

## HONG KONG

## Hong Kong's Culinary Secrets.

Five outstanding private kitchens where you can tuck into some of the territory's tastiest, home-cooked meals. *By* LAURA MILLER

**I**N A CITY WHERE BRASH, boastful display is the norm, some of Hong Kong's best eating experiences aren't advertised or even signposted. Private kitchens are Hong Kong's version of speakeasies; but instead of booze, their raison d'être is food. Originally started in the late 1990's as a way to get around Hong Kong's restrictive health regulations and high rents, these unlicensed venues have earned a following among the city's chowhounds, dishing up everything from Shanghaiese to Creole to haute cuisine. Book several days in advance, bring a bottle, and go with an open mind: the bill of fare usually depends on the chef's whims and market offerings. Here, our top five private kitchens.

### LE BLANC

• **The Place** This eatery's simple name belies its eccentric clutter and bohemian ambience. Velvet drapes

hanging from the ceiling separate the tables and create an air of intimacy. The décor is that of a batty maiden aunt's apartment; an out-of-tune piano shares space with gnomes and other bric-a-brac. The old-fashioned furnishings set the perfect stage for Le Blanc's fine French fare. After whetting your palate with bread and pâté, the five- to seven-course meal proceeds in classic French bourgeoisie order: entrée, *poisson* (fish), *potage* (soup), sorbet, *plat principal* (the main with side dishes), and finally dessert and cheese. The best surprise comes at the end with the bill: the minimum charge here is HK\$290 per person.

• **The Food** Delectable French, from pan-seared foie gras to decadent platters of cheeses imported from France, with escargot de Bourgogne and confit de canard in between. Sixth floor, 83 Wanchai Rd., Wanchai; 852/3428-5824; no corkage fee; open Monday–Sunday nights.

### GITONE

• **The Place** Gallery and pottery studio by day and Shanghaiese dining room by night, Gitone is a rising star in off-the-beaten track Sai Wan Ho. Started in a Wanchai apartment 10 years ago, it relocated to an elegant and roomy ground-floor space opposite a leafy playground in April 2008. Gitone is the brainchild of renowned local artist Terence Lee. His chunky yet elegant ceramic cups, bowls and figurines are scattered throughout the gallery, and strikingly simple portraits adorn the stark white walls. But it's his Shanghai-born parents who provide the inspiration for the menu. As dusk falls, round tables replace pottery wheels and the two extensive, nine-course menus (one vegetarian) are carefully prepared. If you're lucky, Lee's parents will make an appearance.

• **The Food** Eight cold appetizers—including pickled cucumbers and drunken chicken—set the scene, but



**Home Cooking** From left: Vivian Herijanto of Corner Kitchen; the pound cake at Magnolia.



the seven main courses steal the show. Among the standouts are the stir-fried crab served with glutinous rice cakes and green beans, sweet-and-sour deep-fried garoupa with pinenuts and the sublime braised pig's knuckle in sweet soy sauce that juxtaposes crisp skin with meltingly tender meat. Shop 27–28, Ground Floor, Lei King Wan, 45 Tai Hong St., Sai Wan Ho; 852/2527-3448; HK\$380 per person; corkage fee HK\$50 per bottle; open Monday–Saturday nights.

### DA PING HUO

• **The Place** Imagine dining in a gallery where an artist acts as your waiter and his wife plays the role of the chef. Dinner becomes performance art at this industrial-chic Sichuanese restaurant run by Wang Hai and his wife Wong Siu King (who also provides after-dinner entertainment, serenading diners with Chinese opera arias in her apron and Crocs). The couple offers two seatings: one at 6:30 P.M. and the second at 9:15 P.M. With local foodies thronging the tables for Wong's perfect rendition of Sichuanese dishes, reservations are hard to come by.

• **The Food** Sichuanese food revolves around the pairing of fiery red chilies and tingly Sichuan pepper to produce *mala*, a scorching, numbing sensation. Wong dishes up favorites

such as *mapo tofu*, Chengdu pork dumplings and spicy noodles with soy beans. Ground floor, 49 Hollywood Rd., Central; 852/2559-1317; HK\$280 per person; corkage fee HK\$150 per bottle; open Monday–Saturday nights.

### MAGNOLIA

• **The Place** In a two-story shophouse tucked inside a side street in Sheung Wan, Lori Granito pays tribute to her native New Orleans. A cozy sitting room faces an open kitchen downstairs; this is where the evening starts, over platters generously laden with tasty canapés. After watching Granito's staff expertly whip up Creole classics, diners are then invited into one of the three private rooms upstairs, where Granito herself gives a description of the night's menu. Seating is communal; the gregarious chef-owner confesses that she's fond of "forcing people to make friends"—not a difficult task in these convivial surroundings.

• **The Food** Authentic New Orleans' favorites from Granito's family annals. Think hearty seafood gumbo (based on her mother's recipe), jambalaya studded with succulent shrimp, crawfish pie, fork-tender Cajun barbecue ribs and freshly baked cornbread. **T+L Tip** Save room for the luscious pecan pie. Ground floor, Shop 5,

17 Po Yan St., Sheung Wan; 852/2530-9880; HK\$450 per person, no corkage fee; open Thursday–Saturday nights.

### CORNER KITCHEN

• **The Place** An airy kitchen-cum-dining room, Corner Kitchen seats just eight. In fact, the only difference between dining here and supping at a friend's is that owner Vivian Herijanto hands everyone an apron. A meal at Corner Kitchen doubles as a cooking class. Herijanto once worked as a chef at some of New York's top restaurants including Jean-George Vongerichten's Spice Market; while she remains passionate about food, she soured on the restaurant industry's cutthroat nature. She's also a food stylist with impeccable taste—sitting down at the exquisitely decorated teak table is an aesthetic as well as gustatory pleasure.

• **The Food** "A kitchen without boundaries" is how Herijanto describes her eatery. The menu traverses the globe, from Bali to New England. Learn to make *ikan betongol* (Indonesian tuna salad), coq au vin or Catham Bay cod stew—the choice of recipes is varied, but they're all delicious. Ground floor, 20 Po Hing Fong, Sheung Wan; 852/2803-2822; HK\$1,000 per person; no corkage fee; open Monday–Friday for lunch and dinner, and Saturday for lunch. +

**Hong Kong's Secret Spots** French touches on Creole cooking at Magnolia; enjoying a meal at Gitone.

