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The Shanghai Food Scene



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By Alexander Chee
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No-holds-barred kitchens populate the city, particularly along the historic Bund.

If you book the eighth-floor corner suite of the Peninsula Shanghai, walk to the window after you've put your bags down. You're at the northern edge of the Bund neighborhood, which runs for a mile on the west bank of the Huangpu river and has existed from the years following the Opium Wars through the Japanese invasion, the Communist revolution and up to today. At the southern edge is the Waldorf Astoria, and along the way are 33 landmark buildings ranging in style from Baroque Revival to Neoclassical to Art Deco. Together they look like a dream about Europe, the lost arrondissement.

When you tell your friends you're on the Bund and they ask if the name is German, tell them it comes from the Persian word for "embankment."

Your immediate view is of the former British consulate, which is pure *Downton Abbey* and now a dining club for Chinese

government officials. To the right, at the edge of the river, is the Monument to the People's Heroes, in all its elegant, severely geometric splendor. Directly ahead, across the bridge over Suzhou Creek, is an older, European-style hotel once owned by Sir Elly Kadoorie, grandfather of the current head of the Peninsula hotel company and an Iraqi Jew who, with Sir Victor Sassoon, helped modernize Shanghai and may have given the Bund its name.

The entire history of the Bund is in that view—the old hotel, the new one, the former consulate, the creek and the river, the former glory of the Bund before the revolution, the glory of the People's Heroes after the revolution, the glory now.

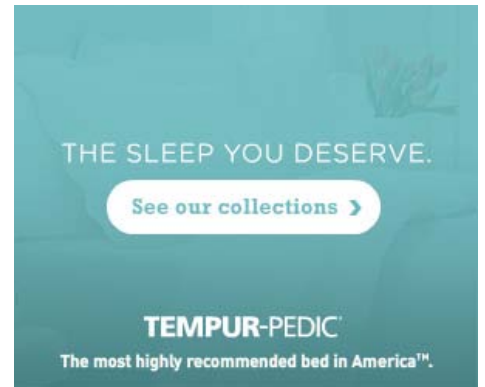
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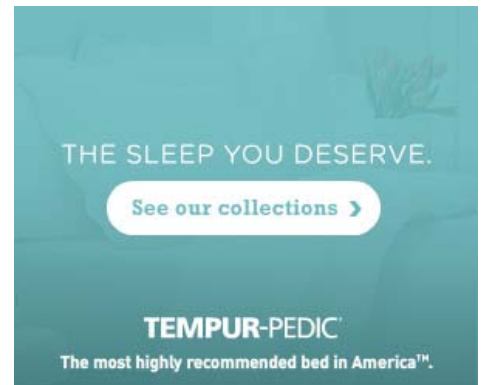
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On my last day in Shanghai, I was eating the four-course brunch at Sir Elly's, in the Peninsula, looking down at the hotel Kadoorie once owned from a restaurant and bar built by his grandson in his honor. The meal was a fine send-off, starting with a savory, crisp waffle served with smoked salmon, sour cream and edible flowers, followed by scrambled eggs in a mushroom foam, then a duck leg confit with a Shanghainese duck sauce and, last, a strawberry shortcake, complete with a nearly invisible flag of blown sugar on top.

Here's to you, Sir Elly, I thought, as I looked out on his former hotel and the tower of the Bank of China, the red-and-yellow flags flying in the wind. Your neighborhood reigns once more.

I still remember the standard old kind of restaurant for foreigners in China, which usually had long menus of well-made Chinese food unfamiliar to Westerners and not-so-great Western food done sincerely, if strangely.

Mr. & Mrs. Bund, at 18 on the Bund, is like a play on that old-style restaurant and on old France as well. Chef Paul Pairet is Shanghai's favorite adopted son, a French-born world traveler whose restaurant was one of the first to bring international attention to the Bund food scene, and his mix of glamour and playfulness set the tone for what came after. The scene: a high-ceilinged dining room with airy glass-and-crystal chandeliers, white columns and black lacquer chairs upholstered in jewel tones. Tall windows offer a sixth-floor view of the Huangpu river and the towers across the way. The staff dresses in Converse sneakers, jeans with suspenders, white shirts and orange or green ties, and the mood is hipster Shanghai.

Pairet's menu is enormous and ranges from the experimental tuna mousse in a can to the more classical veal morel to what I ordered, black cod marvelously done in his version of the French *sous vide* technique. The fish is brought tableside in a somewhat unassuming pouch, which is cut open, and the tender piece of black cod is set down on jasmine rice. Then the server tips the bag and releases a perfectly seasoned, aromatic Cantonese-style sauce into the bowl. The waiter warns you that the Long Short Rib is served for two. It's a phenomenally satisfying example of teriyaki-glazed rib on the bone and a great example of Pairet's wit: It looks as if the chef painted the dish using the rib, and the giant bone is pure Barney Rubble meets Philippe Starck.

One flight up from the restaurant is the legendary Shanghai nightclub Bar Rouge. Think of it as the glamorous single sister of Mr. & Mrs. Bund who lives upstairs. Down in the dining room, you'd never know what is taking place on the roof. That is, until after hours, when the scene at Mr. & Mrs. Bund heats up, perhaps due to its late-night menu of frog legs with garlic coulis and simpler fare like the Mr. Bund croque or Mrs. Bund croque, served right up until 4 a.m. and with aplomb. Without exaggeration, there is no other place like this on earth.

I started off my second night with a Shanghai martini at M-Glamour, a new bar downstairs from the more classic M on the Bund restaurant. The drink was vodka, Campari, grapefruit bitters and lychee, tart and sweet, mellow and cool—not unlike the bar itself. The pink-and-gold cocktail area was slowly filling, and I noticed the floors were patterned in the herringbone I associate with older Paris apartments. There was an Enomatic wine machine lighting much of the right side of the room, the various stations marked by neon signs. When I finished my martini, I ordered a glass of Champagne, partly to see the waiter retrieve it from the appropriate "bar," with its glowing pink "Champagne" label.

This was my warm-up to entering Three on the Bund, just across the street.

Spend more than one night on the Bund and you'll notice that it's typical for its old, beautiful buildings to house at least two, maybe three amazing establishments—sometimes even more. Three on the Bund was so vast that I spent two nights there. For the first visit, I went to the new restaurant from Michelin-rated Argentine chef Mauro Colagreco, famous for his Côte d'Azur restaurant, Mirazur. Here in Shanghai he has opened Unico, a cocktail bar, and Colagreco, his eponymous fine-dining spot.

Unico is the entrance, a long, dark bar lit mostly by glowing alabaster urns that seem to float above, giving the space an almost mystical quality, as if you've entered a cocktail temple. Circling the bar are islands of mismatched modern lounge chairs and coffee tables, which give the bar a casually elegant living-room atmosphere. Presiding at the bar was the handsome Mexican head mixologist, Hektor Monroy, who made a name for himself in Madrid before coming to Unico. The bar's menu is organized around the different regions of Latin America and their different palates. There were a range of cocktails devoted to each area, but Monroy is famous for his gin and tonic: Blackwood's

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gin served in what looked to be a red wineglass, brushed with a crushed sprig of mint, plus tonic water, which Monroy carefully poured down a spoon to preserve the carbonation. It was, quite honestly, the finest gin and tonic I've ever had. All tonic should be served this way.

I then walked over to Colagreco, also housed in Three on the Bund, for dinner. It felt like a separate world from the up-tempo Unico. A beautiful white cockatoo sits in its own room at the entrance, a demarcation of a more serene atmosphere. My banquette had a view of the river and the illuminated ships passing by. I started with the seafood tartare, one of the best things I had in Shanghai, the raw scallops, shrimp and oysters making for a marvelous mix of textures and flavors. This was followed by the shaved-asparagus salad, perfectly bittersweet and dressed with yogurt and a faint bit of honey. I resolved for my return to find someone who would share the Beef Tomahawk for two, as Colagreco offers something like what you'd find at an Argentine steakhouse, the grass-fed beef imported from Argentina and Uruguay.

I spent my second night at Three on the Bund at Mercato, the first Italian restaurant by Jean-Georges Vongerichten. How much does Vongerichten love Shanghai? Three restaurants' worth, and all in that one building. This latest offering, Italian food from a French chef in Shanghai, might sound like a folly, but such is the popularity of that cuisine in this city that he has opened it as a 200-seat beast in a vast loft, headed up by a young Korean-American chef de cuisine, Sandy Yoon, a protégé of Vongerichten's from his Spice Market restaurant in New York. The room's atmosphere is, all the same, casual and somehow intimate, made a little softer by reclaimed wood and beautiful industrial lights.

I was meeting my friend Han Feng, who'd been interning in the kitchen. Feng is a creative director and designer, and her interning at Mercato is just something she does—she loves to cook, claims to have no professional designs on being a chef and yet has also helped out in the kitchen at Ultraviolet, Paul Pairet's other restaurant in Shanghai. She was the one who insisted I pay attention to the Bund originally.

I waited for her at the bar until she emerged, with Yoon in tow. I was surprised by how young Yoon was, because her food—scallop carpaccio served in the shell with pistachio and basil, grilled octopus with potato-and-fennel salad, an enormous twice-cooked rib in a Chianti reduction with polenta fries—has tremendous authority.

She came out to sit with Feng and me after our meal, and I ate her crisp lemon tart with a shiso-leaf sorbet while she spoke of how excited she had been to discover that the widely available lemons in the Shanghai markets are the original Meyer lemons—Frank Nicholas Meyer, the man who gave them his name, brought them from China to America, where a cult has formed around their concentrated yet somehow delicate flavor.

I asked her where she liked to go out after work.

"Go to the Long Bar at the Waldorf," she said. "Order a Vesper martini. It's not on the menu, but they'll make it for you. You'll like it."

Feng and I went up to the roof first, where we found the Cupola, the private dining room of the entire Three on the Bund complex. Here guests are served by a butler and can source their dinner from any of the building's eight restaurants and bars.

"What do you think?" Feng asked me as we looked out over the glittering view.

"I'm blown away," I said.

"It's amazing to see it compared with even two years ago," she said. "Now we have Western-cuisine restaurants that can compete with those ranked highest in the world."

It was more than self-evident, as we were standing atop several of them at that moment. But also something else—I didn't feel like I was eating at Western restaurants as you might find them in other cities; I was eating at them as they were possible on the Bund. Back outside we admired the Waldorf Astoria, in particular the magnificence of its Neoclassical-style façade, before heading in. The Long Bar is named for the 112-foot-long bar, and its 1920s atmosphere has been carefully researched from photographic archives and is strangely effortless, perhaps aided by the smoke from cigars.

The bartender does, in fact, make a very good Vesper.

The trip ended in the Peninsula hotel's Peninsula Green Rolls-Royce after brunch at Sir Elly's. The chauffeur drove the length of the Bund on the way to the airport and, without realizing it, took me past all the places I had been to while in town. As he did, I thought how I couldn't honestly remember another strip like that, say, in New York, Paris or Barcelona, a mile-long battery of some of the very best international culinary talent using the finest local and international ingredients, no matter the price, and with no presiding national taste. It came to me then that the Bund is much more than a dream about Europe. It's a dream about the world.

The Bund Restaurants

Mr. & Mrs. Bund *18 on the Bund*; 86-21/6323-9898; mmbund.com

M-Glamour *Five on the Bund*; 86-21/6329-3751; m-glamour.com

Mercato *Three on the Bund*; 86-21/6323-3355; jean-georges.com

The Peninsula Shanghai *32 on the Bund*; 86-21/2327-2888; peninsula.com

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