

麻辣之道

A fiery debate

Has the authenticity of Sichuan food in the province's capital of Chengdu been diminished in an effort to cater to tourist palates, or is enough being done to preserve the quality of one of China's eight great cuisines?

在四川省會成都市，四川菜有否因應旅客的口味而犧牲了其傳統正宗的風味？當地的餐飲界業者，又有否盡力保存這個中國八大菜系之一的純正質素？

BY CRYSTAL WILDE
PHOTOGRAPHY AURÉLIEN FOUCAULT



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A CHILLI PEPPER SELLER AND HER WARES; A TYPICAL CASUAL EATERY IN CHENGDU; BEEF DISHES AT HUANGCHENG OLD BEEF; TOURISTS THROUGH KUANZHAI XIANGZI DURING THE WEEKEND

順時針上圖起：辣椒乾商店一間；成都一間平民食店；皇城牛肉老店的牛肉美饌；週末的寬窄巷子遊客不絕

A glamorous young woman with dyed ombre hair, a calf-length tweed coat and velveteen slippers waits patiently for her takeaway.

Around her is a scene of chaos: hastily parked luxury cars pen in the outdoor diners, comprising fashionistas with purposefully ripped jeans alongside red-faced men soaking up an otherwise liquid lunch. Chubby stray dogs circle for scraps as plates are scraped into one big tabletop slop bowl by a waiter with broken piano teeth. All are shrouded in a cloud of cigarette smoke – but it’s a small price to pay for a taste of authentic Sichuan cuisine.

Huangcheng Old Beef is one of Chengdu’s most thriving “fly restaurants”, so called because patrons buzz around the eatery, rather than sit down to enjoy a leisurely meal. Set up by the Zhang brothers in the 1960s, the restaurant draws a full cross-section of customers to its no-nonsense meals. Menus don’t exist here; you get what you’re given and you’d better like beef. Braised beef with daikon radish, kung pao beef and cold beef with chilli oil are a few of the regular offerings. All are served straight up with no fancy trimmings or gimmicks. Grandma would approve.

The Zhang brothers have changed little about their tried-and-tested formula in the ensuing decades, but the same cannot be said for Chengdu’s restaurants as a whole. Recent years have seen the arrival of panda-shaped dim sum and dry ice-spewing hotpots in the southwestern Chinese city, as well as the alteration of regional classics for the unrefined tourist palette, the delicate balance of flavours loaded up with too much chilli and peppercorns in a bid to appease uninformed expectations around the cuisine’s essential characteristics.

Concerns about Sichuan food losing its authenticity have been so loudly voiced that the Chinese government recently introduced a number of measures to ensure its preservation. In the same vein as Michelin stars, gold, silver and

bronze pandas – an animal synonymous with the province – are now awarded to exceptional Sichuan restaurants at home and abroad. Some longstanding food institutions have been nationalised, and guidelines have been set for the standardisation of recipes.

“It wasn’t until recently that people started to standardise recipes,” Jordan Porter, the Canadian founder of Chengdu Food Tours, explains. “But most of this is done through the government from the top down – for example through the Sichuan Institute of Higher Cuisine. In some ways, there’s a role for that as it ensures the cuisine’s preservation, but it also denies the cluttered and creative atmosphere of the scene.”

Sichuan food, named by Chinese chefs as one of the country’s eight great cuisines, is typified by bold and pungent flavours stemming from the liberal use of garlic, chilli, Sichuan peppercorns, peanuts and fermented bean paste. It’s said to be China’s favourite takeout and the most commonly served cuisine across the country. But in a culinary history spanning thousands of years, Sichuan food as we know it only arrived in the last three centuries or so. So how do you choose what’s protected? And more pertinently, should any cuisine be encouraged to stand still?

With its highly fertile soil and mild climate, the Sichuan basin is surrounded by farms, many of which host middle-class families for “pick your own” dinners on weekends. Areas of intensively terraced fields, known as the “land of a million steps”, and sophisticated irrigation systems provide an astounding diversity of crops. The markets here are a sensory overload, with fruit you can smell across the street and meat a little too fresh for the squeamish.

The so-called *mala* (numb spicy) flavour profile Sichuan food is renowned for is the culmination of centuries of war and migration that brought new ingredients and cooking techniques to the province. Fermented bean paste, known locally as *doubanjiang* and often referred to as the “soul of

一位打扮時髦的年輕女士，染有一頭漸變髮色，身穿呢絨長褸和天鵝絨平底鞋，耐心等待提取外賣。她周圍是一片熱鬧而混亂的景象：多輛平治和寶馬隨便停泊在街上，專程前來的食客坐於戶外，不少都是穿著破爛牛仔褲的時尚一族，他們身旁的紅臉大叔，中午時分已在仰頭喝酒。侍應咧著參差不齊的牙齒，把客人吃剩的統統倒進大盤子內，胖胖白白的流浪狗圍在一起，等著接收殘菜剩羹。眼前這些景象，都籠罩在一片吞雲吐霧之中——但是，能夠品嚐正宗四川菜的風味，一切都是值得。

皇城牛肉老店是成都最受歡迎的「蒼蠅館子」之一。客人在店內熙來攘往，連椅子也坐不暖，蒼蠅館子因而得名。這間餐廳由張氏兄弟在1960年代創立，憑藉真材實料的美食，吸引各種各樣的客人光顧。店內不設餐牌，實而不華的牛肉菜餚全由老闆發辦，包括蘿蔔燒牛肉、宮保牛肉和涼拌肺片等，盡得家常菜之真味。

數十年來，張氏兄弟沿用傳統食譜烹製佳餚，但成都其他餐廳卻有所不同。這個中國西南部城市，近年陸續湧現熊貓造型點心和乾冰火鍋等新奇菜式，不少餐廳更將地方菜加以改良，以滿足遊客的口味。他們加入過量的辣椒和花椒，就是為了迎合新來者對四川菜的偏見印象，但此舉也破壞了味覺上應有的細緻與平衡。

關注川菜的聲音不絕於耳，就連中國政府最近也實施多項措舉，保育當地飲食文化。當局以四川熊貓為標誌，推出金、銀、銅熊貓認證，嘉許本地和海外傑出的川菜餐廳，與米芝蓮評級有異曲同工之妙。此外，部分歷史悠久的食店已收歸國有，而當局亦頒下指引，為川菜食譜訂立統一標準。

來自加拿大的成都美食遊Chengdu Food Tours創辦人Jordan Porter解釋：「直至最近，人們才開始統一菜式做法。但多數都是政府由上而下頒佈的措施，例如透過四川烹飪高等專科學校實行。某程度上，這樣做的確能夠保育四川菜傳統，但同時也窒礙了坊間的創意氛圍。」

川菜獲中國飲食界納入八大菜系，以濃重辛辣為特色，菜式大量採用蒜頭、辣椒、花椒、花生和豆瓣醬。四川外賣食品在中國各地大受歡迎，也獲譽為全國最常見的菜系。然而，在長達數千年的中華飲食文化之中，川菜的歷史僅能追溯至三個世紀前。

“Gold, silver and bronze pandas are now awarded to exceptional Sichuan restaurants”

「中國政府以四川熊貓為標誌，推出金、銀、銅熊貓認證，嘉許傑出的川菜餐廳」



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A BUSTLING MARKET IN CHENGDU; MALA TOFU IS A TYPICALLY SICHUAN DISH; WOMEN IN TRADITIONAL GARB SELLING BEANCURD AND OTHER DISHES; STREET FOOD IS READILY AVAILABLE ALL DAY AND NIGHT IN CHENGDU

順時針上圖起：成都繁盛的菜市場一景；麻辣豆腐是四川經典菜式之一；穿上中式傳統服飾的店員出售豆腐美點及其他小食；無論日夜都可在成都找到街頭美食

Sichuan cuisine” is one of the region’s original umami ingredients. Another is the Sichuan peppercorn, which is in fact derived from a citrus plant and not a peppercorn at all. It’s a molecule called hydroxy-alpha-sanshool that creates the tingly, numbing feeling these unassuming seed husks create in the mouth.

The eye-watering spice that Sichuan cuisine is now known for, however, is a relatively new addition. Chili peppers were unearthed in Mexico when Christopher Columbus “discovered” America in 1492. They are thought to have travelled to southern China with Spanish or Portuguese traders, after which they were first referenced in relation to Sichuan’s neighbour, Hunan province, in 1684 – a whole 60 years before they reached Sichuan. So, it would seem that a world of relatively new influences is distilled to what we know as Sichuan cuisine today.

Some say evolution is unavoidable, but it’s easy to sympathise with the critics of the most modern manifestations. The tourist-centred shops in Kuanzhai Xiangzi – the so-called “Wide and Narrow Alleys” – are happily peddling cheapened or even totally invented versions of Sichuan food to visitors who know no better. This famed eating street in the city’s Qingyang District overflows with novelty dumplings, flower-shaped cotton candy and all else that’s likely to make it to social media before the mouth.

Porter would never dream of taking his food tour customers here but argues that commercial streets like this have always existed in Chengdu.

“You don’t have to have a culture trapped in its past to ensure authenticity,” the 31-year-old, who speaks the local dialect almost fluently, insists. “A modern manifestation is no less authentic than an old one, and one from 400 years ago may be no less contrived than it is now.”

In any case, there are still plenty of classic Sichuan dishes in Kuanzhai Xiangzi, such as sesame-laden *dan dan* noodles and sweet and sticky kung pao chicken. However, all are made to feed the masses, relying on store-bought chili oil and bean paste, the chef’s personal versions of which are considered the cornerstone of local cooking.

Tian Zong Long, who manages his family’s tiny but well-respected Chun Yang Guan (Pure Sunshine) Restaurant in the city’s Kuixinglou area, says quality ingredients are key to creating an authentic taste.

“The big change in Sichuan food now is that ingredients are getting more expensive,” explains the sangfroid 46-year-old, wiping his hands on his bright yellow apron. “People aren’t willing to pay more for a bowl of noodles so chefs are starting to cut corners. It’s harder to find places doing it the old way. Soon no one will remember what real Sichuan food is like.”

Xiong Yen, owner of Ying Garden restaurant in Chengdu’s Taisheng District, agrees. “You can’t say all the food in the Wide and Narrow Alleys isn’t Sichuan, because some is, but if every restaurant uses MSG and sauces from the factories, the taste will all be the same.”

Her words are testament to the age-old Sichuan saying *bai cai, bai wei* which means “100 dishes, 100 flavours”,



“You don't have to have a culture trapped in its past to ensure authenticity”

「有些時候，歷史越悠久的，不一定正宗」

故此，保育範圍應如何界定？更重要的是，地方菜系應該固步自封嗎？四川盆地土壤肥沃，氣候溫和，周圍都是繁盛翠綠的農莊，不少都以「自摘」農家菜作為招徠，吸引中產家庭於周末前往度假。萬畝梯田依山而建，櫛鱗鱗比，再加上完善的灌溉系統，培育出林林總總的農作物。市集每天上演豐盛的感官美宴，水果香氣傳千里，肉類新鮮得幾乎還是生蹦活跳。

過去數百年的戰爭和遷徙，為該省引入全新食材和烹飪技巧，同時造就了川菜的精髓——麻辣。豆瓣醬獲當地人視為川菜的靈魂，是常用的提鮮食品。花椒是另一核心食材，但它其實屬於柑橘類，與胡椒並無關係。一種名為羥基甲位山椒醇的物質，就是令花椒籽迸發麻勁的秘密。

然而，如今讓川菜聞名於世的元素，卻是另一種使人眼淚直流的食材，其歷史也相對較短。當哥倫布在1492年「發現」美洲大陸時，源自墨西哥的辣椒也開始為人認識。據說，辣椒最初由西班牙或葡萄牙商人引進中國南方，並在1684年登陸湖南省，比起毗鄰的四川省早了足足60年。嶄新元素經過消化融合，便促成了當今的川菜。

有些人會說，進化演變在所難免，但面對現代版本的川菜，我們都能感

受批評者的苦心。老街區寬窄巷子的遊客食店，都樂於向毫無頭緒的觀光客推銷劣質甚至是憑空創作的所謂川菜。這條位於青羊區的著名食街，充斥著新式餃子和花型棉花糖等奇異食物，看來都是「相機先吃」的社交媒體道具而已。

Porter絕對不會帶領他的美食旅客前來此地，但他補充，這種商業色彩濃厚的街道，在成都由來已久。

「有些時候，歷史越悠久的，不一定正宗。」現年31歲的他，說得一口頗流利的四川方言。「部分現代文化可媲美舊有的，相反地，400年前的某些東西，也可能與現在的一樣矯揉造作。」

無論如何，寬窄巷子仍有不少經典四川美食可供品嚐，例如是灑滿芝麻的擔擔麵，還有醬濃味甜的宮保雞丁。不過，這些菜式往往都是為了應付大量遊客而設，用的都是買回來的辣椒油和豆瓣醬；廚師自家製作的醬料，才是地道烹飪的精髓所在。

位於奎星樓附近的純陽館，店面雖小卻地位崇高。經營這間家庭麵館的田宗龍（音譯）認為，上乘食材乃打造正宗口味的關鍵。

「四川菜現時最大的轉變，在於食材價格上漲。」現年46歲的他一派沉



LEFT AND BELOW:
NOSE-TO-TAIL
EATING IS PAR FOR
COURSE IN
CHENGDU; CHENGDU
CHUAN SKEWERS

左圖：豬鼻以至豬尾部
可以是川菜入餡材料；
左下圖：稱為「串串」的
成都風味串燒

implying that each chef's creation should and does taste a little different.

Striking a monastic air with her shaved head and scarlet fleece, 43-year-old Xiong takes me on a tour of her kitchen, where huge vats of doubanjiang sit quietly fermenting and freshly decapitated frogs lie on chopping boards.

Things are done the old way here in many regards, but Xiong and her sister – who quit their jobs and entered the restaurant business in their forties – have woven elements of different cuisines into some of their dishes. Tea leaves are tossed into the wok with shrimps, Hangzhou-style, while Taiwan has influenced both the *tangyuan* sticky rice balls, and the pumpkin and osmanthus flowers pudding.

“It's still a Sichuan restaurant, but because we travel a lot we introduced some food from other regions,” Xiong explains. “People like that, and I don't think it makes a difference if the food is good. We have never claimed to be a typical Sichuan restaurant.”

A few streets away, Beer Duck Restaurant, which has stuck to a purely Sichuan menu, is working hard to keep up with the rapid pace of change. Having started out more than 20 years ago only serving its namesake dish, the no-frills kitchen now offers a wide spectrum of Sichuan food, including pig's foot soup, rabbit head and every imaginable animal part on skewers known as *chuan*.

Zhou Lee, 36, who has only recently taken over the running of the restaurant from her in-laws, says she's all too aware of her vulnerable place in the market.

“Our customers are almost exclusively older local people. Young people and tourists have higher expectations for decoration and style,” Zhou says, motioning towards her cracked tiles and scorched tabletops. “But in these new places you're just eating the decorations.”

The vision of a modern Chinese woman with her painted nails and sculpted eyebrows, Zhou holds her pouting, Hello Kitty-clad daughter while dishing out change

TOP CHENGDU NOSH SPOTS 成都美食地圖

CHUN YANG GUAN 純陽館
Dan dan noodle specialist
6 Jixiang Street

堪稱擔擔麵專家
吉祥街6號

HUANGCHENG OLD BEEF
皇城牛肉老店
An eatery that specialises
in beef dishes like cold beef
with chilli oil
81 and 24 Baojia Alley

供應例如涼拌肺片等牛肉菜式的
著名食店
包家巷81號附24號

YING GARDEN 屋頂上的櫻園
Don't miss the tea-leaf fried
shrimps
37 East Yulong Street

推薦嚐試龍井炒蝦仁
東玉龍街37號



著冷靜，雙手在鮮黃色圍裙上抹了一抹。「人們不願意多花一分錢吃麵，所以廚師也開始削減成本。保留傳統做法的地方不多，很快就沒有人會記得正宗川菜是什麼樣子了。」

成都太升路「屋頂上的櫻園」餐廳老闆娘熊燕（音譯）也同意：「寬窄巷子不是所有食物都不正宗，但如果全部餐廳都使用味精或工廠生產的醬料的話，味道當然會一模一樣。」

她所說的話，引證了四川菜「百菜百味」之傳統特點，每一位廚師製作的菜式，風味都應該略有不同。

這位現年43歲的老闆娘，頭髮剃得短短的，穿上猩紅色抓毛外套，看起來有點僧侶的氣質。她帶

我到廚房參觀，數大缸豆瓣醬正在發酵，剛砍掉頭的田雞正躺在砧板上。

熊燕跟她的姐妹40來歲時毅然辭掉工作，投身餐飲界。這裡很多東西都是依照古法製作，但她們亦把其他菜系元素融入部份菜式。廚師會在鑊中加入茶葉，烹製一道杭州龍井炒蝦仁，而湯圓和南瓜桂花糕，則帶點台灣風味。

「這裡仍然是一間四川風味餐廳，但因為我們經常四出旅遊，所以就將其他地區的美食引入。」熊燕解釋。「客人對此很受落。我認為毋須為美食設定界限，再者，我們從未自稱為正宗川菜館。」

幾條街以外，「啤酒鴨餐廳」供應純正四川美食，同時致力追上時代的急速步伐。這間樸實小



GRANDMA YAN AND HER FAMED GUO HEI, UNLEAVENED BREAD STUFFED WITH BEEF, PICKLED VEGETABLES AND SICHUAN DRESSING

嚴太婆鍋魁創辦人嚴映花手執其招牌美食——鍋魁——香烤餅皮夾著牛肉、筍絲和葱味的四川香料

to the waitresses. Torn between tradition and experimentation, she knows she must evolve to survive.

“Restaurants have to offer so much more now, as customers expect to eat what they want, when they want. I’m open to trying new things, but I will always honour the recipes and techniques of the family and keep the spirit of this place alive.”

Jiu Che, a food writer who has been “professionally eating and drinking for 20 years” in a bid to promote Sichuan food and culture, is a lot less worried.

“Sichuan food has changed a lot over recent years. Modern Sichuan food is a fusion of many different strains thanks to migration which has changed the area’s culture, raw materials and therefore food,” Jiu says. “The changes seen in Sichuan cuisine are the same for Chinese food in general. I think these are good changes, as it

means more people can discover and enjoy Sichuan food.”

But not all young people are seeking something new, it seems. The long line outside Grandma Yan’s hole-in-the-wall stall in near Wenshu Monastery is made up almost exclusively of millennial-types in Ugg boots and Adidas sneakers. The hungry hipsters are more than happy to wait for a taste of Grandma’s *guo hei* - unleavened bread stuffed with stewed beef, pickled vegetables and zingy Sichuan seasoning. Those with the prize finally in hand grin into their smartphone cameras like they’ve won the golden ticket.

“People want the old flavour,” says 56-year-old Yan, who’s only ever made the one dish. When asked how she’s remained popular throughout 20 years of change in the Chengdu food scene, she taps her proud chest with a well-fed finger. “You’ve got to do it from here.” ✪

店於廿多年前開業，當時只提供啤酒鴨，但現在已擴展至其他川菜，如豬蹄湯、兔頭，以及採用不同肉類部位製作的串串。

其老闆娘周莉（音譯）現年36歲，最近才從夫家接手經營。但該餐廳的前景岌岌可危，她對此非常清楚。

「我們的顧客幾乎全是市內的老人家。年輕人和遊客，對店內的裝潢風格都有更高的要求。」她邊說邊步向老舊的磁磚牆和焦黑的餐桌。「但新式餐廳都只注重裝潢。」

這位摩登中國女性，指甲塗上彩色甲油，眉毛修得美美的。女兒一身吉蒂貓裝扮，嘟著小嘴，她一邊抱著女兒，一邊把找鑲零錢遞向女侍應。身處傳統與轉變之間，她也明白餐廳必須進步才能生存。

「顧客期望隨時隨地吃到想吃的東西，所以現今的餐廳都要盡量提升服務水平。我對新事物持開放態度，但同時也尊重家族食譜和烹調技巧，希望將餐廳的靈魂保存下來。」

九車（音譯）是一位美食作者，號稱專業吃喝已達20年。他致力推廣四川菜式和文化，但也認為與時並進是必然的趨勢。

他說：「川菜近年有很大變化。摩登川菜揉合多元特色，這點多得外來人口對區內文化、食材以至菜式的影響。不止川菜，中菜本身也經歷著類似的進化。我認為，這些轉變都是好事，因為這意味著川菜已推至更廣，讓更多人加以發掘和品嚐。」

不過，未必所有年輕人都只愛嚐新。嚴太婆鍋魁是位於文殊院附近的簡陋小店，門外排隊的顧客，幾乎清一色都是腳踏Ugg靴子和Adidas球鞋的千禧世代。這些饑腸轆轆的時尚年輕人，都急不及待品嚐美味的鍋魁——香烤餅皮夾著牛肉和筍絲，還添有葱味的四川香料。終於等到的人，手拿鍋魁向手機展露勝利的笑容，就像贏到大獎一樣。

「人們都愛古早味。」現年56歲的嚴映花從創店以來，只製作這道美食。問及她在變化萬千的成都美食界裡，如何保持人氣高企20年，她就以圓潤的手指輕拍胸膛，驕傲地說：

「就是用心製作。」

3 MUST-TRY SICHUAN DISHES 川菜三大經典菜式

HOTPOT 火鍋

This quintessential Sichuan stew can seem a little daunting at first glance, but it’s pretty simple really. Choose your broth, meat and veggies and throw it all in together – and don’t forget the dipping sauce.

乍看之下，這款四川代表美食或會令人有點卻步，但別想那麼多了。選擇你喜歡的湯底、肉類和蔬菜，然後把所有東西放進鍋中灼熟——可別忘了沾醬品嚐，滋味倍增。

MAPO TOFU 麻婆豆腐

Apparently named after the wife of a Qing dynasty restaurateur who invented it, mapo tofu employs the same braising techniques used for meat. It comes in a spicy sauce with the all-important doubanjiang and Sichuan peppercorns.

這道菜式於清朝期間由四川一家飯店老闆娘「陳麻婆」所創，故名麻婆豆腐。煮法上採用與燴肉一樣的方式，然後加入辣醬，以及不可缺少的豆瓣醬，起鍋前再灑上花椒末。

TWICE-COOKED PORK 回鍋肉

This pork dish consists of simmered pork leg or belly that’s then stir-fried with vegetables and chilli. This dish often contains no Sichuan peppercorns so it’s a safe bet for those yet to acquire a taste for them.

烹製回鍋肉，先要把豬腳或五花腩肉以文火慢煮，然後切成薄片，再加入蔬菜和辣椒爆香。回鍋肉通常沒有花椒入餡，所以對於想要品嚐這道菜式而又不嗜麻辣的人士來說，大可放心享用。

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