

FOOD & DRINK

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Tycoon Tann's giant sesame rice ball, "The Pearl of the Dragon", was created for its visual impact. Photo: Nora Tam

Patriot games, home and away

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American Independence Day can be a double-edged sword. While Americans living in Hong Kong pull out all the stops to remind themselves of home, for Asian immigrants to America celebrations are fraught with questions of identity, assimilation and belonging.

Tiffany Chang works in Washington as a statistician. Her parents met in Hong Kong before moving to the US in the 1970s. Recalling how she celebrated the day as a child growing up in Houston, she would "try to wear something red, white, and blue since most people at school would as well".

As a family, she says "fireworks were the only tradition". More often than not she would go to friends' parties and "hang out with their families ... we would probably pick up something American like a hamburger or fried chicken."

Melinda Wong is also an American-born Chinese; she works as a real estate broker in California. Wong's family emigrated to America in the 1920s from what was then Canton. These days she celebrates the day with her family with a potluck barbecue before watching the fireworks.

But growing up, she remembers her grandparents didn't like to barbecue: there was no room in their apartment in San Francisco's Chinatown and, anyway, "they preferred Chinese food".

"However, they did like to watch the fireworks," she says, acknowledging the major similarity between Chinese and American celebrations.

Wong sees her family's evolving Fourth of July menu as a reflection of their growing assimilation. "In the beginning we just had hot dogs," she says. "Later the barbecues got more elaborate: hamburgers, marinated steaks, marinated chicken, skewers of vegetables ... later as we got more accustomed to American food, sausages were added as well as green salads - we weren't used to eating raw vegetables."

Chang, too, sees her childhood Fourth of July celebrations, or lack thereof, symbolic of something deeper. "I think because we didn't all-out celebrate it, that my parents may not have felt part of the American experience, or maybe just didn't know how to celebrate it."

Celebrating the Fourth of July can be strange in Hong Kong, too. Concepts such as identity and patriotism have a way of becoming very slippery, and the British are in profusion, quick with a snide comment, giving the whole affair a distasteful tongue-in-cheek quality.

At least these days the practicalities of hosting a proper American bash have become less troublesome. With American groceries such as A&M US Groceries (anmstores.com) and the Gateway Supermarket (gatewaysupermarket.com), it's easy to buy the right ingredients.

There is a lot to buy. Just ask America transplant Sarah Martin who was in the middle of planning her Fourth of July party when we spoke: "For starters, we're supplying some American booze. Blue and red Jell-O shots for the frat party feel, Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and a watermelon filled with rum punch. There will be mini corn dogs ... strawberry rhubarb pie, apple pie and pecan pie ... Doritos. Cheetos. Everything that's American."

Something about being in another country makes you really patriotic

SARAH MARTIN, US EXPAT

Martin says the shopping so far has been a breeze: "I'm going to hit up the A&M Grocery store to look for baked beans and Jiffy peanut butter."

"I feel like Fourth of July foods are easy to get here because they're classic American heart attack foods," she says, then as an afterthought, "I'll also get some frozen pizzas to grill."

Meanwhile, she is busy decorating her rooftop with American flags, putting together an Uncle Sam costume, and arranging an American themed playlist with her husband and friends. Still, she admits that there is something different about celebrating the day in Hong Kong.

"It's weird, though, because I've never been this into the Fourth of July. Something about being in another country makes you really patriotic."

The plate show

Some chefs are biting the bullet and designing their dishes to make an impact on social media sites, writes Vicki Williams

There is no stopping the phenomenon of sharing food photos on social media. According to a recent report in *The Guardian*, the influence of social media photos is being taken so seriously by some restaurants that it's influencing what goes on the menu. The newspaper cites the example of a restaurant chain in the US that hired a consultant (at a cost of US\$750,000) to come up with ideas on how to make its dishes more photogenic and increase the likelihood of the photos being shared.

In Hong Kong and Macau, posting photos of meals on Instagram and other social media sites has become a craze. In response, some restaurants are making it a priority to have their dishes Instagram-ready, while others still have mixed feelings about the trend.

One restaurant catering to the social media crowd is the recently opened Tycoon Tann. Its modern Chinese menu was developed jointly by its

marketing and kitchen teams. "With more and more people engaging in social media platforms, it has become an integral tool to include in the marketing communications mix. With eye-catching visual images shared on these platforms, it helps attract people to come and try those dishes for themselves," says Cherry Lo, Tycoon Tann's catering management director.

Blogger Ale Wilkinson of Dim Sum Diaries says restaurants are definitely taking advantage of the sharing of food photos, getting free PR, but that the extra emphasis on presentation could be a boon for diners, with nice plating now extending beyond fine-dining venues.

There are places, however, that go overboard.

"Some places make their dishes overly photogenic, such as Social Place with its little piggy dumplings, or Mrs Pound, which serves rendang bao in a bamboo steamer with their logo stamped over it," she says.

Social Place even has a photo

gallery on its website in place of a conventional menu.

Executive chef Guillaume Galliot of one-Michelin star The Tasting Room by Galliot, is highly creative when it comes to plate choices and presentation, using everything from rocks to hollow glass bowls containing fresh flowers. However, he does not do this with the social media crowd in mind.

"Firstly, a dish with good presentation should photograph well in any circumstances, whether taken by a professional or on a smartphone. Even before social media, it was important for a dish to be a visual treat before it hit the olfactory senses," he says, adding that he doesn't care for social media.

The Verandah at The Reputable Bay is sticking to the traditional approach. However, it has a number of dishes with a visual "wow factor", especially those that are finished at the table, which diners would find appealing to photograph.

With new chef de cuisine Matthieu Bonnier onboard, there are plans to introduce the use of slate and wood for some dishes. But Bonnier claims the changes are not driven by social media.

"We definitely want the diner to be impressed visually by a dish, and, for me, a visually impressive element is important. But a chef needs to remain authentic, and that starts with using the best produce and highlighting it by using the best techniques," he says.

But there is no denying that social media is a key influencer.

"We enjoy surprising our guests," says Lo. "Having something we know they will take pictures of is always a plus."



Tournedos Rossini at The Verandah.

dining out was focused on conversations, taking in every bite and soaking in the restaurant experience. He says that food photography by diners, sometimes taking 10 minutes or more, interrupts the rhythm of courses, and in some cases proteins might end up becoming overdone because of the time spent taking photos.

"When I hear a complaint about an overcooked dish, or lukewarm soup, it begs the question if it was something to do with the cooking or because the guest took time before eating the dish. This is an impossible situation to work around," he says. "Because of all these factors, we have no control over a guests' reaction to a dish, which in turn may have an impact on credibility. A dish may look amazing and have great social media clout, but as a chef, I am more concerned about how it tasted. Was it a gourmet experience?"

He continues: "I would rather someone enjoy the meal, being present in the moment and talking about it, than to take amazing photos of it and miss out on the exact way it was supposed to taste when served."

Wilkinson also says taste is more important than appearance. "As long as it tastes as good as it looks, I don't mind it too much. But when it looks incredible and then it's really disappointing to taste, that I find really annoying." life@scmp.com

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GUILLAUME GALLIOT

She cites Tycoon Tann's barbecue pork as an example. It's presented on a plate that sits over a warmer, which keeps the food hot while diners are busy snapping and posting. Another dish, a giant sesame rice ball dubbed the "The Pearl of the Dragon", was created for visual impact - and it's one of the most photographed dishes on the menu.

Galliot takes a different view and feels that social media is changing the way food is enjoyed, preferring a time when



Hare soup with truffle and foie gras at The Tasting Room by Galliot.



WINE OPINION
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Contest aims to put Ningxia on winemaking map

Will China ever move from being mainly a producer of high volume and low quality wines to a producer of wines to rival the best of the rest of the world?

The country has a wide variety of climates and soils, and optimists have always said it will produce good wine when those elements are married with the right grapes and know-how.

Winemakers in the Ningxia Hui autonomous region believe they are already producing quality wines and this September's Ningxia Winemaker's Contest is an attempt to shine an international spotlight on their efforts. But it will also help them improve further by bringing foreign expertise to the area.

The region mostly grows the classic red varieties cabernet sauvignon and merlot; and

chardonnay and welschriesling for whites, although some grapes for wine production are brought in from outside the region.

"Part of the motivation behind the project is both to raise the profile of Ningxia as a quality producer and to facilitate knowledge exchange, both professional and cultural. It is kind of cool how some of the winemakers who have come out for this and other projects have later seen Ningxia delegations visit them in their home country," says Jim Boyce, a Beijing-based wine consultant and writer who is the contest's spokesman.

Jancis Robinson visited the province and is impressed by its potential. Michel Bettane, Thierry Desseuve and Jeremy Oliver have also given positive



Ningxia has 25,000 hectares under vines and more than 50 wineries.

reviews of Ningxia wines. Judges at the 2011 Decanter awarded an international trophy to Ningxia winery He Lan Qing Xue - the Red Middle East, Far East & Asia over £10 Trophy for a 2009 Bordeaux blend called Jia Bei Lan.

Ningxia has 25,000 hectares under vines and is home to more than 50 wineries, between the Helan mountain range and the Yellow River. That geography offers both shelter from the wind and good irrigation.

The competition is part of an ambitious plan to boost the area's profile. Building on a history of hosting wine conferences and expos, the region also hopes to become a centre for wine tourism.

This year's challenge is the second co-organised by Ningxia's Grape Industry

Development Bureau and the International Federation of Vine and Wine of Helan Mountain's East Foothill.

The first was launched in 2012 and was judged in 2014, with Australian winemaker David Tyney winning. That contest saw winemakers from Australia, Chile, France, New Zealand, South Africa, Spain and the US compete for 190,000 yuan (HK\$240,000).

Robinson said at the time: "Both in the awards and at several wineries it was clear that Ningxia's raw material [assuming that is what we were tasting] is impressively consistent."

The second contest is upping the ante with a prize pot of 840,000 yuan. There are places for 60 competitors, 50 of which have already been taken by

winemakers from 20 countries. The top 10 per cent of the wines in the contest - six wines - each get 100,000 yuan and a gold medal, while the next 20 per cent - 12 wines - each get 20,000 yuan and silver.

"The winemakers will each have three acres [1.21 hectares] of vineyard to source fruit and will make several thousand bottles of wine. It will be in barrel so staff at the wineries will be able to hand general management and the winemakers can come back several times, fully funded, to check the wine," says Boyce.

The winemakers will live in the region for several weeks, selecting grapes, overseeing fermentation and hopefully learning more about the region, with the organisers funding living expenses.

