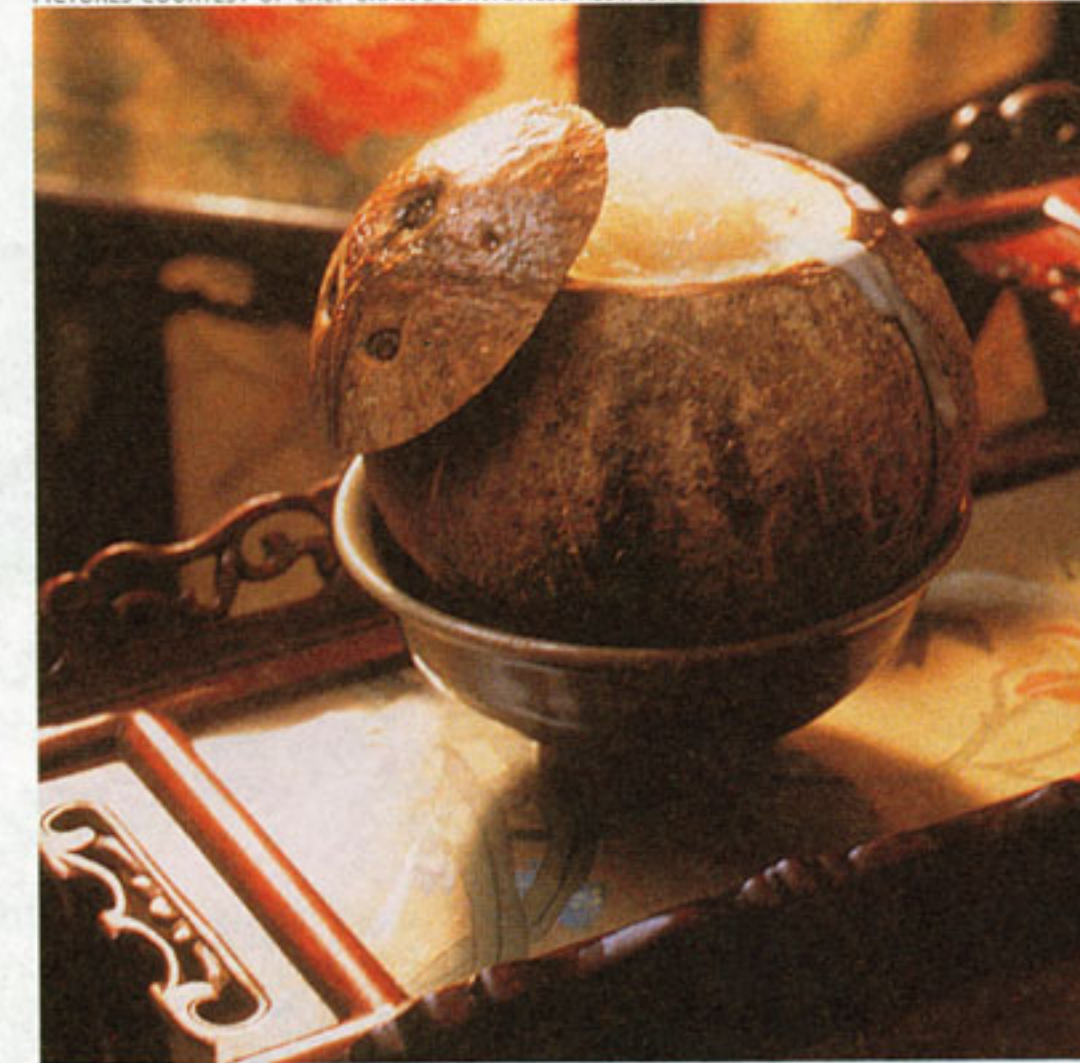




OFF THE EATEN TRACK

BY CHRISTOPHER TAN

PICTURES COURTESY OF CHEF CHAN'S CANTONESE RESTAURANT



Double-boiled supreme bird's nest served in coconut



Steamed crabmeat nestled in orange

CHEF CHAN'S

If the Singapore foodscape were depicted as rolling terrain, Chef Chan Chen Hei would be a prominent mountain. For many years the face and hands behind Hai Tien Lo at the Pan Pacific Singapore, he has contributed recipes to numerous publications, Silver Kris cookbooks (remember those?) and been lauded countless times in print and on screen. He has even appeared in a travel tome entitled *Won Ton Lust*, the tale of an American foodie's quest for the world's best Chinese food, in which Chan's rags-to-restaurant history is recounted in dramatic fashion: born in a small village in Canton province, victim of a violent father, a runaway to Hong Kong at age 13, where as a kitchen apprentice he worked 16-hour shifts.

Years of toil later, his craft and experience have blossomed into his very own restaurant, Chef Chan's Cantonese Cuisine. Far from the intimidatingly stuffy dragons-jade-gold-brocade industry standard, the eatery's Chinese-ness is an easeful, relaxing tapestry of sound and sight. Large, airy and laid out like a teahouse, the space is furnished with items from Chan's personal collection of antiques and Chinese furniture, and we are not talking just vases here: rather, carvings, scrolls, screens and benches... even a record player that requires endless needle-changing and hand-cranking before a warbling songstress springs from its trumpet. It's half-living room, half-museum.

The prosaic names of the dishes belie the mastery that goes into them, the precision of technique that Chan is known for. His classic Cantonese "crispy roast chicken", for example, never sees the inside of an oven; it is instead held over a *wok* and bathed with ladlefuls of searing oil, without stopping, until its skin is



While prices may not be cheap at Chef Chan's, the value for money is excellent

burnished brown from stem to stern and its flesh burstingly succulent. Or his sautéed beef tenderloin, which by means of careful cutting and split-second timing — no bicarbonate of soda in *this* kitchen — is rendered butter-tender, stir-fried with snow peas, onions, asparagus, black pepper and a few fine shreds of torch ginger for a hot kick. A bowl of supreme shark's fin, creamy and orange with crab roe, may induce substantial caloric and environmental guilt, but as the ultimate luxurious comfort food, it has no equal.

Flavours tend to the rich, the savoury, the intense. Lightly crusted baby oysters are stir-fried with bitter melon, onions and chillies. A

whole orange is hollowed out and stuffed with crabmeat, leek, brandy, celery and other herbs and steamed till it trembles with fragrance. Prawn balls have moist, molten cores of goose liver. While prices are not exactly cheap — though they are 10 to 15 per cent lower than at other establishments of the same standard — the value you get for your money is excellent. And a 10-minute drive from the Central Business District is not far to go to reach gourmet paradise.

Chef Chan's Cantonese Cuisine
SAFRA Toa Payoh Club, 293 Lorong 6
Toa Payoh. Tel: 6250 3363