

The Colour of Food: Red, Yellow and Green

By Dr Chong Yeh Woei



I was in Hong Kong in December and was most fortunate to be able to enjoy some very good meals in a long while. In particular, the taste and the colours of the various foods struck me.

Back at the Fu Sing restaurant, a simple dumpling or *xiao long bao* was given the royal treatment with a filling of hairy crab meat and roe. The dumpling came perched on a spoon in a bowl. As one sank one's teeth into the dumpling, the filling oozed out and gave off that proverbial explosive and heady combination of fat, aromas, textural nuances and satisfaction.



Fatty char siew with roast pork in the background.

RED

I was staying in Causeway Bay and went to have dinner at a Fu Sing branch that had just opened across the street from my hotel. The colour red was synonymous with the fatty *char siew* we had. Sweet aromas wafted from the sauces and its texture was reminiscent of *waygu* beef, except that the pork was marbled with streaks of fat. It was quite possibly the best *char siew* I have eaten in my life. The roast chicken ordered for my boys, which seemed more Cantonese than Shanghainese, was crispy with its red

roasted skin. It was accompanied with a sauce derived from the oily residues that wept from the skewered bird in the oven.

Red is also the color of the *Michelin Guide* that was just released before my trip, and a new category was the Bibs Gourmand as opposed to the star ranking. This category is for simple shops that serve a full three-course meal for HKD300 or less per head. I had dinner at Wu Kong Shanghai Restaurant, a winner

in this new category. We had winter melon soup boiled with red Yunnan ham. The salted flavour of the ham permeated the soup that contained round discs of winter melon and strands of bamboo shoots. One could smell the aroma of the ham wafting up the back of one's nose as one slurped the soup.

Dessert, served with red raspberry sauce, was a deep fried sweet puffed ball that had a red bean paste filling and the texture of a doughnut. White



Roast pork or as my son puts it: "square pork".

icing sugar crowned the red sauce oozing down the bright yellow puff. The doughnut-y texture, sweetness of the icing and tartness of the raspberry sauce was a winning combination. Needless to say, that dessert was quite unforgettable. This brings me to the next colour in question: Yellow.



Crab claw with broccoli on chawanmushi.

YELLOW

At Fu Sing, I was served egg noodles smothered in a bright yellow sauce made from the meat and roe of the hairy crab. The full-bodied flavour of the combination served to release volatile fatty acids in the mouth and up the nasopharynx as one swallowed the egg noodles coated in that mouth-watering sauce. The dish's cholesterol content was probably through the roof, and one could feel the satiety from the fatty acids after gobbling down a small portion of the noodles.

This bright yellow crab roe sauce brought back memories of my trip to Beijing some years ago where I had a meal with my immediate past president, Dr Wong Chiang Yin, at the legendary Beijing Hotel. There was a restaurant that served a genre of cuisine called "Tham Family" cuisine. This was a legacy from the Manchu dynasty where a court official named Tham had a talented chef who was his sister-in-law. She cooked so well that his house was always full of guests dying to taste her unique style of cooking. The house specialty was shark's fin that was cooked in a bright yellow sauce made from a superior stock that was cooked over three days.

If you think about it, shark's fin is pretty tasteless on its own and it is the accompanying sauce that gives it flavour. The shark's fin served at Beijing Hotel was expensive and therefore the smartest way to try that same sauce was to order the fish lips. These are actually

cartilaginous as well and cooked in that same sauce.

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the filling oozed out and gave off that proverbial explosive and heady combination of fat, aromas, textural nuances and satisfaction. Indeed, this dumpling puts our local *Ding Tai Fung* branches to shame.

GREEN

The colour of vegetables is usually green. I had *dou miao* at both restaurants but Wu Kong executed the vegetable dish with superior stock. For those who do not know, this is stock that is kept boiling throughout the year and ingredients are added daily to keep the base going. The stock is added to most dishes to create that extra *oomph!* I was given a choice of having the *dou miao* done with garlic, scallops or superior stock and I was glad I chose the last option. It made eating vegetables for my sons a pleasurable experience as opposed to being a drag.

Another amazing dish I ate was pomelo skin cooked in a soya-based gravy. When you bit into the pomelo skin, it released some soup content that had been retained by the skin in the course of cooking. I could not imagine that a dish could be made out of the tough fleshy skin of the pomelo. As for the pomelo, it was made into a dessert with mango and sago pearls.

RED AND WHITE

All this left me thinking about colours and the central role of food in Asian cultures. For the Chinese, we often have "Red" and "White" events. The former is the joyous occasion of a wedding and the latter is the sad occasion of a loved

one's passing. Important to both are the wedding banquet and post-funeral meal. I remember the occasion when my maternal grandmother had passed on. She was an incredible cook, and a woman loved by her three generations of descendants including my sons, who are her great-grandchildren.

She used to cook up a storm during Chinese New Year for all her descendants at her shophouse home in Mount Sophia. She had recipes for mutton soup with black fungus and *fu chok*, fatty pork belly cooked with beans and soy sauce, and salted vegetables and duck in a soup otherwise known as *itek tim*. When she passed on, we made sure that the restaurant that catered the post-funeral meal cooked the same dishes that she had done for us for all her life. As forty-odd of us tucked into the meal, all grief disappeared transiently and we were filled with the satisfaction and comfort that good food brings to us on all occasions be it festive, joyous or otherwise. With all this in mind, I would like to wish all members festive greetings of the season and a happy, joyous year ahead. SMA



Dr Chong is the President of the 50th SMA Council. He has been in private practice since 1993 and has seen his fair share of the human condition. He pines for a good pinot noir, loves the FT Weekend and of course, wishes for world peace...