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Financial Times

Posted on

27 MARCH 2010

Ooh aah Cantonese

Restaurant Insider: Nicholas Lander goes in search of authentic local cuisine in Hong Kong

Hong Kong has one of the highest rates of restaurant openings and closures in the world. The former British colony has always been somewhere to enjoy the most exciting Cantonese food but it seems that many of the more recent high-profile openings have been by overseas chefs.

French chefs Alain Ducasse, Pierre Gagnaire and Joël Robuchon have restaurants there. Roka and Zuma, two London restaurants, have outposts and may soon be joined by one of Jamie Oliver's mid-price Italian restaurants and a Wagamama, the inexpensive noodle chain. Where are the new Cantonese restaurants?

To aid my search, I enlisted Fergus Fung, founder of the annual Word of Mouth (WOM) guide to Hong Kong's restaurants. Fung, who is also a district councillor for the Deepwater Bay area, has plenty of suggestions. We start at the second branch of Fu Sing in Causeway Bay (the original is in Wanchai), which goes a long way to putting my mind at ease about the strength of Cantonese food.

I am joined at Fu Sing by an old friend, born and bred in Shanghai, who tells me he is delighted with his transfer to Hong Kong as it gives him the chance to enjoy the inexpensive Cantonese food on Johnston and Shanghai streets in Kowloon. We are both impressed by Fu Sing's rendition of *char sui*, slices of crisp roast pork; soy sauce chicken; stir-fried beef cubes with garlic; and a plate of bean curd with peanuts in soy sauce.

I meet the urbane Fung the following day at The Chairman, a restaurant five minutes' walk from Central that has justifiably attracted full houses since it opened last May. Both he and the restaurant interior stand out. Fung, 34, is wearing a blue striped suit, shirt and tie with a dark blue handkerchief in his breast pocket and highly polished black shoes. He looks every inch the politician. The restaurant's interior, by contrast, is entirely white including one wall of white leather squares.

The Chairman's food, served on white plates on a white tablecloth, is impressive,



Insight Fergus Fung, founder of the annual Word of Mouth guide to Hong Kong's restaurants, at The Chairman restaurant *Paul Hillon*

including three dishes whose colour is predominantly white: noodles cooked in the stock of crab in white wine; thick, comforting congee; and a delicate almond soup as dessert. Best of all, however, is a first course of a dark brown 10 bean soup.

The Chairman represents for Fung a new direction in Cantonese cooking, which he calls "SOL": seasonal, organic and local. He says: "As Hong Kong has boomed over the years, chefs have grown accustomed to having their food flown in or trucked in

from all over southern China. That's finally changing now."

This process is being encouraged by the spread of the local chapter of the Slow Food Movement, pioneered by Chris Robinson and Annabel Jackson. Their endeavours are made easier by the emergence of producers such as Tam Keung, renowned for his pork.

Fung explains two principles of life for any Hong Kong restaurateur. The first is that Hong Kongers are besotted with the new, which means that any opening will be

extremely busy but this enthusiasm will invariably only last until the next well-publicised opening. (At the time of writing, the favourite draw is Otto e Mezzo, an Italian, in Central).

Then there are the rents, which are invariably high because of the natural shortage of land and the fact that landlords always demand a top-up based on a percentage of turnover. This makes it especially difficult for first-time restaurateurs as Fung demonstrates by pointing out the "Closed for Business" signs on two neighbouring restaurants, Beso and Burger Republic. Restaurateurs want to be in Central because of the high turnover of potential customers it attracts day and night but few can afford the rent.

As we walk past Kau Kee, the corner stall famous for its beef brisket and noodles, Fung grows more enthusiastic about the renaissance of Hong Kong's standing for genuine, inexpensive Cantonese food.

"There had been a concerted attempt to do away with what we call *dai pai dong*, the large outdoor food stalls, but happily this has gone no further. There are seven round here and 28 in total which have survived," Fung says. There are also signs

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of authentic Cantonese recipes being passed from one generation to another. I first visited Luk Yu Tea House in Central 30 years ago. With its lacquered, wooden booths and waitresses strolling between crowded tables with large trays of dim sum, Luk Yu has barely changed in all those years. It clearly has its regulars. I had two breakfasts there on consecutive days and saw, at many other tables, the same customers sitting in exactly the same seats.

A 10-minute walk away is Tim's Kitchen, a 20-seat restaurant that derives its name from chef Yau Tim Lai, who began as an apprentice 40 years ago in the banqueting kitchens of Hang Seng Bank and now oversees everything with his son, Maurice. By day, the menu offers a range of excellent but uncomplicated Cantonese dishes and there is a range of more intricate set menus in the evening. Highlights include crab claw with winter melon; pomelo skin with shrimp roe; and grouper fillets with asparagus. Best of all, however, is the news that, in May, Tim's Kitchen will move to a more comfortable site in nearby Bonham Strand.

Happily, exciting Cantonese food is still thriving in Hong Kong.

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