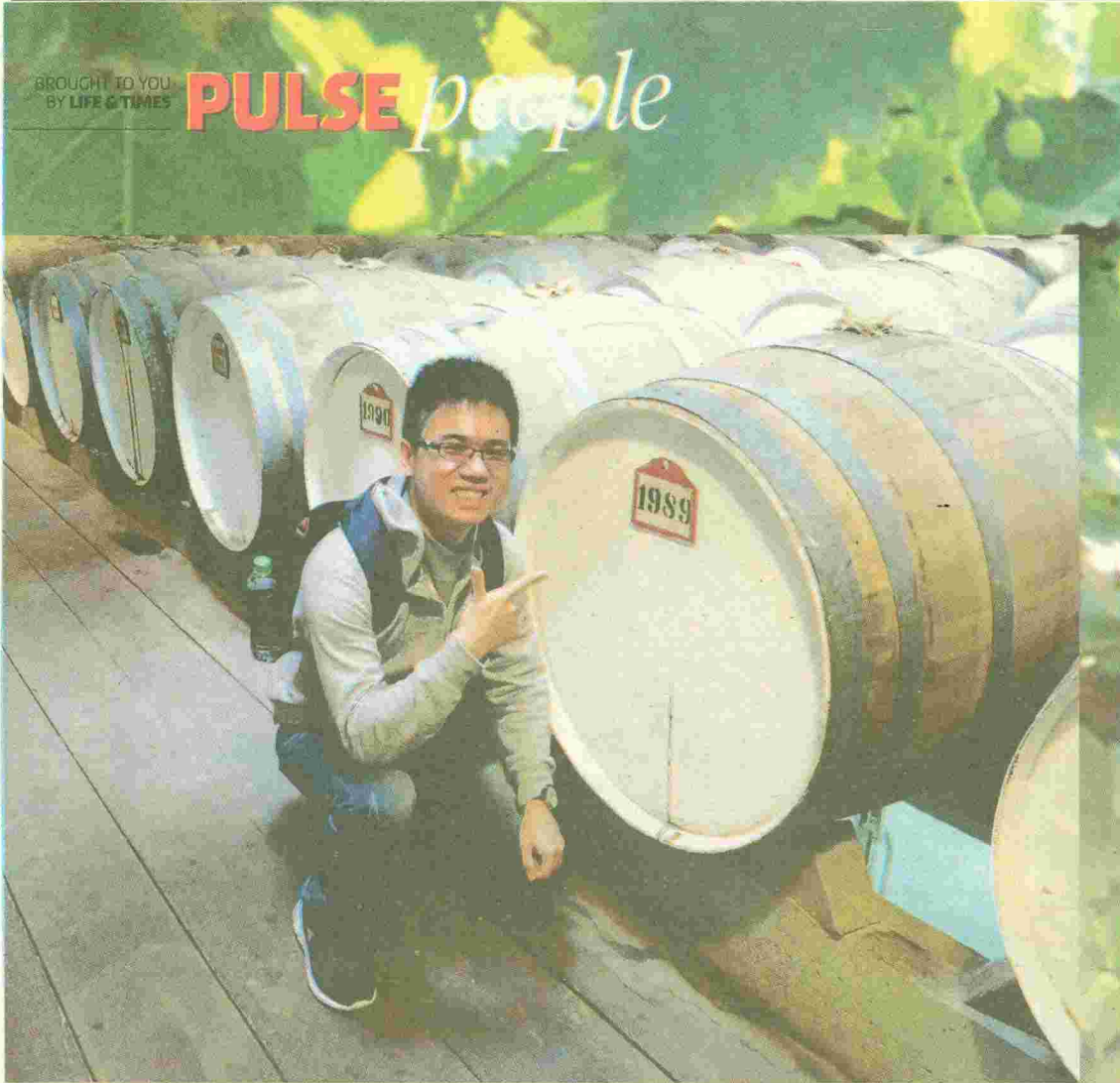


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**"When I first told my parents about being a sommelier, they thought this was a bartender."**

Nick Loo Sze Hong

# CULINARY CHEER

Two Malaysians, a mixologist and a sommelier, celebrate their sweet success in the Hilton Worldwide F&B Master Grand Final, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

**"G**OOD afternoon," the smiling gentleman says. When we shake hands, it's impossible to ignore the art on his forearm. Responding to my query about it, Gritharan Panchakaran (known to all as Giri) concedes that this tattoo has become a conversation starter. It bears the images of the tools this passionate mixologist uses on a daily basis: Bar spoon, strainer, Colin's glass, jigger, knife and shaker.

That passion for what he does has resulted in Giri being declared a winner in the Hilton Worldwide F&B Master Grand Final 2016. Making himself comfortable on the plush sofa at the lobby of the Hilton Kuala Lumpur, Giri informs me that while he won in the Bar category, his colleague, Nick Loo Sze Hong won for the Sommelier

category in the same competition.

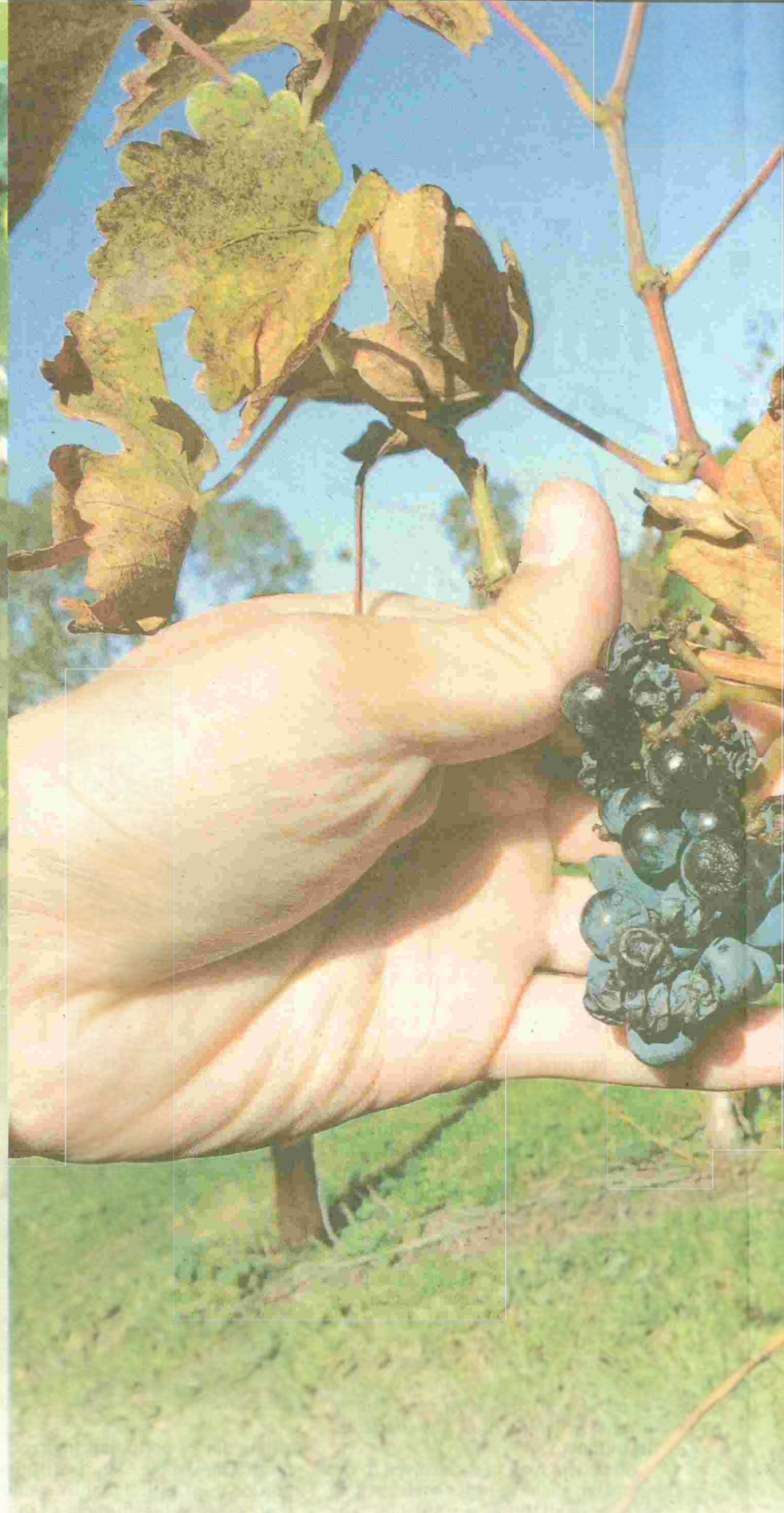
Together, they were part of over 700 competitors from Southeast Asia and India. Their success has been described by some as "elevating Malaysia's culinary heritage onto a regional scale".

Since winning the competition, each man has been on an adventure as they were given the opportunity to travel to a place renowned for quality and innovation related to their craft.

#### STRAIGHTFORWARD WINE

"It was my first time going to Australia," says Nick, when asked about his five-day trip in May 2016 to the Barossa Valley in South Australia.

Grateful that his host, Annabelle, came to greet him in Adelaide, and describing her as a "Mummy-kind-of-person," the



A vineyard in Barossa Valley.

Wine Team Leader at the Hilton Kuala Lumpur adds: "She was very helpful. She kept asking if I'd brought enough jackets. As though she was talking to her own son."

At the Barossa Wine School, Nick became privy to some of the more intricate methods of making wine. Australian wine itself, says Nick, is "straightforward". This is because in the Barossa Valley, the signature grape that is most commonly associated with the region is the one called Shiraz. French wines are more complicated because different varieties of grapes are used to make the wine. "It's a single-variety wine. And it's the style that represents Australia," he adds for emphasis.

As the 27-year-old native of Seremban shares his history, his status as an award-winning sommelier is even more poignant. Although he's always had a desire to work

in the food and beverage industry, it wasn't his aim to become a sommelier. Throwing one hand in the air dismissively, Nick explains that his culinary dream was cut short when he applied to be a kitchen helper at a hotel. "I was told I didn't have enough experience to be one."

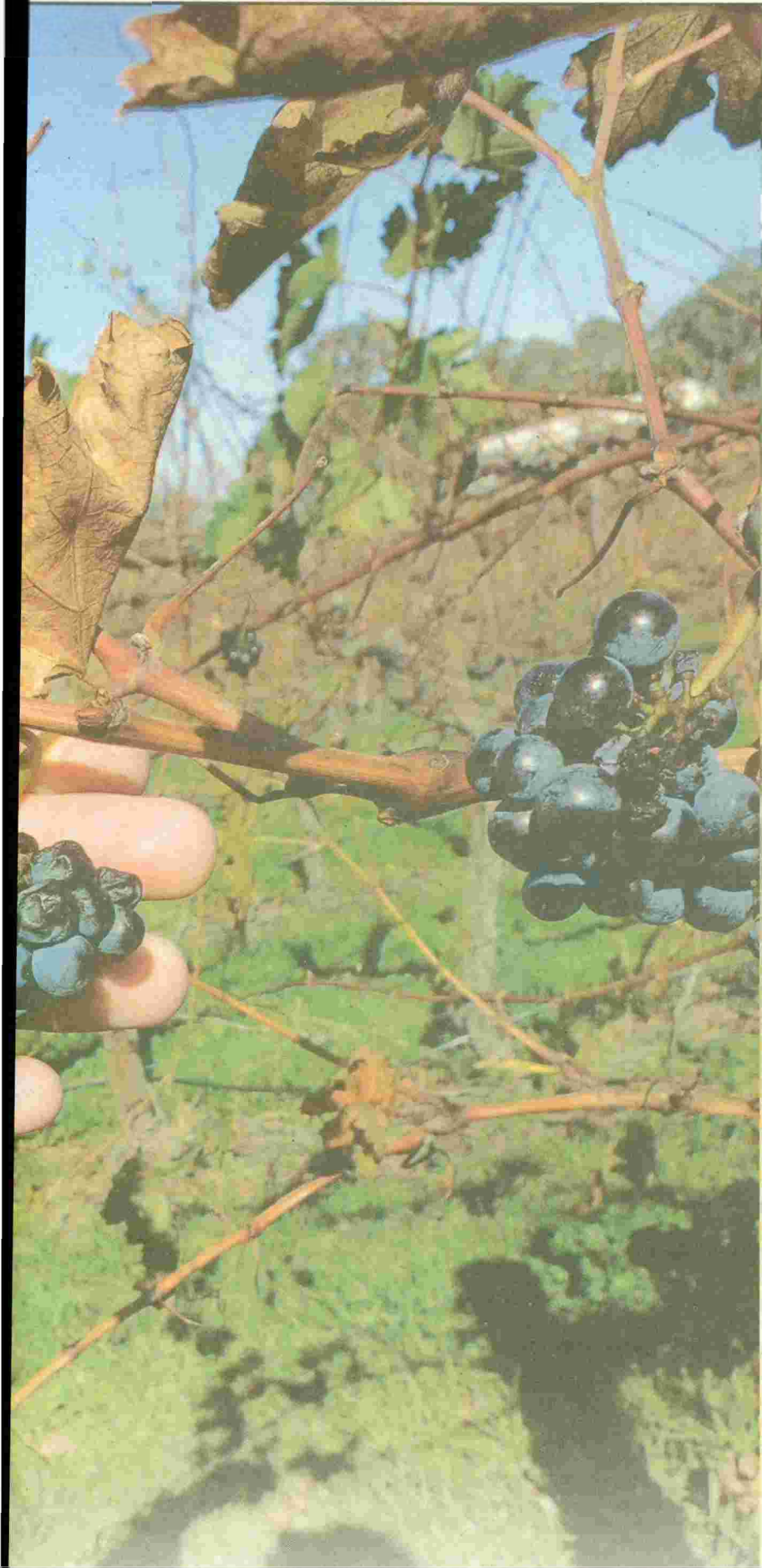
Nodding, he responds to my disbelief and says: "Yes. You heard right. Not enough experience to be a kitchen helper."

#### MORE THAN A BARTENDER

When one door shut, another opened for Nick a career as a sommelier. He gives a short laugh before he says: "When I first told my parents about being a sommelier, they thought this was a bartender. Actually, it's more than that."

A sommelier, says Nick, doesn't just understand wine. It's his job to understand

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then depressed. There's no way around that," Giri is quick to admit. That said, his aim, always, is to capture that moment of happiness for his customers when preparing their drinks. Or, at the very least, help them find that happiness.

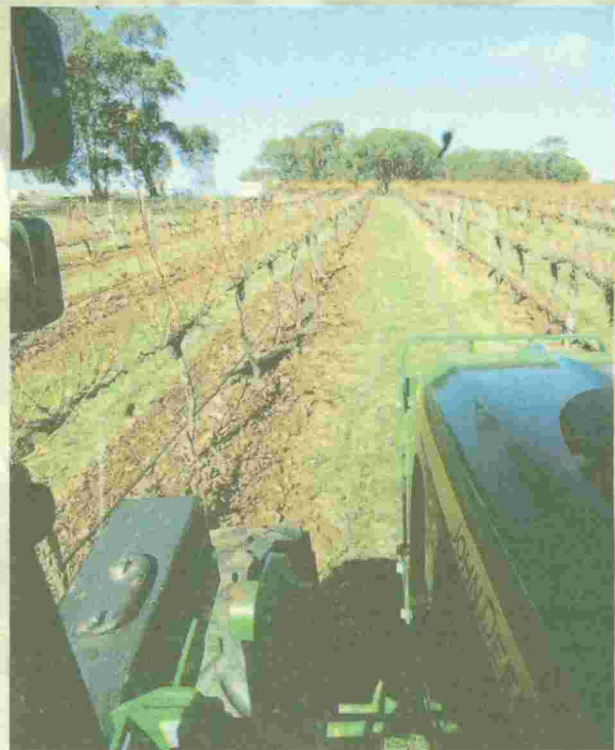
**WATEROFLIFE**

At its most basic, Giri sees his skill as being able to successfully mix two compounds to create a new one. His confidence to do so was amplified when he visited Scotland in April 2016 to tour the distilleries for three whisky labels — Chivas Regal, The Glenlivet and Aberlour.

His fondest memories are of Aberlour, a distillery of Speyside single malt Scotch whisky in Scotland. With the prefix "Aber" meaning "the confluence of", it makes sense that the distillery is located at the confluence of the rivers Lour and Spey.

Describing whisky as *eau da vie* (French for water of life), Giri wasted no time taking every opportunity to soak up Scottish culture. In less than a week, other than consuming a lot of whisky, which he says, runs in his veins more than blood, Giri also tried local delicacies such as haggis and black pudding. Of all his experiences, though, the memory he will hold dear is that of hiking up the path to Linn Falls near the Aberlour Distillery.

"It was beautiful," says Giri. "On either side of us, the grains for the barley

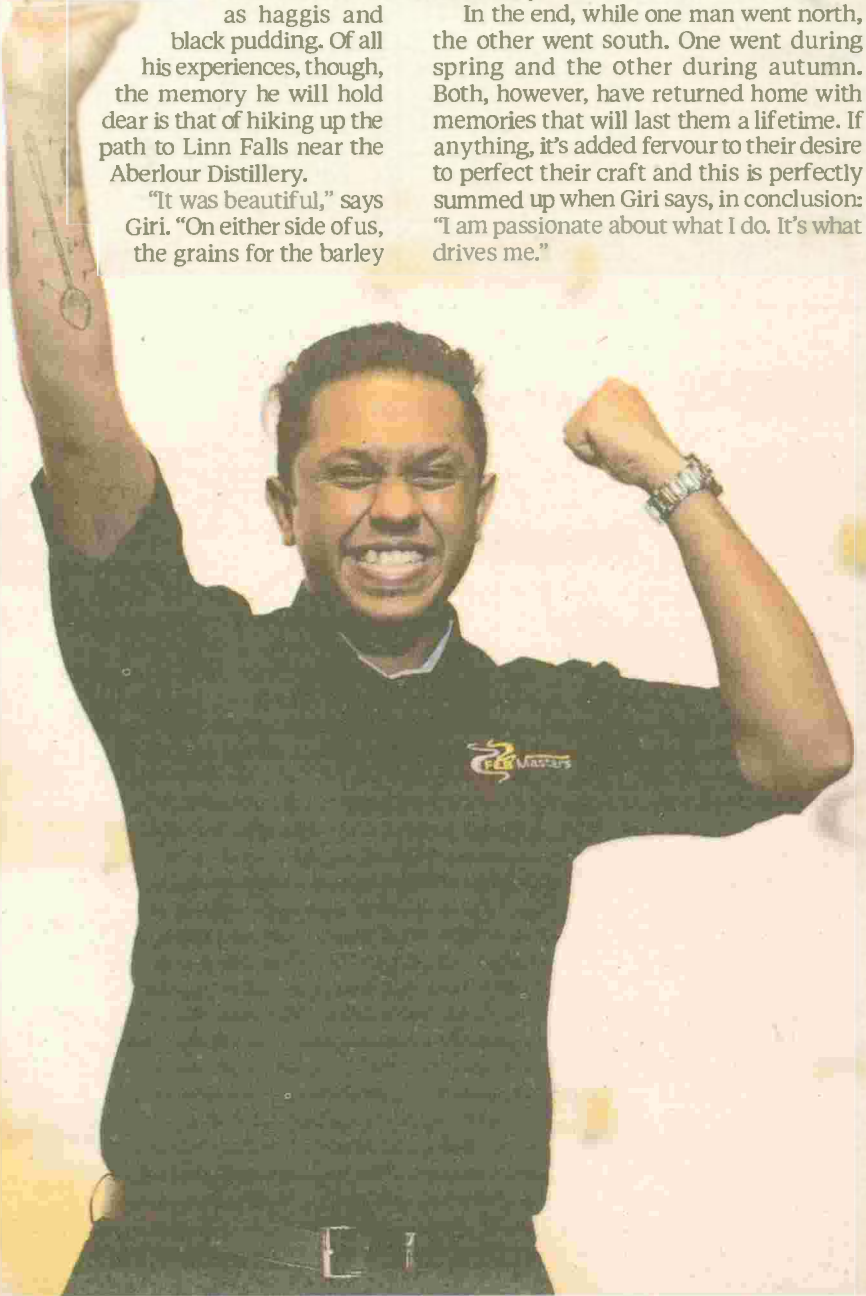


*In the vineyard on a truck with the vineyard manager.*

had been harvested. The land was being ploughed for the next harvest."

With a soft smile on his lips, he adds: "It was evening and all around, I could hear the sounds of nature. When we reached the waterfall, the water was just so clear and lovely."

In the end, while one man went north, the other went south. One went during spring and the other during autumn. Both, however, have returned home with memories that will last them a lifetime. If anything, it's added fervour to their desire to perfect their craft and this is perfectly summed up when Giri says, in conclusion: "I am passionate about what I do. It's what drives me."



**"I am passionate about what I do. It's what drives me."**

*Ciritharan Panchakaran*

the dish and help customers pair it with the appropriate wine. There is a distinct eagerness in his tone when he insists on illustrating this. He offers an example where a customer orders a plate of noodles and insists he wants a glass of wine to accompany this.

"Since it is wok-fried, it'll be heavy," says Nick in a serious tone. "It'll also be oily. That means I have to choose a wine that can balance this. It's also seafood. So I'll choose wine that has some acidity and maybe sweetness. Maybe, I'll choose a Riesling for this customer."

That sentiment of being more than a bartender is something that Giri shares. Unlike Nick, though, Giri's passion for this work was cultivated from a very young age when he recognised that this favourite subject in school was Chemistry.

"Not Biology or Physics so much," insists the 27-year-old born and bred in Kuala Lumpur. Initially, Giri opted for a pre-University course that would allow him to pursue something like Medicine or Engineering. Six months into the course and he realised that he had absolutely no interest in either of those subjects. There was no looking back from the moment he switched courses to one that would lead him to a career in the F&B industry.

"True, alcohol makes you happy first,