

Culinary cross

Shenzhen is bursting at the seams with regional Chinese dining options, writes **Charley Lanyon**

HONG KONG FOODIES don't think twice about grabbing a British fry-up for breakfast, sushi for lunch, and sitting down to a fancy French dinner after work. But, when it comes to Chinese food, Hongkongers can be oddly conservative. We love our Cantonese food, and while some regional Chinese cuisines are common here, many of the mainland's culinary traditions are woefully under-represented in the city.

So where do hungry Chinese food fanatics go when they are craving a fiery seafood hotpot from Guizhou? Or the pungent pickles and preserved meats of Yunnan? The answer is just a train ride away. Shenzhen is one of China's great immigrant cities, and restaurants have sprung up apace to serve the recent arrivals a taste of home.

One of the best of these restaurants is the Hunanese chain restaurant Mao Jia Fan Dian, or the Mao Family Restaurant. Some Hong Kong diners may find the Mao Zedong-themed interior off-putting, but put your politics aside because it serves excellent and authentic dishes from the late leader's home province.

Where Sichuan focuses on the interplay of numbing, cooling, savoury and spicy, Hunanese cooking tends to go all out with the chillies. Some may find it oily or too hot, but for the people of Hunan, nothing satisfies like a fiery



overs



Fatty red-cooked pork from Mao Jia Fan Dian (below). Photos: K.Y. Cheng

chilli-studded fish head, or a bowl of fatty red-cooked pork.

At Mao Jia, the two-colour fish head (52 yuan/HK\$66) is plated beautifully, one half buried under green pickled chillies and the other under a mound of the more commonly used red chillies. The fish head is rich and meaty and the pickled chillies give the dish a hint of Latin American flavour.

It also does the more rustic home-style dishes well. The Mao Family cooked pork (41 yuan), said to have been one of Mao's favourite dishes, is excellent, with thick layers of fat cooked to an almost custard-like consistency.

With a bit of hunting you could find passable Hunan cuisine in Hong Kong, but you'd be hard pressed to find authentic dishes from Guizhou. The southwesterly province is known for its mix of spicy and sour, and the use of salt-cured vegetables. Guizhou is the home of the famous moutai spirit, and many of its dishes are prepared to pair well with the potent tipple.

There is a great Guizhou eatery in a housing estate in Futian. The sign and menu are in Chinese, but you'll know you're in the right place if you see the giant tree sprouting up in the middle of the dining room. It is famous for its sour catfish hotpot, but some of the less common dishes are well worth a try.

The rice beans (22 yuan) are delicious and have a unique aroma reminiscent of graham crackers; they are perfect with alcohol. Other great dishes to enjoy with a beer include a pile of small fish deep fried with spicy peppers (22 yuan) and a dish of what is basically deep-fried country bread served with bacon (22 yuan). It is earthy

and filling with a nice crunch and a pleasant chewy interior.

Yunnan, the province which borders Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar, is home to many of China's ethnic minorities. As a result, it has one of the most singular and flavourful cuisines in China. Hongkongers already love Yunnan rice noodles, which are served in a spicy broth with pickled greens, but it's hard to find many of the region's other specialities here.

Yunnan is well known in China for ingredients such as wild mushrooms, edible flowers and air-dried hams. At The Legend of Yunnan, hidden on the second floor of an office building in Futian, you can try a wide range of Yunnan delicacies. The menu reads like a coffee table book, with large format

Clockwise from below: a healthy soup; fried fish and spicy peppers at the Guizhou Restaurant; which has a giant tree inside the dining room.





Roast fish with lemon grass (centre top) and stir-fried pork with pickles from The Legend of Yunnan (above and far right).



pictures and whole sections dedicated to the cuisine of different minority groups – bee larvae, anyone?

One of the most basic dishes in Yunnan is pork served with preserved vegetables (38 yuan) and The Legend of Yunnan does an excellent version, with the generous portion of pickles providing a bright, briney kick. If you want something a bit more exotic, perhaps try the Dais' roasted fish with citronella (42 yuan).

This whole roasted fish, in the style of the Dai minority group, captures the best aspects of Yunnan cuisine: toasted garlic and sesame seeds make it richly aromatic, while preserved greens, chillies and citronella give it a pungent heat. There is a branch of this restaurant in Hong Kong, but the flavours have been dialed down for local tastes.

So where do hungry Chinese food fanatics go when they are craving a fiery seafood hotpot from Guizhou?

Another minority cuisine almost entirely absent from Hong Kong is that of the Uygurs, who hail from the westernmost Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Xinjiang cuisine is closely related to the food of Central Asia, with lots of cumin-spiced lamb, yogurt and flat bread. Some of the best Xinjiang



food in Shenzhen can be found at the Xinjiang Snow Lotus Canteen, located in an out-of-the-way spot behind a construction site in Luohu.

It is worth hunting for, and Hong Kong foodies have been known to make the trip for a few containers of its house-made yogurt (three yuan each). Aside from the yogurt, must-try dishes include the ubiquitous spiced lamb kebabs (three for only three yuan) and the lamb with naan bread (55 yuan), which is a rich, soupy stew with large chunks of fatty lamb in a thick brown broth tossed with triangles of flat bread. It is enough to feed four to bursting, meant to provide energy for those long caravans over the Silk Road.

While you're there try a cold Xinjiang beer. And maybe grab a yogurt to go before heading back over the border to Hong Kong. charley.lanyon@scmp.com

Eat here

Mao Jia Fandian
Building 1-3, Tiandi Dasha,
3042 Bao'an Nanlu, Luohu
Tel: +86 755 2557 2088

Guizhou Restaurant
1/F Building 3, Meilin Sicun,
Meilin Lu, Futian

The Legend of Yunnan
Room 201B, Ganlan Luzhou Shangye
Building, 1 Jingtian Nanlu, Futian
Tel: +86 755 8295 9199

Xinjiang Snow Lotus Canteen
1034 Chunfeng Lu Dong, Luohu
Tel: +86 755 2511 5536



House-made yogurt (left); dapanji (below left), a type of chicken stew at the Xinjiang Snow Lotus Canteen (top left).

