With melt-in-your-mouth roast duck, shark’s fin and cooked bullfrog on the menu, Beijing cuisine caters to the most exotic appetites. Food writer Madeleine Greer seeks out Olympic city’s finest fare, from five-star restaurants to back alley booths.

Photography by Mark Leong

Left: The late night restaurants of Dongzhimen have given the strip the name Ghost Street. This page: Handmade potstickers filled with summer squash, onions and pork, at Guotie Restaurant, a hole in the wall near the Drum Tower.
Sweet, moist and crispy — this is the most delicious bite of Beijing roast duck I’ve ever tasted. Ling smiles knowingly as our chopsticks dive in unison for another piece, eagerly picking up another über-thin slice of crispy duck skin and dipping it nymph-like into a bed of glassy sugar beads. This first mouthful is an amuse bouche setting us up for a lunch deep in duck — from juicy pieces folded in soft, moist pancakes to crunchy, wake-me-up bites of marinated, webbed feet dipped in Dijon. We’re intent on covering as much duck mileage as possible. So much so, even the fuwuyuan (server) emits an audible gasp at the length of our order. But we don’t care. It’s taken Ling and me a long time to get to China and start eating. Twenty-four years, to be exact.

We always promised each other we’d make this trip. Ling and I have a certain destiny that made its cosmic thud in 1989 when she knocked at my door. I was nine months pregnant and searching for childcare. Newly arrived in Canada, Ling was hoping for a job where she could speak Mandarin, she greeted me at the door with a tentative Ni hao? When I countered in a torrent of clumsy but eager Chinese, she stared at me in disbelief, then laughed. I hired Ling on the spot and she cared for my two children for many years while our friendship grew — much of it over food. Chinese food. We braised, stir-fried and steamed our way through a lot of creations, while our conversations usually focused on Ling’s homeland, a country she’d left as a refugee and I’d studied throughout university. One day we would travel there together and see it for ourselves.

Starting with Beijing. Punningly enough, Beijing is not at the top of the country’s self-appointed “big eight” regional cuisines. Any food-loving Chinese can easily recite the membership. It includes such bright stars as Cantonese and Sichuan cooking, but flatly ignores Beijing. That’s not to say Beijing hasn’t whipped up some tasty specialties...
unique to its dusty, windblown, northern terroir. But owing to its obvious agricultural handicaps, it’s understandable why everyone makes such a big fuss over that duck. Peking duck—known locally as Beijing kaoya—is a variety unto itself. Because of the popularity of the dish, the ducks are raised in numbers too large to fathom. But if it hadn’t been for a restaurant called Quanjude, established in 1864, this oven-hung and roasted water fowl might never have graced modern menus and instead would have been remembered only by the elite few living in the Forbidden Palace. But a savvy entrepreneur paid a retired imperial chef for the secret recipe, and the rest is Quanjude history. Now a franchise throughout China, Quanjude serves more than two million ducks a year following a traditional imperial recipe dating back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368).

The method isn’t pretty. First, the ducks are fattened via force-feeding. Once slaughtered, air is pumped through the neck cavity, lifting the skin off the flesh. The birds are hung and air-dried for 24 hours, all the while basted in sugar syrup. They’re then hung and roasted in wood-oven stoves fueled by date, peach or pear wood, lending a subtle fruity flavour to the mahogany-coloured skin.

Or so they say... The first time I tucked into a Mandarin pancake stuffed with crispy Beijing kaoya was in 1983 at the infamous Quanjude. Reluctantly, a friend and I had joined the lineup outside the restaurant at 3:30 p.m., knowing too well that the stodgy Communist capital didn’t welcome dining activity much past sunset. Like our Mao-suit wearing brothers, we followed local custom and stood behind a full table of duck diners waiting our turn to be seated. Duck bones crunchèd beneath our soles and we watched in silent horror as diners spat on the floor while talking loudly and constantly turning around to stare at us. Foreigners were rare then. The taste of that duck receded into the far reaches of my memory, overshadowed by the ambience and stares, but more importantly, it’s faded because 25 years ago food in China was downright bad. Dirt poor and stifled by decades of Maoist policies and economics, China had lost its grip on one of the world’s finest cuisines. Quanjude—like most public restaurants at the time—was run by listless government employees and chefs without any culinary training.

Now a private venture, Quanjude still looms large on tourist maps. But Ling and I take the path of local Beijing foodies who flock to Dadong, with its leaner duck and Vogue magazine-sized menu listing more than 100 items. Thoroughly modern, with black and white decor offset by dainty Chinese birdcages hanging in the air, Dadong is multi-roomed. But the prime
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Beijing Dadong Roast Duck Restaurant, No. 22 Dongsishitiao, Dongcheng District. Tel: 5169-0328.

Shang Palace, Shangri-La Hotel, 29 Zizhuyuan Rd, Haidian District. Tel: 6841-2211.

Heaven on Earth (Tian Di Yijian), No. 140 Nanchizi St, Haidian District. Tel: 8511-5556.

Hundun Hou Wonton Restaurant, No. 309 Gulou Dongdajie, Dongcheng District. Tel: 6404-2021.

Guotie Potsticker Restaurant, No. 259 Gulou Dongdajie, Dongcheng District. Tel: 8402-1164.

Big Xian Shaanxi Restaurant, No. 7 Meishuguan Dongjie, Dongcheng District. Tel: 8403-8894.

Dali Courtyard: Spicy Yunnan fare (a close relative to Thai cuisine) is served up as a single prix fixe menu in this renovated hutong courtyard home at No. 67 Xiaojingchang Hutong, Gulou District. Tel: 8404-1430.

The drama of the occasion is underscored by what most Asians consider a goodly display of public sanitation: The chef dons a face mask and latex gloves.

I had spotted latex gloves on a diner two days earlier. Ling and I were trolling Ghost Street (Guijie) where some 100 restaurants line a one-kilometre stretch near Dongzhimen. We were looking for bullfrog. We ordered it gongbao-style, tossed with whole dried peppers, fat pieces of green onion, roasted peanuts and garlic. The meat was sweet, moist, delicate and riddled with bones. A plate of fresh fava beans ste-fried with salty and piquant pickled mustard greens was the perfect accompaniment. This was the same establishment that has a utilitarian but clearly hygienic approach to table settings. Each diner receives an all-in-one, cling-wrapped bundle containing plate, bowl, teacup, soup spoon and chopsticks, all stacked and bound in layers of plastic like a string ball. Beijing’s restaurants are either hyper-clean or an obsessive-compulsive’s nightmare. When we’re in restaurants that don’t meet our standards, I follow Ling’s lead and learn never to raise a chopstick to my mouth before rinsing it in hot tea or giving it the once-over with a wet wipe from my purse.

Hotel restaurants, especially upscale ones, are a world apart from street-level ones. At Beijing Shangri-La’s Shang Palace, we luxuriate in a nine-course meal showcasing the talents of chef Chau Oifong. The meal opens with a stellar cold appetizer featuring wiggly tofu and scallops nested inside a glass goblet, sprinkled with red caviar.

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Hot Spots

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and black caviar and intermingled with tiny chunks of thousand-year-old egg and wasabi. Chinese chefs take delight in textural challenges and this slippery concoction, with its tiny bursts of briny fish roe, awakens my taste buds and makes a joke of my chopstick skills.

To the average Chinese gourmand, Cantonese cuisine is paramount. Accordingly, most top-end restaurants across Beijing (including Shang Palace) feature the clean, fastidious flavours of this cuisine, which seems bent on showcasing the expensive and rare, from shark’s fin to abalone.

You’ll find all of these dishes on the 19-page menu at Heaven on Earth (Tiandi Yijian), along with Shanghainese and vegetarian offerings. And here’s the bonus: The ambience is unparalleled. Set in a refurbished siheyuan (courtyard home), the restaurant recreates paradise in small and large detail, be it goldfish gliding through an indoor canal, a sea of bright yellow paper umbrellas decorating the rafters, or a single piece of celadon porcelain thoughtfully lit and displayed. Each of the restaurant’s nine private rooms is an aesthetic delight, filled with Ming period mahogany furniture, and china bearing the Heaven on Earth red ink stamp. The wine cellar, with its predominantly red collection, is one of the city’s largest, and the prices skyrocket to as high as 29,000 yuan (C$4,000) a bottle.

But I’d much rather explore food possibilities in a quiet hutong alleyway than find myself surrounded by Westerners and wealthy Chinese in an expensive restaurant. Sadly, huge swaths of the capital’s low-rise siheyuan — many dating back to the 14th century — have been razed over the past two decades. The city is in a race to build vertically, with some 300 towers currently under construction in the central business district alone. But a few precious hutong still remain, and Ling and I pad through them almost daily. When I spot ceramic tubs of yogurt sold on the steps of a local variety shop in Nanlou Guxiang district, we pounce on them. Tangy yet slightly sweetened, this plain yogurt is locally produced, often sold at room temperature and drunk with a straw.

Revitalized, we walk and gawk, dodging bicycles and those quirky covered motorcycles that putt around Beijing. While we’d never do this in Toronto, we walk right through an open doorway and into a courtyard shared by several private households, and find a retiree sitting on a stool sharpening a cleaver with stone and water. He welcomes us in and soon his wife is serving us tea in plastic cups and we’re all munching on thick wedges of pomelo, sharing jokes and admiring their neighbour’s persimmon tree heavy with fruit.

We talk about food, of course, discussing the merits of Beijing culinary classics like douzi (a hot, fermented soy milk that even locals caution is an acquired taste) to the bing, a loose term covering a delicious world of multi-layered flatbreads and cakes such as the pan-fried scallion pancake congyou bing, to the delicate rose-flavoured meigui shu bing, to my personal favourite, jiaoyen shubing, a drab-looking coffee-coloured, sesame seed-studded cube gently spiked with Sichuan peppercorn, a tender mouthful.

We take leave of our newfound friends, passing the single public washroom that the couple shares with four other households, and continue on to the Drum Tower, where the hours of the day once resounded in deep, thumping beats through the ancient city’s air. Despite a persistent sea of traffic, ever-present construction and pollution-filled grey skies, Beijing is sprinkled with ancient exotics that take my breath away. The Temple of Heaven, the Forbidden City and the Lama Temple are among the big draws, but smaller remnants of Beijing’s glory are littered across the city, peaking out from busy intersections in the form of a tower, a centuries-old gateway or a splash of red wall encasing a temple hidden within.

From atop the Drum Tower, Ling and I stare down longingly at the small eateries below. At the base of the tower is Hundun Hou, where wontons come in dozens of descriptions, best enjoyed with a small plate of crisp, fine threads of chayote and carrots tossed with coriander. Farther down the block is Guo’tai, a small restaurant with an enormous selection of potstickers, 38 in all, each one tempting with its crisp, caramelized underside married to a pillowy handmade wrapper bursting with savoury goodies like garlic shoots, pork, dried bean curd or shrimp. But we show restraint, stumbling down the tower stairs with stomachs grumbling, and hail a cab. The cabbie slaps on the meter and a tinny recorded voice drols out in stiffled English, “Welcome to Beijing. We are pleased to be of service.” Ling asks the driver to take us to the Meishuguan, or Art Gallery Street.

But we don’t have time for any of the art galleries. It’s our second trip to the Big Xian Shaanxi Restaurant, one of several restaurants in the area, which serves up Shaanxi province specialties such as jiamoru, a Chinese Muslim version of the hamburger, served in a homemade bun and jammed with shredded lamb, roasted cumin seeds and thin strands of green pepper. There’s also a non-spicy version. Both are served in white paper wrappers that allow customers to grip a jiamoru in one hand and wield chopsticks with the other. So that’s what I do, sitting on a low wooden bench, hunkered down over a steaming bowl of handmade noodles, my lips covered in glistening chili oil and my tongue tingling. I pick up the wide ceramic bowl filled with Tsingdao beer at my side and make a toast to Ling and Beijing. Neither has let me down. In fact, with Ling’s appetite and Beijing’s unlimited array of delectables, we’ve earned a gold medal in an Olympian stretch of eating. I can’t wait for dessert.