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1 Sky on 57's Justin Quek.
2-6 Cho Cho San.

Finding a balance

We have come a long way from the East meets West fusion tagline with Asian cuisine now celebrated for its rich tapestry of flavours and cooking techniques that Aussie chefs are embracing with gleeful and unselfconscious abandon, writes Sheridan Randall.

Great Australian produce, a global outlook and a love of strong flavours is seeing all sorts of new Asian-themed venues popping up. One of the latest is Chui Lee Luk's Chow Bar & Eating House in Sydney's Surry Hills. Fresh from the closure of her French inspired Claude's restaurant, Luk has embraced her Chinese heritage and reimaged a Chinese pub, something that may have only existed in her imagination until now.

"What I am trying to is create a fantasy of what a Chinese pub should look like," she says. "It's what I would like to serve people when they are having a drink. It's not a very well developed culture of drinking and eating in Chinese culture. Being in a Western context the expectations are different, hence this fantasy."

While Claude's menu had been increasingly influenced by Asian cuisine as it progressed, Chow Bar & Eating House is a fully fledged exploration of Chinese cuisine, with influences from both Malaysia and Singapore.

"I have wanted to explore my Chinese roots for a long time," she says. "The dishes have an authentic base [but] are an individual interpretation of Chinese flavours. I don't think I have changed it [the flavours] as Australians have a fairly sophisticated taste as far as

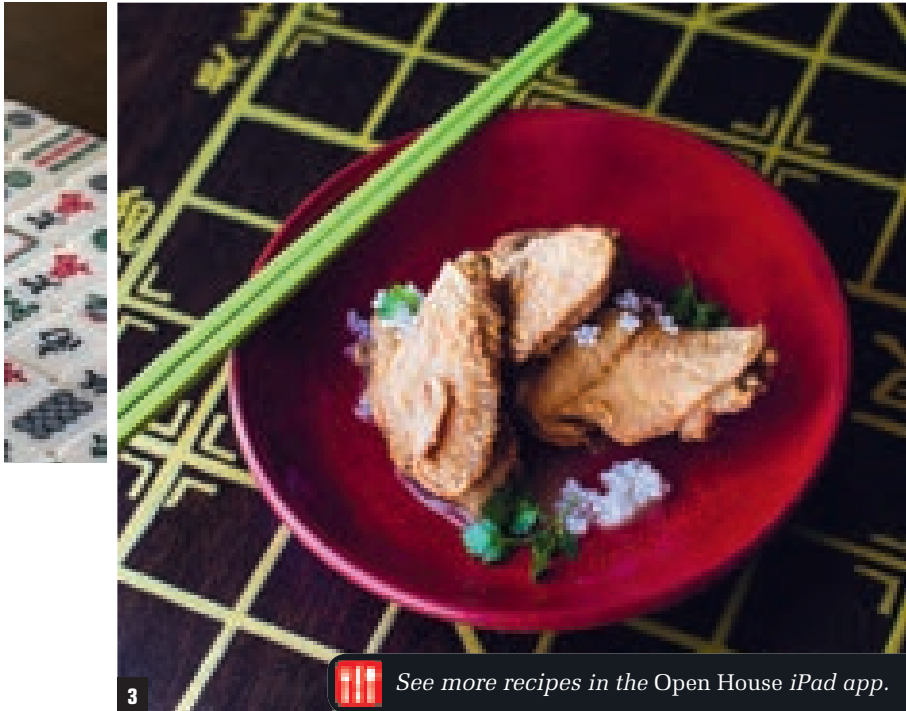
cuisine is concerned and I expect those that come to have a certain amount of open mindedness about it. It is authentic, in the same way I worked at Claude's, which was my version of French cuisine. It is the same thing here. It is meant to be a place where Chinese and Westerners should be happy to come to. I do have a number of Chinese patrons come through who are glad about the authentic taste of the dishes. There are hints of things they have already seen which should trigger some emotional response."

Luk dived into her latest venture despite having no formal training in Chinese cuisine, notwithstanding a brief stint working with Kylie Kwong at Rockpool in Darling Harbour.

"The research I have done myself and by visiting China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and that sort of thing," she says.

"Chow Bar & Eating House doesn't have anything necessarily intellectual about it, it is meant to be an easily accessible, easy to understand and tasty experience. The menu is meant to transform from a snack and drink experience to a full scale dining experience."

"Cannon Shot Dumplings" duck and scallion crisp cakes, "Lucky coin" roast pork belly, shiitake and yam bean, and "Xin Chow Bao" DIY



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goat sausage and lettuce wraps, all feature on the playful menu which evokes the mix of colour, noise and smells of Asian street food.

The hallmark of a lot of cerebral-based cuisine is that it is subtle and complex, but here I am just trying to find the essence of what I am trying to express in that dish," she says. "A good example is sweet and sour pork ribs, [with black pepper and pineapple] which lives up to its name. It's heightened in its flavouring and tastes."

The bar's comprehensive drinks list, combining a collection of wines, cocktails influenced by Asian flavours and textures, plus some hard to get Chinese beers and spirits, also shaped the menu.

"Chinese cuisine when you're drinking isn't limited to the common perceptions of being best with Riesling or those sweeter or aromatic wines," she says. "We think that [alcoholic] drinks have a [similar] reflection of how tea works in the dining experience for the Chinese. We isolate the flavours, scents and the tannic character of tea and use it as a starting point. That's why we came up with a lot of bio dynamic organically made whites [wines]."

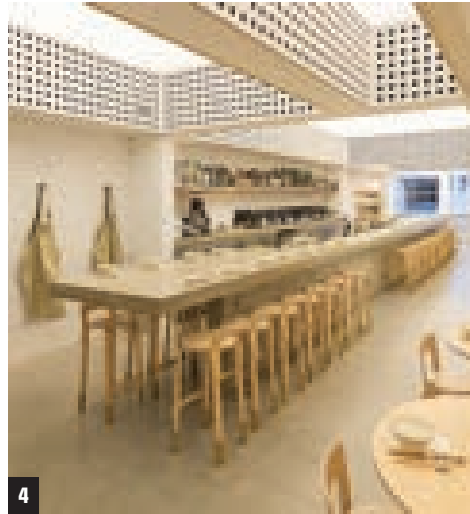
For Luk, the main difference between Western and Chinese cuisine is the approach to flavour.

"In Chinese cuisine it's not about a piece of protein that is the main component as it is in Western cooking," she says. "In French-based cuisine you build from nothing and introduce flavours like onion and garlic and cook it out with butter, vinegar and wine. These base ingredients come together to build up a harmonious flavour. Whereas with Chinese cuisine you use building blocks as flavour [and] have a lot of ready-made flavourings like soy sauces and use them as blocks to build the complexity."

Cho Cho San in Potts Point is another new Sydney eaterie that finds inspiration in Asian cuisine, in this case Japan.

The new restaurant is the brainchild of Jonathan Barthelme (also behind Longrain restaurants) and Sam Christie (the Apollo), and "represents a cross-fertilisation of ideas."

"Jonathan and I have recently spent time in Japan where we were inspired by their rich and multi-layered food and drink culture," says



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T-Bone steak with onion salad

Serves 4 (sharing style)

Teriyaki glaze

100ml dark soy

100ml sugar

100ml mirin

20ml cooking sake

10g ginger

10g brown onion

20g green shallot

1 white onion, thinly sliced into rings

1 bunch chives, finely sliced

¼ Spanish onion

100ml brown rice vinegar

100ml extra virgin olive oil

½ tsp caster sugar

750g T-bone

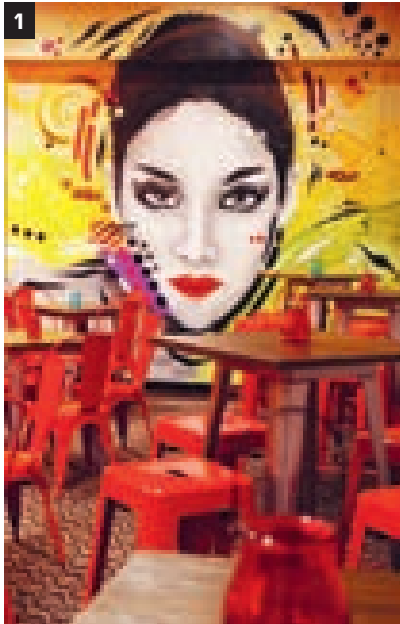
To make the Teriyaki glaze put dark soy, sugar, mirin, cooking sake, ginger, brown onion, green shallots in a heavy based saucepan and bring to the boil and simmer until the liquid is reduced by half. Strain and cool.

For the onion salad soak the onions ring in cold water for one hour. Then rinse 5 times under running cold water. Remove the excess water by spinning the onion rings in a salad spinner.

For the salad dressing microplane the Spanish onion – the consistency should be a fine paste. Add sugar, vinegar, olive oil and whisk until ingredients are blended.

Allow T-bone to come to room temperature (this may take 2-3 hours). Once BBQ is hot, place T-bone on the BBQ on a chargrill coating the T-bone with a little olive oil. Cook it for 5minutes each side on high until the meat has caramelised. Then coat one side with Teriyaki, and continue glazing and turing the meat and allow cook for another 3 minutes on medium. Rest for 10 minutes. Carve and serve. Dress onion with salad dressing and chives.

Recipe from Cho Cho San.



1 Jimmy Wong's Bar and Supper Club. 2 Chow Bar & Eating House.

Christie. "With Cho Cho San, we want to bring some of the big-city buzz and excitement of Tokyo back to Sydney."

The restaurant is headed up by Nicholas Wong (formerly of Billy Kwong, Rockpool Bodega and Ester), who is focusing on fresh produce, using hibachi grilling and steaming techniques.

"Both Jonathan and I are pretty keen on traditional Japanese cuisine and we just wanted to differentiate it from a traditional route," Wong says. Wong cites influences from Chinese and European cooking on the menu, saying they didn't want to make it a traditional restaurant "serving things like sushi and stuff like that".

"In Japan all the restaurants are very specialised, and we don't believe that we would do it justice," he adds.

Describing the food as "on the lighter side", the menu features dishes such as udon noodles with spicy pork and whipped tofu, raw daikon laid over slices of raw kingfish resting over a raw egg yolk and a little soy, and marbled raw beef rib over a mixture of wild and toasted puffed rice and cubes of raw cucumber, dressed in soy, ginger and browned butter.

Again, the comprehensive drinks list plays an important part in the experience with a "pretty cracking cocktail and whiskey list," sake available by the glass, carafe and bottle, a plethora of Japanese and Aussie craft beers and a comprehensive wine list.

"With a lot of Asian cooking there is a lot more balance within flavours and that is the same with our approach, so it is not so one dimensional," he says.

"We are very lucky that we have a lot of different influences and styles of food in Australia."

Perth has also welcomed a new Asian inspired venue at Crown Perth in Burswood. Jimmy Wong's Bar + Supper Club is a pop-up bar and restaurant that offers tapas style treats with an Asian twist – roast duck, char sui pork and soy chicken, pulled pork steamed buns, Shanghai dumplings and Singapore noodles sit alongside a comprehensive drinks list including signature cocktails such as the Tokyo Rose and Chop Chop.

"The kitchen team at Jimmy Wong's Bar + Supper Club drew upon their culinary experiences whilst travelling through Asia, as well as working closely with our South East Asian chefs at Crown Perth,"

says Sophie Ridgeway, a spokeswoman for the venue.

"Jimmy Wong's head chef is actually Thai and has had a lot of exposure to other Asian cuisines as well as Western-style cooking, resulting in a delicious Asian fusion menu.

Describing Asian food as diverse, packed with flavours and colour, Ridgeway says that the menu evokes memories of "tropical holidays".

"Most customers have been exposed to this type of cuisine, so they know what to expect," she adds.

"Our culinary philosophy is reflected in the venue's style – it's cool, urban, modern and artistic. Sharing is fun and interactive, and our guests can experience a wider variety of foods by serving small portions. Our food is street food, ready-to-eat food – reasonably priced, full of flavour and served in a really friendly, sociable setting."

The knife cuts both ways though, with Asian cuisine referencing Western ingredients and techniques in many restaurants. Marina Bay Sands Resort in Singapore is soon to host its Epicurean Market for a second year on September 12-14, with an array of top chefs including Australia's own David Thompson (Long Chim) and Tetsuya Wakuda (Waku Ghin) joining their Singaporean contemporary Justin Quek (Sky on 57) in the line-up.

Like Australia, Singapore is a multi-cultural melting pot, with Chinese, Malay, Indian and Peranakan all on the menu, making it's cuisine both fascinating and at times hard to pin down.

"Singaporean cuisine is about many different elements coming together to create the perfect balance," says Quek.

"At Sky on 57, I present Franco-Asian cuisine, but give new interpretations to traditional favourites, resulting in baked miso cod with ginger and lime butter, Maine lobster hokkien mee, grilled Kagoshima wagyu beef and wok-fried Asian black pepper lobster to name a few."

With hot, sour, salty and sweet "the hallmarks of local Singaporean cuisine", according to Quek, it is Singaporean hawker style food that holds the greatest resonance for many diners from Australia.

"Hawker or street food has been given its due recognition in Singapore," he says. "In a way, it has been elevated and given a

King scallop ceviche with Manjimup black truffle shaving, micro-greens

Serves 1



2 pieces Hokkaido king scallops
6g shaving of fresh black truffles
8g mixed micro-greens
2¼ wedges of lemon juice
3 tsp olive oil
Sprinkles of chopped shallots and chopped chives
Sea salt and pepper, to taste

Cut scallops into thin slivers, marinate with lemon juice, sea salt, pepper and olive oil. Keep chilled in the fridge for 1 hour.

Place the scallops on a plate, and sprinkle with chopped shallots and chopped chives. Lay the shaved truffles on the scallops, toss micro-greens with ¼ wedge of lemon juice, sea salt and 2 teaspoons of olive oil. Place dressing around the scallop and serve.

Recipe from Sky on 57.

higher profile. You'll find local fare being presented in restaurants, from mid-tier to high-end dining establishments. It's not so much hawker food as it is about the celebration of good Singaporean food that's rooted in this country. In Sky on 57, we have this dish *bak kut teh* – it's a traditional local dish that features pork bones cooked in a special herbal broth for hours, and served with rice and fried dough. We give it a spin by adding a dash of whisky at the end, and this immediately lifts up the dish, in taste and aroma."

Quek says that his experience working in both Europe and Asia means he understands both cultures and palates "and balance them well".

"I like to keep the authenticity of the dish in terms of flavour, but always search for the best ingredients," he says. "So it's about presenting Asian inspired cuisine in a European way, and consequently thinking of the wines that can pair with my cuisine. Take for example, the lobster hokkien mee. I first came up with the idea about 14 years ago when a tycoon came to my restaurant. He was looking for something luxurious, so I replaced the prawns in the traditional hokkien mee with lobster and enhanced its stock. Not only does the dish showcase the flavours of a traditional Asian dish, at the same time, it was fitting of the tycoon's social status."

With a lot of chefs attracted to working in Singapore "because the cuisine allows us to mix different Asian spices and create new flavours", according to Quek, it is the city state's reputation as a business and tourism hub that keeps the restaurant's on their toes.

"We need to be able to offer international cuisine to our visitors, so the food scene is constantly expanding and evolving to meet demand," he says. **OH**

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