

Cuisine China

Challenging the palate

An expat Aussie shares her favourite foodie haunts on an up-market gastro tour of China, writes **Caroline Baum**

FLIGHT attendant to passengers as the plane lands at Shanghai's Pudong airport: "Been here before?"

They shake their heads.

"Hope you've got strong stomachs. (Pause for effect.) They eat e-ver-y-thing," he says with the relish of someone who enjoys scaring people.

Chinese food can be daunting with its complexity, emphasis on live ingredients and regional differences, but not if you have a navigator to guide you through its flavours, steer you to secret places, decode menus and walk you through markets you might not feel bold enough to explore on your own.

Enter Victoria Sexton. The unflappable, former corporate strategy and HR consultant from Melbourne has cooked up a high-end gastronomic odyssey based on her experience as an

expat who came to China, learnt the language and fell in love with the cuisine.

Forget Mao's "Little Red Book". Sexton's little black one is more useful these days and she's prepared to open it for visitors with sufficient curiosity and cash for a luxurious introduction to Chinese cooking, from the ultra-traditional to the cutting edge.

First stop is the fish market, which foreigners rarely visit, in the company of chef Ping from the Peninsula Hotel, where we've all been playing like children with the smart technology in our rooms. As well as your own Nespresso machine, there's a nail dryer (yes, truly), a humidity thermostat and a magic valet box in the dressing room: laundry comes back – no kidding – in 20 minutes, wrapped in tissue (but beware: two sets



EASTERN EXCELLENCE: Chef Ping's cooking class at the Peninsula Hotel Shanghai (left); artichoke and cream soup (right); the Capital M restaurant at night (far right); and chefs in a frenzy of activity (below).



of undies cost me \$50. This kind of service does not come cheap).

We ogle slithering things and vats of eels in many sizes, frogs and sea slugs. Once sold, everything is oxygenated to stay fresh until it reaches the kitchen. Back at the hotel, chef prepares flower crab, grouper and prawns in a giant wok which rumbles like a

thunderstorm. We lick our fingers not to miss a drop of juices flavoured with ginger, chilli and rice wine.

But even on a food tour, you have to take a break from eating. Enter Spencer Dodington, the unlikeliest guide to Shanghai. He's from Texas, and calls us "y'all" while strolling through the leafy Art Deco streets of



the French concession and along the Bund, the broad avenue lining the Huangpu river (a branch of the famed Yangtze), explaining the uniquely louche history of this glamorous city in its decadent heyday.

Fluent in local dialect, Dodington talks his way into places that are not in the guidebooks to show us hidden



details of the city's vanishing heritage. He is one of Sexton's secret weapons, along with Vince Pei, our handsomely urbane guide.

Translating overheard gossip from a group of men sitting on park benches, Pei leads us to a farmers market full of fresh water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, tofu and noodle stalls.

Lunch is at the very groovy, bohemian Art Salon. We are the only non-Chinese in the room. Everyone looks arty (and smokes, which takes some adjusting to) but the food steals the show: a banquet of typical Shanghai cuisine with its characteristic sweetness. There is red braised pork belly, all fattiness and caramel, and a

salad of prawns the size of fingernails with salted eggs, fresh tofu and chives. Sliced beef tossed in chilli arrives on a wooden barque sailing through a cloud of nitrogen with a dish of lotus pods stuffed with beancurd.

Sexton has designed the trip to ease us into exotic flavours, gradually, balancing a mix of earthy homestyle

food with fine dining. At night the wow factor is seriously ramped up at hot spot Mr and Mrs Bund. Chef Paul Pairet looks like Che Guevara, sounds like Serge Gainsbourg and is a protege of the world's most Michelin-awarded restaurant chef, Alain Ducasse.

His style is seemingly contradictory: flamboyantly confident showmanship

combined with pared-back simplicity. The menu showcases Chinese ingredients, such as truffles the size of your fist, in dishes that are strong on aroma and presentation. Who'd have thought steaming a giant prawn with a fresh vanilla pod would work?

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TOPFARE: The picturesque Four Seasons hotel in Hangzhou. Picture: Supplied Supplied

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Leaving Shanghai, we stay overnight in the scenic lakeside town of Hangzhou, at the serenely picturesque waterside Four Seasons hotel, where layered undulating roof tiles mimic the scales of a dragon Chinese symbol of power and good fortune.

We are on a gastro pilgrimage to Dragon Well Manor, an exclusive favourite of the Chinese elite. The setting feels as if we've landed in an ancient scroll depicting misty mountains, cherry blossom, a rippling stream, whispering bamboo.

In our garden pavilion, the lazy susan fills with dishes brought by earnest young women in simple robes. It's as if we've joined a religious order, not come for lunch. There's a solemnity to proceedings, perhaps because each dish is introduced with a lengthy explanation as to its rigorous organic provenance.

Much of the food has the gelatinous consistency prized by the Chinese but alien to us. We politely decline the offer of fresh turtle soup. We try to appreciate bird's nest soup with peach sap, especially after we're told of its miraculous properties for skin and longevity, but we just can't. Instead, we feast on prawns cooked in the local green tea we saw harvested at a nearby village and sweet pea sprouts so fresh we can taste the chlorophyll. Sexton worries she's pushed us too far out of our comfort zone but we're all pleased to have been challenged.

After a calf-stretching walk along a section of the Great Wall (the descent via hairpin bend shute is only for thrill-seekers), hard bargaining at the city's flea market for beads, bamboo and ethnic embroidery, and a hands-on cooking class in a traditional hutong to learn cleaver and chopping skills, our final evening in Beijing is homegrown: Michelle Garnaut, already famous for dishing up pavlova at M on the Bund in Shanghai, has opened the very buzzy Capital M at a prime vantage point overlooking Tiananmen Square. The kitchen, staffed by Aussies and Chinese, feeds 400 a night.

It seemed only right to toast Sexton's inexhaustible good humour with the aptly named Grace, the premium drop from China's most renowned winery.

Caroline Baum was a guest of V&A travel.

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