

Culture and Thought -- Food for Thought: Cantonese Cooking in Crisis --- A Pre-eminent Cuisine Loses Its Edge Amid Food Scares, Recession

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Diners in Hong Kong have been buffeted by ill winds now for several years. From chicken virus to pesticide-soaked vegetables to seafood left toxic by algae blooms, food scares crop up regularly. On top of that, the economic downturn has bitten deeply, leaving many restaurants struggling to stay open. It is all disheartening news in a city that is slowly losing its reputation as one of the best places to eat in the world.

In the middle of all this it's odd to find a high-end Cantonese restaurant opening. But the Tin Shan Palace has a powerful backer, a respected chef formerly from the Regent Hotel and the prospects of a long life thanks to the deep pockets of Li Ka-Shing. Hong Kong's most famous billionaire has his own table in the corner behind a carved screen. But it's unclear whether this is to hide him from paparazzi or shield him from the disappointed muttering of fellow diners.

Not all Hong Kong restaurants have sunk to these complacent levels, but there's still a crisis at the heart of Cantonese food that has not been addressed. Lau Chi-Sun, editor of Wine Now magazine and the city's foremost food critic, pins the decline in the quality of Cantonese food on changes in farming in China that have altered the quality and taste of ingredients. As farmers have discovered fast-growing species and a whole pharmacopoeia of chemical additives, the food has declined in terms of quality and safety. "They all grow faster but they don't taste the same," Mr. Lau says.

FULL TEXT

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The restaurant represents everything that has gone wrong with Cantonese food. Over-priced and underwhelming, the menu is purely for the plutocratic, with page after page of hyper-expensive seafood. Even avoiding those dishes, the food is pricey and without much spark. A spiced pigeon dish was gritty and underflavored while pork with crystal sugar seems like an experiment not worth repeating -- think honey-drenched Spam. Even on a slow evening when

the kitchen must have been underworked, the food was tepid and uninspired.

The dining room is also charmless. You step straight from the elevator into the large empty room on the third floor of the new Cheung Kong Centre. The impression is that Mr. Li is just waiting for rental rates to rise again so that he can quickly lease it as office space. Decorated with some cheap stage chinoiserie, the Tin Shan Palace doesn't even have a view.

There is a Chinese saying that you have to be rich for three generations to really know about food. Skip the Tin Shan Palace and wait for Mr. Li's grandchild to open a restaurant.

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As Hong Kong's waters have been fished out, the city now has to bring in fish from further afield. They are often transported in tanks topped up with polluted water. Those with discerning palates like Mr. Lau even claim to be able to tell a marked difference in the taste of such fish as garoupa, which are more likely to be caught in warmer waters off Indonesia than in the cooler area around Hong Kong.

It wasn't always this way. Cantonese food emerged as pre-eminent among the Chinese cuisines because of the freshness of the food. The seas around Hong Kong were abundant. As China's gateway, the Pearl River Delta was exposed to a diverse array of new foods and techniques, and its chefs have long been on the culinary frontier, melding ingredients from around the world and into Chinese dishes. Menus are filled with dishes like chicken in Portuguese sauce that signal their disparate roots. Hong Kong even absorbed some, although many would say mercifully few, British inflections in its food -- Lea and Perrins Worcestershire Sauce is a popular condiment with roast chicken.

Now Hong Kong restaurants tend to rely more on gimmickry and new dishes than on the basic quality of their food. What's missing, according to Mr. Lau, is what the French call "terroir," the essential connection between the land and what it produces. Localities are known for growing a particular product and each region assures the quality of what it produces. The lack of concern over ingredients has amplified a decline in quality that Mr. Lau believes was set in motion by the Cultural Revolution, which ended the training of cooks and the open appreciation of food for more than a decade. Despite his reservations, he still believes Hong Kong has the best Chinese cooks in the world and the best Cantonese food anywhere.

As the dioxin poisonings in Belgium have shown, no country has been immune to food scares recently. But Hong Kong does seem to have had more than a reasonable share. According to Mr. Lau, restaurateurs have shown no inclination yet to resolve these problems by following the lead of high-end restaurants in Europe and the United States, which have refocused their attention on the ingredients. Restaurants have managed to beat back some of the damage of commercial farming by encouraging smaller producers of high-quality produce or demanding traditional varieties rather than accepting the cheapest goods on offer. Unfortunately, all of that seems a long way off in Hong Kong.

Nouvelle Cantonese

Tin Shan Palace is in the Cheung Kong Centre, 2 Queen's Road Central, Hong Kong. Tel: 2186-8288. Dishes start at about \$12. Dinner ranges from about \$40 a head to an almost limitless upper end if you eat any of the dried seafood dishes.

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