



Written by
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Chinese in London - good in parts



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Every year I look forward to the Chinese New Year with great enthusiasm. The Year of the Dog that begins on 16 February, next Thursday, is no exception.

The occasion provides not just several opportunities to enjoy what is probably my favourite style of cooking (and one I have so far failed to replicate at home) but it also brings back memories of my stays in Taipei, Hong Kong and Shanghai.

This year my enthusiasm has had to be toned down by a distinct lack of new restaurant openings in London. It is too soon for the opening of Din Tai Fung, the Taiwanese dumpling restaurant which will open in the renovated Centre Point by Tottenham Court Road station some time in the summer. And it's too early, too, for the second branch of A Wong (whose restaurant

in Victoria continues to serve the best Chinese food in London in my opinion) which will open in the Bloomberg Arcade in London's financial district in late spring. My visit to New York last September was ill timed for the branch of Da Dong, which has since opened in Bryant Place, while this column appears a week before Anna Poon opens a pop up version in Clerkenwell of the Chinese restaurant Poons that her father made so famous in Soho.

And yet I still found myself drawn to two Chinese restaurants in central London I had never visited before and to one long time favourite. Drawn too to certain dishes, particularly those at the end of the meal which go some way to soothing the tingling sensation on my scalp which I always take as a sign of a good Chinese meal.

Kai Mayfair in South Audley Street is long established and its menu well attuned to its neighbourhood and its wealthy clientele. The restaurant's biggest disadvantage is that it is spread over two floors. With the kitchen on the ground floor and our table in the basement, the food not surprisingly suffered from its journey.

While the high prices could, I suppose, be justified for the lobster dish (£35) and the Oriental pork belly (£21), there must have been a huge gross profit on our dish of ma-po aubergines at £26. This simple combination of stir fried tofu, aubergines, onions, garlic and soy sauce is ridiculously over priced.

Our meal was saved by a bottle of Brundlmayer Grüner Veltliner Terrassen 2016 Kamptal (£56) from a very good list, friendly service from a Romanian waiter and waitress and, most unexpectedly a dessert. These sweet endings are listed, unusually, at the beginning of the restaurant's menu, with the pastry chef, Szymon Grzanka, duly credited. A soufflé made principally from the durian fruit was absolutely delicious.

It was also the dessert, and one main course, that distinguished our meal at the **Grand Imperial** restaurant, part of the Grosvenor Hotel by Victoria Station. But these were not to be my lasting memories, sadly.

We began with bowls of soup, a prawn wonton soup and a more unusual but highly satisfying seafood tofu broth with coriander. We followed these with a shared main course, a turbot cooked in the Cantonese fashion, steamed with ginger, spring onion and light soy sauce. This was priced at £48 but was still too small to offer much lip smacking satisfaction from the fish's gelatinous bones. We finished with toffee banana, a simple if not very Cantonese dessert but here distinguished by a fresh, clean batter.

But if the kitchen could cook as well as this, I wondered, why cannot the management of the restaurant ensure that the rest of any visitor's experience is of the same quality?

Its location right by London's busiest train station will ensure that it is a magnet for the homeless, most unfortunately, but that is no excuse for the entrance steps to be littered not just with them but also with empty sandwich wrappings and cake boxes from the neighbouring Pret à Manger.

And inside the restaurant, it appears that the windows have not been cleaned for a long time and that little maintenance is being given to the restaurant's chairs or interior. Grand Imperial must have suffered from the numerous more casual restaurants that have opened in the Nova development nearby but that is little excuse for such neglect. Its interior certainly does not live up to the restaurant's name. It is neither grand nor imperial.



Much more basic but more fun and certainly infinitely superior in terms of food is the branch of the **Four Seasons** restaurant on Gerard Street in London's Chinatown.

I first reviewed this restaurant in 2010 and the quality of their roast duck is as good as it has ever been. Only ducks with a certain amount of fat are chosen; these are then stuffed with herbs and spices; and then roasted at a very high temperature for 60 minutes before being allowed to rest and then sent down from the kitchen on the upper floor to be chopped up. The recipe for their dipping sauce remains, however, a closely guarded secret.

On my last visit I enjoyed half a roast duck chopped but served on the bone, rice and a couple of beers for £39 and one most unexpected surprise – service from welcoming, and smiling, Chinese waiters and waitresses.

Kai Mayfair 65 South Audley Street, London W1K 2QU; 020 7493 8988

Grand Imperial 101 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 0SJ; tel 020 7821 8898

Four Seasons 12 Gerrard Street, London W1D 5PR; tel 020 7494 0870. No reservations.