



## Eating on the fly

Chengdu is known for its cheap restaurants serving simple, home-style food, writes **Robyn Eckhardt**

No sign marks the entrance to Zi Fei, a swanky restaurant occupying a century-old courtyard house in Chengdu's fashionable Kuan Zhai Xiangzi district. Inside, diners in private rooms furnished with luxe fabrics and Ming and Qing dynasty pieces feast on creatively reimagined Sichuanese classics such as *gong bao*, giant prawns served in a dry ice cloud-shrouded coconut half, and tissue-thin slices of *bai rou* (poached belly pork) rolled around cucumber matchsticks and "planted" upright in a platter of seasoned chilli oil.

I'm sharing a dinner of *mapo dofu* (baby-sized portions of tofu plated in delicate ceramic saucers), wild mushrooms steamed in bamboo, and feathery baby mizuna leaves with Zi Fei's manager, Martin Xie, in a purple silk-swathed space just off the central courtyard. Xie eats with deliberation, pausing after each mouthful to fully process the

flavours and textures before moving on to the next. I'm curious to know which of the Sichuan capital city's other upmarket establishments he frequents on his day off.

The manager, a portly thirty-something sporting a black T-shirt and hipster frames, leans back from the table and shakes his head. "Let me tell you something," he says with a chuckle. "This is good. But this kind of food isn't my favourite. If I have a choice I'll eat at a fly restaurant."

"Fly" restaurants – *cangying guanzi* – are Chengdu's dai pai dong: modest, everyman eateries serving no-fuss fare. The term, peculiar to Chengdu, is a reference not only to the fact the restaurants are open-air – sometimes, in fact, they lack walls entirely – but also to their hygiene standards, which might be viewed as dubious. But despite their rustic environments, the city's growing number of middle- to high-end eateries, and its population's

steadily rising income levels, Chengdu's *cangying guanzi* are wildly popular, attracting everyone from construction labourers to well-heeled executives.

In March, citing the city's well-developed cuisine, vibrant food scene and many traditional wet markets among other factors, Unesco named Chengdu Asia's first City of Gastronomy. The designation may have put Chengdu on the international traveller's culinary map, but it only confirmed what serious Chinese foodies have known for years: the city boasts an amazingly rich food culture rooted in an obsession with eating and drinking well.

It's a passion that is embodied in the hundreds of fly restaurants that have survived Chengdu's rapid redevelopment over the past 15 years. While larger Chinese metropolises such as Shanghai and Beijing have all but erased street food culture from their urban landscape, Chengdu's municipal authorities continue to display tolerance for their *cangying guanzi*'s brand of street-side wokkery.

In the evenings the scent of rapeseed oil-sizzled Sichuan peppercorns and dried red chillis – known as *qiang bizi* – forms an appetite-rousing fog over Chengdu's smaller lanes and alleys, and diners perch on wooden stools over plates of straightforward food like chilli oil-dressed *zhu er gen* (an astringent and citrusy wild leaf), slivered pork fried with garlic shoots, and eggs stir-fried with tomato.

Despite the plethora of other, perhaps more comfortable, dining options near his office, Chengdu

• CONTINUED ON C6



Zhang Lingcheng's wife (top) serves dishes such as *mapo dofu* (above left) and smoked, air-dried pork belly with corn and edamame (above centre). Photos: David Hagerman

### Table talk Edited by Susan Jung

The executive chef, sous chef and winemaker of San Felice in Tuscany will be at a dinner at **Angelini** restaurant at the Kowloon Shangri-La tomorrow. The five-course dinner is HK\$980 plus 10 per cent and includes lard-wrapped dover sole with sun-dried wine tomato, Tuscan lentil purée and sangiovese wine sauce with Vermentino Sauvignon Blanc Perolla 2009 San Felice; home-made ravioli with potatoes, thyme and aged pecorino cheese (right) with Chianti Classico Riserva Il Grigio 2006; lamb chops with marinated eggplant and garlic sauce with Brunello di Montalcino Campogiovanni 2005; and warm ricotta tart with acacia honey, chocolate and vin santo gelato with Vin Santo del Chianti 2004. Bookings (for tomorrow): 2555 7431. The promotion continues for two more days; bookings: 2733 8750.

Also at the Kowloon Shangri-La is the Huaiyang promotion at **Shang Palace**. Guest chefs from the Shangri-La

Qingdao are cooking their specialities until Sunday. The à la carte selection includes Huaiyang-style steamed minced pork bun; handmade noodles in superior fish broth; braised dongpo pork in casserole; sweet and sour Mandarin fish; and shredded beancurd soup with mushrooms and sliced abalone. There's also a set menu for 12 people at HK\$6,388 plus 10 per cent. Bookings: 2733 8754.

**Café Deco** will serve Italian wines at its Saturday buffet this week. Wines include Ronco del Gelso Malvasia DOC 2008, Tedeschi Amarone della Valpolicella Classico DOC 2005 and Colpetrone Montefalco Sagrantino DCG 2005. The antipasti buffet offers ginger chicken liver parfait with madeira jelly; smoked duck breast; lamb tortellini; black mussels with fennel; quiche Florentine with blue cheese and pine nuts. It costs HK\$288 plus 10 per cent. Bookings: 2849 5111.

Alain Ducasse hosts a truffle dinner on November 29 at **Spoon by Alain Ducasse** at the InterContinental in Tsim Sha Tsui. Dishes include chestnut and tartufi di Alba broth with Philipponnat Clos des Goisses 2000; truffled Bresse chicken and Albufera sauce with Chapelle Chambertin Grand Cru Louis Jadot 2004; pan-seared scallops with Chateaufeuf-du-Pape Chateau de la Gardine 2005. It costs HK\$1,488 plus 10 per cent, plus HK\$888 for the wines. Bookings: 2313 2256.



## Asian grapevine Jeannie Cho Lee

I've been planning my menu for Thanksgiving this week and it includes my now-classic 12kg turkey with spicy kimchi stuffing. Yes, I've taken a very American holiday meal and given it an Asian twist. I've been making and refining this stuffing for about 15 years and each year I change the recipe, just for the sake of continual improvement.

The basic ingredients include: a half head of cabbage kimchi (fermented spicy cabbage) which is first stir-fried in sesame oil with freshly chopped bacon bits, chilli paste and onions. Separately, I cook long grain wild rice (I've experimented with many types of rice) with chestnuts. Then I combine the mixtures and add some toasted pine nuts, maybe some leftover Korean pickles, fresh chopped herbs, sprang onions and anything else in my fridge that would add flavour and texture. One year, a girlfriend asked me for the recipe and when I answered that I didn't have one, she chided me and whispered, "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone. You can trust me."

I don't have a recipe for kimchi turkey stuffing. The joy of making the stuffing is that it is different each year. How tedious it would be if I had to repeat the same recipe and follow a formula over and over again! It was hard for me to follow recipes precisely when I was studying at Cordon Bleu because my natural inclination is to be innovative and create something new each time. I'm not sure how I managed to graduate with distinction but the methodology went against my inherent nature. The creative joy for me comes from learning, tasting and reading cookbooks and recipes, all of which trigger ideas and a desire to create new combinations. I rarely bake since I accept, grudgingly, that I have to follow a recipe.

With five families including children from all ages getting together over Thanksgiving, food and wine will be on a huge buffet table. Like my mother taught me, I will be cooking for double the number of people who will attend. Leftover turkey and ham leg is always good, as is the kimchi stuffing. This year, as well as every year, the dinner will be a noisy affair where wine flows freely and seems to empty as quickly as it is



poured. Wines I have chosen for Thanksgiving include a hodgepodge from around the world. For appetisers, we will have an array of Shanghaiese cold dishes. I'm sure the 2008 Schaefer Frohlich Riesling Grosses Gewachs, which is a dry, mineral, floral wine, will work brilliantly. I'll also open the 2007 Bass Phillips Premium Pinot Noir, a sensational Australian pinot noir made by the brilliant Phillip Jones, to pair with the appetisers.

For the main buffet, which includes bean salad, turkey with kimchi stuffing, a large baked leg of ham and corn bread, I want to have expressive full bodied reds with plenty of personality. The 1997 Frescobaldi CastelGiocondo Brunello di Montalcino would fit this bill as would the merlot-based, sexy 2004 Fattorio Petrola Galatrona. This latter wine is one of my favourite merlots from Italy and ages extremely well. From the United States, I'm considering the 1998 Pesenti Zinfandel, which is dry and full-bodied with plenty of sweet, dried fruit flavours supported by firm tannins. To satisfy the Bordeaux lovers, I plan to open several bottles of 1990 Cos d'Estournel, which is drinking beautifully now, and perhaps the 1989 Montrose,

another wine from St Estephe, Bordeaux, with plenty of mojo (aka tannins which have now softened).

I love opening mature wine with friends; it's always fun to uncork old bottles to see what stage they are in – drink now, keep in the cellar or use for red wine vinegar. I'm considering the Mondavi Cabernet Sauvignon Reserve 1993, of which I have two bottles remaining from a case. I'm doubtful of its condition since one bottle I opened last year had dried-up fruit exuding a whiff of graveyard gravel. I have many wines from the 1966 vintage, which I bought about 10 years ago at auction because it was inexpensive and I was curious. It was not a great year like the 1961, but there are some lovely mature Bordeaux left. The 1966 Gruaud Larose was in great condition when I opened it a few years ago as was the 1966 Pichon Lalande. This year, I'm considering the 1966 Figeac or 1966 Lynch Bages.

Buying mature wines is a gamble and one has to be prepared to be disappointed and say it was worth it anyway. Why would anyone who is rational be willing to spend money and be disappointed? We're willing to gamble for the sake of the "wine high" – when a wine blows you away and everything and everyone around you disappears for a moment and you are surrounded by the seductive perfume of ethereal flavours and that delicate, but finely etched profile of the wine and its personality. It woos you by not trying so hard and lures you in with a lingering taste that you cannot forget and you dream about the next day. Fantastic mature wines have lost their baby fat, their youthful aggressiveness and loud personality. Sometimes, you have to strain your ears to hear their whispers. Some are on the borderline of starting to fade, to show wrinkles and age, but can still beguile you with intricate expressions and gentle grace. Mature wines are not for everyone's palate, but I admit to being a wine-high junkie.

Jeannie Cho Lee is the first Asian Master of Wine. Follow her at [twitter.com/JeannieChoLee](http://twitter.com/JeannieChoLee) or contact her at [features@scmp.com](mailto:features@scmp.com) or [www.AsianPalate.com](http://www.AsianPalate.com)

PROUDLY SPONSORED BY

Ai Ju DOOYA

Sui Jianguo

Ossing GWON

Simon BIRCH

Beech ALI AT

Antony GORMLEY

## ASIA ART ARCHIVE TURNS 10

Annual Fundraiser 2010

**PREVIEW:**  
22-26 NOVEMBER, 9:30AM-6PM  
SOBHY'S HONG KONG

**AUCTION:**  
27 NOVEMBER, HONG KONG

AAA is a registered charity in Hong Kong financially supported by the HMAAC, private corporations, foundations, individuals, galleries and artists.

Asia Art Archive's annual dinner and auction is a highlight of Hong Kong's social calendar and provides an opportunity for art collectors to purchase inspiring works of art while supporting AAA's mission. This year, the Archive celebrates its 10th Anniversary, a significant milestone for a contemporary art organization in Asia.

It remains AAA's mission to facilitate the exploration, learning, and understanding of contemporary Asian art globally. AAA activates its publicly accessible collection of over 32,000 items through extensive public and education programs and a dynamic website.

This year's auction includes over 70 artworks by Asia's most exciting and globally recognized artists. Works were donated by artists, private collections and galleries. AAA invites the public to support the Archive this year by bidding on cutting-edge artworks or by making a tax-deductible donation online at [www.aaa.org.hk](http://www.aaa.org.hk).

The dinner is sold out but the works will be on view at Sotheby's Hong Kong or online. AAA accepts absentee or phone bids. Please view the online catalogue at [www.aaa.org.hk/fundraiser2010](http://www.aaa.org.hk/fundraiser2010)

WWW.AAA.ORG.HK/FUNDRAISER2010

FOR FURTHER ENQUIRIES PLEASE CONTACT FUNDRAISER@AAA.ORG.HK OR +852 2815 1112.

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

MEDIA SUPPORT: