

hong kong grapevine

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A NEW trend taking shape in the local culinary scene is the resurgence of Southeast Asian cuisine and it has delighted local taste buds with nuances of spice and sometimes heat. A very popular place for Straits delights is **Cafe Malacca** inside the renamed Hotel Jen (formerly Traders Hotel, part of the Shangri-La Hotel Group) in the trendy Western District. Not the place for a romantic meal, this is a brightly lit room, simply furnished and sparsely decorated with jars of herbs and spices. Start with the lemongrass drink with pandan-flavoured jelly to prepare your palate. You can feast on an array of popular street food, from the refreshing Rojak (\$HK62/\$A10) a mixed fruit salad of guava, cucumber and pineapple dressed with belachan (a Southeast-Asian style shrimp paste), to chicken and beef satays (\$HK82-98/\$A14-16), and Penang-style turnip cake (\$HK63-88/\$A10-15, with prawns). The Singaporean otak-otak (\$HK42/\$A7), mackerel fish paste spiced with turmeric, galangal, lemongrass, shallot and chilli, grilled inside a banana leaf has an ethereal lightness lifted by the intense aromatics and a faint smokiness. Laksa comes in two versions: the tangy Penang style or the coconut milk-enriched Singaporean style (\$HK88-92/\$A15). The other signature Malaysian dish is the Penang Char Koay Teow with rice noodles, dried sausage and prawns, stir-fried with sambal paste and chilli paste (\$HK89/\$A15). For more substantial items, order the famous Hainan chicken rice (\$HK118/\$A20) and the richly-flavoured and juicily tender beef Rendang (\$HK102/\$A17). The venue also serves as the hotel's coffee shop and expect to see Caesar salad and burgers on the menu.

Depending on the season, challenge yourself with the pungent Durian ice cream, or for a taste of the Straits, the Bubur Pulut Hitam (black glutinous rice porridge) or the Kuih Dadar (pandan-flavoured omelet filled with coconut and palm sugar) (\$HK32/\$A5 each). Phone +852 2213 6613.

For a centrally located venue with stylish decor, **Mama San** serves delicious Southeast Asian cuisine with a modern twist, on Wyndham St, Central. It is part of the Dining Concepts Group that also brought Gordon Ramsay's Bread Street Kitchen to Hong Kong. The thoughtfully designed wine list includes red, white and rosé by-the-glass options to go with the different combinations of sweet, sour and spice in the food. Great starters for sharing: the chilli harbour prawns with deep fried garlic, iceberg lettuce and lemon (\$HK188/\$A31) and the grilled beef salad with cherry tomatoes, mint, Thai basil, cucumber and hot and sour dressing (\$HK118/\$A20). Save some of the tongue-tingling tangy tamarind sauce from the sizzling claypot caramelised snapper dish with young coconut, black pepper, green mango and Thai basil (\$HK238/\$A39), to cut through the richness of the succulent suckling pig (Babi guling), with beautifully crisped skin, served with sambal hijau and sambal matah (\$HK288/\$A48). Divinely complementary! For a change from chicken curry try the Cambodian duck curry with sweet potatoes, shallots and peanuts (\$HK198/\$A33). Side orders are generously portioned - the stir-fried vegetables could serve as a vegetarian main course, and is very tasty! Check any special off-menu wine offerings from the knowledgeable sommelier Vincent, who is passionate about his food-wine pairing! Phone +852 2881 8901.

Another trend taking hold is smart casual dining that does not take bookings. Luckily, there is usually a trendy cocktail bar or two nearby to help you while away the waiting time. **Ho Lee Fook** (literally means "good fortune for your mouth") in the SoHo district is best described as ultra-chic Chinese fast dining! Taiwanese celebrity chef **Jowett Yu**, with experience at Sydney's Ms G's and tutelage under Tetsuya, has charmed Hongkongers with his innovative



Chinese fusion cuisine. Prawn toast, with okonomiyaki, kewpie mayonnaise, bulldog sauce and shaved cabbage (\$HK118/\$A20), DIY rice balls with toasted sesame, seaweed and pork floss (disposable gloves provided!) (\$HK68/\$A11), Mom's "mostly cabbage, a little bit of pork" dumplings with sachu soy dressing (\$HK98/\$A16), Kimchi fried rice with edamame and crispy Chinese sausage (\$HK118/\$A20) and Wagyu steak tartare, Yunnan style, hot and sour (\$HK158/\$A26) all reflect the chef's bold and playful flair and genius. Do not miss the traditional roast goose (\$HK298/\$A49 for a half, or act the expert and choose between upper and lower quarters). The veggie dishes are highly recommended: fried cauliflower, brussels sprouts, maple bacon and chilli jam (\$HK88/\$A15) is a favourite. Finish with a dessert called Breakfast 2.0, with Horlicks ice cream, cocoa coffee crumbs, cornflake honey joy, oats, and dried longan (\$HK78/\$13). Expect to have starters, main courses, veggies and carbs, all arrived within 30 minutes. There is a lovely rosé from La Clape on the concise wine list, but cocktails and very cold draught beers seem to have a bigger draw. Bookings are possible for parties of six or more. Service is professional and friendly, and the kitchen is in plain sight as you walk in. Only open for dinners, seven days a week. Phone +852 2881 8901.

In Hong Kong for the weekend, why not book a table for lunch at **Rainbow Seafood Restaurant** on Lamma Island? Board the restaurant boat from Central; refreshed by the sea breeze, arrive with an appetite for a fabulous seafood feast of king prawns in soya sauce, salt and chilli scampi, razor clams with black beans and chilli, steamed whole scallops with vermicelli, ginger and garlic, and more. The sweet and sour pork isn't bad either! Spend the afternoon walking around the village before heading back. Phone +852 2982 8100.

Above right: Suckling pig at Mama San.
Above left: Cafe Malacca's Char Koay Teow.