

Food for Thought: Remembrance of Gristle Past --- Revisionist Dining: Colonial Menu Isn't What It Used to Be

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

There are places in Asia where time travel is still possible, at least in culinary terms. In Maymyo, in the cool highlands of Burma, they still serve traditional British Sunday roasts. At the Candacraig Inn, a large mock Tudor mansion that was once a chummary, or guest house for Englishmen employed by Bombay Burma Trading Company, you can eat roast beef with Yorkshire pudding or lamb with mint sauce.

The food at Candacraig almost defies description. Covering half the plate was a sheet of Neoprene beef richly marbled with gristle. This was ringed by a forbidding moat of gravy on which had formed a resilient skin. The other half of the plate was where the vegetables had blended into a homogenous gray paste. Alongside was a single fatigued lettuce leaf topped with Heinz Salad Cream, that obliterating mix of egg yolks, cornstarch and weapon's grade vinegar that has been described as not so much a salad dressing as a salad straitjacket.

Candacraig offers the sort of food that colonial nostalgia-afflicted restaurants really should serve if they were to be true to the times they strive to re-create. There seem to be no end to places in Asia that simply celebrate the mythical glamour of those days. From the sparkling Raffles in Singapore to the Art Deco Cafe Batavia in Jakarta to the Strand in Rangoon and the Dalat Palace Hotel in Vietnam, these restaurants and hotels revel in a painless colonial opulence that never existed and serve food that is a world away from the stodgy fare eaten by sweating European functionaries. They ate not to conjure up the romance of the Orient but to take them back, however briefly, to their homes in colder climes.

FULL TEXT

There are places in Asia where time travel is still possible, at least in culinary terms. In Maymyo, in the cool highlands of Burma, they still serve traditional British Sunday roasts. At the Candacraig Inn, a large mock Tudor mansion that was once a chummary, or guest house for Englishmen employed by Bombay Burma Trading Company, you can eat roast beef with Yorkshire pudding or lamb with mint sauce.

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From outside in the rose-scented garden, the sound of hymns wafted into the gloomy dining room. It came from a group of South Korean Christians on a retreat who had woken the entire hotel at dawn with their zealous singing. Sitting in a weak puddle of light shed by a 20-watt bulb, arranging my food to make it look as though I had eaten more than a mouthful, I realized I was no longer in Burma in the 1990s. I had been transported back 25 years to a British boarding school.

That flashback to that cowed world of early rising, strident religiosity and dismal food ended any temptation I've ever had to indulge in colonial nostalgia. Candacraig reminded me of a theme park that opened in Germany a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Visitors were subjected to all the rigors of life in East Germany under the communists -- bad food, no coffee or fruit, abrasive toilet paper and fume-spewing Trabant cars. To get anything you had to stand in line all day. Amazingly, people loved it.

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One of the problems with colonial food was its frequent determination to replicate the conditions at home while lacking the ingredients. Beef, lamb and pork all taste different when grown in Asia, and most temperate vegetables were not available. Likewise the food was prepared by people who didn't eat it; in fact, they would probably recoil, on religious or culinary grounds, from ever consuming the food they cooked for others.

Colonial food, cut off from its cultural source, tended to be static and unchanging with little of the innovation of cuisines at home. When colonials did absorb the local foods they tended to make the flavors more mild or adapt them to local tastes. Some of these dishes have endured -- mulligatawny soup (a curried beef broth with rice) or kedgeriee (smoked fish and eggs with rice) -- but the bland, barely spiced English curries, served with side dishes of chopped bananas and raisins, have faded away.

The rapid pace of development in Asia has meant that almost no truly old restaurants have survived the past 20 years. Even those hotels like the Strand in Rangoon have been restored to such a degree of polish and are so richly endowed with contemporary convenience that they bear little resemblance to anything in the past. Menus have also moved on. Singapore's Goodwood Park Hotel invites you to "soak in European architecture reflecting the grandeur of Singapore's colonial past" while dining on Taiwanese porridge or a Nonya high tea. Managers of historic hotels have realized that there are few customers to be won over by a genuine colonial menu of brown Windsor soup, stew and spotted dick; if you don't know what these are, let me reassure you that they taste much like they sound.

In the absence of genuinely historic restaurants, those ancient, barely changing institutions like La Tour d'Argent, the Paris restaurant that opened in 1582, there has emerged in Asia a new type of theme restaurant: the quasi-historical. This is history lite -- places where you can enjoy the past but nobody shoves your face into the reality of distant times. At the Cu Chi tunnels outside Ho Chi Minh City you can eat stringy boiled manioc dipped in crushed peanuts while sipping tea brewed from wild leaves in the way the Viet Cong did during the war. You won't, however, be expected to lose 10 percent of your body weight for each month on patrol in the jungle, though, as most Vietnamese soldiers did. Nor will you likely succumb to the beri-beri and other forms of malnutrition that killed so many.

If you are utterly immune to embarrassment and if you can laugh in the face of self-inflicted humiliation -- and a generation of people in Asia raised on karaoke must qualify by now -- there is a hotel in Hue where you can dress up in the full regalia of a Vietnamese emperor and be served traditional imperial food. A chamberlain, dressed in a long, high-collared silk shirt, his chest jangling with real medals from real wars, will taste your food in case it is poisoned.

One of the oddest, and perhaps most disturbing, must be House of Mao in Singapore, whose menu features Maogueritas and TiraMaosu. Decorated with political kitsch from the Cultural Revolution, it serves the spicy Hunanese food that the chairman favored, although it has left off his favorite dish of fatty pork fried in lard. According to his doctor, the great helmsman also liked snakes cooked in lard. Lard seems to have been something of a leitmotif in his diet. House of Mao, which now has two branches, bills itself as the "perfect spot for some 'pre-clubbing' drinks."

Clubbing in this context presumably has nothing to do with struggle sessions against bourgeois capitalist roaders.

Send comments to awsj.food@awsj.com

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