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## *eat*

*Asia and Europe's Best Kept Dining Secrets  
"Fare to Remember"*



*Eat - Asia and Europe's Best Kept Dining Secrets "Fare to Remember"  
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# Fare to Remember

*As the 'Eat' restaurant-review series draws to a close—after three years and 24 cities—Stan Sesser and John Krich give their insights into dining in Asia.*

**IN THIS Q&A** our intrepid gourmets talk about what it's really like being a food reviewer—from weight gain and dining anonymously, to eating tropical cockroaches and yak paws.

**1** *Of all the restaurants you've been to in the Eat series, which one completely blew you away and why?*

**Stan Sesser:** It was my first dinner in Tokyo, three hours after I arrived. I had always been indifferent to Japanese food, wondering how anyone could get excited by a cuisine that used just one basic seasoning, salt (often in the form of soy sauce or miso). But Yoshiko Isshiki, a local who represents Japanese avant-garde artists, promised me something very special at a restaurant called Ichi-i. We walked into one of the most beautiful rooms I had ever laid eyes on—just eight tables and a counter with eight stools, but with floors of rough wood and stone, polished wood tables, and lighting so inventive we could have been on an opera stage. Then came the menu, which began with 15 appetizers. “No problem,” said Ms. Isshiki, “we’ll order them all.” Everything was so beautiful to look at, so delicious, and so inventive. Where outside Tokyo could you find fermented fish intestines served on a dollop of mascarpone cheese, or a single broad bean (albeit a huge one) roasted in its shell?

**John Krich:** Reduce a taste-devoted continent to one mind-blowing moment? How about the nine courses of ultra-fresh fish for under \$15 at Penang’s Terubong Seafood? The 14 global treats set on the bar each night at Osaka’s Washuwashoku Nitta? Penang’s Chue Lang Poh and Hong Kong’s Mum Chau bringing 12-course meals of such distinction out of cramped, illegal kitchens? Or the waiter at Pier in Sydney, asking me to eat my cod filet wrapped in potato slices from the thinner end to the thicker so each morsel could be cooked for the proper number of seconds?

**2** *What was your single most disappointing meal?*

**SS:** I had lots of terrible food doing this series, but matching the reality of the meal against my expectations, nothing came close

to M on the Bund in Shanghai. This fancy Mediterranean-style restaurant with a five-star view is what Conde Nast Traveler magazine called “Shanghai’s top dining experience,” but I’d doubt if it was the top dining experience on its block. The meal began with four different people coming to our table asking us if we wanted drinks. When the food appeared, everything lacked juiciness; even a Moroccan pigeon stew was dried out. After finishing dinner, I came to the conclusion that the hard sell on drinks wasn’t only to make money. The more you drink, the less attention you’ll pay to the food.

**JK:** Great expectations in the gourmet biz often lead to greater disillusion. At one unnamed little hacienda on Macau’s Coloane, described as the finest Portuguese experience in the former colony, it took one hour for a plate of cold sausages with accompanying stale rolls to arrive, and also featured waitresses who looked utterly blank if I dared order a dish as it would be known in Portugal. Most disappointing of all were Red Fort and others of their “haute Indian” ilk in London: beautifully designed, outrageously expensive

and utterly bland.

**3** *What was the strangest experience you had in a restaurant?*

**SS:** Anantashram in Mumbai wins the strangest restaurant award hands-down. It never actually was an ashram, or religious retreat, just a bachelor hotel in its old days. But eating lunch makes you think you’re in a monastery. Each diner gets an individual little marble table and a chair lined up against the wall. You eat in total silence; no one in the restaurant says a word except for giving the order to the waiter. Eccentric, yes. But delicious food, too. As for the strangest dish, that came at Kiu Mei Food Shop in Guangzhou. The menu called them “water beetles,” and my friend insisted they were a great local delicacy. As I was plucking my third beetle—the waiter had given us plastic gloves to perform the task—I suddenly realized they looked like those big tropical cockroaches you see skittering across the floor in downscale restaurants in Bangkok. That’s what they were, my friend readily admitted “water beetles” was a euphemism.



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**JK:** A Sunday lunch in a popular “farmhouse” restaurant outside Chengdu had to be the one that most challenged my cultural and culinary limits: a very large yak paw that looked and tasted like a duffel bag formed of hardened glue, assorted toads and frogs, followed by a finisher of cute, curly pig tails in a sauce the synthetic color of maraschino cherries.

**4** *How many restaurants do you sample before you come up with your final list of eight to 10?*

**SS:** I would always call on locals to recommend good restaurants, so it would often depend on the quality of their choices. My friend Steven Gu in Shanghai is a corporate headhunter by profession, but he must spend two-thirds of his day checking out restaurants, because his selections were impeccable; I could use four out of five. But in Hanoi I relied on a tour guide who had no idea what good food was, and I couldn't find anyone to replace him. In desperation, I started asking everyone in sight for recommendations. One of the best places, so tiny it didn't even have a name, actually came from a cyclo driver who regularly ate lunch there. I had to discard half the restaurants I sampled in Hanoi.

**JK:** The shoeshine man who followed me down a street of restaurants in Chengdu said it all. Finally catching up to me in my third hole-in-a-wall of the evening, he couldn't help asking my translator with exasperation, “Why is this guy eating so many dinners?” As a rule, in cities with higher general quality, the ratio of good to disappointing candidates was naturally higher. Osaka and Sydney probably came away with the best batting average. However, it still seemed remarkable to me on each trip just how many of the highly rated restaurants on everyone's lips and lists turned out to be mediocre. My final list probably amounted to between 25 to 35 restaurants tried for every 10 selected.

**5** *Did the restaurants know you were coming, and did you pay for the meals?*

**SS:** Arriving in anonymity is the only way to do it. Not only do you get to eat what everyone else is eating, but you experience the slip-ups, the rudeness and the eccentricity that makes writing about restaurants so much fun. The Asian Wall Street Journal paid every penny of the meal tabs. You can't accept a free meal and then write about it honestly.

**JK:** Whenever possible, I tried to stick to the rule of anonymous reviewing. Especially since I might only get one crack at a restaurant, I wanted as much as possible to try what an average diner could find on the menu. However, I had to be sensitive to the



fact that pre-arrangement is part of the social ritual in some cultures. In order to meet an owner or chef and get a proper history of a restaurant or understand the full range of its offerings or its guiding philosophy, it was sometimes necessary to identify my affiliation and eat in a private room in China. In general, though, most of the restaurants on my list are ones where I simply elbowed my way into a counter seat.

**6** *How many dishes do you generally order when reviewing?*

**SS:** I couldn't do it with fewer than six dishes, but if I could corral lots of people into joining me, I'd order more, particularly if it's inexpensive food.

**JK:** As many as possible without making myself look ridiculous. I recall sitting before three massive lamb entrees in a Greek home-style restaurant in a Sydney suburb when a knowing middle-aged Aussie woman turned to me and said, “Food critic, I reckon.”

**7** *How did you cope with eating so much for lunch and dinner every day?*

**SS:** I'm a person who loves to eat and hates to nibble; when there's something good on my plate, I want to finish it. So having 10 different dishes for lunch and another 10 for dinner really got to be a burden, even for a food lover like myself.

**JK:** I'd like to claim that I did yoga or 50 daily laps in the pool, but in my case, the gluttony trick is much like learning to ride a bicycle: just never get off. Pepto Bismol did come in handy on certain days of distress, but I'm pleased to report that I never came close to any real dysentery: proof, I believe, of the basic cleanliness of Asian-style cooking with its high heat and rapid serving. Also, when rating my restaurants, I had to give some handicap to my assessments when I reached the third or fourth restaurant of a night. Hunger, as the Chinese say, is indeed the best chef. And no amount of Michelin stars can make up for a backed-up gullet.

**8** *How much weight did you gain?*

**SS:** Not so much as a kilogram. I'm an exercise fanatic, and the more I eat, the further I run. Running can be a real problem in some

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Asian cities, since daredevil drivers make using the streets a potentially fatal endeavor. Worst of all was Taipei, where I had to resort to doing a loop of tiny New Park, which is near the Hilton Hotel, about 50 times each morning. Best was Melbourne, a runner's paradise. You can run on trails along the Yarra River, which goes smack through the center of downtown, for hours and hours.

**JK:** Since I was already doing a lot of excessive eating in Hong Kong before the series even started, I probably only gained around four kilograms slowly over two years—some of this due to the bland pastas I required to recleanse my taste buds once I got back from a trip. But Delhi's butter chicken, Kuala Lumpur's coconut rice, Seoul's marbled beef, Macau's oil-drenched garlic potatoes and Sydney's irresistible wines and breakfast pastries are probably still part of me in portable form.

**9** *What are a few of the telltale signs of a good restaurant, and the instant clues of a restaurant to avoid?*

**SS:** I'm reluctant to admit it, but if I'm checking out Asian restaurants, the first thing on my list is to avoid places where Westerners eat. It isn't that we're a bunch of troglodytes; I know a lot of Westerners who can appreciate a great Asian meal. It's just that when we start filling up a restaurant, that means it stops cooking for locals and starts cooking for us. On the other side of the coin, I'll look for a place that is crowded with locals. This works very well for some cities—it's an impeccable sign in Mumbai, Ho Chi Minh City and Taipei, among others. But in

other cities it doesn't work at all. I'm thinking primarily of Hong Kong and New York, where so many people seem to care about status more than food.

**JK:** For a good restaurant: smell (nothing rancid, no ammonia on the floor); pride (hosts and owners willing to look you in the eye); creativity (at least one attempt on the menu that you've never seen before); freshness (greens that haven't wilted until they hit the pan).

**10** *What are the most positive trends in Asian food culture, and the dangers?*

**SS:** The single most positive trend is that growing affluence—which usually entails more travel and more interaction with different sorts of peoples—leads to a willingness to experiment with other sorts of cuisines. The greatest danger, to my mind, is fusion. A handful of chefs are brilliant enough to know how to combine ingredients from the East and West successfully. But far more often, fusion means nothing more than throwing some lemongrass in the coq au vin and doubling the price.

**JK:** First, the danger—summarized in a single word: shortcuts. The best cooking in Asia is slow and labor-intensive. Nothing can taste the same when it's sped-up with pre-microwaving, pre-sliced vegetables, liquid smoke, food coloring, broth cubes, MSG, spice powders. Yet these harbingers of the convenience-based Western lifestyle are in evidence everywhere from Chengdu to Delhi and Kuala Lumpur. The most positive signs are two-fold. One is the growing health awareness mostly in China but wherever a

middle-class begins to focus on lifestyle over mere surviving. Asia isn't exactly ready to go organic, but watch for many more restaurants in the coming years to pitch the purity of their sources. The other inspiring trend is the loyalty to traditional dishes and their abundant spiciness in such places as Seoul, Chengdu and Delhi—where, thankfully, fusion will never have a chance unless it's fiery.

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*—Doris Beh, Celine Fernandez, Miho Inada, Chui Piling and Lina Yoon contributed to this feature*

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Asia and Europe's Best Kept Dining Secrets

## Fare to Remember: The Restaurants

Our Reviewers Nominate the Best Dining Experiences in Each City

### Bangkok

#### Rut & Lek

You sit on rickety tables on the sidewalk, but this is the ultimate in seafood, sparkling fresh and prepared in both Thai and Chinese styles. Favorite dish: red snapper steamed with Chinese preserved plums. *At the intersection of Yaowarat and Soi Texas. Tel: 66-1-632-2634. Open: daily, 6:30 p.m. to 2:45 a.m. Prices: Three people can stuff themselves for \$25, including beer. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

#### Sonie's

Sonie, the owner/chef, is Japanese, but loves Italian food and loves being inventive, so the menu is as eclectic as a menu can get, unified only by the fact that everything is delicious. Favorite dish: Sonie's sushi pizza. *9/2 Sukhumvit 39, at the Phrom Phong Skytrain stop. Tel: 66-2-260-8386. Open: daily 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. to 10 p.m., except to 11 p.m. Fri. and Sat. Prices: About \$12 a person, more if you order expensive sushi. Visa, MasterCard accepted. —SS*

### Beijing

#### Da Dong Beijing Roast Duck

How many ways are there to duck? There's an infinite number of answers at this scrupulous temple of poultry, where the garnishes are traditional, the meat low-fat, the side-dishes new style. Best dish: Beijing roast duck of course. *Bldg. 3, Tuanjiehu Beikou, Chaoyang District. Tel: 86-10-6582-4003. Open: daily, 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Prices: \$12 per duck, less for side dishes. Accepts major credit cards. —JK*

#### Chama Gudao

A super-smart artists' lair that fronts Beijing's Soho, the Yunnan cuisine here is better than anything you'd find in Yunnan. Best dish: any of the fresh mountain mushrooms, flown-in daily. *3rd floor, Soho New Town Block D, No. 88 Jianguo Lu. Tel: 86-10-8580-4286. Open: daily, 10:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Prices: Nearly \$20 each for rare mushroom dishes, but full dinner for three about \$60. Accepts major credit cards. —JK*

### Bombay

#### Trishna

Admittedly it's touristy, but the seafood here—ranging from grilled white salmon rubbed with Indian spices to squid with chilies and garlic—is a sensation. Favorite dish: king crab stir-fried in butter, garlic and black pepper. *Sai Baba Marg, in the Kala Ghoda section of the Fort district of South Bombay. Tel: 91-22-2261-4991; reservations are a good idea. Open: daily, noon to 3.30 p.m. and 6 p.m. to 12.30 a.m.; dinner hours from 7 p.m. Sundays. Prices: \$10 to \$15 a person. Major credit cards accepted. —SS*

#### Swati Snacks

Bombay's answer to tapas are little "snacks," and no one does them better than Swati, presenting the opportunity to eat Indian dishes you've never seen before. Favorite dish: *thali pith*, a multigrain pancake stuffed with chickpea curry. *248 Karal Estate Rd. in the Tardeo district of South Bombay, across from Bhatia Hospital. Tel: 91-22-2492-0994. Open: daily, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Prices: Most snacks are \$1 or less. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

### Chengdu

#### Xiang Chuzi

A homey, heat-searing place to start sampling real Sichuanese cuisine. Best dish: *tian shao bai*, pork belly baked in sweet sesame rice. *Heng Xiao Nan Jie, No. 2, Bldg. 2. Tel: 86-28-8615-4825. Open: daily, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. Prices: \$2 to \$5 per dish. Chinese credit cards only. —JK*

#### Zhu Hai Tesi

For something unusual, why not this hole-in-the-wall that serves with pride every possible part of the bamboo? Best dish: bamboo flowers with three peppers. *Zhu Hai Tesi, Zhong Nan Sheng Long Jie, No. 11. Tel: 86-28-8524-0399. Open: daily, 11 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Prices: \$8 per person for large meal. Chinese credit cards only. —JK*

### Delhi

#### Made in India

A trendy hotel reinterpretation of region-

al breads, kebabs and casseroles, without compromising flavors. Best dish: semolina pancakes with carrot halwah dessert. *Radisson MBD Hotel Noida, L-2, Sector 18, Noida, New Delhi. Tel: 91-120-251-5333. Open: daily, 12:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., 7:00 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. Prices: \$21 per person for degustation, \$14 for buffets. Accepts credit cards. —JK*

#### Punjabi by Nature

A North Indian restaurant with very American marketing: bright and cheery setting, huge portions of classic kebabs. Best dish: *raan-e-punjab* leg of lamb. *11 Basant Lok Community Centre, Priya Cinema Complex, Vasant Vihar, New Delhi. Tel: 91-11-51516668-9. Open: daily, 12:30 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., 7:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. Prices: \$14 per person. Accepts credit cards. —JK*

### Guangzhou

#### Xiong Ji

Bounteous, cheap, authentic, with Cantonese seafood as good as it gets. Favorite dish: stir-fried eel with garlic in black bean sauce. *Xin Qiao Zhi Jie Alley between Xi Hua Road and Dong Feng Xi Road (no street number). Tel: 86-20-8890-1680. Open: daily, 11 a.m. to 12:30 a.m. Prices: about \$10 a person. No foreign credit cards accepted. —SS*

#### Sha He Feng Cun

Noodles and more noodles, in every shape, size and topping imaginable, elevating this lowly staple of Cantonese cooking to a high art. Favorite dish: five-colored noodle platter. *Kang Wang Zhong Road (no street number) between Chang Shou Road and Long Jin Road. Tel: 86-20-8139-4781. Open: daily, 6:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. Prices: \$1 or \$2 a dish. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

### Hanoi

#### Huong Bien Quan

An old French colonial house, where diners sit at giant tables heaped high with incredible seafood. Favorite dish: barbecued sea crab. *30 Tong Duy Tan St. at the edge of the Old Quarter, at the foot of Dienbienphu Street. Tel: 844-828-6311. Open: daily, 10 a.m.*

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to 9 p.m. Prices: A sea crab is about \$8; a live, whole one-kilogram fish \$19.50. No credit cards accepted. —SS

### Quay Thuc Pham Cong Nghe

You sit on knee-high stools and eat the best sidewalk food in Hanoi, *banh cuon*, which are steamed rice rolls stuffed with miraculously good fillings. Favorite dish: egg *banh cuon*. 71 Hang Bo St. in the Old Quarter. No phone. Open: daily from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. Prices: You'll stuff yourself for a dollar or so. No credit cards accepted. —SS

### Ho Chi Minh City

#### Luong Son

A big, barn-like room with a 20-page menu that takes you through the great dishes of southern Vietnamese cuisine. Favorite dish: *bo tung xeo* (grilled sliced beef). 31 Ly Tu Trong, Q.1. Tel: 84-8-825-1330. Open: 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Prices: Most dishes \$1.50 to \$3. No credit cards accepted. —SS

#### Ban Xeo

An outdoor restaurant so crowded at peak hours that a stool is a precious commodity, featuring Saigon's great delicacy, *ban xeo*, a rice-flour crepe stuffed with shrimp, pork and bean sprouts. Favorite dish: *ban xeo*, of course. 46A Dinh Cong Trang, Q.1 (in the alley, look for the Ban Xeo sign on your left, not the one on the right, which is from an imitator). Tel: 84-8-824-1110. Open: daily, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. Prices: A big, filling *ban xeo* is \$1, but good luck trying to confine yourself to only one. No credit cards accepted. —SS

### Hong Kong

#### Yuet Wah Wui Crab

This small restaurant in a row of crab-steamer may be stuck in urban density, not some seaside promenade, but it's still the champ for Hong Kong seafood specialties served without fuss or outrageous prices. Best dish: dry chili crabs. 409-419 Lockhart Road, Causeway Bay/Wanchai. Tel: 852-2573-2927. Open: daily, 6 p.m. to 4 a.m. Prices: a single crab is about \$20 (varies seasonally). Major credit cards accepted. —JK

#### Yung Kee

No, this isn't the tourist factory on Hong Kong Island famed for goose but a local favorite in a Kowloon red-light district, where every taste is intense and unapologetic. Best dish: crispy pork. 118-120 Fuk Wah Street, Sham Shui Po. Tel: 852-2387-1051. Open: daily, 5:30 p.m. to 2 a.m. Prices: around \$6 per dish. No credit cards. —JK



### Kuala Lumpur

#### Greenview

A perennial South Seas Chinese favorite for New Year's noodles and every style of crab and steamed fish imaginable. Best dish: *belachan* tiger shrimps on noodles. No. 6 and 8, Jalan 19/3, (near Rothman's Roundabout). *Petaling Jaya*. Tel: 60-3-7958-1076. Open: daily, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Prices: average crab dinner, \$15 per person. Accepts major credit cards. —JK

#### Songkhla Hawker

If you can stand the dirty surroundings, this street stall has an amazing array of unusual stews and desserts from the northern state of Kelantan. Best dish: *nasi kerabu* "blue rice." On *Jalan Sultan Sulaiman*, in front of the main post office, *Chow Kit*. No telephone. Open: daily, 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. Prices: less than 50 cents per dessert. No credit cards accepted. —JK

### London

#### Rasa Samudra

This eccentric pink house with branches

throughout the city serves real Kerala cooking, subtly using coconut. Best dish: *kappayum meenum*, hunks of kingfish with tapioca, turmeric, ginger and morels. 5 *Charlotte St.*, *Fitzrovia*, W1. Tel: 020-7637-0222. Open: Monday to Saturday, noon to 3 p.m.; daily, 6 p.m. to 10:45 p.m. Prices: \$35 for a set, three-course menu. Major credit cards accepted. —JK

#### New Tayyab

London abounds in Pakistani grills where grilled lamb, *naan* and eggplant rule but this one is hard to beat. Best dish: fiery lamb chops. 83 *Fieldgate St.*, *Whitechapel*, E1. Tel: 020-7247-9543. Open: daily, 12:00 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. (closed during Ramadan). Prices: \$15 for a major stuffing. Major credit cards accepted. —JK

### Macau

#### Si Fu Zai

Macau is now a thoroughly Chinese city, which means most people eat in places like this—and one taste tells you why. Best dish: the real sweet-sour pork or shredded chicken with jellyfish. *Shop C, Block 3, Ground Floor*,

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*Hoi Pan Garden, North East Ave., Hac Sa Van (Areia Preta). Tel: 853-454-735. Open: daily, 6:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. Prices: \$4 average dish. No credit cards accepted. —JK*

### **O Manuel**

Similar to a lot of those humble Portuguese eateries that remain, owner Manuel's personal touch makes the difference in the grade of *bacalhau* (dried cod fish) and more. Best dish: grilled *bacalhau*. *Rua Fernao Mendes Pinto, No. 90, Taipa Village. Tel: 853-827-571. Open: daily, 12:00 p.m. to 3:30 p.m., 6:00 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. (closed Tuesday). Prices: \$10 to \$12 a dish. Accepts major credit cards. —JK*

### **Manila**

#### **Laing, ATBP.**

Better than all the big-time grills, this tiny cafeteria serves up with love a small selection of spicy specialties from Bicol region. Best dish: jackfruit with sardines and chili. *33 P. Tuazon Street (opposite LVN Studios), Cubao, Quezon City. Tel: 632-415-1054. Open: 8 a.m. to 9 p.m., closed Sundays. Prices: All dishes under \$1. No credit cards accepted. —JK*

### **Sushi Tsumura**

Yes, a lot of Japan's tuna comes from the Philippines and this long-time haunt of Japanese businessmen is hard-to-beat, no matter which country it's in. Best dish: lapu-lapu sashimi. *Third floor, 828 Arnaiz Ave., Makati. Tel: 632-812-1393. Open: 5:30 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. Monday to Friday; also open 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. for lunch, weekends. Prices: Average \$30 per person. Major credit cards accepted. —JK*

### **Melbourne**

#### **Mo Mo**

A very successful attempt to modernize Middle Eastern food with fresh ingredients and a lighter cooking style, without robbing it of its essential flavors. Favorite dish: pigeon *pastila*. *115 Collins St. (entrance around the corner in George Parade). Tel: 61-3-9650-0660. Open: Monday through Friday, noon to 3 p.m., Monday through Saturday, 6 p.m. to 10:30 p.m. Prices: Starters \$14 to \$21; main courses \$25 to \$29. Major credit cards accepted. —SS*

### **Cicciolina**

An example of what Melbourne's talented chefs do to European cooking, in this case making Italian food sparkle through innovation and great ingredients. Favorite dish: lamb brains wrapped as a sausage using prosciutto as the casing. *130 Acland St., St. Kilda. Tel: 61-3-9525-3333. Open: Monday*

*to Saturday noon to 11 p.m., Sunday noon to 10 p.m. Prices: Starters and pastas \$9 to \$15; main courses \$20 to \$24. Major credit cards accepted. —SS*

### **New York**

#### **Ping**

Dim sum for lunch and Cantonese seafood for dinner that matches anything in Hong Kong. Favorite dish: steamed lobster with garlic on a bed of *yi-fu* noodles. *22 Mott St., between Bayard and Pell Streets. Tel: 1-212-602-9988. Open: daily, 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. Prices: About \$15 a person for dim sum and \$30 to 40 a person for a seafood dinner. Visa and MasterCard accepted. —SS*

### **Sripraphai**

Quite simply, the only first-rate Thai food I've eaten outside of Thailand. Favorite dish: jungle curry (shrimps, bamboo shoots, tiny eggplants and red chilies). *64-19 39th Ave., between 64th and 65th Streets, Woodside, Queens. Tel: 1-718-899-9599. Open: 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. (closed Wednesdays). Prices: Cheap, most dishes \$6 to \$8. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

### **Osaka**

#### **Kahala**

A one-man culinary show at a single dark counter where every course, and even the plates themselves, are hand-created works of art. Best dish: grilled beef with fresh wasabi. *Kishimoto Bldg., 2F, 1-9-2 Sonezaki-Shinchi, Kita-ku. Tel: 81-6-6345-6778. Open: 5 p.m. to*

*10 p.m. (last order), closed Sundays/holidays. Price: \$250 per person, plus beverages. Accepts credit cards. —JK*

### **Washuwashoku Nitta**

A homey bar laden each night with pottery bowls heaped with the owner/chefs' fresh Japanese-Italo-Asian whimsy. Best dish: Japanese oyster gratin (seasonal). *Iwata Kaikan, 2F, 16-19 Doyama-cho, Kita-ku. Tel: 81-6-6312-0341. Open: 6 p.m. to 11 p.m., closed Saturdays/Sundays. Price: \$40 per person. Accepts credit cards. —JK*

### **Penang**

#### **Mama's**

The premier and least pretentious purveyor of true Penang-style Nonya food, which means Malay-Chinese with a heavy dash of Thai. Best dish: *kerabu bok nee*, cloud ear/chicken lime salad. *31D Abu Siti Lane, George Town. Tel: 604-229-1318. Open: daily except Monday, 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., 6:30 to 9:30 p.m. Prices: \$4 a dish. Major credit cards accepted. —JK*

### **Terubong Seafood**

This unadorned storefront in an obscure and unappealing suburb is worth the trip for everything hauled out of Penang Island's seas, cooked to perfection before your eyes. Best dish: sting ray grilled in banana leaf with lemongrass sauce. *1238 T Taman Indah, Paya Terubong. Tel: 604-866-0903. Open: daily, 5:00 p.m. to 11:00 p.m. (closed every other Wednesday). Prices: \$10 a person for a fish feast. No credit cards accepted. —JK*



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### Phuket

#### Laem Sai Seafood

A rickety wooden pier with tables and a ramshackle kitchen is all it takes to produce magnificent seafood, plucked fresh from the ocean. Favorite dish: whole crab in curry sauce. *On Lam Sai Beach, 48/7 Moo 6, Tambon Thep Krasatri (call for directions). Tel: 076-210788. Open: daily, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Price: Five of us stuffed ourselves with the most expensive seafood for \$45. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

#### Krua N.C.

Great southern Thai food—a very distinctive cuisine that you'll almost never see in Bangkok—is a rarity, but here it is in all its fiery glory, laid out on tables so you can compose a lunch without knowing a word of Thai. Favorite dish: chicken mussaman curry. *183/6 Phang-Na Rd., Phuket Town. Tel: 076-224668. Open: daily, 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Price: Five of us spent \$16, including lots of fresh fruit juice. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

### Seoul

#### Byeokje Galbi

A chain that has but one gimmick: the most melt-in-your-mouth, specially-farmed beef in Asia, grilled at the table. Best dish: beef ribs. *205-8 Songpa-gu, Bangi-dong (near Bangi subway stop). Tel: 82-2-415-5522. Open: daily, 11:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. Prices: Starting at about \$28 per person. Major credit cards. —JK*

#### Doorei

Set in an old house down a back-alley of traditional Insadong, this is the perfect venue for elegant set dinners that show the real range of Korean cuisine. Best dish: raw squid with chicory leaves (menu changes daily). *8-7 Insadong, Jongno-gu. Tel: 82-2-732-2919. Open: daily, noon to 3 p.m.; 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Prices: sets from \$30 at lunch, dinners from \$70 to \$120 a person (also weekend specials). Major credit cards accepted. —JK*

### Shanghai

#### Xin Jishi

An uncharacteristically stylish place for classic Shanghainese food, updated to eliminate a few gallons of grease. Favorite dish: red-cooked pork belly. *169 Long Tai Cang Rd. Tel: 86-21-3307-0761; reservations essential. Open: 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Prices: moderate, two people can eat well for \$35 in total. Major credit cards accepted. —SS*

#### Xiao Yang Shengjian

A bib would be the most appropriate article of clothing to wear to this hole-in-

the-wall restaurant for the world's greatest dumplings, a relative of pot stickers called *sheng jian bao*, so juicy they'll squirt out over the table if you don't eat them properly. Favorite dish: *sheng jian bao*. *54 Wujiang Rd. No telephone. Open: daily from 6:30 a.m. to 11 p.m. Prices: A plate of dumplings will set you back about 75 cents. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

### Singapore

#### Wee Nam Kee Hainanese Chicken Rice and Restaurant

Hainanese chicken rice is ubiquitous at food courts in Asia, but this open-front restaurant elevates it to such an art it's like you never tasted this dish before. Favorite dish: chicken rice. *275 Thomson Rd. No.01-09 (near the Novena MRT stop). Tel: 65-6255-6396. Open: daily, 10 a.m. to 2 a.m. Prices: Very cheap, nothing more than a couple of dollars. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

#### House of Peranakan Cuisine

This is Singapore's unique cuisine, an amalgam of Chinese and Malay, served in pleasant surroundings overlooking the ocean. Favorite dish: fish-head curry. *1020 East Coast Parkway. Tel: 65-6242-0810. Open: daily, 11 a.m. to 3 p.m., 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. Prices: cheap; lots of dishes \$5 to \$10; fish-head curry \$15. Accepts Visa, MasterCard, American Express. —SS*

### Sydney

#### Sean's Panaroma

Nightly Franco-Aussie blackboard specials that knock the socks off most anything in the haute cuisine world. Best dish: pheasant or borlotti beans (seasonal), chocolate/rosemary nougat (always available). *270 Campbell Parade, Bondi Beach. Tel: 61-2-9365-4924. Open: Wednesday to Saturday, 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday; noon to 3 p.m. Prices: \$55 per person for three courses. Accepts Visa and MasterCard. —JK*

#### Pier

A pristine, almost too-silent covered pier that sticks into the water and serves so many types of native fish so perfectly, you'll think you've turned into a shark (or a mermaid). Best dish: Balmain "bugs," crayfish with fennel (occasional). *594 New South Head Rd., Rose Bay. Tel: 61-2-9327-4187. Open: daily, midday to 3 p.m., 6 p.m. to 10 p.m., or until last diner leaves; open until 9 p.m. on Sundays. Prices: \$55 for three courses. Major credit cards accepted. —JK*

### Taipei

#### Han

Snake Alley may be tourist-central, but Han is where the Taiwanese go for impeccable seafood, in a setting so informal you get your own drink by walking to the refrigerator. Favorite dish: Taiwanese oyster omelet. *No. 74 Huaxi Night Market, or 28 Huaxi Street (five minutes walk from the Longshan Temple MRT stop). Tel: 8862-2308-8046. Open: daily, noon to 1 a.m. Prices: Four people ordering lots of food will spend about \$50. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

#### Dalian

Here's a rarity: the unique cuisine of Dalian, a city just across the water from North Korea, incorporating lots of dumplings and sour vegetables. Favorite dish: Dalian-style *mu shu* pork sandwiched in a layered flatbread. *175-1, Sec. 2, Fushing South Rd., Sec. 2 (next to Technology Building MRT stop). Tel: 8862-2325-4877. Open: daily, 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. to 9 p.m. Prices: Four people ordering lots of food will spend about \$50. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

### Tokyo

#### Ichi-i

This place is a textbook example of what makes food in Japan so good, a succession of simple yet wildly inventive dishes served in a magnificent setting. Favorite dish: *uni* (sea urchin roe) encased in gelatin served on a bed of tofu skin. *7-18-6 Roppongi, Minato-ku (call for directions). Tel: 81-3-3423-8260. Open: daily, 6 p.m. to midnight. Prices: dishes from \$5 to \$27. We stuffed ourselves for \$62 a head, including sake and beer. Major credit cards accepted. —SS*

#### Daiwa Sushi

The freshest, the best sushi imaginable, served at a decrepit lunch counter after you stand in line for an hour, even in the morning. Favorite dish: no choice; they give you a variety of whatever is fresh that day. *Chuo Shijo Building, No. 6, 5-2-1 Tsukiji (exit A-1 from Tsukijishijo subway station). Tel: 81-3-3547-6807. Open: daily, 5.30 a.m. to 1.30 p.m. Prices: \$29 for a set meal. No credit cards accepted. —SS*

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