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FOOD

Sichuan Cuisine, Imperiled by Success

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By CHRIS BUCKLEY JUNE 14, 2016

CHENGDU, China — The tang of the famed cooking of Sichuan wafts through streets crowded with restaurants. Hot pots of chile and oil simmer like restless volcanoes. Chicken, rabbit and frog bathe in stews tingling with red and green peppercorns. Favorites like Pock-Marked Grandma Tofu abound.

But along with all the pungent aromas, a whiff of panic is in the air here in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province in southwest China.

“Sichuanese cuisine really faces a crisis,” said Wang Kaifa, a 71-year-old chef who has been leading a campaign against what he sees as the creeping debasement of the region’s celebrated cooking.

“The scene feels like it’s booming, but this is a chaotic boom that has had a lot of negatives,” he said, drawing out his vowels and emphasizing high notes in the region’s lilting accent. “Finally, they could become a sickness that brings down Sichuanese cuisine.”

Such gloom seems surprising. Chengdu has a bustling food scene with many thousands of restaurants, from chic newer ones to hole-in-the-wall places called “fly diners.” Tourists go there just for the food.

Sichuanese cooking has been conquering the world. It has become China’s favorite out-of-home dining, sold in countless restaurants that often advertise its trademark chile heat. It has made major inroads in New York, London and other intensely competitive dining cities abroad.

But many cooks and food enthusiasts in Chengdu worry that, like a once-humble hometown band dazzled by sudden stardom, their tradition risks betraying its roots and selling out for easy but fleeting hits.

Rapid growth, especially in the last decade, has debased much restaurant cooking, drowning the tastes and textures of dishes like fish-fragrant eggplant in gobs of acrid chile, oil and monosodium glutamate. Menus are often narrowed to dauntingly spicy dishes, like boiled duck-blood curd and tripe in chile broth, ignoring the great variety and nuance of the cuisine.

“Our taste buds have been battered into decline so that we demand it to be spicier and spicier,” said Shi Guanghua, a gravel-voiced food writer and former restaurateur in Chengdu. “Sichuanese cuisine has become shallow and flattened.”

In Chengdu, people dissect their meals with the reverence that other cities devote to sports teams. Everyone in the food business here offers solutions to the problem. Lively debate has broken out, especially about finding the balance between preserving tradition and embracing new ways and new customers.

And in this country where almost every problem prompts a state plan, the province’s government last year upgraded its guidelines for standard Sichuanese

dishes. The guidelines advise, for instance, that “strange-flavored chicken strips,” a cold dish that includes dark vinegar, should use the meat of a one-year-old rooster.

News websites mocked the effort as futile kitchen meddling. But in April, the government announced a plan to award Sichuanese restaurants, at home and abroad, Michelinlike ratings — gold, silver and bronze pandas — to encourage standard-bearers for good cooking.

“Shocks from commercialization and the simplification of tastes have created a crisis,” said Mr. Shi, who is on a supervisory panel for the restaurant-rating plan. “Sichuanese cuisine can’t survive without its traditions, but how to preserve them and reinvigorate them at the same time? That’s the focus of discussion.”

To outsiders, this alarm may seem over the top. But the angst over Sichuan cooking distills wider anxieties about the place of tradition, as China becomes increasingly unmoored from its past.

Some defenders of old-school cooking look to President Xi Jinping of China, known for dining out on cheap steamed buns, who has called for restoring homegrown traditions in politics. They hope to see the same in kitchens.

“Too many of the old ways have gone by the wayside, but the trend now under Xi Jinping has been to restore Chinese traditions,” said the chef Chen Baiming. “Sichuanese food is a part of Chinese culture, and we need to protect it.”

Early this year, dozens of retired chefs formed the Sichuan Old Chef Traditional Artistry Society to restore time-honored ways they say are under assault. Its 160 members, most in their 60s and 70s, meet weekly in a clubhouse above a restaurant to swap recipes, promote traditional skills and play mah-jongg, even more of an obsession here than in much of the rest of China.

They gripe about young cooks who use lashings of new ingredients, like mayonnaise, and recall neglected classics, like sliced pig kidneys fried in fermented bean paste. Mr. Wang said he was inspired to start the society after watching in dismay while a 30-year-old chef from a five-star hotel added celtuce, also called asparagus lettuce, to kung pao chicken.

“I was furious,” he said with a grimace. The dish should be an uncluttered mix of chicken, peanuts, stubby dried red chiles and spices, he said. “Young chefs these days just don’t understand what tradition is.”

Of course no cuisine stands still. Classic French food evolves, as does every other cuisine. In Sichuan, the question is what elements to preserve and how to change without betraying the culinary heritage.

A camp of chefs here hopes to remake Sichuanese cooking for urbane middle-class tastes, building on the core of traditional ingredients and techniques. Some have opened airy modern restaurants that serve recipes with contemporary twists and presentation.

“You do have to maintain tradition, but it’s not a display in a museum,” said Yang Wen, a chef whose restaurant, Lotus Shadow, features refined dishes, like braised shrimp infused with jasmine tea, that are a world away from the homespun fare favored by old-school revivalists. “There’s no survival without innovation.”

Ms. Yang, who is also a gastronomy teacher, plans to open a cooking school and research institute in Chengdu, called the Chinese Food Academy and Information Center, to help restore and reinvent local cooking. A mundane dish like twice-cooked pork, a classic Sichuan dish made from boiled pork belly, could be remade for new tastes, she said.

“It’s preserving the essence of tradition while meeting modern expectations,” said Ms. Yang, a rare woman among the legions of male cooks here. “Sichuanese food has never stood still.”

Ms. Yang has a point. Sichuanese cooking is classified as one of the eight great cuisines of China. But its roots are relatively recent. Over several centuries of war, trade and migration, outsiders brought in chiles, fermented bean paste, sugar and other spices, and their own cooking traditions.

These influences melded only several generations ago to create an unusually aromatic and versatile toolbox of flavors. Sichuan’s historic openness to other influences should be seen as a virtue, say some food lovers here.

“The truest Sichuanese food has only about a century or so of history behind it,” said Wang Shiwu, a food critic at **Sichuan Gastronomy**, a monthly magazine. “The attractiveness of Sichuanese food is that it’s a big melting pot. Whatever is attractive in your cuisine, I can absorb and adapt it.”

Nowadays, a Sichuanese cook uses the zesty green or red local pepper, scallions, earthy fermented broad bean and chile paste, black fermented soy beans, dried tangerine peel and dozens of types of chiles (big and small, red and green, fiery and mild) prepared in several ways: fresh, dried and pickled.

These and other condiments can be combined to create dozens of flavors, many of which defy quick description in English. “Each dish its own, 100 flavors in 100 dishes,” goes the saying repeated by the chefs who fear that those tastes will vanish.

“Sichuan, Chengdu in particular, has an incredibly high concentration of restaurants and a fiercely competitive restaurant industry, so people are always looking for the next new thing,” said Fuchsia Dunlop, the English food writer and consultant who spent many years in Sichuan. “But it’s certainly true that since the late ’90s, the pace of change has really accelerated.”

From that time, Sichuanese food took off in national popularity, first inspiring a love for a spicy hot pot, and then bringing a burst of chain restaurants that consolidated the cuisine as the national favorite for dining out. Lately, the craze has been for freshwater lobster in chile hot pots.

But in Chengdu, Xiong A’bing, a chef who runs a chain of restaurants called **Rustic Impressions**, specializing in robustly traditional dishes, said people would tire of the race toward spicy novelty.

“We’ve also felt the many changes in China since 2012,” the year Mr. Xi came to power, he said, while making bowls of boiled beef strips under heaps of surprisingly fragrant ground chile. “Now many people, especially those born after the 1970s, are turning back to eat traditional Sichuanese food. They’re returning to their roots.”

Recipes: **San Hua Kao Ji, Three-Flower Roast Chicken | More Dishes**

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