

Pushing their duck

Hong Kong restaurateurs are helping to redefine Beijing's dining scene, writes **Mark Graham**



Clockwise from left: the entrance to Duck de Chine; 1949 - The Hidden City; Patrick So at Let's Burger; the interior of Duck de Chine. Photos: Mark Graham



It takes entrepreneurial effrontery to open a restaurant in Beijing offering a Cantonese reinterpretation of the capital's most iconic dish, Peking duck. Still, the gamble by Hong Kong restaurant group Elite Concepts has paid off in a big way – its gourmet restaurant, Duck de Chine, is packed every night with locals and visitors.

There, the duck is roasted over a fruitwood fire in the classical way, but sauce options include herb-infused hoi sin with peanuts, garlic or sesame. French music plays in the background and a champagne bar greets diners at the entrance.

Duck de Chine is among several innovative Hong Kong-run ventures that are helping to redefine the Beijing dining scene. The 2008 Olympic Games sparked a culinary revolution that is still transforming the once-dull capital. Although Hong Kong restaurateurs are by no means the only ones introducing

new concepts to Beijing, they operate some of the most high-profile venues.

Several are located at Opposite House, a stylish, minimalist, lobby-free hotel owned by the Swire group. Sureno, the hotel's open-plan, light-flooded restaurant, is a favourite with the art, fashion and design crowd; Bei restaurant's Japanese and northern Chinese dishes, prepared by an American chef, has a coterie of fans.

"There are just so many more options these days in Beijing, upscale and international-inspired things," says the restaurant and bar manager of Opposite House, Milan Sekulic. "Investors are prepared to put more money into the design to give things a much more contemporary style. The whole feel of the city is becoming more international."

That growing cosmopolitan awareness inspired advertising executives Patrick So and Ellis So (no relation) to launch an upscale

burger bar, convinced that expatriates and locals would pay HK\$80 for a top-quality burger and french fries.

The pair enlisted Danish-Chinese chef Kevin Lam as the third partner in Let's Burger, located on lively Nali Patio in the nightlife zone of Sanlitun. "We both like burgers but to find a decent one in Beijing you had to eat in a hotel, so we thought opening a burger shop would be a good opportunity," says Patrick So. "It is a simple idea – burgers are simple – and we offer a cosy environment where people can sit and chat with friends."

But running the eatery, which cost about HK\$1 million to set up, has been challenging. "We were naive before opening; we thought we would be able to sit and enjoy a glass of wine and talk to people but that is not the case," Patrick So says. "In the food and beverage business you have to work hard; you have to put everything into the restaurants – time and money."

Their burgers, made with Australian meat, organic lettuce and tomato and thick-cut fries, and served with a range of sauces such as wasabi mayonnaise, have proved hugely popular.

Buoyed by that success, the pair went on to open Let's Seafood in an adjoining space. Its menu features such items as classic English-style fish-and-chips and Thai-style fish curry. Prices there are higher, with customers spending an average of HK\$150 per head.

"There were no seafood restaurants like this in Beijing" says So. "It was more expensive and more difficult to source the seafood we wanted but our aim was to provide good food at a reasonable price; there are plenty of people in Beijing with money to spend on quality food."

Tom Pattinson, a British entrepreneur and long-time Beijing resident who runs the annual Affordable Art fair, appreciates the improved options.

"A lot of restaurants opened for the Olympics and the dining scene skyrocketed, but now it has levelled off and the best operators have been left standing. In recent years, we have also seen the rise of the value restaurant. At the top end, Duck de Chine is always on my personal list for entertaining people; it is a special restaurant but can be affordable if you don't go for really expensive wines," Pattinson says.

"If you live a local lifestyle in Beijing it can still be incredibly cheap. You can spend 20 yuan (HK\$24) to 40 yuan a head and it will be decent food."

One downside for restaurateurs is the Beijing weather, which makes often generous patio space unusable for much of the year. The extreme cold in winter and the stifling heat and buzzing mosquitoes during the midsummer months make sitting out impossible.

Finding capable staff is also difficult. "In Hong Kong two guys take care of eight tables and do everything," So says. "Here, you have to ask three people to take care of six tables. They are learning fast but one of our main problems is turnover. People just change all the time and salaries in Beijing are rising fast, especially at Sanlitun."

Drilling staff to the service levels that are the norm in Hong Kong is an ongoing process at Duck de Chine. "Most of the staff now understand the Hong Kong hospitality style," says director Amin Yip. "We want them to have a passion for service we try to train them so they can understand the Hong Kong way by using the magic words like 'Thank you'. We put a lot of effort into it."

Duck de Chine is among several outlets that Elite runs in a converted machinery factory compound, now known as 1949 – The Hidden City. Diners enter the 60,000 sq ft complex via an art gallery, before making their way through a garden to the Japanese, Mediterranean and Peking duck restaurants. The

compound also features a tiny noodle bar that seats just 12 people and, in summer, an outdoor bar.

Chien men 23, a cluster of outlets occupying the former American diplomatic complex just off Tiananmen Square, was set up on a similar concept with high hopes it would attract food-lovers. But the operation has been less than successful: Hong Kong-based Aqua group, one of the flagship tenants, closed its Japanese restaurant, lounge and rooftop bar and relocated its Spanish restaurant, Agua, to bustling Sanlitun.

Across the street, however, a venture by Michelle Garnaut attracts patrons who pay upwards of HK\$550 a head for a three-course

"People in Beijing are not the going-out type and they don't like to spend money like people in Shanghai and Hong Kong. They are still extremely price-conscious. It is also a city that is hampered by the traffic, weather and politics."

Master chef Jerome Leung, who learned his trade in Hong Kong, also established a restaurant in Shanghai before opening the Whampoa Club in a converted merchant's house in Beijing. Leung dreams up unusual combinations such as bean curd and vegetable roll with foie gras terrine, Beijing-style pork and bean jelly, and cheesecake with Beijing pea custard.

For all their entrepreneurial verve, the trailblazing restaurateurs face many challenges in Beijing, not least among them opaque rules and niggling bureaucracy.

"It is an expensive place to do business – rents are expensive and salaries are expensive. We are doing fine, but it is not an easy business environment," Garnaut says.

Still, the potential of an increasingly affluent city of 20 million people continues to attract adventurous restaurateurs. Food writer Lillian Chou reckons Hong Kong operators have a head start over rivals from the United States, Europe or Australia because they are used to Chinese and Western ways of running businesses.

"They have been working both sides for ever and are familiar with China," says Chou, an American.

- **Bei: The Opposite House, 11 Sanlitun Lu, Chaoyang, Beijing; tel (10) 6410-5230, 6410-5230**
- **Capital M: 3/F, No.2 Qianmen Pedestrian Street; tel (10) 6702 2727.**
- **Duck de Chine: Courtyard 4, Gongti Beilu, Chaoyang, Beijing; tel (10) 6501-1949**
- **Let's Burger: D101a, Nali Patio, 81 Sanlitun Beijie, Beijing; tel (10) 5208-6036**
- **Whampoa Club: 23A, Jinrong Jie (bet. Fuxingmennei Dajie & Guangningbo Jie) tel (10) 8808-8828**

Afternoon tea memories add zest to Cambridge graduate's bakery

Lexie Morris could have had a promising corporate career in London. Instead, the neophyte businesswoman, who was born in Hong Kong and went to school here, gave it all up to start a cupcake business in Beijing.

"After university, I got a job at a strategy consulting firm in London. I was the highest-paid graduate coming out of my year, but I absolutely hated it," she says.

But Morris, 25, who had studied in Beijing as part of her degree in Chinese studies at Cambridge University, figured there would be a market in the Chinese capital for properly made, prettily packaged cupcakes and relocated to launch her venture.

"The idea for cupcakes came from going for high tea in London, to the Ritz or Fortnum & Mason. I also knew how successful the Peninsula in Hong Kong was with its afternoon tea," says the keen baker. "I knew from experience that Beijing did not have anything like that – one thing I hated about the city when I was there as a student was that there was no cake." Morris did all the baking out of her 800 sq ft flat when she set up Lollipop Bakery

(www.lollipopbakery.cn) a year ago. Her biggest expenses at the time were rewiring the place to cope with an electric oven in constant use and placing an order for 10,000 packaging boxes (the minimum her supplier would accept).

"At first it was just an order a day, and then it really began to snowball," she says. "Since last September, it has been insane – I get orders from individuals and also supply coffee shops. I have never done any advertising or marketing; it is all word of mouth."

With the business expanding, Morris (above) has since moved into commercial premises and hired three full-time workers. A standard order of 24 mixed cupcakes costs about HK\$220, with a choice of chocolate, vanilla, Earl Grey, spiced carrot, red bean, cookies and cream, black sesame and red velvet



flavours. The bakery also customises the cupcakes with inscriptions for birthday parties or other special occasions.

Morris's base in Beijing makes it convenient to meet her father, a civil engineer, when he visits Hong Kong as a designer on the new bridge linking the city with Zuhai. Martin Morris worked on all three cross-harbour tunnel projects and met his wife, Fifi Chan Lai Thiong, while posted to Hong Kong.

Lexie Morris has clearly inherited her Cantonese mother's entrepreneurial genes. "Right now, I am really engaged with what I am doing," she says. "I find it really satisfying when compared to the corporate world. I feel I am creating something. I have to decide where to go from here, whether to hand over day-to-day control, do a coffee shop or franchise it."

Mark Graham

Fast food for hungry Berliners is a wurst case scenario

Michael Slackman

Berlin is full of contradictions. Like the rest of Germany, it demands conformity to certain rules (think twice about jaywalking), but leaves moral judgments up to the individual (no problem with nude bathing in public parks or gambling in shopfront casinos).

Germans are largely blind to the contradictions, of course. But the inconsistencies can be jarring for newcomers, often told to cast aside preconceptions, ignore the seemingly familiar modern city and brace for the unexpected.

That may be true for currywurst, the most popular fast food in the city. The dish, generally eaten from a paper plate with a disposable fork while standing up, is itself a culinary contradiction: a greasy pile of pork sausage (very German), smothered in ketchup (American), sprinkled with curry powder (thank you, Britain and India).

"Currywurst is a culinary symbol of Berlin and of all Germany," says Birgit Breloh, who eats it once a week, stays fit by going to yoga class and is the director of the world's only Currywurst Museum.

Germans, or at least Berliners, look puzzled when asked how they

could be so health-conscious, with their regular walks and emphasis on organic foods, and yet devour the fat-laden dish, often with a pile of French fries doused in ketchup, mayonnaise or both. According to Breloh, Germany's 82 million eat 800 million of them annually.

"You can eat a lot of currywurst without getting fat," says Mario Ziervogel, the owner of Konnopke's, one of the city's most popular currywurst stands, in the trendy Prenzlauer Berg area. "You have to move! If I sit and watch television all day, of course I will get fat."

In many ways, Germans are misunderstood.

"It's true, they see themselves as being the only world-class economy, and maintaining their standards is important to their success," says John Kornblum, a former US ambassador to Germany who still lives there.

But how does this explain the love for fried sausage smothered in ketchup and curry powder?

Currywurst has its roots in the second world war and its aftermath. Breloh says the dish was first made in 1949 by Herta Heuwer, a Berliner, who like many others in postwar Germany, struggled to make ends meet. Sausage, or wurst, has long been a staple. But Breloh says when

Berlin was divided into sectors, Germans saw Americans eating steak with ketchup. They could not afford steak, but they could manage ketchup. Heuwer traded some alcohol in the British sector for curry powder, so the story goes.

The recipe is straightforward: plop the sausage in oil and fry until crisp. Slice it into five chunks. Add ketchup (Heuwer took her ketchup recipe to the grave) and shake on curry powder. That's it.

"Currywurst," says David Schultze, a high school student, "is a German tradition."

The New York Times



Classic currywurst at the popular Konnopke's in Berlin. Photo: NYT