

TASTE

Magpie Disposition

Michael Chow has been at the centre of food, fashion, music, film and art on both sides of the Atlantic for nearly 50 years.

by Britt Collins



IT'S HARD TO DEFINE WHAT MICHAEL CHOW does. Restaurateur, designer, painter, he's a cultural magpie who's been at the heart of the food, fashion, music, film and art orbit on both sides of the Atlantic for nearly 50 years.

"Guess I'm in the business of glamour," Chow jokes, peering out from behind his trademark black-framed round glasses.

Sitting in a chair beside the garden-facing windows of his Los Angeles home, he is dressed in a paint-splattered black t-shirt and jeans. Given that his London and New York restaurants are synonymous as hangouts for the cool crowd, he comes across as shy and modest. From the moment

he arrived on the scene with the Mr Chow restaurant in London in 1968, it became a creative salon that drew the Beatles, the Stones, David Bailey, Celia Hammond, Mary Quant and anyone rich and fashionable enough.

"It was a wild time," he recalls. "I had long hair and wore ridiculous clothes."

His latest Las Vegas outpost at Caesars Palace is the seventh addition to his fine-dining empire. The voluptuously white circular space has a 26ft moon sculpture swinging down from the domed ceiling that opens like a night-blooming flower, bathing the guests in soft, shifting light. "The idea

of dining under the moon is romantic," says Chow, who has designed the interiors of all of his restaurants. "It's like theatre with a light show. Vegas is a pop city, it fizzes with energy."

One of Chow's talents is his knack of being in the right place at the right time — 1960s London, 1970s Los Angeles and 1980s New York. "When I came to New York at the tail end of Studio 54, they went crazy. The restaurant phone never stopped ringing. Sometimes we took it off the hook. We hit New York like a storm and it soon turned into a cafeteria for all the great artists: Warhol, Mapplethorpe, everybody. Jean-Michel Basquiat sent this huge portrait of me that he painted to the restaurant as a calling card, and I thought: 'What the f___ is that?' He introduced himself later and we fell in love with each other," he says. At the time, the trail-blazing artist was sleeping on friends' couches and Chow and his late wife Tina helped him survive by feeding him and buying his paintings. "Jean-Michel was so bright and tender, and he became a good friend."

Chow has been fortunate with his friendships. "My good looks helped obviously," he laughs and shrugs. "I never noticed the celebrity thing." In so many words, it's the only lifestyle he's ever known. "I had more glamour when I was young. My father was a famous actor in China and people pointed to me in the street like I was Elvis's son."

An orphan of China's Cultural Revolution, Chow was born into a theatrical dynasty. His father Zhou Xinfang, who was later imprisoned, tortured and purged, was one of the biggest stars of the

Beijing Opera. "At 13 I was sent to London by myself. I'd lost everything I knew, my parents, my country. I had a broken education. Going to St Martins art school liberated me."

Chow designed his Los Angeles family home, where he lives with his wife, Korean-American Eva Chun, a former fashion designer. The museum-like mansion has cathedral ceilings, soaring Art Deco chandeliers and is filled with priceless antiques and art.

"That's by Julian Schnabel, we did a swap," he says, pointing to the Herculean yellow painting looming over a giant stone fireplace. "And that's a Damian Hirst," he says of Hirst's famous spot painting.

Moving to another room, he points out his own large-scale, sculptural abstract work with precious metals, newspaper, money and duck's eggs fossilised in swirls of colour. "This is 17ft tall," he beams. "As long as I can still climb a ladder I'll paint." At 77, he's returned to painting after five decades. "When I left art school in the 1950s I was broke and starved for three days. No way could I create good art with no food. It was just too tough. It was sink or swim, I survived. My fame and fortune gave me wings to soar."

While his glittering success may have soothed his insecurities, the losses of his parents and his second wife Tina Chow, supermodel and style icon who died of AIDS in 1992, the sadness hasn't gone. "I'm all f___ up," he says sombrely, forcing a smile. "I poured my losses into creativity, and it made life more bearable. I continued to be creative in the restaurant business because I treated it like theatre, and that's what kept me going. Now I'm painting like a madman. There were plenty of artists who painted in late age," he adds.

Does it worry him that people question his integrity as an artist? "Not worry me," he laughs, "It's my Achilles heel. I was like Cinderella. No one looked at me like an artist and everyone wanted me to stay in the kitchen. But I have always felt I'm a f___ artist." ♦

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MR CHOW'S EPONYMOUS RESTAURANT IN CAESARS PALACE, LAS VEGAS

