

Wise men say: 'Stick to the dim sum path'

On a search for an authentic taste of the Orient, the insights of a Hong Kong guest prove invaluable. But will Royal China in Baker Street pass the Kwong-Shing test?



Chinese restaurants, eh? We all have a picture of them – and I doubt the picture can ever vary very much: thick and dowdy carpeting, paper lanterns, paper napkins, a pair of lurking dragons, unsmiling (and very possibly inscrutable) waiters, waitresses who seem incapable of not smiling, and a pair of bloody chopsticks. Some are cheap, some far from it, but the initial impression is generally the same. Which is maybe what coaxes us to order what we always order: the usual westernised crispy this, sweet and sour that, rich in pork and noodle and moreishly seductive in all its monosodium glutamate gloopiness. So when I decided to give Royal China a go (this is the less expensive of the two in Baker Street, the other being Royal China Club) I hit upon a really rather radical wheeze: bring along a Chinaman! Where could be the harm? Could prove to be highly instructive and even life-altering (within the limited context of a restaurant menu).

So enter then Kwong-Shing, a wise and placid fellow who is an economist by profession, though possessed



of rare artistic sensibilities – a collector of Chinese antiquities who divides his time between Hong Kong and Zurich, with occasional stop-offs in London. Now Royal China ... God, it really is a dog of a room, you know: huge, low-ceilinged and dull. Did I say dull? Well it's more than dull, the ceiling – it's horrible, actually: shiny and grey, pockmarked with studdings of recessed downlights that truly shed no light whatever, and scooped out dimly glowing circles, which serve to illuminate even less. The old hotel carpet is there, miles of it ... and there is a curious mural scattered with the heads of eagles (could be ducks) and a repeat of the famous tsunami wave (which is by Hokusai, a Japanese painter, so God alone knows what he's doing in here). The plus side of so sprawling a room is that the tables are decently spaced – and I bagged a large circular one in the corner, this vantage point securing for me a panoramic view of ... bugger all, really. On a weekday lunchtime, the place was one third full ... of westerners. So tell me Kwong-Shing, is it really true that the sign of a good Chinese restaurant is that it's full of Chinese people? "No," he replied. "But a lack of Chinese people is a bad thing". Which is either scrutable or inscrutable, depending upon how you care to look at it.

Tempting

So we scanned the glossy menus – one devoted solely to dim sum – which were writhing with colour photographs of food so tempting as to resemble the rather brilliant plastic stuff you see in the windows of restaurants in Chinatown: the actual food never looks as good as that. But this is what I was eager



■ The painter Hokusai's famous tsunami wave is recreated on the wall of the Royal China

Picture: Polly Hancock

to know: what is authentic here? And what is merely a sop, chucked with contempt into the crude and undiscerning maw of the lumpen westerner? "Most of the dim sum seem to be the real thing. But the so-called 'signature' dishes are all western corruptions – except for the crispy aromatic duck. There's no point in ordering that, though – because it will taste exactly as you know it will taste". Which, fool that I am, I thought was the very point of ordering something that you liked – but then let's face it, I'm just too scrutable

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for my own survival. "Generally, pork is a good sign. You'll find pork in every region of China. Most of the dishes here are southern Chinese. As you go north, the food becomes increasingly plain."

The plan was to kick off

with a few dim sum, then follow with a couple of mains. K-S suggested the minced pork dumplings with shrimp, the prawn cheung fun (my choice, because there was 'fun' in it) – it's actually chunky prawns in a wrapping of rice sheet, a bit like a tiny canelloni, and served in soy sauce. And roast pork buns: what a yummy phrase – roast pork buns! I tried to pick up one of these white and frothy customers with my spraucy black and gold chopsticks, but K-S said to use my fingers. "Why?" I said. "Because they're buns,"

though he was less sure about the pork and shrimp dumplings, which naturally were my favourite. And we were drinking tea: chrysanthemum, with just a little sugar – and do you know, it really did taste very wonderfully of flowers. "I could drink a lot of this," I said. "Don't," K-S cautioned. "It has toxicity. Two pots, and you would be poisoned". I tell you: I'd never had a Chinese meal like this one, matey...

Trepidation

And I haven't yet confessed to the final dum sum we ordered. "A great delicacy," enthused K-S. "My wife, who is Swiss, has finally come to appreciate them." And I said "Uh-huh. And how long did it take her to finally come to appreciate them, K-S?" "About three months". Right. Because what we're talking about is chicken feet. I know. So I held the brown and taloned thing in front of my face: here is foot, here is mouth ... God Almighty, put the two together and what you get is a famous disease ...! It tasted of fat and gristle and was filled with bone. K-S said "very good indeed" and I said not a bloody word.

For the main thing, there was a whole steamed sea bass. This thirty quid dish

did look magnificent on its oval and golden platter, and was – with plain boiled rice – perfectly delectable. "They have the texture just right," approved K-S. "The sauce is a little heavy, the fish perfect". And I had oafishly ordered something because I knew I would like it: crispy noodles with chicken in black bean sauce. The chow mein was as addictive as ever, the chicken tender, the sauce very pleasingly black and gooey. "That is decidedly western," whispered K-S, pointedly not eating it. Well good: I loved it. Would have been better with a fork. Which is also western.

When the waiter gave me the service-inclusive bill, I handed him my credit card. Then he put another piece of paper in front of me which repeated the total cost, and beneath that was printed the word 'tip', where I was invited to write in an amount. I looked at him. Was he having a laugh? He wasn't smiling – but then they never do. I told him that I would not be induced to tip on top of the tip for all the tea in China, chrysanthemum or otherwise. He seemed perfectly unfazed. And so tell me, K-S: overall, how was it...? "It was not altogether bad," he said. Which is another way of saying it wasn't altogether good. I think it is, anyway. I'm still not too good at unscrutable.

■ All previous restaurant reviews may be viewed on the website www.josephconnolly.co.uk.

FACTFILE

- **ROYAL CHINA**
24-26 Baker Street, W1
Tel: 020-7487 4688
- Open Mon-Thu noon-11pm. Fri-Sat noon-11.30pm. Sun noon-10.30pm
- Food: ★★★★★☆☆
- Service: ★★★★★☆☆ (apart from the 'tip' nonsense)
- The Feeling: ★★★★★☆☆
- Cost: Depends if you stick to dim sum. If not, about £80 for two, without drink.

Competition

Festival tickets and a BBQ kit get summer party started

Just in time for the summer season of barbecues, everyone's favourite local butcher, The Hampstead Butcher & Providore, is adding some heat to its range. South Devon Chilli Farm's Smokey Chipotle Chilli Sauce will now be available from The Hampstead Butcher.

South Devon Chilli Farm's special barbecue set will transform the simplest of dishes. This hot and fiery selection includes a Smokey Chipotle Chilli Sauce, Chipotle Salsa and a Hot Habanero Sauce, as well as a stylish black apron

(available online www.sdcf.co.uk).

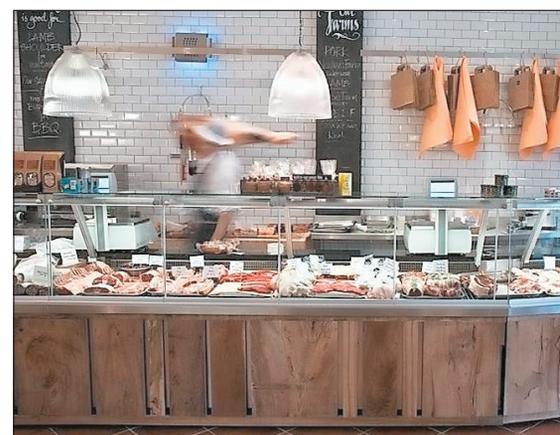
Located in the centre of Hampstead, The Hampstead Butcher & Providore is the area's premier butcher, delicatessen, charcuterie, cheese and wine shop. It offers an extensive range of patés, terrines, marinades, sausages, savoury snacks and hams – many of which are made in their Hampstead Kitchen.

The traditional meat cuts include free-range beef, pork, lamb, chickens and poultry from British free-range farms in addition to game

when in season. Their fresh meat is British, free range, ethically reared and traceable from British farms.

To celebrate this collaboration, The Hampstead Butcher has five pairs of tickets for either the Thursday 21 or the Friday 22 of Taste of London (worth £56 a pair; at Regent's Park) and a South Devon Chilli Farm BBQ kit (worth £20 each) to give away to five lucky Ham&High readers.

■ For a chance to win, email your name, address and phone number to chance2win@hamhigh.co.uk by June 18.



■ Inside The Hampstead Butcher & Providore in Rosslin Hill