

Wining & Dining



No kidding!
ENSURE YOUR COMPANY New Year party stands out from the rest by booking a Hong Kong



WOM
guide 2009

Bits and bites

The authors of a bestselling guide to local eateries tell **Joyce Kam** what makes their mouths water

IF THE TASK of picking the best restaurant to go for your first date or to impress your in-laws in that first meeting leaves you scratching your head, word-of-mouth recommendations can come in handy. And the wisdom has become more tangible – two local gourmets have compiled it into a guidebook, simply called *WOM* (for word of mouth).

Oxford graduates Fergus Fung and Samanta Pong joined international investment banks as financial analysts before they realized their true calling was to be food critics.

"We are really natural born eaters," said Fung, an avid fan of meticulously prepared food that melts in the mouth. "We started the business as a hobby when we saw a lack of local guidebooks in the city."

WOM is so popular it is now in its fourth edition. With a bold new bite design on the top right corner, the book contains reviews of more than 1,300 dining establishments in Hong Kong, from traditional tea houses and the humble noodle stall to Michelin-class eateries, luxury hotels, private dining rooms and tourist favorites.

"We condense the comments made by members on our website in short sentences," said Pong. According to their company, they have more than 8,000 members who spend more than HK\$630 million on dinners a year.

The guidebook is based on feedback from those who have feted on roughly 1.54 million dinners a year. "Then based on the summaries, plus our own opinions, we come up with *WOM* choices

like the best place for *char siu*, the best designed restaurants or places to drive and dine."

The authors rate the restaurants on three aspects – food, service and ambience – on a one to 10 scale. But the book also contains helpful details for those on the lookout for al fresco dining, pet-friendly places and establishments that offer a bring-your-own-bottle policy and no corkage charges. Basic details like prices and opening hours, as well as signature dishes, are *de rigueur*.

The book has been criticized for its Island West emphasis as well as for the profligacy of fine-dining places among those restaurants it recommends highly to readers.

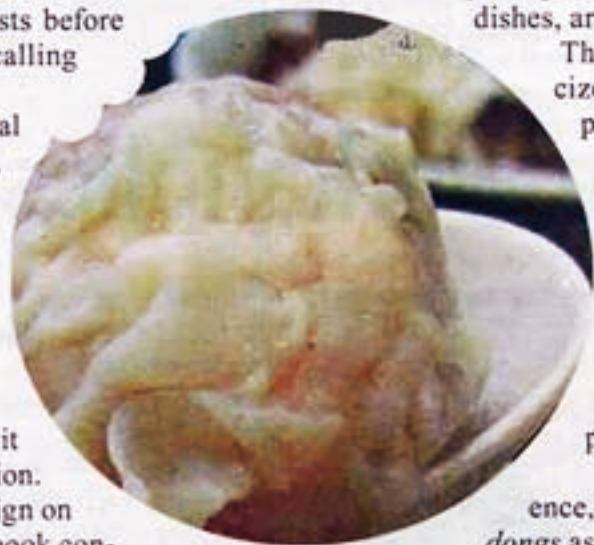
Pong denies there is any snobbery, saying they are absolutely food persons.

"We do rate for ambience, but we still go to *dai pai dongs* as long as they serve excellent food," she said, adding she yells for Fung whenever she spots empty seats at popular stalls so he can make a dash for them.

"It's part of the experience, part of the culture, to eat at a *dai pai dong*," said Pong. She lamented the fact that there are only 28 street eateries left in Hong Kong.

"Even if the second generation wants to take over the licenses, it cannot be renewed except by its registered owner," she said. "I think some people are revisiting the regulations now. But *dai pai dongs* are really an essential part of local culture that should be conserved."

The two friends are so crazy about food



they choose their travel destinations based on their culinary possibilities. "We are attracted by a country solely because of its dishes. Then we will plan the meals first, and then everything around the meals," said Fung.

"Our job is actually very dangerous," he smiled. "I'm allergic to eggs and if I eat too much over a period of time, I can't breathe."

Yet he was savoring an egg and cheese omelet during the interview since he said it's one of the best in the city.

Pong is allergic to crabs. "But I'm so crazy about them. I love all kinds of crabs. So I'll take a pill before I start eating," she said, pulling out a pill case from her bag.

The result of the labors of these two life-risking gourmets is priced at HK\$160 and sold at bookstores or www.paddyfield.com.

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