Happy New Year of the Snake

8 Feb 2013 by Nick Lander/FT

Singapore recently provided even more contrasts and surprises than usual.

There was the humid heat interspersed with downpours that even my home town of Manchester would have been proud of. But as a result of all the rain, I was to meet a taxi driver whose 60 years living there had meant learning three different national anthems - British, then Malay and finally Singapore's own.

There was the obligatory early morning trip to Tiong Bahru with its wet market and, above, a triangular array of hawker stalls for a breakfast of 'carrot cake', an irregular omelette of steamed radish, garlic, turnips and eggs, and rice cakes with preserved garlic and sesame seeds. But on this occasion it was followed by a cappuccino round the corner at the new Forty Hands cafe that was as good as any you would find anywhere.

At **Esquina**, in Chinatown, I met Irish chef Andrew Walsh cooking Spanish food in a restaurant that is a partnership between British chef Jason Atherton and Singapore restaurateurs Geoffrey Eu and Loh Lik Peng.

Finally, there was the opportunity to enjoy memorable Chinese meals at Le Chasseur, where our bill for nine was less than 250 Singapore dollars (£140), and at Tóng Lè where we chose the 250-dollar tasting menu. Both meals ended with an opportunity to meet their respective chefs, Andy Lim and Martin Fu, although the lecture on cooking techniques Lim dispensed was as particular as his restaurant.

From the outside, **Le Chasseur** looks no different from many other 'coffee shops', as they are known in Singapore, with its simple furniture. The walls inside are covered in photos of the dishes Lim prepares, with a cholesterol chart thoughtfully provided (his quails eggs top the list). By the counter that separates the two dining rooms from the kitchen is a stack of cheaply printed menus that customers take, sit down and fill out. The headings range from rice to desserts with seven soups, 30 à la carte dishes and desserts.

So far, all seemed relatively normal. Lim's background, however, accounts for the significant differences that follow. Chinese by birth, he is an engineer by training and turned to cooking while in Mauritius, hence the French name of this restaurant he opened 10 years ago.

This engineering approach to cooking manifested itself in two excellent claypot rice dishes, one with chicken and the other with pork liver and sausage. Both appeared on our table very swiftly and far faster than I had ever experienced in any other restaurant because Lim prepares these with basmati rice rather than the far more traditional jasmine rice. And because he starts cooking the claypots on gas while waiting for the charcoal, which he prefers for the extra flavour it imparts via the claypot, to reach an even higher temperature.

Other culinary highlights were a duck soup with salted vegetables; crisp fried pork knuckle, a Filipino favourite; barbecued prawns that are put on the charcoal flame for no more than 15 seconds each side; and the unctuously sweet dessert of 'tau suan', spilt green beans cooked in sweet potato starch with palm sugar.

Lim followed this with a tour of his kitchen, explaining how at 9 pm he was preparing batches of his popular curry chicken by cooking and saucing quartered chickens so that they could subsequently be joined at the last moment by their essential bedfellows, diced potato and coconut milk, to maximize their flavours. Over the years Lim reckons he has got through 10,000 claypots as they crack over the charcoal, and vast quantities of his favoured non-stick woks from Korea because they last no more than three days.

Lim accepts these costs as part of running a busy restaurant. But it is the large STOP signs on several of the photos of the dishes on the wall that unite Lim and all the other Singapore chefs and restaurateurs I spoke to.

These are there because Lim has had to let go numerous cooks recently as new government legislation now restricts the number of foreign workers that any business can employ as a percentage of the total. The immediate consequence is that several of his most popular but most labour-intensive dishes have had to be removed from the menu, and Lim

intends to close his restaurant over the normally busy Chinese New Year as he cannot call on the extra staff needed.

This is somewhat less of an issue for those running the **Tóng Lè** restaurant on the revolving floor at the top of the OEU tower close to the Central Business District because this is the recently opened and most high profile restaurant of the TungLok group, which operates 23 other less expensive, less labour-intensive and, I would imagine, far more profitable restaurants. (Photo taken from the restaurant's website.)

But dinner here was exciting and not just for the views. Martin Fu sticks closely to classic Cantonese techniques, does not experiment for experiment's sake, and by sourcing some excellent ingredients from Australia to Japan, produces some fascinating dishes.

The most impressive of these were lobster steamed with Chinese wine; a braised bird's nest soup with black truffle; and a fillet of hump head wrasse, a plump white fish, with bean curd skin.

Less impressive were the wine list and a muzak tape that revolves far more quickly than the tower and plays the same doleful music over and over again.

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Tóng Lè OUE Tower, 60 Collyer Quay; tel 00 65 6634 3233 www.tong-le.com.sg