

The best roast duck in the world?

13 Feb 2010 by Nick Lander/ FT

It was 3.30 pm and my fifth visit to the Four Seasons restaurant in London's Chinatown (pictured at night). Finally, I was going to be granted a rare glimpse of its famed barbecue section, located on the fourth floor of this narrow, but always bustling, building, normally never revealed to a journalist.

As we turned the final corner of the narrow stairway, Joe, the genial manager, asked me to hold tight to the handrail. 'The floor gets very greasy from roasting so many ducks and we have to wash it down regularly', he explained.

Two smiling chefs greeted me and took off their yellow plastic gloves to shake my hand while behind them the tools of their trade were clearly visible.

Ducks and sides of pork were hanging from hooks close to the window so that they could benefit from the air blowing through the room. On the large table in front of me were bowls that held the ingredients for the essential marinade and the sauce that remains a secret known only to the roasting chef. There were two metal roasting ovens about a metre tall which could hold eight to a dozen ducks each and in between these was a large rice steamer.

When I asked the chef why there was a separate rice steamer here when I had seen another one a floor below in the kitchen that produces all the non-barbecue dishes, he proudly replied, 'I prepare all the rice for my dishes, and this way, if something goes wrong, the management know who is to blame.'

This was certainly the most low-tech kitchen I had been in in a long time, albeit very Chinese. The cooks were wearing wellington boots; one was quickly scooping the contents of a bowl of food into his mouth after a busy service; and all of them were delighted by my compliments on their food, particularly their roast duck, and laughed appreciatively.

The Four Seasons' renown for this dish, here and at their original branch in Queensway, west London, which has now been open for over 20 years, has spread far and wide. They have a particular following in Thailand, perhaps because their secret sauce is slightly sweeter than most, while my initial visit was prompted by a tip-off from a hotelier in Hong Kong who believes that this roast duck is the best she has ever eaten, even in Asia.

My visits only confirmed this opinion. At one lunch, the bill for a large bowl of spine-tingling hot and sour soup followed by roast duck, Chinese vegetables and rice for four came to £57. At another, Guillaume Rochette, a headhunter who places chefs and general managers around the world, was so impressed that he begged me to keep the restaurant a secret and not to write about it.

My next meal, with Peter Tsui, the company secretary and spokesman for the two restaurants that are privately owned by several Chinese families, was by far the most challenging, principally because of my lack of dexterity at taking notes while eating with chopsticks. But also because Tsui, who was born in Hong Kong but grew up washing dishes in his mother's restaurant after they had moved to England, uses Chinese astrology as the basis for his wide ranging views on the restaurant business, which football teams to bet on or not, and what is likely to happen to the stock markets here and in the US.

After ordering Chinese broccoli, because the stems on that day's delivery were respectably thin, rice and a mixed plate of duck, chicken cooked in soy and pork with excellent crackling (because the skin had been pricked to allow the marinade to penetrate the meat over 24 hours), Tsui revealed a few of the secrets behind his barbecue section's continued success.

'Between the two restaurants we prepare about 700 ducks a week. They come from Ireland at the moment and they have to have a certain amount of fat on them. The fat is important because a lot of our business is take away and the flavour has to survive being carried off and then reheated in a microwave or an oven.' On the first of several occasions, Tsui repeated what has obviously become his business mantra: there must be no weaknesses in the chain from preparing the food to serving the customer.

The ducks are stuffed with herbs and spices to get rid of their gamey flavour and then dunked completely in a mixture of vinegar and maltose syrup before roasting at a very high temperature for 45-60 minutes. When the ducks come out of the oven, they smell, according to Tsui, 'as sweet as freshly baked bread'. The combination of a hugely popular restaurant and a busy take away section means that the ducks never linger in the restaurant's front window before they are expertly chopped into mouth size pieces and served either on or off the bone (the flavour of the former is definitely the stronger).

Tsui advances several reasons for their ducks' continued popularity. Only his roasting chef knows the precise proportions of the ingredients in their marinade and, more importantly, in their sauce. This involves soy sauce, a sweetener, herbs and spices, and, crucially, must never be too salty (a fault of the competition, in his opinion) and is made by the roasting chef only when he is on his own. 'We have managed to keep it a secret not just from the rest of the staff but also from a number of people who have offered to work here for nothing as a way of finding out just how we make it', he reported with a combination of relief and satisfaction. Finally, there is Tsui's particular contribution to the restaurants' continued pre-eminence with this dish. 'Part of my job is to go round and taste the competition, the other part is to ensure we never let our standards slip', he added enthusiastically.

Finally, three small caveats. Although they share the same name, this restaurant has no connection with the hotel chain; while the food is excellent, the décor is functional; and although bookings are taken, they will always be for when a table becomes available rather than a specific time.

But for lovers of roast duck, this is a price well worth paying.

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and
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Both open 7 days.