At home in Hong Kong

6 Nov 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

Hong Kong presents a particular professional challenge: it is the city in the world where I am least likely to see a menu and, as a consequence, least likely to order a single dish. And all this happens because I try to do the very best for my readers.

The dates fixed, emails wing their way. My Chinese friends know that they are my conduit to insider restaurant knowledge and soon every meal is arranged. At this stage I still seem to have some influence because back come questions such as 'Cantonese or Shanghainese, informal or formal?' My response is invariably the former in both instances. It is at this stage, however, that I begin to be marginalised.

This happens principally because these friends are extremely generous and they want to share the good food and gossip with others. Then there is the fact that many here have splurged on the fine wine market and want to include several good bottles too. Finally, there is the much older tradition of the Chinese banquet that simultaneously combines munificent hospitality with the newer desire to match top-quality Cantonese food with several French wines of equally high standing.

And so on my first night, I found myself ringing the bell of the Southbank private kitchen and going up in the lift of a building that during the day houses offices but whose fourth floor becomes a restaurant by night under renowned chef Ah Tak.

Little has changed since I first ate here in 2006. The ceiling is low; the lighting unflattering; the exposed ductwork gurgles away; and on this occasion an air-conditioning unit blasted cold air on to my left shoulder all evening.

Just as before, two lugubrious waiters served a succession of Cantonese delicacies, and all without a word of explanation or a menu. Double-boiled chicken soup, 'crystal prawns', and a small crab shell full of baked crab meat that had Chinese and Western heads around the table rolling their eyes with pleasure. I left extremely well fed but with what I can now recognise as incipient menu deprivation.

I didn't believe that this would be the case on the second night as we headed out to Kin's Kitchen in Tin Hau to meet a Chinese woman, now married to an English banker, who is so decisive I have long taken to calling her Boss.

But on the threshold of the ground-floor restaurant, about whose menu I had heard so many good things, we were promptly escorted round the corner and up a flight of stairs to the first floor that is now this restaurant's private kitchen. On the table were the details of what was to be our nine-course dinner. As my hostess sat down next to me she confessed, 'I was going to pre-order just one dish but then I thought I would let the chef choose it all.' This time there was a menu but I was still a spectator.

Whatever professional disappointment I may have felt was soon negated by the appearance of Lau Kin Wai who has inherited the hospitality trait from his restaurateur father. Dressed in chinos, T-shirt and sporting a particularly stylish haircut, Wai skipped between our table of six and the table of eight Australians next to us like an enthusiastic schoolteacher.

The dishes he explained over the next couple of hours included a duo of stuffed and sautéed prawns, a recipe that dates back to the 1950's; a pigeon, slow cooked at 72 degrees for two hours before being deep fried and then served with pairs of plastic gloves, leading to jokes about Hannibal Lector; and how that morning he had selected the drummer fish, served whole and simply steamed, at Ap Lei Chau, across the bay from Aberdeen.

Most unforgettable, however, was the second course of double-boiled soup with slices of pork, ginger and what was described as vintage tangerine peel. When we all raised our eyebrows at the delicacy of this dish, Wai disappeared into the kitchen and returned with a plastic container full of dark brown tangerine skins that he claimed were 55 years old and replete with medicinal properties. Whatever their long-aterm effect, this was one of the most fascinating and delicious soups I have ever enjoyed.

I finally managed to get my hands on a menu only hours before I left when, with a couple of enthusiastic food bloggers and Susan Jung, my counterpart at the South China Morning Post, we sat round a corner table at Manor, Causeway Bay.

This restaurant's somewhat incongruous reputation, as an excellent seafood restaurant that also serves one of the very best renditions of suckling pig, was matched by its location and interior. Manor is right by a noisy flyover while inside full bottles of expensive brandy and a beer fridge stand next to empty bottles of first growth claret and opposite a fish tank.

But I was there to be introduced to Manor's roasted 'gold coin' chicken, a delicious sandwich of slices of pork, chicken, pork fat and taro, all wedged between two thin slices of bun. The first person to finish promptly described this as 'a cholesterol sandwich'. I enjoyed mine immensely, along with the other dim sum. On the way out, I have to confess, I stole the paper menu.

Southbank, Fourth Floor, 4 Pottinger Street, Central
Kin's Kitchen, 9 Tsing Fung Street, Central +852 2571 0913 (Dinner HK$488 per person, HK$100 per bottle corkage)
Manor Causeway Bay, G/F Lockhart House, 440 Jaffe Road, Causeway Bay +852 2836 9999