



Digestive Fires

by Erika Kelsey

In New York, where I'm from, we have a special way of telling which Chinese restaurants are good: look how many Chinese people are eating in the dining room. For obvious reasons (Singapore is more than 75 percent Chinese) that's not much of an option here.

Beyond that, Peony-Jade is on the second floor.

Of course, an even better way to learn about a restaurant is by word-of-mouth. (My mouth is still watering and the words are below!)

Clarke Quay is almost serene early on a Wednesday evening as I weave through the passing faces. The doors to Peony-Jade are open and a hostess smiles warmly as she leads me up the red-carpeted stairs, lit by candlelight, into the lovely dining area. It is high above the street but you still feel close to the river. Through the window I watch the waning light dance along the surface of the water in prelude to darkness. And appetizers.

Somebody is always getting married at Peony-Jade – the restaurant can accommodate up to 250 guests – and tonight is no exception. Behind a silkscreen two families, now one, laugh and toast again and again. The rest of the place, every bit as elegant, is filled with soft instrumental music and the pleasant hum of people chattering.

We begin with a crispy soft-shelled crab (\$18), taken fresh from the giant tanks below. The deep fried golden mushrooms (\$10) and half a smoked duck with camphor wood and fragrant tea leaves (\$30) follow; the latter is my favourite: boneless and tender, it fits nicely into the shaped dumplings, like little sandwiches.

I'm learning a lot about Chinese food tonight, enough to know I could never choose between Sichuan and Cantonese. The pan-fried eggplant with garlic sauce (\$16) is divine, a bit spicy – the hallmark of Sichuan. The vegetable soaks up the sauce and renews its robust flavour as you chew. But likewise, I can't get enough of the sautéed scallops and shimeji mushrooms (\$28), a Cantonese dish. The vegetables are still crisp and covered in a light sauce. The dish was well worth my struggle with the chopsticks; I'm too proud to ask for silverware.

"Sonia," I ask my friend, who has joined me for dinner, who also happens to be Chinese. "What's the secret to picking up these scallops?" She replies matter-of-factly as I continue to fumble with a bit of asparagus, a slight smile at the edges of her lips. "Your spoon."



The absolute pinnacle of this meal is the cod with oat cereals (\$14), which Executive Director Pauline Graham, who also runs Quayside Seafood, explains is a signature dish here. I am reluctant to give away one bite, even in trade to Sonia who is enjoying cod with mango sauce (\$14). The fish is as juicy and flaky as any I've ever tasted, more so, and is enhanced by the tangy, almost sweet cereals.

We finish up with some mango sago with pomelo sacs (\$5) and a little glass of limejuice, a nice touch to aid digestion, then sit and drink cup after cup of tea. No one waiter attends to each table, but we never have to ask for anything. Our teacups and water glasses are always full. Of the latter mine is cold, thankfully, because

the food comes out hot. Sonia takes hers warm, in the Chinese tradition not to 'cool the digestive fires'. I assure her that my fires are burning way above normal already. They could probably even go for another entrée.

Peony-Jade is located at Block 3A in Clarke Quay #02-02. Open for lunch, dinner and events. Visit www.peony-jade.com or call 9633 9146.

