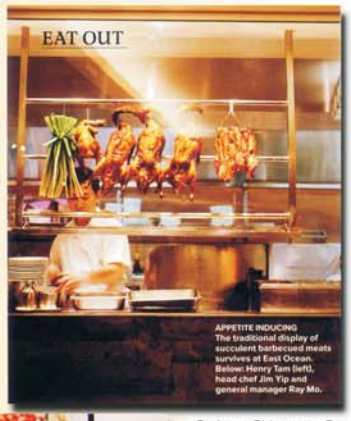


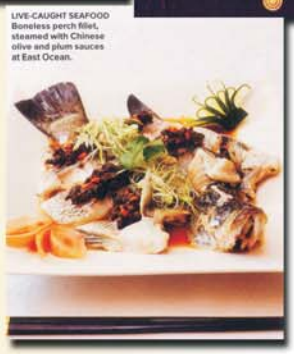
APPETITE INDUCING The traditional display of succulent barbecued meats survives at East Ocean. Below: Henry Tam (left), head chef Jim Yip and general manager Ray Mo.

Cultural evolution

Standard-bearers such as Billy Kwong and Flower Drum have led the long march to credibility and cool for high-end Chinese food. Now the movement goes mainstream.

Don't throw out those fishbowl beer glasses just yet. They may yet become collector's items as Chinese restaurants mimic the changing fortunes of their parent country. The sleeping dragon is waking up, shaking itself off and leaving the fanned-napkin and sweet-and-sour pork clichés in its wake. Subdued chocolate and grey tones have replaced the feng shui-friendly garish wallpaper; gone are the salmon-pink tablecloths and, yes, even the enormous fizz-killing beer glasses. Quality produce and fresh preparation is the new mantra, and frozen and canned foods in homogenous gluey sauces are on the way out as diners and restaurateurs stop seeing Chinese cuisine merely as a quick fix or a quick buck and start treating it with the kind of care that its depth and diversity demand.

Stalwart Chinatown Canto palaces have updated their menus and traded their fluoro lights and paint jobs for something with a dash more style.



LIVE-CAUGHT SEAFOOD Boneless perch fillet, steamed with Chinese olive and plum sauces at East Ocean.

Leading the charge are smaller restaurants in hip or affluent districts, such as Sydney's Billy Kwong in Surry Hills and China Doll on the Woolloomooloo wharf, and Melbourne's Asiana in Albert Park, Azalea in St Kilda and AY Oriental Tea House in South Yarra. But it's the movement in stalwart Chinatown Canto palaces such as Sydney's Zilver and East Ocean – which have updated their menus and traded their fluoro lights and paint jobs for something with a dash more style – as well as the emergence of newcomers such as Kam Fook Bondi Junction that suggests this is no flash in the wok.

Chinese has long been entrenched in the Australian food landscape. When immigrants, mostly from Canton, arrived during the gold rushes in the 1850s and 1860s, they brought with them their regional cuisine – doubtless the first truly 'foreign' taste available to non-Chinese diners. But because the migrants were mainly peasants, their food was a meagre representation of the riches of authentic Cantonese food. Things didn't improve much as the cuisine became further diluted and bowdlerised for *gwei-lo* palates in take-out joints and leagues clubs. If you weren't Chinese, Chinese restaurants were somewhere you went for a cheap meal or to get ballast for your beers and little more.

Affordable travel and a massive growth of interest in all things food-related have seen the evolution of both Chinese restaurants and their clientele (in the capitals, at least) over the past 20 years, to the extent that non-Chinese diners are more willing to see the cuisine in a new light and experiment with what they order, and restaurateurs are willing to help. But breaking through the lemon-chicken (or, nowadays, salt-and-pepper squid) barrier to get to the cream of what our best Chinese restaurants offer can be a challenge for even the most patient non-Chinese-speakers, and too few restaurants extend their commitment to producing quality food through to the attention to detail that diners expect in service, décor and wine.

Ground was broken, certainly, by the likes of Melbourne's Flower Drum and Ying's in Sydney in terms of service and raising expectations of just what an Australian Chinese restaurant could be, but now the baton has been passed to a new generation of restaurateurs. Some are Australian-born Chinese, others are fresh from Asia or even Caucasian. They look to the latest Hong Kong food trends on the one hand and to the ultra-chic work done by London's Alan Yau in his plush, hip, Michelin-starred restaurants Hakkasan and Yauatcha.

"You can carbon-date the food in most Chinese restaurants in Australia by asking their chef when they arrived from Hong Kong," says Les Luxford, an Australian-born Chinese restaurant critic and long-time commentator on Sydney's Chinese food scene. "That's how the new ideas come here." The newer restaurants, though, look to a broader range of inspirations – the food of their families and the food they may have cooked at other Australian restaurants – and seek to reconcile these elements with the best available produce and wine.

The baton has been passed to a new generation of restaurateurs: some are Australian-born Chinese, others are fresh from Asia or even Caucasian.

In many respects Australian-born Chinese restaurateur Kylie Kwong is the poster-child for this generation. Owner and chef at Sydney's Billy Kwong, she, like every other Aussie, grew up with cornflour sauces and canned pineapple in her sweet and sour pork. Now the use of top-quality ingredients is intrinsic to her style: Kangaroo Island chicken is ideally suited to the slow poaching method used for the traditional white-cut chicken with ginger, green onion and Darling Mills baby coriander; sung choi bau is buoyed with free-range pork mince; sashimi Hiramasa kingfish is served simply with organic pickled carrot and chilli soy.

"I think the food available to diners in Chinese restaurants in Australia has certainly improved over the past 20 years and even more so over the past five years," Kwong says. "What we're trying to do at Billy Kwong is to raise the awareness of how beautiful and sophisticated Chinese food can be, and that it's not so much about MSG-laden gloopy sauces as the gentle arts of poaching and steaming or pickling and red-braising and so on." She says fostering diners' understanding of China's culture is also part of the restaurant's credo. "The more you understand a country, the more you'll get out of its food."

Around the same time that Billy Kwong opened, Hong Kong-born Randolph Cheung and Bee Yap established Asiana, and later Azalea, in Melbourne. Travels abroad, particularly through Europe, inspired them to open an Asian bistro replete with a 30-page wine list (which received the Best Wine List gong at our 2005 Restaurant Awards) and Riedel stemware to match. Up until then, few Chinese restaurants had sought to marry Asian flavours with top-notch Australian, let alone French, Italian or Spanish varietals. "Wines are a great passion of mine," says Cheung. "Customers today know a lot more about wine and want to drink it when eating Asian food. In the past, people just drank tea."

Not that tea has fallen by the wayside. David Zhou's AY Oriental Tea House opened in 2004 and offers a modern interpretation of that Chinese ritual, yum cha, in which tea plays a starring role. There are no scary trolleys careening in the aisles or dubious translations to wager. "It's for people who don't like the hustle and bustle," says Zhou. More importantly, "it's perfect for those who want to try new things but may feel out of their comfort zone at a normal yum cha."

Neil Perry has been eating in Sydney's Chinatown since he was a boy and, as a chef, has sought inspiration for Rockpool and his other projects from leading restaurants in China and Chinatowns abroad. "I think in Sydney the guys have been trying a lot harder in recent years," says Perry. "But even though the quality of the food is improving, so many restaurants still throw the food onto the table. They don't have that kind of smooth elegance that the Flower Drum's Gilbert Lau has encouraged in Melbourne, but they're moving in that direction. We haven't quite seen anyone pick up the ball and run with it in terms of produce the way Kylie has in Chinatown – yet. They can see that's the fashion now, so hopefully it'll change quickly."

Perry's XO popped up doing mostly glam but authentic Chinese and Malaysian food, such as the famed mussels in XO sauce and tea-smoked duck pancakes, in an uptown setting in two inner-urban incarnations. XO – down for the moment, but not, we suspect, out for the count – spawned an offshoot: China Doll, set on the wharf at Woolloomooloo, takes Chinese waterside, selling food to the fashionable amid a sleek Iain Halliday fit out and sun-drenched seating.

Not to be left behind, Sydney's Chinatown bigwigs have revamped, too – no small thing when you consider the size of these operations, which seat hundreds and potentially serve thousands a day. East Ocean, a mainstay of the Chinese dining scene for nearly 20 years, underwent a massive refit in 2003, the latest Kam Fook in Bondi Junction is slicker and then Silver Spring was rebranded as Zilver in late 2005. Happily, while the tack and chintz have been largely dispensed with, authenticity has not been sacrificed for modernity.

East Ocean's director, Henry Tam, has noticed an increase in the numbers of Western diners from 20 to 40 per cent since the renovations. He believes the increase is due to diners' greater understanding of the cuisine. On the food front, Tam takes his lead from trends in Hong Kong and Singapore. These include novel methods of making dumpling wrappers and a move away from golf-ball-sized dim sums to smaller morsels.

Similarly, Zilver's refurbishment was a response to diners' changing attitudes. "We wanted to move with the times," says Henry Tang, Zilver's managing director. "Diners today are young professionals with high disposable incomes. We wanted a comfortable environment where both Chinese and non-Chinese, new and old, could enjoy good food." Unique to Zilver's is the Peking duck pancake trolley and open kitchen where executive chef Jack Ng cooks dishes to order.

"It's important to me that the type of food you can get now as a Westerner has changed, too," say Perry. "Red-braised shoulder of pork and interesting things like that ... are now dramatically more accessible." Les Luxford says change has been slow but significant – and is now gaining momentum. He points out that the *gwei-lo* diners who Chinese waiters once thought of as people who ate nothing but fried food are learning to enjoy the simplicity of key Cantonese techniques. "There's bok choy in every supermarket, and the waiters now assume that everyone can use chopsticks," he says. "And I haven't heard a cat-meat joke in ages." ★

THE NEW CHINESE: WHERE TO TRY IT

ASIANA
181 Victoria Ave, Albert Park, Vic, (03) 9696 6688.
AY ORIENTAL TEA HOUSE
455 Chapel St, South Yarra, Vic, (03) 9824 0128.
AZALEA RESTAURANT
4 Acland St, St Kilda, Vic, (03) 8598 9880.
BILLY KWONG
355 Crown St, Surry Hills, NSW, (02) 9332 3300.
CHINA DOLL
4/6 Cowper Wharf Rd, Woolloomooloo, NSW, (02) 9380 6744.
EAST OCEAN
421-429 Sussex St, Haymarket, NSW, (02) 9212 4198.
KAM FOOK BONDI JUNCTION
Level 6, Westfield Shopping Centre, Oxford St, Bondi Junction, NSW, (02) 9386 9889.
ZILVER
Level 1, 477 Pitt St, Haymarket, NSW, (02) 9211 2232.

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