

DESTINATION
HONG KONG

Secret diners' business

Leanne Tolra joins a growing crowd of foodies at the city's 'secret' speakeasy restaurants.

Mrs Feng is a formidable host, a dedicated vegetarian and one of Hong Kong's growing band of illegal restaurant owners. "You see my son," she demands as soon as we are seated. "He is 11 years old, he is strong and he's never eaten meat. He eats only my cooking."

I'm thinking he's a little on the pudgy side, actually, and can see my companions are in agreement. But we are so intrigued by the venue, the woman herself, the elaborate-looking plates of food arriving at our table (and the thrill of being let in on a "secret") that none of us spares him more than a polite glance before his mother answers the phone and he makes his escape.

The phone rings incessantly – and Feng flicks furiously through her booking diary each time. For a speakeasy kitchen, as Hong Kong's hidden dining venues are known, it seems pretty high profile.

"I am very popular, so I am scared they will try to close me down," she says.

Veggie Palace has been in this location, on the second storey of a commercial building just outside Kowloon's central business district, for almost 12 months. It is Feng's second restaurant. Her first, Veggie Culture, is in Causeway Bay and has been operating in a residential building for almost six years. She began cooking for her husband's art students. As her reputation as a vegetarian cook grew, students began to make bookings and a restaurant business blossomed. Feng says the previous owners of her second restaurant "lost millions" but she's tantalisingly reluctant to say how.

Rents have been driven so high in this city of almost 7 million people that restaurant owners have gone up and underground at the same time. This avoids exorbitant ground-floor rental prices and the prohibitive cost of a restaurant licence.

The trend began nine years ago and some locals say it increased during the SARS scare in April 2003. People were afraid to eat in public restaurants and preferred the idea of small, private ones.



"In Hong Kong, to have a restaurant licence, one-third of the floor area must be allocated to the kitchen," Feng says. This makes it difficult to generate enough income to make ends meet.

So the speakeasy kitchens operate under "club" licences, with less rigid rules. They must comply with fire and hygiene regulations, guest numbers are limited and guests are required to be club members.

There are dozens of them in the city and hotel concierges are the best source of local knowledge. Some hotels offer guided tours or will happily direct tourists to these not-so-secret locations. Our guide is the Langham Hotel's Winny Mui, a savvy young woman with a sense

of fun and a built-in radar. She takes us to three speakeasy kitchens in a single afternoon. Each could belong in a different city.

Mui negotiates taxi fares and makes many phone calls as we near each venue, delaying arrival times as we linger and negotiating menus for us.

Our second stop is Le Marron, a French restaurant in Causeway Bay. We wander along laneways, past street vendors and take a clunking, claustrophobic ride up several storeys in a residential lift. Our guide presses a doorbell and we are transported to provincial France. Lace curtains divide dining compartments. Faux antique chairs and tables, gilded wallpaper, elegant artwork and muted lighting set the scene.

Le Marron is owned by a partnership that includes an artist who lived in France for 20 years and an interior designer. Its manager, Toh Yeung, says patrons make bookings a week ahead and know to ring the doorbell when they arrive.

We drink French wine with dishes such as marinated foie gras, scampi sashimi glazed with white truffle oil and rare herb-crusted tuna. For dessert we are served a 20-year-old liqueur to accompany a souffle laced with Grand Marnier.

One more taxi ride through the city to central Hong Kong and we arrive at Club Qing. Ornate, solid timber doors with heavy latches open to reveal one of the city's more famous speakeasy kitchens. Club Qing is decorated in the style of

Members only ... (from far left) Club Qing; Le Marron; dishes from Le Marron.



the Qing dynasty (1644-1911 AD), featuring dark timber antiques and Chinese artefacts.

Owner Any Lam was running an IT business when the SARS crisis hit. His passion for Cantonese food, love of antiques and interest in tea set him on a new career path. Lam says about half his customers are local, the other half are international visitors. "We have had some publicity in the media and on internet blogs," he says.

Lam changes his menu every three months. Most dishes arrive with an accompanying beverage, either a delicately brewed tea or an infusion of fruits and herbs. There's a strong Cantonese bent with an international twist: a single prawn is topped with Italian pesto and served on a banana leaf with slivers of lemongrass. It arrives with a lemongrass-and-lemon-leaf tea, and the unorthodox combination works.

This is clearly our guide's favourite venue. She cleverly saved herself for these dishes and is delighted with the ricepaper-wrapped banana served in a katafi pastry "bird's nest", flavoured with rose tea. "Eat first, then drink," says Lam, as he serves us a ginger infusion blended with soda water.

Mui says tourists love the thrill of the secret and the exclusiveness of the speakeasy restaurants but she believes the food has to speak for itself. She says each of the three restaurants

we visited has a cult-like following and international guests return frequently.

Other speakeasy kitchens of note in Hong Kong include Xi Yan, a four-year-old venue in a commercial building in Wanchai, which serves contemporary Chinese food; Yellow Door Kitchen, which claims to be Hong Kong's first private kitchen; and Da Ping Huo. Both Yellow Door and Da Ping Huo serve Sichuan cuisine.

Interestingly, a number of these venues have their own websites, which invite tourists, encourage bookings and display menus and location maps. Sort of spoils the secret.

Leanne Tolra travelled courtesy of the Langham Hotel, Hong Kong.

Qantas and Cathay Pacific fly non-stop to Hong Kong from \$971 and \$1035 respectively. Virgin Atlantic flies non-stop from Sydney from \$1046 while Melbourne passengers pay the same fare and fly to Sydney with Virgin Blue. Or you can fly China Southern Airlines for \$935 non-stop to Guangzhou, where you change aircraft. (All fares are low-season return from Melbourne and Sydney and do not include tax.)

For information on some of the better-known speakeasy restaurants, see www.marron.com.hk, www.clubqing.com and www.yellowdoorkitchen.com.hk.