

MELBOURNE DINING





An elegant stormy blue entrance for welcoming guests to David's; a glimpse at the table setting; and a white-washed rural-cum-urban interior.

Once upon a time, the international Chinese diaspora was identified by red and gold chintz, fortune cookies and more sweet & sour pork than one could possibly stomach. Now, with the emergence of cuisines like Thai and Japanese as the new tastes of Asia, the tides are certainly turning.

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Text by Emma Westwood

In the face of such challenges Chinese restaurateurs across the world have needed to reinvent themselves, and in Australia (specifically Melbourne), that new wave of Chinese dining comes most pointedly realised in the form of David's. Yes, David's... hardly a name that conjures thoughts of dumplings and chopsticks but an appropriate name all the same, as it's the anglicised appellation of the restaurant's congenial host, David Zhou.

Opened in 1999, David's the Restaurant was David the Man's gigantic leap of faith into the food industry. After arriving in Australia "to see the world" in 1989, Zhou spent his days and nights labouring from a tiny retail nook, AY Tea, where both he and his wife, Kathy, dispensed healing brews and tonics, as well as wisdoms on traditional Chinese medicine.

"I got into hospitality because of my tea," explains Zhou. "I'm from Shanghai and I'd never seen any true Shanghainese food with proper teas in Melbourne at the time, so I started cooking and preparing this kind of dish. Ever since we started, it's been quite popular."



This page:
Wooden seats are conveniently made more comfortable with cushions stowed in side-board shelving.

Facing page: Details from around the restaurant, including David Zhou himself, as captured by the author.



‘Quite popular’ is an understatement considering David’s very quickly became a multiple award-winning establishment, and one that enjoyed almost unanimous critical acclaim. It even served as an incentive for Zhou to open a chain of Oriental teahouses across Melbourne that have seen his tea recipes rise from best-kept local secret to an urban cottage-industry of their very own.

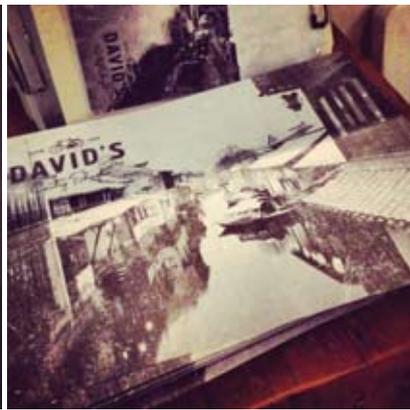
“It’s really true – in China – food and herbs are from the same source,” says Zhou. “When the Chinese people were hunting for food, they saw that those leaves and those nuts were good for healing. Then it developed over many generations – not from clinical testing – and they collected more knowledge from Russia, India and Greece. It’s basically from the same source. This concept can still guide us in preparing meals and dishes.”

Such an approach to healthy, wholesome eating has helped David’s rise above the popular misconceptions of Chinese food being fattening or laden with additives like MSG. David’s food movement is one of fresh, delicious, heart-warming fare for tweaking the tastebuds and warming the soul. Dishes

like his ‘Grandma’s 8’ - a spicy Shanghai medley of scallop, shrimp, pork, chicken, chestnut, cashew, bamboo and shitake - are a David’s exclusive because they come from his grandmother’s imagination as opposed to a cookbook.

As the menu itself says, David’s foods are “designed to be non-fussy and can be shared amongst the table in an effortless fashion. The menu offers treats from the garden to the sea, including a number of offerings unlikely to be found anywhere else, all designed to be shared and all made to sit cleanly on the palate.”

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”Yanan insists on patrons drinking plenty of tea post-feast (for aiding digestion – the best means of tempering the ‘yang’ in the body after some taste bud-tingling spicy duck wings with cinnamon and soy). She also, surprisingly, gets very excited about the bathroom fit-out, which plays on the country styling of the restaurant, especially the likes of a rustic Shanghai wooden trough that has somehow found its way to Melbourne to double effectively as a basin. “Dad likes to pretend it’s all his vision but many of the details come from Mum,” says Yanan with a sly smile and a wink.

Among the gourmands of Melbourne, David’s is once again on the tips of tongues following a recent renovation by Hecker Guthrie. The interior has been transformed into something entirely different – a serene, whitewashed, warehouse-style space with rural accoutrements like wooden chairs, a plethora of plants, Chinese paper lanterns (made in France!) and blue and white dynastic porcelain.

David’s

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Zhou admits to arguing with his chefs to convince them to adapt certain traditional Chinese foods in more contemporary ways. One such battle, which he won, was putting chocolate in dumplings – the result now appearing on the menu as a soft-centred, white chocolate dumpling with peanut and coconut praline is a culinary sensation worth the wait until dessert.

“Let the ice-cream melt a little then mix it with the dumplings,” advises Zhou’s eldest daughter, Yanan, who is now committing her marketing and customer service skills to her parents’ restaurant. “The difference between the hot and the cold makes it even better.”

So why change the restaurant when it’s already successful? If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it? “Just personal taste,” shrugs Zhou. “If you’re into what you do, you want to do something better. If you feel like improvements can be made, you want to do it. Like an Olympian, you really compete with yourself.”

In terms of the restaurant’s loyal patronage, this renovation offers a chance to rediscover David’s from a new angle but without compromising the quality of cuisine and hospitality that have made the restaurant renowned.

If anyone wanted to doubt David’s dedication to authenticity among the chocolate dumplings and oolong tea eggs, they just have to sample the popular Sunday staple of Yum Cha, served here on an all-you-can-consume basis. You can’t get more Chinese than that... except for, maybe, fortune cookies. **FRV**