

CONTRIBUTORS

DESMOND LIM

Desmond Lim has been taking pictures of food for the past four years, an occupation that has no doubt fuelled his already-large appetite. He shoots with every aspect of the lighting in mind, as well as an eye for detail, so minimal amounts of tweaking need to be done on image-editing software. His keen eye also comes in useful when he's spending his free time on leatherworking—a skill in which he is entirely self-taught.

Keep up with his appetite on Instagram at @limminglong.



MARK ANDREWS

Although Mark Andrews considers himself a travel writer, food and drink always feature heavily in his pieces. He believes that part of getting to know a place is about sharing the local way of life, and one of the easiest ways to do that is by breaking the proverbial bread. Despite being a fussy eater as a child, he now enjoys nothing more than eating local specialities—the stranger the better. And there is no greater way to spice up mild-mannered Britishness than with foods such as mouth-tingling Sichuan cuisine.



MARISSE REYES

Based in Amsterdam and Ubud, Marisse explores the complexity of the world through the pen. Her food, travel, and lifestyle writing has brought her to the far-flung mountains of China to explore ancient rice-growing practices, to the Philippines' most secluded and luxurious private islands, and face-to-face with some of the most respected names in the culinary world. Whatever she's reporting on, Marisse always gets to the heart of the matter. When she isn't typing away, you can find her travelling, cooking up delicious organic meals, perusing local markets, or getting her zen on in nature.

www.marissereyes.com

VIVIAN PEI

Vivian Pei is a cook, writer, stylist and instructor who authored the cookbook *Awakening the Appetite*. She has also worked with the inimitable Anne Willan on the James Beard award-winning book *The Country Cooking of France*. She has run her own restaurant and a catering business, apprenticed in Michelin-starred establishments, and now sharpens her pencils as well as her knives. She speaks five languages, has lived in five countries, and has eaten her way through countless others. Her interest in adult beverages led to a hard won CSW and she has now branched out into the cocktail world... all of which go nicely with her other love—travel!

Follow her food adventures on Instagram at @viviliciousxo



OYSTER THURSDAYS
AVAILABLE FROM 6PM

Freshly flown from France, these succulent oysters take on sweeter and fruitier flavours and make the perfect pairing with a glass of Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc 2017, with its ripe, juicy stone fruit and lemongrass notes.

Fine de Claire Oysters

\$18⁺⁺ ½ dozen \$29⁺⁺ a dozen

Pair with Cloudy Bay Sauvignon Blanc

\$18⁺⁺ per glass \$85⁺⁺ per bottle



Level 33, The Westin Singapore, 12 Marina View, Asia Square Tower 2, S 018961
T. 6922 6948 | E. cookandbrew.singapore@westin.com | W. thewestinsingapore.com/cookandbrew

Zhen San Guan's Chongqing style hotpot is divided into nine blocks, each boasting a different temperature for cooking different ingredients.



ON THE GLOBAL TABLE

Sichuan's Spice Of Life

Exploring the nuances of Sichuan cuisine, from Upper River approaches in Chengdu to Lower River style of food enjoyed in Chongqing and beyond.

TEXT MARK ANDREWS

PHOTOS, MARK ANDREWS, QIUJU XIAOCHAO ,
SONG YUN ZE AND ZHEN SAU GUAN

In our lives, certain cities and places resonate. For me, Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province in China, is one of them. In the 90s, staying at the then-tourist central, Traffic Hotel, an American introduced me to the delights of *huajiao*, Sichuan peppercorns, on my nineteenth birthday at a shack of a restaurant near the bridge crossing the Jinjiang River.

Returning a decade later, Chengdu had changed. The restaurant was gone, replaced by the imposing façade of an Agricultural Bank of China much in the same way that narrow winding streets of wooden buildings had been ripped down to create a city being pulled into the 21st Century. Still lingering on my lips, though, was the taste of *huajiao*, but it would be some years yet before I learnt I wasn't meant to eat them.

Sichuan peppercorns provide the *ma* (numbing) part of *mala*—a taste that for many epitomises Sichuan cuisine. "Sichuan food is all about flavour. It's known as spicy and numbing, which is kind of true. But it's a lot more than that. There are thousands of different combinations, made up by the flavours of salty, sweet, sour, spicy, numbing and bitter. I'd say the key characteristic and taste of real Sichuan food is about the diversity of the flavour," says Hu Ruixi, a Chengdu native and founder of Lost Plate (www.lostplate.com) food tours, which takes tourists to small neighbourhood restaurants that only the locals know about.

Chengdu received the accolade of UNESCO City of Gastronomy in 2010, the first Asian city to be so

named. It's a city that values its work-life balance, with its inhabitants taking their food very seriously.

Regarded as one of the eight great cuisines of China, Sichuan cuisine is a product of its topography, which varies from the fertile Sichuan basin to the wild mountainous areas that once made up parts of the Kham and Amdo Tibetan kingdoms. The geography of the place helps divide the food into the three basic branches, with the Min River that vertically cuts through the province being the main dividing line. Upper River style refers to food eaten in the west of the province in places like Chengdu and Meishan. Lower River style refers to the food eaten to the east, largely Chongqing, which until 1997 was part of the province. Rounding out the triumvirate, Small River refers to the cuisine of places on the inner rivers in the south of Sichuan such as Zigong, Neijiang, and Yibin.

"The Lower River and Small River styles are heavier and spicier, but Upper River, which represents the very orthodox part of Sichuan Cuisine, is not just heavy and spicy. There are 24 types of flavour in Upper River style, and only seven among which are heavy or spicy," explains well-known Chengdu food blogger Jimi He, who writes under the name 挑食的Jim (weibo.com/jimeats). Basic dish flavours include fish flavour (*yu xiang wei*, 鱼香味) mouth-watering (*kou shui wei*, 口水味), strange flavour (*guai wei*, 怪味), garlic paste flavour (*suan ni wei*, 蒜泥味) along with, of course, *mala*.

TRUE CHENGDU FOOD

Upper River style Sichuan cuisine was traditionally centered round Chengdu; today, it is largely the preserve of high-end restaurants. "It's known for being fresh and mellow with a wide range of tastes. Some dishes are spicy but they are mild with a balance that doesn't give excessive stimulation," says Zhang Yuanfu, executive chef and co-founder of Song Yun Ze, an Upper River style restaurant. Zhang learnt to cook at the legendary Rong Le Yuan restaurant, an institution founded in 1861 and which at one point had a New York branch.

Famed dishes are often very complex and hardly known outside Chengdu. *Gufazheng yantuan* (古法蒸岩团) uses a type of fish native to the Yangtze River that is marinated and covered in multiple layers of pork oil before being steamed and seasoned, producing a dish that appears to have been mummified. Another dish largely unknown outside Sichuan is diced pork in a pot (坛子肉, *tan zi rou*) made with soup from five-year-old Jiange (a county in Sichuan) ham, chicken, bamboo shoots and mushrooms. Hind leg knuckle from black pigs, dried scallops, pigeon eggs and lion head meatballs are then added and cooked in the soup for five hours.

Better known is *shui zhu niu rou pian* (水煮牛肉片): beef slices cooked in a stock flavoured with chilli bean sauce, ginger and garlic before boiling red oil with dried chillies and Sichuan peppercorns are poured over.

Restaurants in many of Chengdu's five-star hotels serve food of this style. At Li Xuan in The Ritz-Carlton, Chengdu, one of the best dishes is the Sichuan Tangerine-Flavoured Beef. Helpful in relieving coughs, it is both sweet and spicy with a soft texture and red colour. The orange peel helps offset the spiciness and offers health benefits.

Other hotel restaurants are pushing the boundaries. Shangri-La Hotel Chengdu's Shang Palace is helmed by executive chef Li Tok Fan. Although not a Sichuan native, he has lived in Chengdu for 10 years and devoted himself to preparing Sichuan cuisine in new and innovative ways. Dishes include pan-fried cod with green Sichuan pepper sauce, and braised pork belly and eggs in sweet and sour sauce. While these dishes are not traditional, they hold true to the style with their balance. "The key characteristics of Sichuan food are balance, variety, and diversity," says He.

DIVIDED BY HOTPOT

When considering Sichuan food, it is important to remember that chilli peppers are not native to the area, and only first appeared in China around the end of the 16th Century. From historical records, they first came to China via Guangdong or Guangxi, and it took another century and a half for a written record of chillies to appear in Sichuan Province.

"There are three stories of origin when it comes to cooking ingredients in a chilli-laced soup," says He. The most told of these is that poor Chongqing dock workers and boatmen around the early Qing Dynasty era invented hotpot as a way of cooking. According to others, Zigong is the true home as the city is rich in salt, Sichuan pepper and beef, all things Chongqing wasn't renowned for. The third version puts Luzhou as the source from where it spread to Chongqing initially as street hawker food—a story He notes is more verifiable from records.

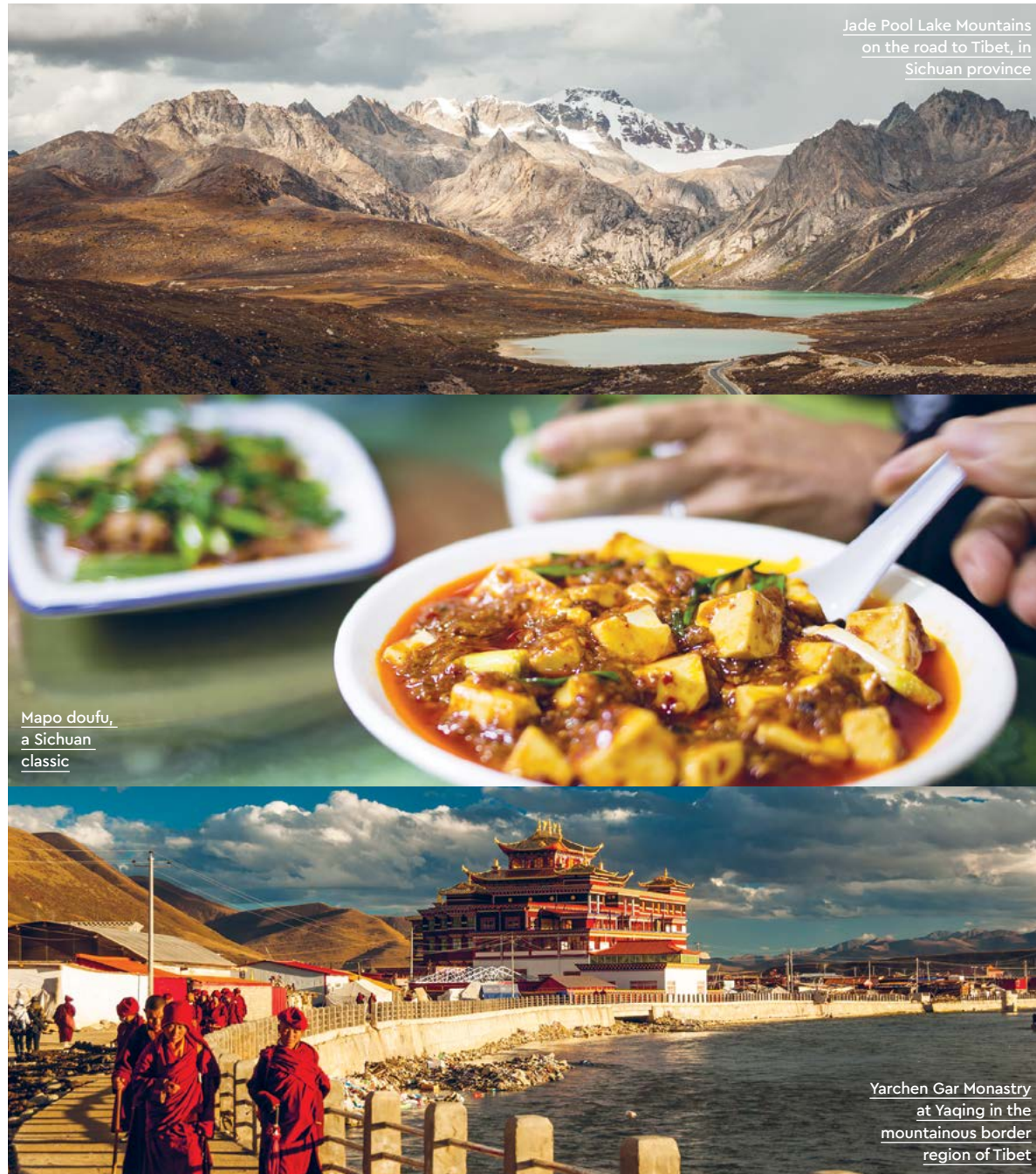
Both Chengdu and Chongqing are very proud of their hotpots, with people in each city often claiming that theirs is the original and the best. There is, though, a big difference between the two. "Chengdu hotpot

When considering Sichuan food, it is important to remember that chilli peppers are not native to the area and only first appeared in China around the end of the 16th Century.

Gu Fa Zheng
Yan Tuan
(古法蒸岩团),
an exquisite
Upper River
style fish at
Song Yuan Ze



Popular hotpot
ingredients include
tripe and other offal



uses a large percentage of rapeseed oil and a small percentage of beef tallow whereas Chongqing hotpot usually only uses beef tallow. These days, Chengdu hotpot is becoming a fancy, fine dining affair whereas with Chongqing hotpot it doesn't matter as much—as long as it's good, it's popular," says Hu.

History aside, what gets put in the pot may vary little between the cities. What matters most however, is the broth. "The characteristics and differences between Chongqing and Chengdu hotpot are like the characters of the people of the two cities. Chongqing people are hot-tempered whereas people from Chengdu are mild-tempered," says Xiao Ya, Chief Operating Officer of Mona Space Hotpot, an upmarket restaurant well-known for its Chengdu-style hotpot.

Chengdu hotpot is typically defined by a balance of spicy yet fragrant flavours. On the other hand, for Chongqing hotpot, the seasoning is rough and thick because "we're less concerned about balance, and more focused on pursuing an extremely spicy and numbing taste to stimulate feeling", explains Chen Liwang, restaurant manager of Zhen San Guan Hotpot.

Zhen San Guan happens to be one of the most authentic spots in Chongqing to hit for hotpot. Its signature broth—made from beef tallow, fried chillies, and *baijiu* (distilled spirit made from grain)—gets most

of its flavour from 60 kinds of herbs and spices. You don't just dip and eat here; there is a systematic formula to cooking. The pot of fiery soup is divided into nine sections (*jiu gong ge* 九宫格), each boasting a different temperature. If you imagine a grid, the centre offers the most intense heat, perfect for putting in intestines, tripes, and thin slivers of meat for a quick boil. The blocks to the top, bottom, left, and right offer medium heat, while the outer peripheral blocks are most suitable for ingredients—like pig's brains and duck blood—that can cook over a low flame.

TRAVELLING IN RURAL SICHUAN

Throughout Sichuan you see the same dishes on most menus, and these are largely based on Chongqing-style food—the cheaper-style dishes enjoyed by the mass population. Even when driving in Sichuan's mountainous areas bordering Tibet with two other non-locals, it is easy to find these dishes.

After getting a punctured tyre on the rough road over Mount Zhuodala, we stop in Ganzi (the autonomous prefecture of China occupying the western arm of Sichuan) for repairs and lunch. In a small restaurant near the market, we sit out on the street and eat arguably the most famous Sichuan dish of all. *Ma po dou fu* (麻婆豆腐) supposedly dates back to 1862 from a Chengdu

“The characteristics and differences between Chongqing and Chengdu hotpot are like the characters of the people of the two cities, Chongqing people are hot tempered whereas people from Chengdu are mild tempered.”

restaurant run by an old pock-marked grandma (*mapo* in Chinese). She would buy red chilli oil from the coolies carrying it over the nearby Wanfu Bridge and then serve it up to them in this incendiary dish of tofu. Today, it is usually made with minced beef or pork, which accompanies the tofu in a red oily sauce based on chilli bean paste and fermented black beans.

We accompany this with one of Sichuan's strangest named dishes, fish flavoured pork (鱼香肉丝, *yuxiang rousi*). Consisting of fine strips of pork fried with pickled chilli, cloud ear mushrooms, and celtuce, it has a slightly spicy sweet and sour flavour. Despite the name, it actually contains no fish. "I always order this dish wherever I go but unfortunately I've never had a good one outside Sichuan," says Hu.

Driving between Ganzi and Ma'erkang, we stop at an unassuming roadside restaurant for lunch. Finding places to eat in rural Sichuan can be difficult and is very much a matter of luck. The utilitarian interior and glimpses of the basic kitchen don't inspire confidence but what follows are great examples of two classic Sichuan dishes.

Gongbao jiding (宫保鸡丁, *kungpao* chicken) is one of the most ubiquitous dishes in China—usually appearing in restaurants from Beijing to Guangdong but with poor execution. In its true home, Sichuan, it's a perfectly-balanced dish of diced chicken, peanuts (or

cashews in more upmarket versions) and dried chillies with a limited amount of tingling from Sichuan peppers; it certainly shouldn't be sweet or cloying. Commonly it is bulked up with vegetables and celtuce, as in the case of this restaurant. As with most Sichuan dishes, there is a story behind its name. Reputedly one of the favourite dishes of Qing Dynasty Sichuan governor Ding Baozhen, the *gongbao* in its name possibly comes from his official title.

Twice cooked pork (回锅肉, *huiguorou*), the next dish to appear, is another classic. Slices of pork are first boiled, then fried with garlic shoots, chilli bean sauce and fermented black beans. "I grew up with this dish and I always want it when I get homesick. Locals eat it pretty much every day," says Hu, who currently resides in Shanghai. In Sichuan, it is one of the most common dishes on menus.

Later that evening we reach Ma'erkang, a long narrow town surrounded by villages with Qiang watchtowers. Along one of the two main streets we stop at a small barbecue place. Ingredients are cut into cubes or slices and marinated with mixed spices before being cooked over hot coals on skewers. Popular over much of Sichuan, this style of barbecue originates from Yibin.

On the final day driving back to Chengdu, we stop for an early lunch in Wenchuan, the city that was devastated by the earthquake in 2008. Money has



Diners wait on the street for a table at Qiu Jin Xiaochao



Dry-fried shredded beef at Qiu Jin Xiaochao

JCB Platinum Airport Lounge Service

Whether you are savouring sashimi in Japan, surfing in Hawaii or on shopping sprees in Hong Kong and Singapore, JCB Cards will make your travel and transit a breeze.



Uniquely Yours

Exclusively for JCB Platinum Cardmembers, you can now relax in luxury with **complimentary access** to over 40 airport lounges in Asia and Hawaii.



- JAPAN
- New Chitose Airport
 - Hakodate Airport
 - Aomori Airport
 - Akita Airport
 - Sendai Airport
 - Niigata Airport
 - Narita International Airport
 - Haneda Airport
 - Chubu Centrair International Airport
 - Toyama Airport
 - Komatsu Airport
 - Osaka International Airport (Itami Airport)
 - Kansai International Airport
 - Kobe Airport
 - Okayama Airport
 - Hiroshima Airport
 - Yonago Airport
 - Tokushima Airport
 - Matsuyama Airport
 - Fukuoka Airport
 - Kitakyushu Airport

- Oita Airport
- Nagasaki Airport
- Kumamoto Airport
- Kagoshima Airport
- Naha Airport
- Yamaguchi Ube Airport
- Takamatsu Airport

- THAILAND
- Suvarnabhumi International Airport

- HAWAII
- Daniel K. Inouye International Airport

- HONG KONG
- Hong Kong International Airport

- SOUTH KOREA
- Incheon International Airport

- SINGAPORE
- Singapore Changi Airport

Scan here for more information.



• Complimentary airport lounge access is not valid for JCB Platinum Cards issued in Cardmember's country of issuance
• Privilege is valid for JCB Platinum Cardmembers before departure and after arrival at selected airports located in the countries listed above • JCB Platinum Card and boarding pass/stub must be presented on the same day before entry. • Access may be denied if lounge is full and other services may incur additional charges • JCB Platinum Cardmembers are limited to two complimentary access per card in one year (from 1 January to 31 December 2018) for lounges located in Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand • Other terms and conditions apply. For details, visit www.jcbcard.com/platinum.

To apply for UOB JCB Card, SMS **JCB**<space>**NRIC**<space>**Name** to **77862** or sign up now at www.uob.com.sg/jcb

Like us: JCB Singapore



poured into the city, as evidenced by the smart wood-clad restaurant that we were dining in. As with many restaurants, it doesn't strictly follow any certain style of Sichuan cuisine. We eat dishes from both the Lower River and Small River styles.

According to Huang Tianyong, founder of Chengdu's Qiu Jin Xiaochao restaurant, a popular restaurant specialising in Small River-style Sichuan food, the dry-fried shredded beef we eat is one of the most representative dishes of the Lower River cuisine. "Thin strips of beef brisket are fried together with strips of chillies for half an hour and 48 different spices are added after no juice is left," he explains. While it may not be up to Huang's standards, the one we try in Wenchuan still gives a powerful kick even if it may be lacking some of the 48 spices.

Rounding off both our meal and trip is a dish often simply known as Sichuan noodles outside China. Small River-style Sichuan cuisine is known for its snack food and dandan noodles (担担面, *dandan mian*) is one of the most famous. The dish originates from Zigong around 1841, where sellers would hawk it around town carrying two baskets, one with noodles and the other with a redolent sauce of preserved vegetables and minced pork, fired up with chilli oil and Sichuan peppercorns. These two baskets

were carried around via a pole—*dandan*—which then lent its name to the dish. ❶

- Song Yun Ze
8 Liuli Road, Fencui 2-8, Chengdu
Tel: +86 134 5852 2999
- Mona Space Hotpot
Rainbow Bridge Branch, 2F Jiangchenghua, 39 Tongci Road, Wuhou District, Chengdu
Tel: +86 028 8557 5500
- Zhen San Guan Hotpot
18-9, Section 3, South Second Ring Road, Wuhou District, Chengdu
Tel: +86 028 8518 5551
- Qiu Jin Xiaochao
15 Longwang Temple Street, Jinjiang District, Chengdu
Tel: +86 028 6132 6862
- Shang Palace
9 Binjiang Dong Road, Shangri-La Hotel Chengdu, Chengdu
Tel: +86 028 8888 9999