

ON THE TOWN by Apple Mandy

Journey to the Feast

Fuschia Dunlop eats her way through Sichuan

Fuschia Dunlop's gastronomic epiphany goes back to Chengdu in 1993. A friend had invited the British food writer – then on her first visit to China – for lunch at one of city's more modest restaurants. There, over the course of a lazy afternoon, they feasted on *dou ban yu* 豆瓣鱼 (fish in chili sauce), *yu xiang qie zi* 鱼香茄子 (fish-fragrant aubergines) and *huo bao yao hua* 火爆腰花 (fire-exploded kidney flowers). Dunlop was smitten: the dishes were unlike any Chinese food she'd ever tried. A century egg, she admits, was the most 'exotic' thing she'd managed up to that point.

Dunlop recounts her love affair with the 'Land of Plenty' and its cuisine in her latest culinary memoir, *Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper: A Sweet-Sour Memoir of Eating in China*, which has won plaudits from *The Times* as an "absorbing adventure, enough to make the reader long to jump on the next plane to somewhere weird... and stay there."

And stay there she did. Dunlop returned to China eight months after her initial trip and enrolled in formal classes at China's finest cooking school – the Sichuan Institute of Higher Cuisine in Chengdu, where she lived from 1994-96. One of only two Westerners in a class of 50, she learned as much out of the classroom as she did in it, befriending market vendors and noodle shop owners, badgering them about recipes and cooking techniques.

If she learned anything in cooking school it was that there's more to Sichuan cuisine than spice. "Most people have a terrible simplification of Sichuan food as *ma la* [numbing and spicy]," says Dunlop, who is now the BBC World Service's East Asian specialist. "But the true art of Sichuan cooking is known for its *fuhe wei* 复合味, or complex flavors." Dunlop says the complexity extends to Sichuan dining etiquette too. "There are different ways to hold the knife, and different shapes in which the food can be cut into," she says. Dunlop's book features handy illustrations of such shapes with seemingly whimsical, yet perfectly appropriate names like 'horse ears' and 'phoenix tails'.

Dunlop's culinary journey doesn't end with Sichuan though. She takes the reader to Beijing to learn about the history of Imperial cuisine as she conjures up "a picture of what the emperors ate



P-A Jorgensen

and what their lives were like – particularly the life of the last emperor, Pu Yi." The book also makes a stop in Yangzhou where Dunlop was inspired by the locals notion of eating as "discerning, kind and pleasurable" and a "reflection of cultural sensibility".

But you can't have the sweet without the sour. Dunlop acknowledges some of the darker recesses of Chinese cuisine. She expresses concern for the growing

taste for luxury delicacies like shark's fin. "Sharks are endangered because of the Chinese appetite," she says. "In the past it was OK to eat it as there were just a few rich people. Now, more people can afford it so it's served up even more. Personally, I don't think it's moral to eat it." ■

Shark's Fin and Sichuan Pepper: A Sweet-Sour Memoir of Eating in China is available at Chaterhouse Books, Shanghai Times Square, Shop B1-K, 93 Huaihai Zhong Lu, by Xizang Lu, for other locations see Art listings P94