Markets

Don’t Be Shy

Nerves of steel reward a shop stop at Toronto’s other Chinatown

By Madeleine Greer

I LOVE TO SHOP. Not for shoes or diamonds, but frozen banana leaves at Broadview and Gerrard, my shopping stomping grounds. The signs, labels, language and odours transport me to the streets of Southeast Asia. OK, the vibe isn’t exactly consumer friendly... but the stores have the goods that make my stomach sing.

This is where I pounce on the greenest, crispest Shanghai bok choy and feel a flutter of retail rejoicing when scooping a crate of 16 yellow, kidney-shaped Ataulfo mangoes for a shocking $9.99. Friends beg me to show them around so I’veculled a tip or two for the food obsessed among us.

Like earplugs. You’ll want a pair when browsing Fu Yao Supermarket. The current management plays sappy Mandarin pop CDs that skip endlessly. Amid a repetitive blur of “Wo Ai Nee” (I love you), try to stay focused and rifle through the freezer section, where frozen dim sum lies in hiding. Best are har gau (shrimp in rice flour dumplings) or shiao mai (ground pork, open-faced dumplings). Heat in a cabbage leaf-lined bamboo steamer (sorry, best sets are in the other Chinatown at Tap Phong, see sidebar) and blatantly lie about your culinary prowess when you serve them to dinner guests.

Fu Yao is also HQ for Thai cooking supplies. Pantry essentials include club-size tubs of Cock Brand Thai curry paste (available in red, green or yellow), fish sauce (Gourmet magazine recently gave Phu Quoc brand the thumbs up) or Aroy-D coconut milk. For Chinese stir-fries, your gotta own a bottle of Lee Kum Kee oyster sauce (at very least, perk up some steamed broccoli with it) and a jar of LKK black bean and garlic sauce (perfect on stir-fried yard-long green beans). If you like to barbecue, you and hoisin sauce should be on a first-name basis. Again, go with LKK and slather it over lamb chops or wild salmon steaks.

Bill’s Lobster usually has that politically correct, PCB-free fish, not to mention tanks full of live lobster, crabs and mussels. Once, I spotted shrimp, dancing like drug-addled insects. Owner Bill Cheng breaks the Chinatown norm. He’s (a)friendly, (b) informative and (c) will give you a better price if you smile the right way. Sushi-master wannabes take note: they’ve got supplies from wasabi to nori to sushi-grade fish.

I have to admit they also smile at Charlie’s Meat and Seafood but in a fiendish way. (I presume I would too, if I owned a butcher shop in the shadows of the Don Jail.) You’ll find some of the cheapest, freshest slabs of pork tenderloin and beef flank steak here, not to mention bins overflowing with chicken feet, wings, backs, necks and drumsticks. Unlike the rest of Toronto’s poultry fans, the shoppers at Charlie’s aren’t infatuated with chicken breast (Chinese chefs prefer those juicy, dark cuts) so you’ll leave breast-less but rich in stock (there’s nothing like a hen’s toes for a memorable soup). Charlie keeps a good supply of exquisitely thin beef and lamb slices for hot pot parties in the freezers. Also under ice are thin, bony blocks of short ribs: marinate, toss on the grill and wow your guests with “Korean barbecue”.

Due south is Sing Sing. Give the guy holding the cleaver a jolt by tossing in a thankful Cantonese “mm goy” once you’ve ordered half a roasted Peking-style duck. All those hanging birds and beasts in the window are not only safe to eat but pack much more flavour than supermarket-variety rotisserie chicken. Price is right, too. Check out honey-coated wings, buy a pound of roast pork (the crackly skin is sinful), but leave the heavenly braised duck livers for me (they always run out).

Across the street is the Rose Café, where sweet but strong-like-bull iced Vietnamese coffee awaits, sans Starbucks-like lineup. Choose from eight different, custom-made banh mi or Vietnamese subs for $1.50 (extra hot peppers are free) and don’t miss the neon green 1,000-layer jelly cakes nestled beside the cash register.

Before you leave the area, head over to Maple Garden and load up on fresh herb plants. Grab a flat and fill it with sprightly Thai basil, Vietnamese peppermint and bitter melon to cultivate that Gerrard-and-Broadview feeling in your own backyard.

Shops and Eats

Bill’s lobster
599 Gerrard St. E., 416-778-0943

Charlie’s Meat and Seafood
383 Broadway Ave., 416-261-1312

Fu Yao Supermarket
639 Gerrard St. E., 416-778-1920

Maple Garden Florist and Gift Shop
673 Gerrard St. E., 416-466-9811

Rose Café
324 Broadway Ave., 416-406-9906

Sing Sing BBQ House
351 Broadview Ave., 416-778-8029

Tap Phong Trading Co. Inc.
350 Spadina Ave., 416-377-5154