

## So French, Libertine

By **DONNA MAH**  
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When a new restaurant opens in Hong Kong, one of the first questions people ask is, "What kind of food do they serve?" It's a question that reflects the plethora of dining options in Hong Kong. So when new French bistro Libertine opened recently, I wondered: "Why French food and not some other cuisine?"

Located in the Central district on the steep and relatively quiet Aberdeen Street south of Hollywood Road, Libertine is not exactly in the heart of all the action, but it's near enough.

With a rustic interior that features a big dark wood bar area with high ceilings, they are trying to transport the diner to a sleepy French town bistro. The atmosphere is pleasant and welcoming, but felt a little too slick, even with rounds of dark country bread lining the shelves. The entire front of the restaurant is a row of glass doors that open out onto the terrace, which makes it a good place for drinks after work and weekend brunch.

As for dinner, the dishes that made the biggest impression were the appetizers — pate de campagne and rilletes and warm fig and goat's cheese salad. The pate and rilletes were served with grilled country bread freshly baked daily in house.

It's a good hearty starter and would also be good as a snack with drinks.

The goat's cheese and figs were both warm and were good complements. The salad of mixed greens had a bit too much dressing on them, so if you order this, ask for less dressing or have it served on the side.

The main dish of grilled sea bass with pesto and crushed new potatoes was a bit overcooked, but the green pesto was fresh and went well with the fish. The half pan-roasted chicken with potatoes, onion, and bacon was tender and well seasoned. These dishes were recommended, but I think next time I will try one of my French favorites — steak frites with Bearnaise sauce.

As to why Libertine is a French and not, say, Italian, it seems that the French are flocking to Hong Kong and therefore there is a need to provide them with a taste of home. According to the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, the French population has swelled by 60 percent since 2008, making it the biggest in Asia.



Warm fig with goat's cheese served in Libertine.

### IF YOU GO

**LIBERTINE**  
24-26 Aberdeen Street, Soho, Central, Hong Kong. 852-2858-2022.  
Average cost per head: HK\$400 (\$13)  
Open: 8 am-1 am



Foie gras and brioche are a fine example of David Pooley's culinary art.

PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

# Pooley's poetry on plates

There is a new Australian in town, and he's giving the food at Aria some wonderful new notes. **Ye Jun** talks to David Pooley and finds out how he looks at food.

Australian chef David Pooley says being a chef is 50 percent cooking and 50 percent bringing ideas together. All he needs is the right ingredients to start with, and after he figures out the proper details and structure, everything falls into place.

Just two months after he has arrived in Beijing, the new chef de cuisine of Aria Restaurant at the China World Hotel has finished refreshing the lunch and dinner menus, and is working on a degustation menu of seven courses.

Pooley's food has been described as poetry on a plate, and according to Beijing food columnist Zhao Ziyun, his use of ingredients is like a poet's use of words. Pooley has developed his own distinctive style — which is what differentiates a master from a mere chef.

A good example of his art comes from Pooley's presentation of foie gras, three ways on the same plate, as terrine, pate and torchon, served with brioche. That is followed by a lobster with chamomile consommé served in a tea pot and a main of Blackmore Wagyu with olive ash. Dessert was a lychee pavlova.

The 28-year-old Australian chef started in the kitchen at 14. Although there were no chefs in the family, the young man told his parents at 10 years old that he wanted to be a professional cook.

Fourteen years later, the chef has already worked at two restaurants in Australia with three chefs hats, the equivalent of three Michelin stars. Both Quay and Claude's are epicurean icons in Sydney.

Pooley considers himself lucky to get a chance to work in Quay as an apprentice. The restaurant is ranked among the top 50 restaurants in the world, and is probably the best restaurant in Australia. Pooley started at the bottom, making salads, cooking fish, and getting grounded in the basics.

"It was fast, hard and mean," he says. "But you can see all the hard work in the dish."

He describes Quay's celebrity chef Peter Gilmore as a "kind and exceptional man", whom young chefs can look up to.

"He is a very genuine man, which is reflected in his food. I learned from him how to respect food and bring the best ingredients together."

Pooley compares creating a dish to building a house — you have to start



**"The food is our way of communicating."**

DAVID POOLEY  
CHEF DE CUISINE OF ARIA RESTAURANT  
AT THE CHINA WORLD HOTEL

from the foundations, and success starts with the small things, like how you slice an onion.

His next move was to Claude's as sous chef under Chui Lee Luk, the Chinese-Australian chef known for her classic French cooking.

Pooley says this was probably his best cooking experience. While Quay has a flotilla of 16 to 17 chefs, Claude's has four, and a 40-seater dining room.

Pooley also says Chui was "the kindest but toughest lady" he had ever worked with.

"While Peter showed me respect for food, and texture of ingredients, I learned how to use ingredients from Chui," he says.

Another important thing Chui told him was not to look too far into food, but take it as it is, and avoid the mistakes most new chefs commit.

Although he gratefully acknowledges his mentors, Pooley is on his own culinary journey.

"I think I've found my own style," he

### IF YOU GO

**ARIA**  
2/F China World Hotel, 1 Jianguom-enwai Dajie, Chaoyang district, Beijing. 010-6505-3318.  
Average cost per head: 500 yuan (\$79)  
Recommended: Foie gras, lobster and Blackmore Wagyu  
Monday-Friday: 11:45 am-2:30 pm, 6-10 pm. Saturday and Sunday: Dinner only

says. It is a style that comes from the influences in his life, from his mentors to the neighborhood cafe his grandparents bought after they retired, and even Australia's climate.

It is a style that he describes as "always flowing, always organic, always relaxed, and natural".

He is also looking at food at source. He compared the white asparagus he found in Beijing with the imported variety, and found that Beijing produces the better

ingredient. He also found some farmers from Beijing offering good organic food such as potatoes.

Pooley, with the help of his team of Chinese chefs, has changed almost all items on the menu at Aria. He says he wants to give people what they want, but also pique their interest.

"Right now I'm offering the best we have to offer," he says. The restaurant is investing a lot on quality beef, including Blackmore beef, Australian Wagyu, and Black Angus.

Pooley's tasting menu will start soon, at 600 yuan (\$94) a person, featuring top grade Wagyu, foie gras and pigeon, ending with a deconstructed cheesecake, which he had kept from the old menu.

"The food is our way of communicating," he says. "If people walk away feeling the meal is different, interesting and stimulating, then we are happy. Because they've understood us."

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## What's it all about, Alfie?

By **LI XINZHU** in Shanghai  
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Google "British food" and you get a distracting list that includes haggis, pork pie and black pudding. But apart from sheep's intestine stuffed with meat and vegetables, a pie with chopped pork and pork juice jelly sealed in a hot water crust pastry and a thick sausage made with blood and fat, you also get fish and chips.

In London, the Olympic hordes are probably enjoying fish and chips around every corner. For less than a fiver (\$7.80), you can go away with a heaped portion of beer battered fish and wedges of potatoes accompanied by tartar sauce in a white take-away box.

In Shanghai nowadays, fish and chips is nothing new, although it may still be less popular than the favorite tummy-filler of a rice pancake rolled up with fried dough sticks.

More and more British-style restaurants and bars have appeared, starting with the cafe at Marks and Spencer, the

### IF YOU GO

**ALFIE'S BY KEE**  
Unit 111A, Alfred Dunhill, Plaza 66, 1266 Nanjing Xilu, Jing'an district, Shanghai. 021-6288-3822.  
Average cost per head: 150 yuan (\$24)  
Recommended: Alfie's fish and chips, Toffee Banoffi, Mango Panna Cotta  
Open: 10 am-10 pm

thoroughly British department store, which offers fish and chips served with green peas.

Go a little more up market, and you get a restaurant run by Alfred Dunhill, those posh retailers who have decided to branch into a bit of posh nosh.

Alfie's by KEE is hidden inside the Dunhill flagship store at Plaza 66, a commercial and office complex in downtown Shanghai, where top fashion brands from around the world rub shoulders.

It takes some courage to walk into the



Alfie's by KEE is ideal to sample British favorites.

store under the eagle-eyed gaze of shop assistants, but persevere and you will soon find the restaurant and bar downstairs. It is an elegant and well-designed space for a spot of lunch or high tea.

Alfie's was opened in May 2009 and managed and operated by KEE, a high-end private members club.

Unlike an ordinary restaurant, Alfie's sofas and tables are in various sizes and colors, and seem more like a VIP room for guests to take a break from shopping. And indeed, it was planned as such.

"It's good for wives and girlfriends to sit here and have a drink while their

partners try on the clothes," says Karen Yang, marketing director of KEE.

It is a nice intimate place where you can sample British favorites like fish and chips, with a menu designed by Neil Tomes, the celebrated head chef of Alfie's by KEE in the Hong Kong Home of Alfred Dunhill.

What sort of food will go well with the decor? You can expect excellent fish and chips, and the wives and girlfriends will definitely appreciate the toffee banoffi and apple crumble and vanilla ice cream. We are told they are perfect matches with the Earl Grey tea.

## SMALL BITES

### Seafood and roasts

The brand new Camilla Chinese Cuisine at the Northern East Third Ring Road is a high-end eatery offering Chaozhou cuisine.

The cooking is typically seafood inspired, with light stir-fries, braised meats, such as goose, and all washed down with kung fu tea, deep-brewed infusions that cleanse the palates. The duck is equally good, and there is a mixed platter that includes boned goose, tasty duck heads and duck webs. Another winner is the slow-cooked bitter melon with pork (pictured below), a summer specialty.

There are big private rooms, a marble floor, carpets, and chandeliers on the ceiling and paintings on the wall.

3/F, SOHO Nexus Center, A 19, Northern East Third Ring Road, Chaoyang district, Beijing. 010-5967-0567.

— YE JUN



### Fancy a scorpion?

Variety is the spice of life, but those folks at the Quanjude Qianmen branch are full of surprises. They're serving scorpions with duck breast. The dish is apparently a hot favorite and a signature dish — "whole scorpion with sesame duck squares", which translates to a square of duck meat accompanied by a cracker, topped with a nice, crispy scorpion.

According to the restaurant, scorpions eliminate harmful toxins in the body and dispel heat, especially in summer. And this dish has been a summer favorite for the last 10 years.

Try it, for novelty and for health, along with the other signature dishes that the roast duck icon is known for. Expect to pay about 200 yuan (\$31) per person.

30 Qianmen Dajie, Dongcheng district, Beijing. 010-6511-2418.

— YE JUN

### Jazz and brunch

The cicadas are calling from the old plane tree in the courtyard and competing for attention with the three-man band spinning out all the jazz classics. As you tap your feet along to Dave Brubeck's *Take Five*, the first course arrives — a generous seafood platter that puts you in the Sunday mood.

This is brunch at Yi House Restaurant at the Grace Beijing. For less than 300 yuan (\$47), the Sunday Brunch here is excellent value for money.

Apart from the seafood platter, you can choose any four dishes from the listed appetizers, mains, Asian dishes and desserts. You need to go back for a week of Sundays to try every one, but the starters and desserts have some must-try charmers — including baked escarrot, an organic ham platter, eggs Benedict and a molten chocolate cake. And homemade macaroons.

2 Hao Yuan, 798 Arts Zone, Jiuxianqiao Lu, Beijing. 010-6436-1818.

— PAULINE D. LOH



### Yes ma'am

We first went to Madam Sixty Ate (pictured above) for drinks and were immediately impressed by its quirky, lounge-like vibe. The wine list includes a good selection of reds and whites, such as Paul Jaboulet Aine's Rhone Valley Syrah. And another restaurant that serves Hungarian Tokaji is a winner.

The dining room boasts a sunny terrace overlooking Wanchai. An open kitchen lets us see what the chefs were up to, and though more restrained than the lounge, the decor included plenty of surreal art. We loved the warty menu with its whimsical descriptions and the Alice in Wonderland feeling was further reinforced as every dish offers wine pairings.

Dishes were well balanced in flavors and textures, though use of foam was a tad too enthusiastic.

Shop 8, 1/F The Podium, J Senses, 60 Johnston Road, Wanchai, Hong Kong. 852-2527-2558.

— REBECCA LO