

Food Memories of 2011

By Dr Wong Chiang Yin

Personally speaking, 2011 came and left in quite a huff. I didn't have the time to particularly ruminate over what I had eaten (bad choice of words). So when the *SMA News* Editor gave me 72 hours to write something about my eating experiences in 2011, I gamely took up the challenge because I thought this would be a short article. I was wrong...

Let's start with something quite accessible. I was once again reacquainted with an old haunt of mine – Redhill Hawker Centre. You know this particular hawker stall means business when it only sells three items – fried beancurd (tao kwa), ngoh hiang and fishballs. The main attraction is the beancurd. It is pan fried to perfection – crispy on the outside, smooth and juicy on the inside, served with chilli sauce and garlic, and 80 cents a piece. Open only for lunch. This stuff brings back childhood memories. Other goodies in this hawker centre include the satay beehoon and black carrot cake (at night only).

Recently introduced to me by no less a guru than KF Seetoh is this curry fish head stall at Block 253 Jurong East Street 24, called Zai Shun Curry Fish Head. The show-stealer is not the curry fish head but the steamed shark head in taucheo. The taucheo is topped with spring onion and fried bits of lard done to perfection – a perfect foil for the chewy collagen-like skin of the shark head. Yummy. Open only for breakfast and dinner. Try also the chicken feet – the biggest and sweetest you can find on our island.

A new discovery is actually an old haunt – Chao Shan Cuisine at Beach Road. This Teochew restaurant serves some really authentic stuff that is not seen elsewhere in Singapore. One dish in particular is a sweet pancake of sorts with bits of water chestnut, called chee chang luak. It's really like an or luak, but instead of oysters, there is water chestnut. Divine. Something even harder to find is this long lost delicacy of chive noodles. Chive juice is mixed with noodle dough, which is then fried and served with a mixture of black vinegar and icing sugar. An explosion of flavours that defies description. You have to order this in advance, by the way.

A friend of mine is always looking for the perfect suckling pig. It's kind of hard to find one in a country that doesn't have freshly slaughtered pigs. But this one comes close – in a restaurant in D'Kranji Farm Resort near Sungei Gedong Camp. All you former Armour medical officers out there will know how to find this place. The pig is done Teochew style, with uncracked skin. But the skin is also crispy and light (*soong* in Cantonese) and you will be back for more in no time.

Moving a little upmarket – Imperial Treasure at Great World City serves a mean hairy crab roe steamed with egg white. Rich and sinful. If the season is over by the time you read this, sorry, you can try it next year.

Back to another of my old haunts – Jade Palace Seafood Restaurant at Forum Galleria, where the dry beef brisket is a must try. Traditionally, it's the brisket taken from just below the 12th rib where the intersection of the

subcostal, diaphragm and oblique muscles is. But with increased demand for this dish, you may not get this select cut. But other cuts are probably good enough. The meat is seasoned, cooked and air-dried. Then it is fried with light batter and then served with brown sauce. Intense flavours against the background of fat and muscle and a crunchy crust makes this a must try. Another dish is fried milk, an old Cantonese Shunde delicacy. Many friends of mine ask me what is good on the menu of this restaurant. I really don't know because I haven't read it. You need to talk to the boss or the staff there to order the best dishes.

Heard a lot about Keppel Bay's Prive and their new Jospur Grill menu. Gave it a try and it lived up to expectations. The ribeye cap there ranks up there with anything I have tried (except maybe Peter Luger Steakhouse and Chicago Chop House) and cheaper than some of the more fancy steak houses in town.

Of course, there is this slew of fine dining restaurants that have opened in the two casinos, sorry, I meant integrated resorts. L'Atelier de Joel Robuchon at Resorts World Sentosa was a great experience. I am no fan of Australian wagyu but their version with Sarawak pepper was very good. One or two of the dishes unfortunately did not live up to my memories of what I tried in other Robuchons elsewhere. I think it's mainly due to the quality of ingredients we get here than the cooking. I am told the stringent rules of the Agri-Food & Veterinary Authority of Singapore don't help. Do try the daikon veloute and quail if you have the chance. Something that will blow the lid off your lipid profile is the bone marrow at Robuchon. This is aristocratic tulang. A cheaper but no less inspiring version is the one at L'Entrecote at Duxton Hill.

Moving beyond Singapore, one of my best experiences of the year must be eating durians in Penang. You may think Bentong's Mao Shan Wang is #1. But really, Penang is the place to be. There are many species of durians there that most Singaporeans have never tried. Giving Mao Shan Wang more than a run of the money is the Red Prawn, also called Ang Hae in Hokkien or Udang Merah in Malay. The best come from Balik Pulau in Penang. The closest comparison I can give is if Mao Shan Wang is Bordeaux First Growth, then Ang Hae is the Burgundy Grand Cru of durians. Ang Hae is intense and complex, yet pure and light and not cloying – a contradiction that delights and intrigues. It is also so rare one cannot find it south of Kuala Lumpur (KL). And even in KL, it's pretty hard to find.

My recent trip to Taipei brought back many memories of my stay there as a 17 year old exchange student. The soya bean milk and fried dough fritters at Yonghe Doujiang are cheap and to die for. But not every branch is as good. Try the one at Fuxing South Street. It's shoddy, run-down but really, really good. Then, there is the famous shop, Ah Zhong Mee Sua, at Ximending, which sells mee sua stewed in a rich broth of bonito, intestines

and bamboo shoots. How good is this? There is a neverending queue there – folks just buy the stuff and stand around and eat. There were no seats until only recently when this establishment put stools along the walkway for customers to sit. It's about S\$2 for a small bowl and S\$3 for a big one. A great bargain.

For authentic Taiwanese restaurant fare – look no further than Shin Yeh. There is a branch here in Liang Court managed by Tung Lok group. But for the real deal, hit the original and legendary restaurant at Shuang Cheng Jie (Double City Street). The ingredients used in Taiwan are so much more diverse and fresher than in Singapore. The or luak and sotong are testament to this fact.

Finally, for the esoteric stuff – boiled starfish in Qingdao, China. One breaks a leg off the echinoderm and eats the creamy pith inside. Unctuous stuff that hits your senses like a Pacquiao punch.

And then, there is also the urologist's delight – Andouillette

tripe sausage from France. This is really an acquired taste and has strong notes of urea. It has a flavour that is hard to miss and an aroma that is a cross between delicious and disgusting (trust the French to do something like this). Goes very well with a dry champagne. One of few places that serves this in Singapore is Le Bon Marche at Bukit Timah Road, opposite Singapore Chinese Girls' School (SCGS). I don't think many SCGS girls will be trying this stuff anytime soon.

Happy eating and here's to even better eating in 2012! **SMA**



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