

Culinary revolution

Flavours from the Hunan province grace the Great Helmsman's table.

WEEKEND DINING
HELEN GREENWOOD

Chairman Mao Chinese Restaurant
189 Anzac Parade, Kensington,
9697 9189
Mon and Wed-Thu, 5pm-10pm;
Fri-Sun 5-11pm

WHETHER you regard Mao Zedong as a tyrant or saviour, he has his place in history. He also has his moniker on this restaurant, which showcases food from his native Hunan province in China whose salty, spicy cuisine he always favoured.

Mao satisfied his yen for red-braised pork and home-style bean curd by hauling around a personal chef. In Sydney, we only have two Hunan restaurants, one in Burwood called Sydney Xiang Chinese Restaurant and this newer one in Kensington called, not surprisingly, Chairman Mao Chinese Restaurant.

I figure the newbie is the perfect place to farewell an Australian friend who loves anything uncommon. And Chairman Mao delivers on all fronts. After you slide open the darkly

tinted glass doors, you are almost blinded by the bright orange walls. A cascade of fake garlic, chillies and onions hangs off a decorated screen. They are a tell-tale signifier of the flavours we will encounter.

Then there are the antique-style, marble-topped, mahogany tables with carved legs and a covered hole in the centre (used by the last owners to cook hot-pot dishes). Add matching high-backed, carved chairs and portraits of the great man himself and we feel as though we are in a party bureaucrat's office waiting for the Cultural Revolution to pass.

Our party swells to 12 as friends join us to farewell the expatriate. The genial host, Andrew Bao, takes it all in his stride. He adds more chairs to the imposing furniture and as our numbers increase drags two of the heavy tables together to fit us all in.

We're not the only customers causing a commotion. A huge group of students is clustered around a giant round table, celebrating a birthday with cake, songs and lots of posing for cameras. Kensington is a university precinct and that's a good reason to open a restaurant where there are a lot of Asian students who are either homesick for, or familiar with, Hunan cuisine.

Tea and Tsingtao beers arrive and three of us take charge of ordering. The menu has cold,



Party people ... the eclectic and striking decor; (below) smoked beef with garlic shoots. Photos: Fiona Morris

steamed and classical Hunan dishes (we miss out on the red-braised pork because it's all sold out). The vegetables are as varied as stir-fried cucumber with perilla and broad beans with preserved mushrooms.

A starter of pickled radishes and chillies revs up our appetites. We are then blown away by the home-made smoked beef with stir-fried, delicate garlic shoots and the eggplant with green chilli, which is head-snappingly hot yet allows the milky, soft flesh of the baby eggplant to shine through.

The Chinese love of contrasting textures comes to the fore with the melting, almost slippery, steamed pork belly against the firmer, spicy smoked tofu. Stir-fried river shrimp with leek is seasoned with sesame oil, warmed with chilli and balanced with the leek greens. Their fine skins crunch under your teeth.

We amaze our host by not only ordering but relishing the stir-fried green capsicum with special pork crisp. Pieces of pork fat are rendered dry into dice and zapped with green chillies (not capsicum - Hunan people don't like the stuff). We make pigs of ourselves over this porky popcorn that would drive Homer Simpson absolutely wild. It reminds me of the Croatian cvarci, by the way.

Finally, two amazing soups to finish. The soups are in bowls that would qualify as tureens in my house.

The lamb with celery is ultra peppery and palate-cleansing in a surprisingly light stock. The broad bean and pork meatball soup has coarsely textured, hand-shaped balls bobbing in a broth salty from preserved mustard greens and fresh with broad beans.

Bao's wife, Pingjun Li, is the cook and she rustles up rustic, home-style food like her grandmother would have made. Li's cooking has no pretense at finesse but bursts with the kinds of flavours that Fuschia Dunlop describes in her *Revolutionary Chinese Cookbook: Recipes From Hunan Province* as creating "a rich glow in the mouth".

Li and Bao also mean to keep Chairman Mao's menu changing frequently. A new one is on the way with pictures.

Although we couldn't even manage another mouthful, we ask about dessert anyway and our host says apologetically that sweets are not traditionally a major player in their meals. Understandable. You really just need a nice orange to help you digest. Or keep drinking and have that discussion about Chinese politics you'd postponed earlier.

DIGEST

► **Food**
Home-made Hunan food cooked traditionally and with an amazing palate of seasonings, heat and ingredients.

► **Service**
The owner is a genial host who can explain the dishes and tell you where his wife got all of the recipes.

► **Atmosphere**
Cultural revolution. Orange walls, heavy carved furniture and rustic tableware.

► **Value**
Very generous. Huge portions - for \$30 a head you'll get a second meal.

► **Noise**
Medium.

► **Recommended dishes**
Smoked beef with garlic shoots, stir-fried eggplant with green chilli, smoked pork with five-spice bean curd, river shrimp with leek, special pork crisp, lamb with celery soup, broad bean and pork ball soup.



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