

Guangzhou -- The Rebuttal: Ossified Ideas, No Variety? No Thanks

By Robert Templer

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

The Cantonese and the French have a lot in common. Both cultures put a lot of emphasis on food and fashion. Neither puts much stock in politeness or is known for its shy, retiring public demeanor. Both regard themselves as guardians of a great culinary tradition. And both have turned a complacent eye to the slow ossification of their traditions.

The most acclaimed chefs of today, men like David Bouley of Bouley Bakery in New York, Thomas Keller of the French Laundry in Napa and Ferran Adria of El Bulli in Spain, are not French. They were able to innovate in a way that French chefs have found impossible. Cantonese food is now languishing in the same cul-de-sac: luxury comes above everything and the food has lost touch with its roots.

FULL TEXT

The Cantonese and the French have a lot in common. Both cultures put a lot of emphasis on food and fashion. Neither puts much stock in politeness or is known for its shy, retiring public demeanor. Both regard themselves as guardians of a great culinary tradition. And both have turned a complacent eye to the slow ossification of their traditions.

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The problem with having a great tradition is making sure it stays alive. Even more than French food, Cantonese food has taken a beating in the past 50 years. Conflict in China wiped out much of the knowledge and later the Cultural Revolution nearly ruptured the tradition completely.

Economic reforms have brought the restaurant scene back to life but the emphasis now is too focused on conspicuous consumption. As in Hong Kong, too many restaurants have become all about show. Menus put such emphasis on ridiculously expensive, and very profitable, dried seafood dishes that they forget the basics. Guangzhou has become a great place to eat endangered species and absurdly expensive delicacies but it's hard to focus on the food amid the stench of unbridled greed and corruption.

I was once invited to a meal in Hong Kong cooked by a chef who had just arrived from Guangzhou where his skills were much acclaimed. I still shudder when I think about it. The gray, fatty meat bounced around my mouth, the prawns reeked of ammonia, a custard with fish intestines was a slimy nightmare of aggressive fishiness. The meal gave the overwhelming feeling that the pre-eminence of Cantonese food in Chinese cuisine was unwarranted. Give me Beijing, Shanghai or Sichuan food any day. I'd rather eat those tasty, unpretentious cuisines that sit through

another interminable Cantonese banquet.

Another problem with a great tradition is it rarely co-exists well with other foods. Guangzhou, like Paris, offers little except local food. You may be able to get some of the best food from the dominant cuisine but today most people prefer to have some variety. Living in Paris for a year I developed a feverish lust for Indian food that could only be satisfied by going to London. Now I'd hesitate to live anywhere that didn't offer more than just the local food.

Guangzhou's Best
Lijiang Seafood Restaurant
20 Xizheng Rd., Xican, Tel: 8650-8789
Recommended dishes:
-- Long-neck clams
-- Scallop-like shellfish
-- Yellow fish soup
-- Daikon pancake
-- Steamed chicken
Puli Sichuan Restaurant, 744 Dongfeng Rd. Tel: 8775-1685
Recommended dishes: steamed pig's shank, braised sea eel, crispy rice
soup
Hunan Girl Restaurant, 54 Daojin Rd.
Tel: 8357-5680
Recommended dishes: steamed spareribs in rice flour, Chairman Mao's
favorite

Kiu Mei Food Shop, 52 Shamian St.
South. Tel: 8191-3018
Recommended dishes: congee with pumpkin and fish, sweet potato
pancake, frog fat tarts, freshwater eel in clay pot
Shahe Hotel, 318 Xianli Rd.
Tel: 8771-4639
Recommended dishes: five kinds of rice noodles
Zhuo Ji Claypot Rice, Damazhan Lane.
Tel: 8339-7033 (Take alley next to McDonald's on Beijing Rd., turn on
first right)
Recommended dishes: claypot eel over rice, claypot spareribs over rice
-- Stan Sesser

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