

FOOD & WINE

“Food can never be too good and cooking can never be done too carefully,” wrote Confucius in *The Analects*.

Food has always taken a central role in the mindset of the Chinese, and knowing how to eat properly has long been a metaphor for knowing how to live. Attention to detailed cooking techniques, which became apparent from imperial times, is also at the heart of modern fine-dining concepts. Perhaps this explains the appeal in looking back for inspiration.

Over the past few years, Hong Kong has seen a small but steady revival in ancient Chinese gastronomy. The latest attempt to resurrect the spirit of an imperial banquet can be found at The Ritz-Carlton's Tin Lung Heen, collaborating with premium porcelain tableware brand Legle France to host their ruyi dinner concept.

A ruyi is a ceremonial sceptre used in Chinese Buddhism. It symbolises power and luck, and appears in every piece of the ruyi dinner collection.

The feast, which will run until mid-September, promises to take diners on an indulgent journey showcasing the very best of China's 5,000-year-old food heritage.

“Over the last couple of years Cantonese eating habits have been changing. The Cantonese are more adventurous, have deeper pockets and are starting to travel more, so they want something more luxurious and special,” says Peter Find, executive chef of The Ritz-Carlton. “As China becomes more prominent in the news, Westerners too are showing an increased interest in the country's historical past.”

Imperial cuisine can be categorised into imperial court cuisine and imperial official cuisine. Although the former originates from what was served to the emperors and the latter from the aristocracy living outside the palace gates, both styles were excessively grand, boasted the finest produce from across the empire, and were defined by rare or exotic ingredients such as sea cucumber or bear's paw.

One of the best-preserved styles is the Tan family cuisine (*tan jia cai*), developed during the late Qing dynasty in the household of a government official named Tan Zongjun. “As the reputation of the Tan family cuisine became widespread, officials, literati and wealthy people were all proud of being a guest at the Tan family feast,” says Wicky Tse Wai-kit, assistant professor from the department of Chinese culture at Hong Kong Polytechnic.

Tan cuisine, which is notable for its delicate and luxuriant style is served in the capital's Beijing Hotel, as well as in Wynn Macau's two Michelin-star



Nine-dish starter at The Ritz-Carlton.

OLD WORLD

A sophisticated take on Chinese imperial cuisine brings out essence of complex dishes prepared with lavish ingredients, writes Isobel Yeung

ORDER

Golden Flower restaurant. Wynn Macau's executive chef Liu Guozhu oversees the labourious methods crucial to the essence of Tan, such as simmering the chicken stock for seven to eight hours every day.

Isaac Yue Man-cheung, assistant professor at the University of Hong Kong's faculty of arts who writes about representations of food and drink in imperial literature, says that recent attempts to recreate imperial food are “at best imitations”. He points to recipes dating back to the Song dynasty, which were specific to the point that fish must come from a certain river, or that a stew must use snow melted from a particular mountain.

At the same time, Yue notes the vague measurements of documented cooking processes. After all it was the literati rather than the kitchen maids who were responsible for writing the recipes, and they saw their duties as a poetic and

literary exercise rather than anything scientific.

Instead of attempting to replicate any particular imperial cuisine, the ruyi dinner perhaps wisely sticks to the Cantonese cooking it knows best, while cherry-picking elements of ancient dining logic. “In terms of how people ate, we looked back through ancient Chinese history and found they dined extremely similarly to the way we do in modern fine dining,” says the creator of the concept and partner of Legle France, Desmond Chang.

“The earliest record of course-by-course degustation comes from the Song dynasty when they'd have at least 30-odd courses. First course is usually an incense ceremony to clean the energy, followed by music and then tea.”

The sophisticated approach to dining is not lost on Chang, who claims they are reviving a “multifaceted experience”, including impeccable service, atmosphere, and multiple courses paired with tea and steeped in culture.

The ruyi dinner menu is a mere six courses, and is designed with a nod to the old ways, starting off with a series of cold appetisers, moving on to high protein dishes such as lobster, and ending with lighter foods that are easier to digest. Portions are typically small: as Chang reminds us, guests should ideally be 80 per cent full after the meal.

The lavishness of ingredients is also important. “Emperors and aristocrats cared about exotic and expensive ingredients more than anything,” says Yue.

In a similar vein, the ruyi

dinner menu features steamed superior bird's nest with sea urchin and truffle, the modern-day equivalent of bear's paw and shark's fin.

In the imperial kitchens, long processes and experimentation were employed in order to find ideal textures and flavours. For imperial state banquets or royal weddings, premium products such as fish maw would be slowly soaked in chicken stock over a low flame, before being

Emperors and aristocrats cared about exotic and expensive ingredients more than anything

ISAAC YUE, UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

lightly fried to give a sponge-like texture to absorb the stock's rich flavours.

Although such painstaking methods are out of favour today, Find proudly explains how each menu item has been practised and timed to perfection. The baked pumpkin appetiser is steamed in its skin to maintain its true colour and flavour, before the truffle is added. This job alone requires experienced cooks who are well versed in the exact timings taken to reach optimum pumpkin firmness.

Pairing with tea is a nice touch, as it has been the beverage of choice since the Tang dynasty. “Tea works like

wine, each belongs to a different region and terroir, and with its own characteristics,” says Find. So guests begin with green tea to open the palate, move their way through a smoky peony tea that is matched with the delicate flavours of sea urchin, and end with the rounded flowers of chrysanthemum.

What Chang and Find pull off most exquisitely is their presentation. As far back as the Zhou dynasty, the aristocracy used fancy utensils and presentation to demonstrate hierarchy and superiority. It was during the Song dynasty that porcelain became affordable and extreme attention was paid to the aesthetics of meals.

The ruyi menu kicks off with a starter, beautifully plated like a Nine Halls Diagram (*Jiu Gong Ge*) to symbolise harmony, prestige and power. Colours are designed to offset perfectly each morsel of carefully proportioned food placed in the centre of each of the nine small dishes, such as the amber deep-fried shrimp toast sitting on a cheerful rose lacquer plate.

Far beyond a gimmicky marketing ploy, Find and Chang's efforts have resulted in a well-thought-out and detailed menu, which they hope will boost appreciation for the glories of China's past and a move away from greasy Chinese takeaways.

“Chinese cuisine should be festive, celebratory and auspicious. Hopefully one day we can all enjoy very high quality Chinese cuisine. That would be beautiful,” says Chang. life@scmp.com

Aussie truffles win global fans

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Selling Australian-grown Périgord truffles to French chefs may seem a foolhardy, even impossible goal, but that is exactly what The Truffle & Wine Co has successfully done.

Why would French chefs resist having access to *Tuber melanosporum*, the second-most valued truffle, twice a year instead of once? There are many possibilities – pride, snobbery and disbelief that truffles from Australia could be as good as the French product, leading to an unwillingness to even taste the fungus. But recently there has been a change in attitude.

“Last year we cracked the French market, and it is now in the top six of our biggest markets. We sold 500 kilos of Périgord truffles to French clients last year,” says Shane Styles, vice-president of marketing at The Truffle & Wine Co.

This represents more than 10 per cent of the 2013 crop, which came in at approximately 4,300kg, with a forecast for this season (late May to September) of 5,500kg, which will account for around 60 per cent of the Australian truffle harvest.

Included in the new French client base is Restaurant Bruno in Lorgues, France, a Michelin-starred restaurant that is known for using more truffles than any other restaurant in the world, with a year-round focus on truffle tasting menus only.

Chef Umberto Bombana, of three-star Michelin restaurant Otto e Mezzo, has a summer black truffle menu available until the end of the season.

While Bombana has been purchasing truffles from The Truffle & Wine Co for four years, for the past two years he has only used that company to source his Australian truffles.

“The main reason for exclusivity is I like the product, another is the support that they as farmers can offer. I use a lot of truffles, I am known for truffles, so to have the support of the truffle farmer direct is a joy for a chef, and this creates a certain synergy,” says Bombana. “They are very similar in taste to those from Périgord, with an equal fragrance and aroma.”

Styles says their truffles are now sold in more than 30 countries. “We are creative with our partnerships, targeting key chefs. We are able to provide support including marketing assistance, farm visits and truffles for promotional dinners. We have a high quality product for the entire season, which no other Australian company can match.”

The company also supplies Richard Ekkebus of Amber and Shane Osborn of St Betty in Hong Kong, as well as American chef Thomas Keller of French Laundry and Per Se, and Heston Blumenthal.

Styles is often asked if the two seasons of Périgord black truffles are going to dilute its status and reduce interest in the product from chefs – his answer is a firm no.

Bombana agrees: “Chefs love the opportunity to create truffle dishes using summer ingredients. To create a truffle dish that is completely different due to what is available seasonally is exciting for them, and this excitement helps the Australian truffle industry through demand.”

“Truffles express so much, having them available at this time of year gives chefs an extra ingredient to play with, and they are a great match for summer vegetables,” he says.

Bombana's menu showcases this attitude with the home-made tagliolini with butter, parmesan and black truffle. The addition of the truffle brings focus to the pasta and elevates it to a restaurant dish.

“For me truffle enhances flavours, it is not necessarily the star, but it makes the dish a star, it makes the ingredients shine, such as in risotto, pasta and egg dishes,” says Styles.



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CHEF UMBERTO BOMBANA

The company has just introduced a high-end wine range to pair with truffles, which was made in an old-world style, which Styles thinks are a better pairing than many Australian wines.

“A German riesling is a great match for lighter dishes, moving through to a pinot noir from Burgundy, and of course a Bordeaux red as dishes become heavier.”

Styles says that part of the company's success and domination of the market is due to science. “Other Australian producers have a product as good as ours, but thanks to five years hard work by our full-time scientist we have cracked the secret to high yield and low rot that our competitors have not managed.”



Stewed rice with Alaskan crab at The Ritz-Carlton.
Photos: May Tse



WINE OPINION
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Single-grape champagne is a pure delight

Not to do myself out of a job, but a smart way to get some wine tips is to open the fridge in the kitchen of a Bordeaux négociant. You'll almost certainly find a bottle of Denis Dubourdieu's dry white AOC Graves, Clos Floridene. Next to it, I think you'll come across a bottle of Delamotte Blanc de Blancs NV champagne.

The reason that this is such an insider's choice is because the grapes from Delamotte are sourced from the same place as Champagne Salon, perhaps the world's rarest champagne: one that is only made in specific named years, and sold as a vintage. When a vintage is not declared (and Salon champagne not bottled) those same grapes end up in the citrus zing of a crisp Delamotte.

It's a beautiful, delicate champagne, trembling with understated complexity, a signpost to just how astonishing Salon can be. That's doubtlessly why those same négociants

turned up in force last week when CEO Didier Depond brought the latest Salon vintage, the 2002, to Bordeaux for an unveiling (one of the later stops on its international release tour, no doubt because more than 90 per cent of Salon leaves France).

This is the first vintage released since 1999, and although we have the 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2008 to come, there has been no vintage since 2008.

Even without the rarity factor, Salon is a wine that breaks all the rules. For a start, unlike the vast majority of champagnes, it is not a blend of grapes from different villages. It is 100 per cent chardonnay and comes only from six hectares grown in the village of Le Mesnil-sur-Oger on the Cotes de Blancs (both Salon's own and those bought in from a select group of neighbours).

Mesnil grows only 100 per cent grand cru vines, and Salon makes no more than 60,000 bottles each vintage, meaning



The Blanc de Blancs uses the same fruit as Champagne Salon.

that most countries get just a few thousand bottles per vintage. There have only been 38 vintages since 1911, including the 2002 that we came to taste – and they are aged for an average of 10 years before release.

We were fortunate to have Alain Terrier with Depond. He has been cellar master of Laurent-Perrier, Delamotte,

Krug and Salon. He started in 1975 and retired just under a year ago.

Terrier was responsible for three of the four vintages that we were tasting – Delamotte 2004, Salon 2002 and Salon 1997 (in magnum, drinking beautifully right now) and the 1962 (“the year I was born”, says Depond, “so not as old as all that”). Terrier

explained that the label was created as a love song to champagne by Eugene-Aimé Salon, when he bought a row of pure chardonnay vines in Mesnil in 1905.

It was, at first, only for his private consumption (Salon claimed he could find no champagne that lived up to his exacting standards). It expanded to a lucky group of friends and clients.

Its first “commercial” bottling was in 1921, and it remained with the Salon family until it was bought by Laurent-Perrier in 1988. Even after that, Salon never compromised its quality – there is no secondary malolactic fermentation, which ensures the flavours are austere, crisp with menthol notes.

The lack of oak ageing underlines this, with winemaking taking place only in stainless steel, which again emphasises the purity of the flavours. Even the dosage is kept very low so there is no masking

sugar sweetness. This is a wine confident of its own greatness.

“It has exactly the same character as the 1982,” says Depond, although my neighbouring tasters all placed it in a higher bracket.

“You can see after 12 years the colour is still pale, there is no hint of oxidation or deepening golden colour, which is a good sign for the potential of the wine. And the bubbles are tiny; an indication of extreme quality.”

More than a week on, I can close my eyes and still taste the thrilling heights of this wine; so



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elegant and restrained, so astonishingly young even at 12-years-old, with fine bubbles that caressed at first, but drew themselves up to deliver electric touches of aniseed mixed with white flowers and hawthorn.

It was certainly a stunning champagne, seemingly hard to better – although we were left with one tantalising fact that suggested it just might be.

In most releases, Salon puts 10 per cent of its production in magnums. But Depond says he has decided to bottle the 2008 vintage in magnums, with no normal-sized bottles.

“It will be kept in the Salon cellars for a minimum of 15 to 16 years before being released,” he says. “Its evolution is truly magical – and a magnum is the perfect format for such an exceptional wine.” In the meantime, get that bottle of Delamotte chilling.

Jane Anson is a Bordeaux-based wine and travel writer



Tagliolini with butter, parmesan and black truffle at Otto e Mezzo.