



TERRY DURACK RESTAURANT REVIEW

Follow your nose

It's not the Chairman Mao portraits on the orange walls that turn me on at this Kensington regional Chinese, nor is it the generously large portions and generously small prices. It isn't even the fact that Rockpool's spice-loving Neil Perry has been spotted here once or twice. Nope, it's the box of tissues on every table.

If your nose doesn't start running halfway through a Hunanese meal, there's something wrong, either with the meal or your nose. Hunan food is spicy, salty and oily, built on chilli, garlic, ginger, spice, black rice vinegar and more chilli, so the tissues mean instant cred.

But first, a word. You know how Perry gave China's regional cuisines a makeover and sent them out into a nightclub basement space with a 100-strong wine list, swish service and loads of glam at Spice Temple? Well, this is nothing like that.

Chairman Mao just has a door. You have to slide it open yourself. There is no cocktail bar, no private room, no anticipatory floor staff, no Riedel glassware. You're lucky if you get a table. In fact, you're very lucky if you get a table, as word has spread fast since Hunanese-born locals Andrew Bao and his wife, Pinjun Li, gave up finance and accountancy last year to open their restaurant.

He is on the floor, she is in the kitchen and the big, square, marble-



Host country ... Mao's Li and Bao.

topped tables are filled with noodle-skinny children tucking into fatty pork, extended Chinese families celebrating birthdays over huge steamed fish and the odd non-Chinese sucking on bottles of Tsingtao beer.

Sichuan food may be hotter and Cantonese more subtle but Hunanese food balances the natural flavours of prime ingredients with hot, sweet and sour flavours through smoking, steaming and slow-cooking.

First-timers generally fling up their hands at the long menu and ask Bao for advice but I summon fading memories of gastro-tripping around China and cover the table with a grab-bag of contrasting textures and flavours.

First up is a spicy, **cold seaweed salad** (\$5.80), which is like eating kelp on the seashore, and **crunchy, cold pig's ears** (\$8.80) that have been

marinated, braised, pressed and sliced into a pile of strangely irresistible rubber bands.

The biggest seller in this people's eating republic is Chairman Mao's favourite **braised pork** (\$16.80), a bowlful of wobbly, slow-cooked briquettes of pork belly that have taken on the deep flavours of the red-braise stock. This is comfort food so obviously heartfelt, domestic and authentic, it makes me feel quite privileged.

Then come **pickled snake beans with minced pork** (\$15.80), a tongue-tingler with flavours shooting out from all directions; and **stir-fried beef with jelly-like preserved eggs** (\$18), a minefield of hot, sour and salty, simultaneously challenging and calming.

A **hot and sour soup** is a dark, lightly spiced broth (\$8.80) studded with no less than 18 plump, handmade pork dumplings.

Another humdinger is an intense, heady **stir-fry of oven-dried harbour shrimps with glossy green leeks and hot red chilli** (\$19.80) that has an almost smoky, dried shrimp flavour.

A huge bowl of smooth, silky, junket-style steamed savoury custard topped with minced pork (\$15.80) is like a savoury panna cotta. I want it for Sunday night tea for the rest of my life.

So why a score of 13? Because so many of the dishes are swimming in oil (authentic but not necessarily desirable). Because spring onion pancakes (\$3.20) are bland and the classic Dong'an chicken (\$16.80) shows poor cleaver technique, the little bones dangerously splintered rather than cleanly sheared. And because the restaurant paid two fines for violating NSW food standard codes earlier this year (methinks chilli makes a great antidote); and you could swoon with boredom over the workmanlike wine list. Service is a lottery - pleasant but hard to pin down.

You can tell our food culture is getting stronger when we can adore Spice Temple, cheeky little minx that it is, but adore this, too, because it is like eating in a Hunanese home.



See red ... dishes at Chairman Mao are full of the flavour and colour of mainland China. Photos: Marco Del Grande

That's what is great about Sydney - we not only get both, we "get" both.

And what with *Mao's Last Dancer*, the arrival of the scholarly British food writer and Hunanese food authority Fuchsia Dunlop for the Sydney International Food Festival and the Chinese Communist Party's 60th anniversary celebrations next month, I'm thinking Hunan food is hotter than ever.

More tissues, please.
tdurack@smh.com.au

CHAIRMAN MAO

Address 189 Anzac Parade,
Kensington, 9697 9189
Around \$60 for two, plus drinks
Dinner Wednesday to Monday
Licensed and BYO, corkage
\$3 a bottle
Full scoresheet smh.com.au/
goodliving

13
/ 20



CAFE REVIEW

To get a table outside at Pablo & Rusty's, you'll have to fight the hordes of private-school girls spilling out from nearby Gordon train station. If you don't have enough energy for that, the dark teak communal tables inside are just as comfy.

Breakfast at this breezy, simple cafe, named after the owner's two brothers-in-law, is thick toast with Hank's jam (\$4). A selection of loose-leaf teas such as green sencha and Daintree chai or Pablo & Rusty's own coffee blend are a perfect accompaniment to Hank's triple berry. The coffee (\$3) is smooth and chocolatey, a little on the heavy side but a good brew overall.

Winter soups have made way on the menu for lighter spring fare - fruit salad with vanilla yoghurt (\$5.50), home-made Bircher muesli with pear and roasted almonds served in plastic milkshake cups (\$5.50) and a few store-baked pastries, such as Portuguese tarts.

A poster on the wall extols the chai latte (\$3.60), a mix of Daintree tea, local and imported spices, sugar cane and honey from Queensland's Mossman Gorge, brewed fresh with Bonsoy. Like most chais, it's not hot enough but it's not as sickly sweet as others.

There's not a lot in the way of substantial meals - Turkish sandwiches or toasties only - but with its whitewashed walls and quirky local art, it's a great stop-off for a summery snack, a fruit smoothie and a coffee.
Rachel Olding

Pablo & Rusty's Espresso Bar,
1/1 St Johns Avenue, Gordon
(9499 8442)

fection Chocolates

South Head Road,
9371 7857

I caramels (\$7.90 per 100g)
infectious institution of
should come with a

While jaw-achingly good,
old unseat fillings if tackled
ustalistically. Chocolatier
pos recommends sucking
dark couverture chocolate
ed, by which time the
is softened to chewing
ncy. Although making
nary is a precise

n, there's no thermometer
these. When the caramel
hed a slow, lava-like boil,
ows it's ready to come off
. Unlike the quick fix of
eets, each of these
requires commitment,
d by a good 10 minutes of
. As for the trend towards
aramel, Kapos says he's
king it for years.



THE ONE DISH YOU MUST TRY

Stir-fried harbour
shrimps with leeks
and hot red chilli,
\$19.80.