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Culinary adventures beyond the golden trolley



by Ky Chow

Summer ... 'tis still the season for eating and, especially for those sick of the sight of ham, Australia's Chinese restaurants have long been a staple. Three decades of extensive field testing mean I can now share tips for how you can get the most out of these evolving institutions – and you don't even have to get stuck into the pig's tripe.

There's more to graduating from the McChinese steam tray set than eating freaky, just as the French would blanché at the idea that snails and frog legs are Michelin star musts. (You should give the chicken's feet at yum cha a shot, though. You eat drumsticks and thigh, so why not nibble the toes?)

Of course, some folks don't care less about eating "the real stuff". If you love sweet and sour pork and spring rolls, who cares if the Chinese eat it, right?

And in these tough times for hospitality, no restaurant will be precious about customers who are happy with fare flung from the freezer to the fryer, especially when they're washing it down with copious amounts of margin-friendly booze. You don't want to know what the origins of fried rice are, but the occasionally cited concerns about society's other mince-based items such as pies and hot dogs are not irrelevant. All good for business.

But no complaints, as diners who like their pleasures simple subsidise Chinese families who order ginger and shallot lobster and noodles and drink solely from the bottomless \$2 pot of jasmine tea.



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For those who see Chinese-only wall menus and dream, and only try new places as they surface in mainstream newspapers, however, I invite you to take a few more steps in your journey towards Oriental culinary enlightenment. Take yum cha, where many diners succumb to “golden trolley syndrome”. I once returned to a favoured restaurant after a break and was dismayed by a convoy of nothing but deep fried dim sims. They’d gone *gwei lo*.

Don’t get me wrong, I love the crunch and glowing sensation from a plate of fried whitebait. But if your only play is a trolley that looks like it’s been driven through a car wash of golden, boiling oil, then don’t expect fine techniques or ingredients any more than if you dared to order a well-done rump.

Many diners now tout their credentials in dumpling-filled soups and Peking duck. Being of Shanghainese lineage, I’m proud to see arriving mainland Chinese earn a reputation for something other than swallowing up Harry Triguboff’s apartments.

There are caveats here, of course. Avoid places that dish up your duck pancakes as individual serves rather than carved at your table. Learn which venues cook their ducks in-house or, even better, to order. Treat trendy new Mandarin menu items at long time Cantonese institutions with the suspicion you afford the office cafe’s “curry” special.

And then there’s “fusion” (read: run by celebrity chefs). Unlike some fellow Asian food snobs/purists, I no longer automatically sneer at places that charge double because they prefix proteins with “organic” and ply you with pricey wine. Top service is rarely found in authentic Chinese restaurants (unless you’re mates with the manager or collecting protection money). I also appreciate a swish dining area and clean kitchen, and you know there’s a floor on the quality of the ingredients (as opposed to the ingredients being on the floor). The food itself at fusion, however, is ridiculously expensive. The lack of Asian pedigree means hit and miss dishes, with oversalting the most common crime. Enjoy them, but don’t make fancy five-star joints your Chinese dining staple.

Enjoying Chinese food is also about how you eat. Smart, not hard! I cringe when I see a poor soul trying to lift their rice with chopsticks, maybe collecting five grains with each grab. Raise that bowl to your mouth and use the chopsticks as a shovel. It’s no more undignified than eating a pie with your hands, and you can focus on enjoying the

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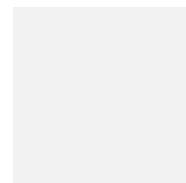
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food which is what this authentic eating diatribe is ultimately about.

These are only tips of culinary icebergs, but here are some final Chinese restaurant “avoids”. Al fresco. Banquet menus. Absence of Chinese diners. English-only menus. And taking this column too seriously, or not seriously enough.

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