

Experience

“Experience is a riverbed,
Its source hidden, forever flowing:
Its entrance, the root of the world,
The Way moves within it:
Draw upon it; it will not run dry”+



“To invite a person to your house is to take charge of his happiness as long as he be beneath your roof.”*

Last Sunday, March 16th, my girlfriend, Michele and I had the privilege of being the guest of KianLam Kho, aka *Red Cook* for what became an elaborate Chinese Banquet meal. As befits my relationship with one of the other guests, Gary Cheung, I did not know what was implied by the “mid afternoon snack” that we had been invited to share in. I only knew that Kian liked to cook, had a possible dream of a creating a casual restaurant in the hood, and worked with computers and information technology.

The meal reminded me of another culinary epiphany that I had experienced as a boy. In that scenario, my father, a Columbia doctoral candidate came to the aide of another graduate fellow. His colleague a recent Indian émigré had been taken advantage

by a street savvy charlatan. All of her luggage and several hundred dollars were stolen in the scam. Dad convinced their classmates to pitch in, and help their colleague.

As repayment, thirty days later our family was feted with a multi-course Indian feast. Our meal, comprised of many small plates, each dish more exotic than the next with flavors, aromas, textures and names that were quite foreign to all of us in late 60's. Being a *'Tween'*, the dishes that I most enjoyed had to do with the various Indian flat, puffed and crisp breads. My meal ended much later that evening at a Dutchess Drive-in hamburger franchise enroute to the suburbs.



“The discovery of a new dish confers more happiness on humanity, than the discovery of a new star.”*

For this meal I was prepared for the challenge that Kian had painstakingly created for us. Kian’s cooking is exceptional. Having an amazing knowledge of the regional cuisines of China, he referenced many cooking styles, and culinary traditions.

Upon my arrival in his home, I spied a countertop filled with large and small dishes, bowls and serving platters, brimming with caramelized garlic cloves, steamed



Beginning with a suite of small plates of cold dishes, took us on a quite a culinary journey. Toying with our perceptions, Kian presented a beautifully balanced chilled salad of lightly pickled watermelon radish, just as crimson red as if it were a fine julienne of Lap Cheong, a traditional Chinese pork sausage.

Curiously, I was in the middle of a professional culinary seminar that weekend. One of our discussion topics had been the global expressions of slow cooked eggs. We compared and tasted the Modern Sous Vide “Exact Temperature” eggs to the Sabbath *Hamine* Eggs of the Jews with the *Thousand Year*, Preserved Eggs of China, decorated with wispy pine flower designs.

When I was then passed a Salad of Preserved Eggs, Soft Velvety Tofu and Chili, I felt that I had truly arrived. The theory of my weekend seminar was colliding with the experience of a dedicated and talented chef’s presentation of his heritage and expression of his culinary passion. The suite was completed with a platter of Emerald Green Batons of Cucumber drizzled with Sesame Oil and a wonderfully crunchy and slithery salad of marinated Jellyfish.

The food continued unfolding like the petals of a tender blooming rose. Our first set of warm dishes, a wonderful trio of Stir Fried Prawns coddled with a glaze of

Longjiin or *Dragon Well* Tea, Steamed Silken Tofu with shreds of pleasantly leathery Dried Scallops and finally Red Cooked Pork served with fresh Steamed Buns and sprigs of cilantro. The mahogany colored unctuous chunks of both lean and fatty pork were redolent of cassia and star anise; a virtuoso member of the global barbeque family.

Next we received a unique palate cleanser, a delicate broth strewn with simmered Strawberry Papaya, White Fungus and Chewy lean morsels of Pork. Subtly sweet and rich this soup appeared to release our palates to embrace a fresh new set of flavors yet to come. I made a mental note to try steaming or braising the papaya in my own cooking.



“Physically, as the brain becomes refreshed, the face lightens up, the colors become heightened, and a glow spreads over the whole system.”*

Our savory courses ended with another trio, cum quartet of dishes. By now, I was freely associating on the complex rhythms of the meal akin to both jazz improv and the interplay of movements in a classical string quartet. The melody or dance of flavors in each of the dishes, riffing off one another, while asserting their own tone and character without any overt brashness was quite engaging and sublime.

All of this subtly was crying for a drum solo. And as Kian finished deep frying his whole steamed chicken, he accidentally hacked a platter instead of the chicken. For a moment that minor calamity grounded all of us. We had been blissfully floating with our palates as a guide lost in the joy of discovery and succor of all the textures, tastes and aromas that had danced on our tongues over the last few hours.



The whole fried chicken arrived with a cracklingly burnished skin, a satiny flesh, an almost chocolate brown head, sliced scallion, slivers of chili and diced ginger; all ready to be devoured. A tasty bowl of deftly stir fried Spinach with a chicken-y flavored Superior Stock followed.



One of the highlights of the meal for me was the next dish. A perfectly steamed whole Pomfret garnished with a unique rich Preserved Cabbage. This cabbage quite different than the northern style Tianjin cabbage I like to cook with, was almost inky in color, flavorful yet subtly spiced. I believe that it is a hallmark of the Te Chow regional style. I am ready to have a daily bowl of this delicious cabbage. It exemplified the unique regional character of the cuisines of China. And it fostered a discussion of how easily it would have been to tackle a few of these banquet dishes as an adjunct to a family dinner. Everyone agreed that the nuance of all of our meal was not typical in our general Chinese restaurant experiences in NYC. It begged for a deeper reading of the cuisine and demanded more of the restaurant community as emissaries of the tradition.

The quartet of warm savory dishes was completed by a large bowl of nicely crisp fried rice littered with salty dried baby shrimp, scallion asparagus points and squeaky soft white of egg. Almost greedily, we took seconds and thirds of this non greasy, delicately fluffy rice. This fervor was a statement on how well executed the meal had been. We were all poised for more food, though we had been served ample quantities of every dish.

After a brief respite, Kian gave us a quick class in the preparation of an old stalwart dessert that is rarely seen on most menus; Deep Fried Bean Paste in Meringue. He gently folded flour and cornstarch into a lightly sweetened meringue. Carefully

scooped mounds of this concoction were stuffed with the soft bean paste and deep fried. Showered with powdered sugar, they were a new feast for the fingers, lips and tongues. Simple as a doughnut, elegant as a beignet, these were a perfect denouement to a wonderful *afternoon snack!*

“After a good dinner body and soul enjoy a peculiar happiness.”*

We ended our journey reflecting on the recent crane disaster in midtown with reverence for those whose lives were lost in the tragedy. Coincidentally, one of the guests had been on her way to eat at the home of one the families who lost their home in the accident. Finally, gathering ourselves to journey homeward we reflected as a new community of friends on what had just transpired and the work needed to foster better quality cooking and appreciation of Chinese cuisine and other regional culinary styles. Styles that unfortunately still sit in the shadow of France, Italy and Japan.

**“.....Bearing and nurturing,
Creating but not owning,
Giving without demanding,
This is harmony.”+**

Scott A. Barton

* *The Physiology of Taste*; 1825, Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

+*Dao De Jing*; 6th Century B.C.E., Lao Tze