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# Secret tastes of hidden HK



## THE CURIOUS COOK

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**O**UTSIDE the office block in which we sit is a busy Hong Kong street, yet it feels as if I am in provincial France. Faded oil paintings allude to a shabby gentility that only money can buy, and a table set with ornate silverware holds the promise of culinary delights to come.

It is surreal and about to become even more so.

We raise glasses of bordeaux as our host looks around the room. "Did you know we're dining in what used to be a company director's office?" he asks.

Welcome to Hong Kong and the underground world of private dining. Members' dining rooms, speakeasies, private kitchens: they mean the same when it comes to illicit dining, Hong Kong style.

Speakeasies operate under a club licence rather than a restaurant licence, to avoid certain legal requirements. Legislation that states a restaurant kitchen must occupy more than one-third of the available floor space makes it almost impossible for some to turn over enough tables to make a living.

A club licence is a neat, albeit devious, way around this problem, although the threat of official inspection keeps owners on their toes. In a bid to elude authorities and save on rent, private kitchens are located in apartment buildings, office blocks or nondescript residential areas. This adds a certain



## A PLAIN DOOR OPENS TO REVEAL A SLICE OF FRANCE WITH ANTIQUES AND LACE

thrill to a night out but can make the restaurants challenging to find.

Getting to Le Marron (12/F, Ying Kong Mansion, 2-6 Yee Wo St, Causeway Bay) involves buzzing my way into an office block, a ride in a rattling elevator and a ring on an ancient doorbell. When a plain door opens to reveal a little slice of France, complete with antiques and fine lace curtains, I can't help but feel like Alice in Wonderland. The gilded photo frames on top of an ornate *armoire* create the impression I am a guest in a private home.

Conventional French restaurants in Hong Kong are formal and often expensive, so the reasonably priced Le Marron fills a gap in the market. With tempting dishes such as French mussels in white wine sauce, confit de canard and grand marnier souffle, this place frequently books out well in advance.

However, speakeasies can feature any cuisine. Not surprisingly, Cantonese is the most popular, and Club Qing, located in the hip area on Hong Kong Island known as Lan Kwai Fong, is an outstanding example.

The SARS crisis made for tough economic times but what caused the demise of owner and chef Andy Lam's IT business was also his salvation. Lam loved food so, in 2003, he opened Club Qing to serve traditional Cantonese cuisine in a relaxed setting.

Decorated in the ornate style of the Qing dynasty, this private kitchen is cosy rather than ostentatious, and instantly welcoming. News of its opening spread quickly and Club Qing was soon inundated. Those planning to dine here would be wise to book early.

Lam believes a good dining experience revolves around decoration, tea and food. The beauty lies in its execution. As we enjoy rose-flavoured bird's nest rolls, steamed with the delicate dried buds used to make tea, Lam hands us each a shot glass. "Summer ginger drink," he explains. "Drink after the roll."

The flavour is an exquisite blend of sweet and savoury that perfectly complements the food.

Our next drink is equally memorable and provided by Club Qing's in-house tea master. She does not make the Iron Kwan-Yin Oolong tea in a pot; rather, we are served individually, with each cup specially brewed. As is often the case with private kitchens, the dining experience has a distinctly personal touch.

Club Qing's set menu changes with the seasons, except for dessert, which is different every day.

■ [www.marron.com.hk](http://www.marron.com.hk)  
 ■ [www.clubqing.com](http://www.clubqing.com)