

MY OLD CHINA REVIEWED BY TOM JACKSON FOR THE TIMES
MAGAZINE

My undertaking to review relatively inexpensive restaurants for the duration of the cost-of-living crisis has led to a sharp drop-off in texts and emails from friends suggesting lunch. At least from friends who read this column. Indeed, it has enabled me to identify very efficiently which of my friends do read me and which don't.

“Have you been to that new £300/head omakase place in South Molton Street?” writes my old pal Simon, not planning to pick up the bill, but ready and willing to open his gullet for a free one on the paper, unaware that I am not going to places like that any more and achieving only instant deletion from my contacts list.

“What about this new chef at the Ritz?” asks Delilah, similarly ignorant of the new normal and yammering for a hoolie on my exes. “Surely we should check him out?” So I reply, “Great idea. Is this on you? Don't mind going halvesies.” And the line goes dead, and I'll never hear from her again.

Grilled fish in chilli oil



Listen, I don't care who reads my columns and completely understand that most of my friends have had more than enough of my blather over the years not to need any more of it at the weekends, but if you're only mates with me for the free grub – which is entirely understandable – then I think you've got to at least pretend to engage with the narrative. Read my most recent review, for example, before moving in with your reverse invitation. At the very least, read the few lines visible above the paywall, where it says, "From now on, I'll eat cheaply or not at all. So 40 quid tops, plus tip – less if I can."

Which is why the friends who do occasionally read me, knowing this, have gone quiet. Because who wants a free cheap lunch? A cheap lunch, you can pay for yourself. The point of me is that I say, "No, no. I'll get this," as you feign a move for your wallet, and drop my plastic on a ten-course tasting menu with the wine flight, foie gras supplement and stickies, for the price of a three-year-old Kia Picanto. It is a plus side to sharing my company that enables people to overlook almost anything. Which is why, now I'm on this cheap jag, you'll have noticed I'm mostly eating alone, or with my children, who have no choice.

So it gladdened my heart to get a WhatsApp from my old pal Jim the other day, whom I've not seen much since he moved out to Acton a few years ago, saying, "Hey Giley, if you're eating on a budget we should check out this place in Acton," attaching a web link and map for a place called My Old China.

Proper friendship there, you see: reads the column, notes it, comes up with a helpful idea, wants to lure me out his way for a catch-up and isn't just after a freebie, because the bill is not going to be a big deal anyway. That's how you ride the Coren gravy train, if you want to stay on for the long haul.

Sweet and sour seabass



I like Acton. It's far enough away to feel like an adventure at lunchtime but looks just like Cricklewood, where I grew up, and is only 18 minutes from my front door on account of the "wormhole", the miraculous, time-and-space-defying Overground line from Gospel Oak that goes on to have you in Kew about six minutes later and, for all I know, Madrid half an hour after that.

Except this time it spat me out at Willesden Junction. They said it was a power failure but I reckon the electricity got so expensive they switched it off for the afternoon to keep bills down. Which will be why they refused to refund me for the failed trip. Which was doubly irritating because there were TfL staff on that very train shaking down fare dodgers, and I was left wondering if the kid in the hoodie whom they served with a penalty charge notice because he hadn't tapped in will still be expected to pay his fine, seeing as the train he had tried to get free of charge never made it to where he wanted to go.

The ten-quid Uber I had to take the rest of the way was an annoying addition to the lunch bill, what with all I am trying to achieve, and I was in quite a piss about it when I arrived. But I soon shook that off because My Old China is lovely.

It's bang there on the high street, not looking much from the outside but big and breezy and full of light and colour inside, wooden floors, white tablecloths, white and yellow woodwork, comfy colourful chairs and a decent buzz on a Wednesday lunch, a big table of young Chinese mums drinking beer, a couple of middle-aged white geezers drinking water... Oh, wait, that's Jim and his neighbour Gethen, who suggested this place to him on the basis that his 12-year-old son had a crispy chilli beef takeaway from here and said it was delicious. But, of course, crispy chilli beef is always delicious, so there was still room for disappointment.

The menu is a big, laminated, two-sided Chinatown-style affair of 200-plus dishes, with dim sum, roasts and other Cantonese dishes on one side, Sichuan and other bits and pieces (Malaysian curries, noodle dishes, set menus) on the other, a slightly discombobulating arrangement until you have a chat with one of the owners, Jing, and she tells you she has two chefs, a Cantonese expert with 40-odd years in Soho under his belt, and a Sichuan guy who works next to him – look, there they are, visible through the big kitchen window – each keeping more or less to their respective halves of the kitchen.

And it's the guy stage left who feeds us first: delicate soup-filled siu long bao; sleek, tangy turnip cake; crisp, crackling rolls of newsprint-thin tofu skin rolled around steaming chopped prawn; meaty chicken feet in black bean sauce; fat puffy char siu bao... All very straight and traditional. There is nothing I can write to make them sound different from the way they ever are, except to say that they occupy, in execution, the top end of the scale for this sort of caper, provide the basic Royal China flawlessness, and fall shy only of the mickey-taking, gold-filigreed Mayfair clip-joint versions.

Jing and her colleagues have no background in restaurants. They ran a travel agency before, specialising in the pre-Covid boom area of incoming Chinese tourism. When that went splat overnight as the pandemic hit, they didn't just "pivot", as the phrase went back then; they changed industry, recruited the two

master chefs, set about hunting out a site, found this one eventually, and opened a year ago. A brave move, when so many Chinese restaurant owners were hit so hard by the very shortage of Chinese visitors that drove Jing from the travel business.

Spinach with salty egg yolk in broth



But she and her pals have done a hell of a job. And the Cantonese/Sichuan split is a clever one, because the British diner in a Chinese restaurant, however sophisticated she has become, however much she is there for the dry-fried pig intestines and duck blood in chilli, simply can't glide over the words "sesame prawn toast" or "quarter of roast duck" and not chuck one in for old times' sake.

Nonetheless, it was the Sichuan dishes that stood out. Sliced fish poached in chilli oil involved a vast porcelain bowl of still bubbling oil, thick with its jetsam of chopped dried red chillis, Sichuan peppercorns, spring onions and coriander, under which lurked fat slabs of sea bass on and off the bone that, lifted clear and dropped onto plain rice, were perfectly poached, sweet and aromatic and kissed with those cold-hot spices.

The spicy Sichuan chicken was also a prime example of the genre, not a lucky dip of bird popcorn in a barrel of dried chillies (which I also love), but nutty chunks of sweet and hot chicken dressed only with a firm handful of the pimentos that gave them their heft. With a big bowl of stir-fried cabbage leaves, as delicious as anything we had, and a couple of bowls of rice, green tea and coffee, this all came to £95 for the three of us, with a suggested 10 per cent for service that you should bump up another 5 per cent if you can afford it. So it is not a budget Chinese. No cheaper than food of this quality would be anywhere else. But I never said I was going bargain basement, I just said no more silly money. And My Old China isn't silly at all (beyond the very faint daftness of its name). It is very, very sensible indeed.

My Old China

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Cooking 8

Service 8

Value 8

Score 8