

A Homesick Heart

Master Chef Longs for China, Laments Singapore's Shallow Roots

By JOHN KRICH

WITH A CAREFUL EYE, Chan Chen Hei builds a banquet from the bounteous steam tables at Soon Teck Teochew Porridge, an outdoor corner eatery in Katong. Every dish at this rare lunch away from his own restaurant is as pure in its flavor as it is unpretentious: cold baby lobsters dipped in the traditional Teochew oil seasoned with Mandarin oranges; vinegar baby octopus as good as any in Italy; firm fish cakes flecked with fresh peppers; delectably meaty duck slices—all teamed with perfectly grainy rice porridge seasoned with a touch of sour plum.

For more than two decades, Mr. Chan has been one of Singapore's most celebrated and uncompromising chefs, overseeing some of the city-state's most respected restaurants. But when he chooses his favorite Chinese food, Mr. Chan returns to this humble eastern neighborhood where he lived when he first arrived in Singapore. It's a simple stall that, coincidentally, bears the same name as his home village of Soon Teck (which comes from the Cantonese pronunciation of Shunde, a town in China's Guangdong Province).

"It's very authentic cooking that you don't see much in Singapore," says Chef Chan, who prefers—and cooks—food that is Chinese in spirit more than in presentation.

Earlier this year, Mr. Chan finally opened his own spiritual and culinary home: Chef Chan's Cantonese Cuisine, a dramatic 760-square-meter restaurant dotted with treasured antiques from his own collection, and featuring a menu that gives full play to his homespun yet original cooking. But despite the restaurant's success, Mr. Chan remains an odd man out in this mostly Chinese city—critical of the city's Chinese dining scene and of the values and food tastes of the expatriate Chinese around him.

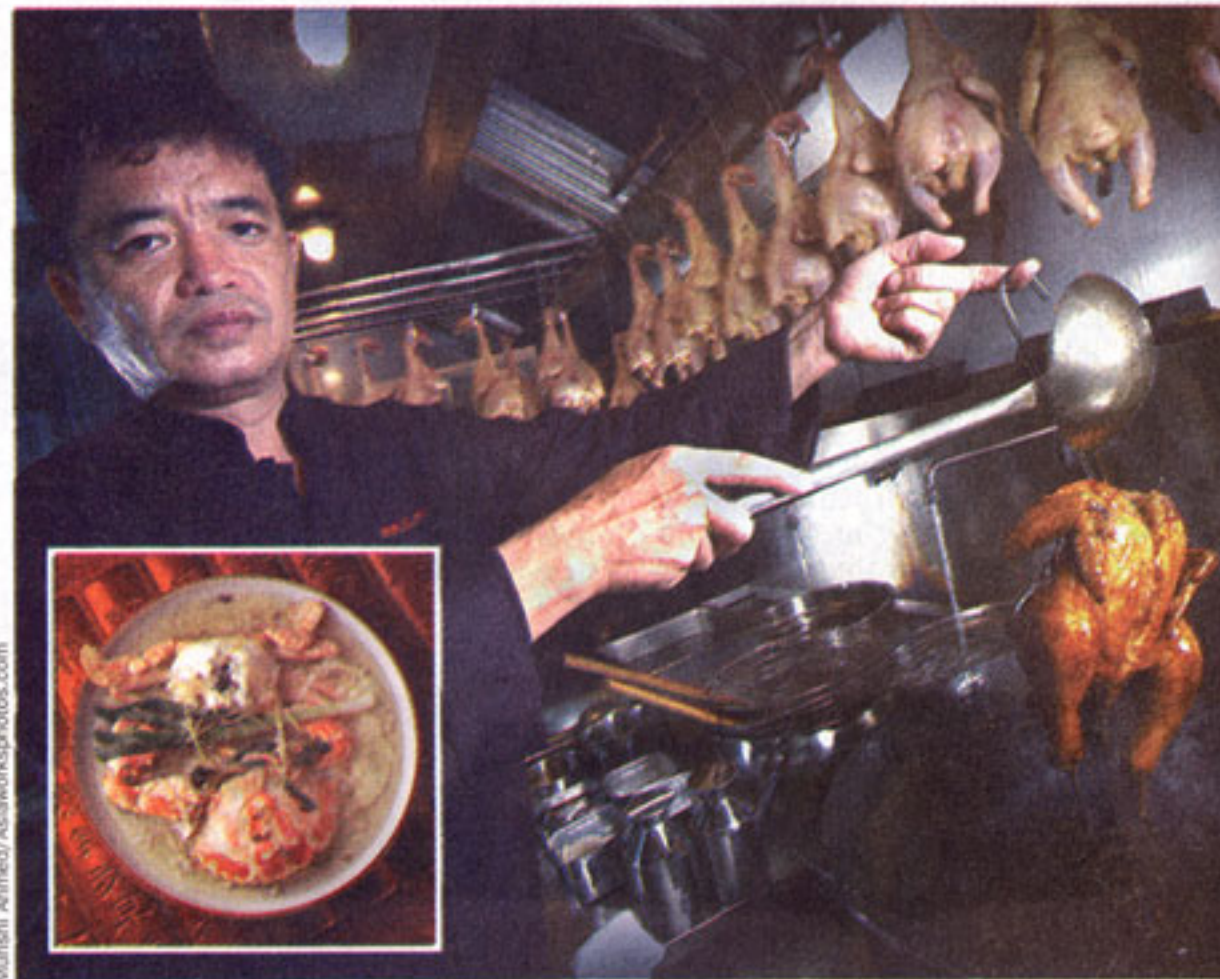
"Here, I can only achieve 60% of my art," Mr. Chan says, without arrogance. "People here will spend a thousand (Singapore) dollars on a dinner for some visiting French chef, but they would never support Chinese food in the same way. They know how to bring in good things, they know how to package ... But the roots don't go deep enough. The history isn't long enough for them to produce great cuisine."

Mr. Chan's own roots are marked by the hardships and challenges of village life. Growing up in southern Guangdong, the young Chan watched his mother beaten by an alcoholic father. Running away from the ongoing violence, he was offered shelter by a Christian missionary. From the age of 13, having sneaked illegally across the border to Hong Kong, his ultimate refuge would be a kitchen. "My only other choice was car repair," he says. As an apprentice in the '70s, Mr. Chan worked in an all-night restaurant where triad gang clients turned over the tables if they didn't like the food.

In 1982, he moved to Singapore to work at the Intercontinental Hotel and then took over as the head chef at Hai Tian Lo, a posh revolving seafood restaurant atop the Pan Pacific Hotel. But in 2002, this proud man suddenly parted company with the hotel after a dispute over what he viewed as insufficient support for new table settings and decor. Soon after, he opened the first Chef Chan's restaurant in a small, rented room at the back of a military service club in the distant Singapore suburb of Toa Payoh.

Here, the chef who admits that he "thinks of perfecting recipes even when I'm sleeping," labored just as hard for a small following of neighborhood families and gourmets loyal enough to make the 45-minute journey from town. Here, too, he began to display a few of his 500 to 600 fabled antiques—of which the pieces in the restaurant alone are worth about US\$600,000.

Now, in their new home at Chef Chan's Cantonese Cuisine, the antiques



Brave heart: Chef Chan with his famed crisp-skinned moist roast chicken (above); a Vietnamese-inspired crab dish cooked in beer and mint leaves (inset).

are given the showcase they deserve. There's room for a full 19th-century carriage, and the restaurant entry is marked by rows of Yuan and Ming Dynasty stone carvings. Ancient wares sit alongside modern touches in a room plied by solicitous waitresses wearing silk brocade jackets and microphones.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, the 50-year-old square-jawed chef supplements his own long history by searching Song and Tang Dynasty books for recipes. While his menu is rooted in the basics of southern village-style fare, emphasizing hearty tastes and respect for fresh ingredients over showy presentation, his travels through China in the search for antiques has broadened his palate to include spicier Sichuan influences.

On offer is perfectly steamed garrupa; gritty beef stir-fried with orange peel; and outstanding dim sum like his lusciously multi-layered pork puff stuffed with lotus and coconut paste. The dish is served with a blend of tea called "eight treasures," to which aromatic herbs and chunks of fresh corn have been added. Mr. Chan's menu also features the signature dish that first brought him fame in his early days presiding over the Pan Pacific Hotel kitchen—a super-moist yet crisp-skinned roast chicken that he never seems to tire of ladling with hot oil for a final bronzing and that his loyal clientele never tires of devouring.

But the new establishment also makes some daring departures: cold strips of winter melon "enlivened," as his menu translates, with a soaking in orange juice; a Vietnam-inspired crab cooked in beer, mint leaves, egg white and Sichuan peppercorns; an array of dishes using home-made, air-dried meats and eel; prawn balls stuffed with pâté and wine; and bird's nest combined with almond milk. All are testament to Mr. Chan's personal motto in Cantonese, "Dam dai, sum sai," which he translates as "Be brave, but be careful with the details."

"No one cooks quite like Chef Chan, he's definitely one of the most rigorous, with distinctive dishes that tend to be salty and very aromatic," says Christopher Tan, a veteran food writer and observer of Singapore dining. "With Singapore populated by immigrants who came from Southern China a century ago, there's a loyal following for old-style Cantonese food."

Despite the vast array of Chinese restaurants in Singapore, Mr. Chan rarely frequents the town's many over-hyped, higher-priced entrants. While he is too discreet to name names when being critical, he does give a positive nod to Jade, the Fullerton Hotel's elegant flagship of the Tung Lok restaurant group. Like most of the group's creations, such as House of

Mao and My Humble House, Jade would appear to be the opposite of Mr. Chan's endeavor—short on flavor and long on white-linen atmosphere. But young Malaysian-born head chef Sam Leong seems pleased that his exquisite, highly-designed entrées with Japanese touches would be endorsed by one his mentors.

According to Mr. Leong, Singapore's Chinese fine dining still suffers the effects of the mass importation of Hong Kong chefs who have "kept jumping from restaurant to restaurant" for the past decade. This is the reason, despite constant hyping of the Chinese dining scene, that high-end dining still ranges from the predictably tried-and-true to the outlandishly trendy—with Chef Chan, and corner eateries such as Soon Teck, standing as rare champions of bold flavor.

For Mr. Chan, however, the problem goes deeper. At higher-end establishments, he believes, "There's no pressure to improve, so long as you can do five dishes. Taste isn't important, so long as dishes give face to the customers and look nice to photograph."

That's why his heart, and his plans, still are in China. Despite efforts to create a large menu and high-end decor, Mr. Chan says he plans to close his restaurant in 10 years or so, rather than have others carry on in his name.

And where he once thought to donate his prized collection of antiques to some local museum, he now says he'd rather sell them off than see them end up "where they wouldn't be properly shown or appreciated." With the proceeds, Mr. Chan wants to open an orphanage in the Guangdong region and establish a cooking school where he can pass down his skills and recipes to children who may want to follow his path.

Until then, Mr. Chan will return each year to Chinese soil, wandering the countryside in his search for precious antiques and in the hope of seeing small acts of mutual aid amidst hardship. It's these benevolent local gestures, he says, that show "the true feeling of being Chinese, a feeling that, for all their riches, people in Singapore have lost."

Send comments to john.krich@awsj.com

Chef Chan's Cantonese Cuisine,
331 North Bridge Rd., #01-02 Odeon
Towers, Singapore. Tel: 65-6250-3363.
Open: daily, 11:45 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.,
6:15 p.m. to 9:45 p.m.
Prices: \$16 average a head.

Soon Teck Teochew Porridge,
300 Joo Chiat Rd., Katong.
Tel: 65-9237-2189.
Open: daily, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.
(closed Tuesdays).
Prices: \$5 for a dish, \$18 for lobster.