

A new sort of speakeasy - in Hong Kong

3 Feb 2006 by JR

It was an impressive gathering around the round table. There was a senior investment banker, a partner in a private equity fund, two restaurateurs, a statesman, Chinese ex-ballerina, and an Australian businessman opposite a New Zealand barrister, both long term Hong Kong residents and equally passionate about food and wine. And all of them were sitting in an illegal establishment.

The surroundings were somewhat less impressive. There was no sign of the restaurant's name on the outside of the building while the name of the host on our party had been discreetly spelt on the small sign to the left of the lift. The room where we ate was comfortable with enough space for us to stand and have a drink before we ate but it was sparsely decorated and to save the barkeep one had to ask the waiter for a key.

This is the world of the private kitchen, an increasingly popular phenomenon in Hong Kong, one also referred to as a speakeasy or members' dining room. And here twelve of us gathered one Friday evening to see extremely well, to enjoy wines that each of us had brought and to keep gossip about food and restaurants around the world.

But before paying my dues by bringing the rest of the party up to date on what is happening in London I wanted to find out how these private kitchens, of which there are now about 40 in Hong Kong with their own colour brochure, in full colour but ready only in Cantonese, had started and why. Happily, Frank Sun, owner of the local California restaurant Tribeca, could explain succinctly.

"Private kitchens began to emerge about eight years ago straight after Asian financial crisis. A lot of people found themselves out of work and, needing to make a living quickly, turned to opening their own simple, inexpensive restaurants." The same phenomenon, I realised, had happened in the UK during the recession of the early 1990s and had been one of the factors in the rise of gastro pubs.

"But what was particular to Hong Kong and especially so in this area, the commercial Central District, was a change in the planning laws which required that every building must have two means of egress in case of fire. Now a lot of these old office buildings don't, so their owners had to find an alternative uses for them."

The particular kitchen, Southbank on Postinger Street, acknowledged to be one of the best and justifiably so on the basis of what I saw, was in a property system who had initially adapted it for his own corporate entertaining purposes, building a kitchen on the 19th floor and converting two offices below to private dining rooms. Once established, it was now available for hire to a group of 40 friends.

Private kitchens not only had to meet the regulations, of course, but they are unlicensed in many other respects such as their kitchen design and drainage. They also operate free from health and hygiene regulations, a situation perceived quite understandably as an unfair commercial advantage by the other Hong Kong restaurateurs I spoke to. But they also meet a very pressing need for ageing chefs and restaurateurs.

One of the most extraordinary aspects of Hong Kong restaurant life I discovered is just how short their commercial leases are. Whereas in the UK or US commercial leases may range from 10-25 years and be assignable in case of failure, in Hong Kong they are never longer than five years and inevitably come in multiples of two plus two years or three years plus one and are invariably non-assignable. This means not only that, once successful, restaurateurs will soon face a hefty rent increase but that they also have to make a return very quickly. "Many restaurateurs here have to make their money back in their first year or else their profits become the landlord's income," Sam explained.

But the other challenge is that Hong Kong's continuous building programme is providing ageing restaurateurs with little choice when it comes to choosing a sympathetic site. Over the counter in his kitchen at So Innovation where he is creating some exciting contemporary dishes mixing Asian ingredients with modern European techniques, chef Alain Leung Jr. explained the stark choice he faced looking for a site. "It is very, very difficult to find an attractive site that is not in a shopping mall. We are right next to the Foreign Correspondents Club but the different restaurants have failed here before me in the past seven years. I think we can back the trend but I have only got four years to recoup a considerable investment."

By contrast, Southbank's financial future looks much less risky with less regulation and therefore a smaller capital investment and a lower rent. And another talented chef, An Tai, who had trained under a 'maverick' chef and produced a ten course dinner of exquisite Cantonese food.

The meal began with small mandarin-shaped parcels of brioche, moved on to steamed tiger prawns, crab claws with chili, shark's fin scalloped with egg, spring onion and bean sprouts (a dish which I naturally fell very guilty about eating), a double boiled consommé, a large steamed flounder, duck stuffed with eight 'treasures' which included mushrooms, chestnuts and ginkgo nuts, glutinous rice with sausage and mustard greens and, finally, almond soup with very good quality lotus seeds.

The reason I learnt that these were of particularly good quality was one of the two particular reasons this meal was so distinctive. Sitting round the table with so many people knowledgeable about Chinese food I was able to learn so much, not just about what to look for in the flavours of each dish but also their significance and Tai's skill in executing them.

This in turn has had a lot to do with why the best private kitchens have proved so popular. As the senior investment banker explained, "There is something very relaxing about these places. We can bring our own wine and there is a genuine sense of being in your own space without the formality of a restaurant or a hotel."

The evening certainly ended on a relaxing note with a bottle of 25 year old Yau Shan Xian Dao, Chinese dessert wine which Sun had kindly brought and with everyone contributing HK 1,000 dollars (around £20 or US\$32) each to cover the evening. Private kitchens, not surprisingly, do not take credit cards.

NB Private kitchens are small and extremely popular. Anyone planning a trip to Hong Kong and wanting to eat in one should use whatever contacts and book well in advance.