



Natasha Dragun

Schoolhouse Canteen

Quite possibly the first classroom that I haven't graced with my snoring, the dining room at the Schoolhouse Canteen has many exciting features to keep you awake and inspired. From the gorgeous children's artwork displayed on pin boards, to the menu brightly chalked up on a blackboard, to the interesting stories told to us by our host and Schoolhouse co-owner, Julie Upton-Wang... there's hardly a dull moment to put your head down and take a nap.

Julie, along with eight or so other old China hand expats and locals, established the Schoolhouse Canteen to compliment their art glass studio - perched in Mutianyu only a kilometre from a stunning section of the Great Wall. "We all really care about China and want to do this right," Julie said about her restaurant/gallery project. "We're not just building a restaurant, but are maintaining a village - utilising local resources, local staff, local produce, local talent."

As the name suggests, the courtyard building was once a school, and after a lot of creative input from co-owner Jim Spears, has slowly been transformed into the space that it is now. Although Jim has a day job, he "dabbles" in renovating properties around Mutianyu, and aside from the Schoolhouse, has done up a number of courtyards in the area, including one for himself only a couple of hundred metres from the restaurant.

Coinciding with the opening of the Canteen, the Schoolhouse team also established a noodle house in nearby Ying Bei Gou village. Open weekends, a local noodle puller dishes up fresh and interesting creations in a gorgeous old house bordered by a peaceful patio area featuring a fountain and fairy lights for outdoor dining once the weather begins to warm up again.

All of the properties maintain the initial building structure, as well as some furniture, and all make the most of the stunning Wall vistas in the area. In the summer, a rooftop patio above the glass studio at Schoolhouse is the perfect place to relax with a stem of bubbly after a long hike. In the winter, get cosy in the dining room with its heated floors and creative comfort food. Don't be dissuaded by the "canteen" moniker - there's nary a soggy meat pie or sausage roll in site at Schoolhouse.

Utilising local, organic and wild produce, Indian/Canadian chef Randhir Singh has created a small, but thoughtful menu. The schoolhouse club sandwich could easily feed a gaggle of kids - bursting with crispy bacon, chicken and salad on three layers of fresh rye (RMB 48). It's accompanied by one of the best salads we've had in a long time, with local walnuts and a raspberry vinaigrette. The wild mushroom ravioli (RMB 59) is hard to beat - half a dozen or so parcels filled with delicate mushrooms, and drizzled with a light sauce so as to not overpower the wild fungus flavours.

After a hearty meal in the cosy room, it's hard to face the prospect of heading back to the hustle and bustle of Beijing. Others feeling the same way will be comforted to know that boutique accommodation is in the pipeline, in addition to a host of gourmet feasts and cultural classes in the Canteen, and visiting artist events in the glass studio.

The Schoolhouse Canteen, 12 Mutianyu Village, Huairou District.
www.theschoolhousemutianyu.com

Jewel

"One of the benefits of being a new restaurant is that you can really push the boundaries," F&B Director Bernhard Langer told Beijing Talk about his new baby, Cantonese restaurant Jewel at the Westin Beijing, Financial Street. "Jewel is about new, and about doing things differently."

At a glance, the menu offers traditional Cantonese and Sichuan staples - think sharks fin, sea cucumber, abalone... But there are more than a few twists when the food hits the table. The *gongbao jiding* (spicy chicken with nuts) is a dish that we've tried on more than a few occasions, but at Jewel it comes served with crunchy almonds and a chili-vinegar sauce that actually lets you keep your tastebuds long enough to savour the tender chunks of chicken. The sautéed duck is another surprise - perfectly complemented with apple and candied sesame walnuts. The wok-fried Australian wagyu beef served with shimeji mushrooms takes a traditional Chinese dish, but fuses it with foreign flavours and products - the wagyu perfect in Cantonese cooking where the flavours and sauces are mild enough to let the meat speak for itself.

Food presentation at Jewel matches the modern menu interpretations. The delicate poached salmon comes atop a bed of fluffy eggwhites, spattered with plump salmon roe that, together with thin slivers of asparagus, forms a Zen-like tree image on the plate. Definitely too nice to eat, but I dig in and make a mess anyway.

It all comes courtesy of Hong Kongese chef Ronald Chi - with over 30 years of experience under his belt in the food industry across China and Indonesia. "I wanted to challenge the food a little bit," he said of his creations at Jewel. His most "challenging" signature dishes are listed in their own section on the menu: the braised zucchini with dried scallops and Enoki mushrooms is one of the more interesting.

Aside from the *a la carte* options, Jewel will soon add a weekend dim sum menu (Dim Summary), which will evolve over time as the dim sum chef adds creations on a weekly basis to keep the offerings fresh and modern.

Similar to the food, the design of the restaurant is simple yet chic, with modern elements complimenting traditional Chinese ones. Stunning silk lanterns illuminate large silk prints, and hanging dividers create intimacy in the cosy dining area.

"There are many things that are classic about Jewel that we can fall back on," Bernard summarised after our meal. "But we're also doing something very different and creating a very unique dining experience."

Jewel, 1F The Westin Beijing Financial Street, 98 Financial St, Xicheng District. Tel: 8608 8888. Map ref: 4f



greenfish

Aside from the cute, little green-hued fish lazing lethargically in a long tank at the entrance, the first thing you notice about "greenfish" at the Ritz Carlton Beijing Financial Street is that it smells delicious. Above and beyond the food and coffee aromas, the creative restaurant managers at the hotel have imported heavenly scents to characterise each of their outlets. In greenfish it's Ocean Breeze, while from "qi" and "ceppe" waft aromas of incense and sandalwood, amongst others. The scent at greenfish fits the mood of the light, airy restaurant perfectly - decked out in whites and greens, with flourishes of purple. Fish and flowers intermingle - floral waves on the ceiling mimicked in mosaic tiles on the ground; fish salt and pesce-printed napkins.

Reminding me of lazy afternoons spent in a holiday beach house overlooking the sea, being in greenfish immediately puts me in the mood for champagne. Marketing well done! But alas, as I have many hours of work ahead of me, I opt for sparkling water instead, and begin perusing the interesting "flexitarian" menu.

"Many people in American are flexitarian these days," F&B Director Robert Petrovic tells me. "They eat meat maybe once on the weekends, but otherwise eat mostly vegetables and maybe seafood during the week." As such, the smallish menu only lists three dishes that "flex the concept" and include meat - the rest are vegetarian or seafood, and there's also a good range of vegan dishes.

On the menu, the char-grilled Portobello mushroom burger with pickled beetroot and home fries (RMB 75) falls into the latter category, although the melted cheese layering the mushroom and tomato might make it more suited to lacto-vegetarians... Semantics aside, the burger is brilliant - smoky, tender and almost meat-like in texture. Aside from a flash of colour, the beetroot adds sweetness offset by the fat, crispy home fries salted and just begging me to devour them. Fungus also features in the mains - the wild mushroom stroganoff with herb spaetzle (RMB 120) a highlight, perhaps only outdone by the colourful house signature green fish and red potato (RMB 166).

The Cesar salad (RMB 60) is served in a bowl as big as the fish tank at the entrance, although thankfully the plump anchovies in the salad are not swimming in dressing, as is often the case with creamy salads dished up across Beijing. For an extra RMB 75 you can add smoked salmon or a couple of fat, grilled prawns to the crunchy cos, sundried tomatoes, and huge garlic-crisped croutons, and make it a meal. The chef's salad is also interesting, with crispy mushroom wonton, five spice white bait, and green mango (RMB 88).

After a healthy vegan meal, reward yourself with one of the indulgent desserts: the caramel manjari chocolate gateau with marinated orange, Grand Marnier and mandarin coulis (RMB 55) or the totally more-ish apple almond crumble tart with vanilla ice cream and nutmeg sauce (RMB 48). A flexitarian feast that definitely calls for pants with a flexible waistline...

greenfish, 1F The Ritz Carlton Beijing Financial Street, 1 Jincheng Fang Street East, Xicheng District. Tel: 8601 8888. Map ref: 4f