

Extract from:

## Concrete Forest

As evening set in, I stepped onto the road and flagged down a taxi. Traffic roared past, engines labouring against the city's steep terrain. Grappling with camera pack and tripod, I climbed in, flashing the slip of paper with Maggie's note towards the driver, who squinted at it in the dim light. Giving me a nod of acknowledgment, he gunned the engine, spinning into a U-turn, heading for Chi Chi Huo Guo Cheng – literally, Food Food Hot Pot Restaurant.

After a roller-coaster ride of hills and snarling traffic, we pulled up to an enormous neon sign. Its mass of pulsing red light was set with gold characters that flashed above the restaurant entrance casting a hot glow over the scene. Seduced by the neon, I leapt from the taxi and ran up a pedestrian walkway overlooking the restaurant. Below me were flurries of activity with a full house of customers inside, and more diners outside at small tables lining the footpath. Snapping camera atop tripod, I whipped off a few time exposures of the scene: diners noshing, blurred swirls of waiting staff rushing around them. Fortuitously, two customers vacated one of the outdoor tables, so I swung back down and pounced on it – the perfect spot for this hyperactive city's most famed food.

My seat faced the restaurant, its neon sign throwing a lurid blush across my table, a buzz of activity beyond. Just metres behind me, on a four-lane highway, traffic barrelled past and hordes of pedestrians trudged along the footpath. Waiters dashed back and forth, ferrying plates of food to diners sitting around boiling cauldrons recessed into the centre of each table. These were the Sichuan hot pots, their churning steaming broth jiggling with a liberal garnish of bobbing red chillies, releasing rich heady aromas into the night air.

Around the hot pots, plates were piled with mounds of food: slivers of pork and beef; bloody fillets of fresh eel; tangles of long-stemmed mushrooms; layered slices of lotus root; slabs of pearly cabbage; and piles of snapping fresh spring onion. Diners hungrily pinched up morsels of the edible array with chopsticks, dunked them into the soupy brew and fished them out after a suitable scalding. Dunking again, the food was swished through a small bowl filled with a wicked sesame sauce before a final frenzied devouring between gulps of tea, slugs of Sichuan Premium Beer and loud blasts of conversation.

Packed with customers, the restaurant was a panorama of frantic activity, a noisy, messy mass of gourmandising enthusiasm. Diners out on a Sunday-night fling tore into the food, revelling around hot pot tables that were either crowded with piles of food, or groaning with empty plates, beer bottles, tea pots and numerous condiments; the remains of an Oriental bacchanal. And rubbish, tossed with abandon by customers, was strewn across the floor. It all served to further fuel my anticipation of the meal to come.

A waiter came over to give the porta-gas bottle beside my table a shake, made an it's-got-enough look, and took my order for an immoderate feast of meats and vegetables. One of the dishes I ordered was being created about two metres away. A teenage boy with porcelain white skin and bloodied hands was plunging an arm into a tub of squirming eels that resembled a potted Medusa-head. Plucking the eels out one by one, he drove their tiny heads into a raised nail on a wooden plank, bodies writhing in a final spasm before a flashing knife separated flesh from bone. I literally oversaw the death of my dinner, and truly understood the trepidation of killing an animal for personal consumption. As Anthony Bourdain discusses in his book *A Cook's Tour*, it is the precursor to any meal of animal flesh, though in our supermarket-sanitised world, we never witness the act. Here, I was sitting directly in front of a mini abattoir.

I whipped a few pieces of eel into the hot pot, letting them simmer briefly among the chilli-laden brew. Pecking at the meat with my chopsticks, trying to avoid steam burns, I lifted out a few slivers, bypassing the sesame sauce initially, to savour the hot pot flavours direct. All too soon, a rush of spicy heat burst across my mouth like an electrical charge and my lips, likewise, began humming with a high-wattage zing of culinary voltage. I was reeling from an incredible hit of Sichuan pepper, which the boiling brew obviously contained in spades; and the other flavours, especially the chilli, only served to amplify its intensity. Now I knew why Maggie was grinning; she did have a sense of humour after all.

I flicked some mushrooms into the broth, in between gulps of Sichuan Premium. It was a vain attempt to quell the fire-breathing effects of my meal. Noting the beetroot-flushed face of his only Western customer, the manager came over to my table and gestured towards the sesame-sauce bowl, indicating it would cool the effects of the hot pot. I took his advice, pinching a cooked fillet of eel in my chopsticks and swishing it through the thick brown sauce. My mouth now all but numb, I couldn't gauge the sauce's cooling effects, but it certainly added a further spectrum of intensely nutty flavours to the gamey eel flesh, its taste shining through despite the plethora of spices. The heat continued to build until I felt like an epicurean blowtorch, but I carried on regardless, attempting to ease the flames with long draughts of beer.