an education

JANICE KIRKWOOD discovers the fascinating flavours of China on a culinary tour with Fuchsia Dunlop.

I caught the Chinese food bug in Australia. In Melbourne's Hutong Dumpling Bar, Dainty Sichuan and Shandong Mama, I discovered flavours I'd never experienced before, and realised there was so much more to Chinese food than chicken and corn soup and beef hor fun. I developed a particular liking for the spice of Sichuan cuisine and soon, those trips across the Tasman weren't enough. I began looking for recipe books so that I could make Sichuan food at home and the name Fuchsia Dunlop kept popping up.

Dunlop is a UK-born food writer, restaurant consultant and chef. Her own obsession with China began while she was working in sub-editing at the BBC – she started taking evening classes in Mandarin, then won a scholarship to study in Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan province, for a year. Since then, she's become an authority on the food of China and has published a number of books, including *Shark's Fin & Sichuan Pepper* – a memoir of her time spent in China – and three excellent cookbooks, which helped me to begin to recreate the magical flavours I was hooked on. When I learnt that Dunlop leads regular gastronomic tours to China with WildChina, I knew I had to go. What better person to help further my education?

Together with my partner Rory, I signed up to join Fuchsia and nine new friends to travel from Beijing to Xi'an, Chengdu, Hangzhou and Shanghai. We were told that we would sample more than 300 dishes over 12 days and despite my excitement, I must admit to some pre-tour nerves. Firstly, I had never been on an organised tour before and wasn't sure what it would be like travelling with strangers.

And secondly, I wasn't sure how on earth I was going to eat that much.

Our first meal in Beijing together sets the tone for the rest of the visit, as we are ushered into a private room with a large round table and a lazy Susan. The main restaurant looks fun, but for 11 of us to be able to hear Dunlop describe the dishes' origins, ingredients and cooking methods, we need to be segregated from other diners. And so the dining room becomes our classroom.

A similar pattern unfolds for subsequent banquets. Dunlop orders an array of hot and cold appetisers and mains; we average 20 dishes a meal. In each place, she takes into account local ingredients, textures and cooking styles when placing our order, and endeavours to ensure we will not have the same dish twice.

We spend the next three days in Beijing sampling the food from Shandong province, including the famous Peking duck and what we in the West call Mongolian hotpot, but is locally known as scalded mutton hotpot. We attend our first market, with Dunlop escorting us around the stalls and explaining what different vegetables are. Most stallholders are taken aback when she speaks to them in fluent Mandarin – and none more so than the one she scolds for being rude after she overhears him talking about the size of our Western bottoms.

In Beijing I notice that there has been no rice at our banquets – Dunlop explains that as we are in wheat country, our carbs will come in the form of noodles and steamed mantou breads. The northern provinces of China typically eat more wheat-based foods, while southerners eat more rice.

At each meal, we encounter new ingredients. The range of Chinese greens far surpasses the bok choy and choi sum we know back home. We sample amaranth, perilla leaf, Sichuan pepper sprouts, chrysanthemum greens and fiddlehead ferns. Dragon whiskers sound exotic, but turn out to be pumpkin shoots. Lettuce stem has a crunch and freshness I come to love. A dish of the brilliantly named stir-fried monkey head mushrooms has us asking to see one – it's impressively large, white and shaggy. I am also surprised to see raw potato appearing in a salad, grated with coriander.

Other dishes also surprise. Camel's foot with chilli and long leeks is actually very tasty, though a bit chewy. I have decided I have to at least try everything that is put in front of me, though I almost come unstuck when faced with a plate of silk worms. But after a deep breath it's down the hatch they go, a bite through the crisp exterior revealing a soft, creamy filling.

Pressed and jellied meats are common starters throughout the tour and we see them in a variety of forms, from pressed

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Fresh bamboo sandwich with chicken and chicken bone marrow, Dragon Well Manor
Opposite: Fuchsia Dunlop talks with a chef in Chengdu

Buildings on the waterfront in Shanghai
OPPOSITE, LEFT TO RIGHT
ROW 1 egg pancakes with chrysanthemum leaves; pork meatballs; noodles in sesame broth; pak choi hearts; pork-filled buns
ROW 2 beef & radish in spicy sauce; beef & spring onions; pig's skin jelly; noodle soup with white pepper & pork balls; sweet potato noodles with pig intestines
ROW 3 claypot with tofu & clams; pressed tofu skin with salt pork; steamed buns; peach tree sap with medicinal seeds; vegetarian crab meat
ROW 4 smoked duck eggs with caviar; crab, potato & tomato soup; white cut chicken; buckwheat sprout salad; silver fish
ROW 5 glutinous rice balls with crab; seaweed battered fish; steamed dumplings; boneless duck stuffed with glutinous rice; scrambled eggs and spring onions
ROW 6 crab xiao long bao; lamb tripe with sesame sauce; bamboo pith fungus with matsutake mushroom in broth; tofu and fermented mung beans; boiled rabbit with spicy sauce
ROW 7 spinach with tofu; crab meat with tofu; phoenix tails with sesame sauce; man and wife offal slices; pork and shrimp wontons

FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY, JANICE KIRKWOOD
SHANGHAI, ISTOCKPHOTO DEEJPILOT

donkey to pork belly, pork knuckle, jellied pig skin and pig's tongue. Eating in China is not just nose to tail, but down to the toes as well. Dishes such as boned duck feet webs cooked in a mustard sauce help us start to appreciate ingredients for their texture.

Moving to Xi'an, where there is a large Muslim community, we have an excellent mutton stew which is poured over tiny pieces of torn flat bread. As the bread soaks up the liquid it almost becomes pasta-like.

It's in Xi'an that the full range of noodles available in China becomes clear. There are the usual suspects made from wheat, buckwheat and rice, but we also try fiddlehead fern, sweet potato, mung bean, lotus starch and sweet water noodles. And the shapes they come in are equally as varied.

The other ingredient that turns up in many forms is tofu. We see tofu skin pressed and cut into tagliatelle-like noodles and are enthralled by a dish of this tofu "pasta" with salt pork and greens. In another dish, dried tofu knots are added to a scalded mutton hotpot, along with frozen tofu. Freezing tofu changes its texture, meaning it's able to absorb more of the sauce it's served in. Tofu skins are often stir-fried with vegetables and while fermented tofu sounds unappealing, it turns out to be quite delicious.

As Dunlop lived in Chengdu while studying both Mandarin and cookery, it's perhaps not surprising that Sichuan food is her first love. When we arrive in Chengdu, the hot and numbing scent of Sichuan pepper fills the air (and later our suitcases, as we look to bring some home). A more recent addition to local menus is the use of fresh green Sichuan pepper, which has a more intense flavour.

You can't go to Chengdu without having a Sichuan hotpot, which is a fun way to share a meal. We dip ox penis, rooster testicles, goose intestines, tripe and rabbit kidneys into our boiling red hotpot and Dunlop tells us that while we may not be the most gluttonous group she's led, we are the most adventurous.

As well as the traditional regional dishes we enjoy on our tour, we also sample modern Chinese cuisine. In Chengdu we eat a beautifully presented 23-course meal in a hushed, refined restaurant on a tree-lined street, with dishes starring ingredients such as fresh sea cucumber, truffles and the very special matsutake mushroom.

Another knockout dinner is at the famous Dragon Well Manor in Hangzhou. It's dark when we arrive, but the garden is lit with fairy lights and we can see beautiful plantings, stone lanterns, ornaments and little streams with bridges to cross. The manor is large and airy with eight private dining rooms, and the produce and meats are all locally grown and organic. We are wowed by simple dishes such as scrambled eggs with spring onions, a pancake stuffed with chrysanthemum leaves and simple cold white cut chicken with soy sauce. A soup of three-year-old duck has a rich flavour that would be perfectly at home in France. Today there are 26 dishes.

Once we hit Shanghai, we are officially in rice territory, but it still proves elusive. We eat dumplings at the renowned Din Tai Fung and since the Shanghainese delicacy hairy crab is in season, a whole meal is devoted to them. The crabs are small and it looks like picking the meat from them would be a lot of effort; luckily for us, industrious chefs have done the hard work, and we enjoy numerous dishes starring their sweet meat and rich roe.

The regional differences in cuisine have continually surprised me throughout the trip – from rice versus wheat, to the hot and numbing flavours of the south contrasted with the plainer dishes of the north. And now in Shanghai, we discover that those in Beijing were correct when they described Shanghai cuisine as sweet.

Unfortunately, Rory and I were caught out on our last night there. The tour was over, Fuchsia was no longer ordering our food and we chose what were great sounding dishes but turned out to be mostly sweet. The meal had little balance and I was left feeling disappointed. Had we learnt nothing?

Despite this misstep, of course we had learnt a great deal. The 12 days of the tour were an incredible education, dispelling all my preconceived ideas about Chinese food. Dunlop shared her time and knowledge freely, and her enthusiasm for every new dish in every meal never waned.

And my initial fears proved unfounded – like me, the majority of my travelling companions had never been on an organised tour before, but we found happy common ground in our preoccupation with food. And as for my uncertainty about being able to eat 300 dishes? Well, there turned out to be considerably more than that and I tried every one. ✱

*** For more information about Fuchsia Dunlop and her tours, visit fuchsiadunlop.com**

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Fortifications of Xi'an