

CULTURE SHOCK



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They've been told that this cuisine is the finest America has to offer, but the three chefs from China are not very impressed

We sit on the terrace on a chilly autumn night, in the warm light spilling out from the windows. To say I'm excited would be an understatement. My intense sense of anticipation comes partly from the fact that this is my first visit to The French Laundry, Thomas Keller's temple of haute cuisine in Yountville, California, and I can't wait to see whether it lives up to its reputation. More importantly, however, my dining companions are three outstanding chefs from Sichuan province, a heartland of Chinese gastronomy. Xiao Jianming is the head chef of Piaoxiang restaurant, in the Sichuanese capital, Chengdu, and erstwhile cook to Chinese and foreign heads of state. Yu Bo is the chef-proprietor of Yu's Family Kitchen and a man well known for his radical take on the Sichuanese culinary tradition. Lan Guijun is a noodle master extraordinaire and chef-proprietor of The Village Cook. None of them has ever been to the West before, or had any real encounters with what is known in China as "Western food," and I am as much interested in their reactions to the meal as my own.

Driving down Highway 29 to the restaurant, I had prepared my guests by casually remarking, "You're very lucky, because we are going to visit one of the best restaurants in the world."

"In the *world*?" asked Lan Guijun. "According to whom?"

It was a clear foretaste of what was to come.

As far as I'm concerned, the meal more than lives up to my expectations—the understated opulence of the room, the friendliness of the service, and, of course, the 14-course chef's tasting menu that I order for all of us. Hallmark dishes such as "oysters and pearls" are as wonderful as I'd imagined. A sautéed fillet of red snapper sings with a perfectly judged accompaniment of sweet-sour orange and "melted" endive. Some of this is indeed food as poetry: sublime and enchanting.

But as I warm up to the pleasures of this utterly satisfying dinner, I can't help noticing that my companions are having a rather different experience. Yu Bo, the most adventurous of the three, is intent on savoring every mouthful and studying the composition of our meal. He is solemn in his concentration. But the other two

are simply soldiering on. And for all three of them, I realize with devastating clarity, this is a most difficult, a most alien, a most challenging experience.

We begin to talk about it in Chinese. They explain that they find the creaminess of the “sabayon” in the first course off-putting. And surprisingly, given the Chinese penchant for strong and salty pickles, none of them can stand the taste of the sharp Niçoise olives that accompany the lobster. “They taste like Chinese medicine,” they all agree.

They are shocked by the rare flesh of the lamb, although it’s the most perfect I’ve ever tasted. (“Dangerous,” says Xiao Jianming, who refuses to touch it. “Terribly unhealthy.”) The sequence of delicious desserts is an irrelevance for these visitors from a food culture without much of a sweet tooth. (The only dish they relish, curiously, is a coconut sorbet.) They are also mystified by the custom of serving tiny, personal portions of food on enormous white plates, and find the length of this meal served *à la russe* interminable.

I am struck by how much, at some abstract level, Thomas Keller’s food has in common with the finest of Chinese cuisine, in its magnificent ingredients, intellectual wit, and delicate sensitivity to the resonances among tastes, textures, and colors. But the physical facts of its expression, the sequence of dishes before us, might as well have come from another world.

“How am I supposed to eat this?” asks Yu Bo, puzzling over the red snapper that has sent me off into flights of ecstasy. He is as confused as a Westerner faced with her first bowl of shark’s-fin soup, plateful of sea cucumber, or serving of stir-fried ducks’ tongues. I’ve often seen this scenario in China, but this is the first time I’ve witnessed it from the other side.

The chefs are not as arrogant about their own prejudices as many Westerners are in China. Lan Guijun admits, “It’s just that we don’t understand, it’s like not knowing a language.” Yu Bo is even more humble: “It’s all very interesting,” he says, “but I simply can’t say whether it’s good or bad: I’m not qualified to judge.”

Sichuanese cuisine is comparable to French cuisine in its sophistication, and it is legendary in China for its diversity of flavors. In the West, however, as Lan Guijun observes, “People just label Sichuanese food as hot and spicy; the layering of flavors is completely lost on them.” This is largely due to the fact that few people outside China have encountered the genuine article. It’s the same for the Sichuanese when it comes to authentic Western food. Ten years ago, it was all but unknown in Sichuan. Even now, when a booming economy and a mobile population have brought ingredients like olive oil and cheese to supermarket shelves in the larger cities, so-called Western food is still a poor reflection of the original and is represented mainly by fast-food chains. So the three chefs arrive in California having had minimal exposure to our culinary traditions.

In the beginning, they are game for trying almost anything, so I seize the opportunity to ply them with all kinds of unfamiliar tastes and textures. At our hotel, I tempt them with ripe Stilton and Roquefort, aged Parmigiano-Reggiano, capers, and chicory. The cheeses are a particular challenge, as they are completely alien to the Chinese diet (though they do invite comparison with fermented and “stinking” bean curds). The chefs sample politely, without much enthusiasm, although Yu Bo uses a very positive term, *xian* (the Chinese equivalent of *umami*), to describe the taste of the blue-veined Roquefort.

The chefs are in America to give demonstrations at The Culinary Institute of America in St. Helena, and when they have lunch at the school they eat politely, filling their plates with cooked meats and salads. In restaurants, the Western foods they like best are always those that have the closest affinity with Chinese food: barbecued pork chops, roast chicken, puréed squash. The only dish they polish off completely is a seafood risotto: perfectly edible, they all agree, though they find it hilarious to be charged such a high price for a simple bowl of *tang fan* (soupy rice).

But there are strong taboos I haven’t anticipated. The most striking is the visceral dislike of rawness. In China, the consumption of raw foods was historically viewed as a barbarian habit, and most everything is still eaten cooked. The chefs are horrified by the rare, bloody meat they are offered in America. And after two days of buffet lunches at the school, they are even tiring of salads: “If I eat any more raw food I’m going to turn into a savage,” jokes Xiao Jianming with a wicked grin.

They find crusty sourdough bread uncomfortably tough and chewy. Despite the Chinese love of the slithery, gristly textures that are repulsive to most Westerners (think chickens’ feet, jellyfish, and goose intestines), there doesn’t seem to be an immediate equivalent in Chinese food to this bread’s particular mouthfeel. The daring Yu Bo continues to taste and analyze everything, even when the other two are running out of steam. I watch him, fascinated, as he chews his first-ever mouthful of artichoke heart, samples maple syrup, inhales for the first time the bouquet of a good red wine.

I’m still determined to offer them the chance to appreciate the kinds of food that Westerners rave about, so one day we drive down for lunch at the Chez Panisse Café, in Berkeley. I order oysters. Xiao Jianming won’t try even one of the mollusks, and Lan Guijun eats a single one just to humor me. Yu Bo, to my great satisfaction, is pleasantly impressed with the first raw oyster of his life, and even ventures to take a second. When I ask him how they taste, he nods furiously in approval: “Not bad, not bad; a bit like jellyfish.” Main courses are more successful, and they tell me that the chicken breast saltimbocca with butternut-squash purée, as well as the clams in a chickpea stew, are reasonably suited to Chinese tastes.

In a strange mirroring of cultural attitudes, just as Westerners complain of feeling hungry within an hour of dining at a Chinese restaurant, in America these Chinese travelers face the recurrent problem of not feeling full. In particular, they are yearning for rice. One evening, after consuming several courses in the European manner, Xiao Jianming actually makes me ask if our restaurant can rustle up a quick egg fried rice, a perfectly normal request in China. (They can't, of course, because they don't have any cooked rice on hand.)

On our third day at The Culinary Institute, they choose to eat in a notoriously bad Chinese restaurant rather than brave another fine Western meal. After the fourth day, we find a rice cooker in the school's kitchens, so for supper we all have steamed rice with a simple stir-fry of Chinese chives laced with chile. I haven't seen any of them eat so eagerly, or look so happy and relaxed, since we arrived in America.

We may think it's the Chinese, with their surprising diversity of ingredients, who eat "weird" food, and that Western food is "safe" and "normal" by comparison. But as these chefs' experiences in this country show, gastro-culture shock works in both directions.

Their reactions in California remind me of my own early memories of eating in China: The evening I pitched up, tired and bedraggled, at a Chongqing hot-pot restaurant and was faced with a tableful of strange rubbery things that I didn't recognize, let alone know how to eat; my first encounter with Sichuan pepper, strewn with abandon into every dish I ordered ("unpalatable, unbearable," I wrote in my diary); my attempts to avoid eating the choice morsels of pig's brain that had been placed in my rice bowl by well-meaning friends. It was tough, trying to put on a brave face while eating what my Chinese hosts considered special treats, when I had to struggle to get them down. So I really feel for these Chinese friends, making their first tentative steps on this challenging path, trying to be polite and adaptable.

Our dinner at The French Laundry over, I really don't know whether to laugh at this mirror image of the experience of many foreigners in China or to cry at my friends' failure to appreciate the genius of the meal. Will they, I wonder, go back and tell their friends appalling stories about raw meat and olives, plainly the American equivalents of snake soup and scorpions?

Somehow I suspect that in a few years' time, many of these foreign flavors will have worked their way into the affections of Xiao Jianming, Yu Bo, and Lan Guijun. China is changing at a breathtaking pace, and the restaurant scene is in a state of constant, rapid innovation. In Chengdu, sashimi, red wine, and asparagus have all become popular in recent years, and you have only to look as far as Hong Kong and Taiwan for examples of truly cosmopolitan, cross-cultural Chinese dining.

But first encounters are always shocking, whether you start out from Sichuan or California. The chefs were intrigued by their fleeting glimpse of America. But gastronomically, it was just too much novelty to absorb in too short a time. By the end, Xiao Jianming and Lan Guijun were dying to get home, where Sichuanese rice porridge, braised duck, and chile bean sauce would greet them. (Yu Bo actually decided to stay on in the States and help out at a restaurant outside of Manhattan for a few months.)

My own duties as a guide and translator complete, what did I do? Sat back in a café and ordered a hamburger, medium-rare, with a slice of cheese and plenty of raw salad. A barbarian meal, perhaps, but my, how delicious it was.

Source: <http://www.gourmet.com/magazine/2000s/2005/08/frenchlaundry?printable=true>