Eating out in Hong Kong

21 Mar 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

As we climbed the stairs to the first floor of the Lei Garden restaurant in Mongkok on the Kowloon side of Hong Kong, a branch of this business that has been famous for its dim sum for over 20 years, all the sights and sounds of this distinctive style of lunchtime eating seemed to coalesce.

There was the noise generated by the numerous happy customers as they ate. There were the commands the waitresses were passing to the kitchen and their colleagues via their mouthpieces. There was the clatter of countless bowls and chopsticks. And, most crucially for the whole enterprise, there was a woman dressed entirely in white other than her black, waterproof boots, who along with her colleagues provides the human solution to the vast dishwashing challenge dim sum restaurants pose.

Our small private dining room for seven had a distinctive view of the local Water Supplies Department that proclaimed 'Water Tanks Cleaned Every Three Months', a somewhat incongruous contrast to the international line up at the round table. This included two British wine merchants who had relocated from London's St James's to Hong Kong to sell wine in Asia; two American-educated bankers who certainly enjoy their food and wine almost as much as we do; and an old Chinese friend whom we immediately entrusted with ordering the food.

No sooner had she done so than she began with a lesson on the etiquette for enjoying what was to follow. The pair of dark chopsticks on the outside was for serving oneself and others, the pale pair on the inside, was for eating with. And while there would be a series of hot and spicy sauces to accompany the dim sim, there would be no soy sauce. 'So western,' she proclaimed with obvious disdain.

She had no sooner finished than one of the wine merchants said something that I thought could have had him dismissed from the table. He opined that, while he was enjoying Chinese food in Hong Kong, nothing he had so far eaten here had in his opinion touched the heights of the very best Japanese food in Tokyo. Fortunately, any potential for a diplomatic incident was averted by the arrival of several waitresses with the first wave of dim sum.

Over this meal and an excellent Cantonese dinner later that day at Celebrity Cuisine on the first floor of the Lan Kwai Fong Hotel in Central district, I bore this comment in mind as I analysed not just what I had eaten but also how the food was presented. My deliberations led me finally to disagree with his verdict.

There is admttedly one aspect of cooking in which the Japanese do outshine the Chinese - and probably ever other style of cooking in the world - and that is in the style and detail of their presentation of their food. If I had only to eat with my eyes I would choose Japanese food every day for its colour, the precision with which it is arranged on the plate and its overall aesthetic appeal. A plate of Japanese food brings a smile to my face even before I have tasted it.

Lei Garden's dim sum were distinguished by their thin wrapping, the freshness of the steamed dishes, particularly the char sui buns, and the clean taste of the fried dishes, but their range of colours was indeed limited. In fact the only dish outside the pale to dark brown spectrum was provided by thin slices of green pepper topped with minced fish that was served alongside braised tofu with peanuts and excellent barbecued pork. After that came three different clay pot dishes of rice topped with chicken with mushrooms, spare ribs with black beans and, our particular favourite, spicy Chinese sausage.

The same limited range of colours, but happily the same delicious flavours, were in evidence at Celebrity Cuisine. Here, despite the rather glamorous name, the plastic-coated menu still comes with photos that do not do the dishes justice and below headings such as Home Cooking Specialities and Chef's Recommendations.

Our meal began with their interpretation of the classic turnip cake with spicy sausage that was light brown in colour and then again quickly proceeded along the colour spectrum to dark brown. First came a small stuffed crab shell; then deep-fried oysters with leeks; then their version of eight-treasure duck, a whole duck stuffed with chestnuts, ginko nuts, barley, lotus seeds and more, roasted and then quickly fried; and, finally, a deep, dark brown unctuous rendition of pork belly with preserved vegetables that was lip-smackingly good. The bowl of almond paste and egg white to finish was light relief, certainly visually.

Over my final dinner, this time an excellent Western meal at The Principal, recently opened, I explained my curiosity about the apparent Chinese disinterest in the colour and presentation of their food to Lingling Huang, an art curator who has lived in Beijing and Shanghai, and asked whether this would ever change.

She was adamant that it would not. 'We're very practical people,' she explained, 'and in this area looks do not matter for us. After all when you are served a claypot dish, invariably the best bits are those at the bottom that have been closest to the flame. They may never look too attractive but they always have the best flavour.' I have to agree.

Lei Garden, 121 Sai Yee Street, Mongkok, 852 2392 5184 www.leigarden.com.hk

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The Principal, 9 Star Street, Wan Chai, 852 2563 3444, www.theprincipal.com.hk