

## Nick is Shanghaied

18 Mar 2008 by Nick Lander/FT

A pot of jasmine tea overlooking the Yangtze river; a beer after a trip round a former abattoir; and dinner in a restaurant in a former early 20th-century villa with 17 separate dining rooms and space for a full-size snooker table provided contrasting settings for tasting the continually evolving food of Shanghai.

My tea companion at **M on the Bund**, which has provided the glamorous location for many meetings since Australian Michelle Garnaut had the foresight to open here in 1999, was the elegant and knowledgeable Lynn Pan. Born in Shanghai in the 1940s, Pan is one of only a handful of women who have a comprehensive view of her city's food, on which she holds strong opinions.

"I can tell you right away what the best Shanghaiese food isn't," she told me firmly. "It isn't oily, over sweet or too salty. I think that these are all myths that have been perpetuated by the Cantonese. But our food is different, partly because of the proximity to the sea and I think it has a lot in common with Japan. Unlike most Chinese we really enjoy cold first courses and we use seaweed, for example, in several dishes. There is a very strong emphasis on fish and shellfish.

"There are two other important factors. The first is that Shanghai has seen a continuous wave of immigrants who have brought their own dishes with them which have subsequently been subsumed as our own. We had a cook once who thought that borscht, beetroot soup, and curried chicken were Shanghaiese but the former arrived with the White Russians and the second with the British. The other point is that this city has always focused on the future because its past has been so painful."

Pan's opinions rang true as I sat down with Australian chef David Laris, whom I had first met a decade ago when he had been in the vanguard of Australian chefs astutely brought to London by Sir Terence Conran. Having opened Mezzo in Soho to great success, Laris was lured to Shanghai by the developers behind 3 on the Bund, directly opposite M on the Bund, which now houses **Laris**, Jean-Georges and the Whampoa Club restaurants.

"I arrived in 2003 with my wife, daughter and a fair bit of debt," Laris explained with a smile, "but my timing could not have been better. Restaurants in China, and Shanghai in particular, have been developing very quickly but there is a great deal of money chasing not that many ideas."

As a result, Laris today has a staff of over 200, mainly in his restaurant, including six working with him as consultants on a hotel project led by Swire in Beijing to open later this year and on the transformation of 1933 ten minutes from the Bund. This former concrete abattoir, built in the round by British engineers and finally opened in 1933, will over the course of the coming year emerge as a mixed space housing a theatre, retail outlets, showrooms and a restaurant and bar on the top floor, which Laris's vivid imagination will transform into a steak house with lots of 1950s Hollywood glamour, he assured me.

Laris has also developed a café, Slice, and an extraordinary chocolate business in which five of the six chocolatiers he now employs are deaf, a mutually beneficial association he plans to develop - along with much more, he hopes. "My consultancy role really keeps me on the edge, which is what I love about it. And although we are facing the same shortage of chefs as every other major city, at least I know that as someone who has been one for the past 20 years I can lead and inspire by example."

Certainly, my meal at his restaurant reinforced the opinion of a local hedge fund manager who has lived in New York and London that this was the most consistent high-end restaurant in the city. It combines several distinct eating areas, including a long seafood bar, where I enjoyed two very particular dishes that had immediately caught my eye: a soup of lime, lemon and lily root with frogs' legs, and abalone, a great favourite with the Chinese, here served in the style of an Austrian Wiener schnitzel - flattened, breaded and fried with capers and lemon.

Dinner also included a conversation with Jason Oakley, Laris's American head chef, who explained some of the particular pleasures of cooking in Shanghai. "We can get the most wonderful red clams, eels and frogs' legs, kingfish, turbot and live hamachi. Vegetables are not that great on the whole because of the high pollution in the soil but it is a big advantage being relatively close to the Caspian and the source of caviar. Whenever the local stock market jumps five to

ten per cent we do sell a lot more caviar."

This modern face of the city seemed far more distant than the 15 minutes it took to travel by taxi from our hotel near the Bund to the narrow entrance to **Fu 1088** in the former British quarter, where we were greeted by four doormen. But then this was one of the most remarkable restaurants I have ever eaten in.

Opened six months ago, Fu 1088 is a conversion of what must have been a remarkably spacious private villa and it is one that has been done not only with a style in keeping with the building's past but also a great deal of attention to the history of Shanghai's food.

Each room has now been converted into a private dining room which can seat from two to four, up to ten or twelve in the larger rooms under the roof. They have restored the magnificent dark wooden hallway and staircase and each room contains some well-restored or new replica furniture such as couches, chairs, coat stands and dressing tables with mirrors whose drawers now contain cutlery rather than hairbrushes. One of the larger rooms even houses a piano.

All this contributed to the fact that as the demure waitress, dressed in black, ushered us into our dining room there was definitely an air of expectancy and excitement amongst our group, heightened, in my case, by the presence of a large menu full of Shanghainese dishes, described in Mandarin and English.

Among the first courses were deep fried fish in sweet soy sauce; crisp eel strips in sweet chilli sauce, which proved highly popular with someone who had not dared to try eel before despite a year in this city, and chilled cucumber with soybeans in a spicy, sour sauce. Then steamed river shad with ham; sautéed 'Ba Bao', a mixed meat dish with spicy soy sauce; and dark cubes of pork in a thick, unctuous sauce.

As we left, the female owner of Fu 1088, Fu Yafen, was sitting with friends by the first table, which is situated in the open hallway, while a man with a face very like W H Auden's played the pianola. Only the realisation that we had eaten so well prevented us from thinking we had just walked off a film set.

**M on the Bund**, [www.m-restaurantgroup.com](http://www.m-restaurantgroup.com)

**Laris**, Jean-Georges, Whampoa Club, [www.threeonthebund.com](http://www.threeonthebund.com)

**Fu 1088**, 375 Zhenning Road, 021 52397878,

**Franck**, a new French brasserie, Ferguson Lane, 376 Wukang Lu, 021- 64376465.