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The private dining room
at Duddell's Hong Kong

香港都爹利會館的私人
廂房



Starched linens, portentous waiters and three-month waiting lists are no longer the automatic hallmarks of haute cuisine. With restaurants offering bar seating, no reservations and sharing plates, and removing airs and graces from the high-end eating experience, can the old guard survive the casual fine dining revolution? 高級餐廳不再等同於平滑無綫的枱布、高傲的侍者和長達三個月的訂座名單。吧枱座位、無需訂座、共用餐桌的休閒高級餐廳的興起，會否令氣氛拘謹的傳統高級餐廳奏起輓歌？ **By Anna Cummins**

Is fine dining dying?

高級餐飲 輓歌高唱？

It takes an inarguable vision, a good deal of swagger, a big reputation and a whole lot of hype to break an industry status quo. And there are fewer industries that have been quite as staid for quite as long as haute cuisine.

Since the turn of the 20th century, the theatre of multi-course meals and wine pairings presented by haughty waiters – a production often unfolding over several hours in a solemn restaurant laden with starched linen and endless cutlery selections – has been synonymous with some of the best food in the world. And it's a ritual that was, until recently, questioned by few critics and chefs alike.

But if you've ever sat wondering which fork to use for your hors-d'oeuvres as a hovering waiter tops your water up for the fourteenth time, you'll be acquainted with the uptightness that can make high-end restaurants off-putting for many diners.

Things are changing. The last decade has seen an unprecedented explosion of restaurants serving top quality food presented in more relaxed settings. The lean toward more straightforward menus, open kitchens, communal tables, casual dress codes and no reservations all result in an increasingly no-nonsense approach to the rituals surrounding dining out.

The question is: Why this trend, and why now? It's certainly little to do with money – food and wine presented in 'casual fine dining' (as opposed to casual) restaurants can be just as expensive as their traditional counterparts. And, as consumers, we're not baulking at spending money. A 2018 LendEDU survey of 1,000 millennial Americans found that 49 per cent now spend more on dining out than they put towards retirement. Meanwhile, a 2015 MasterCard survey found Hongkongers spend the most on dining out in the Asia Pacific region, spending around HK\$1,700 per person per month on eating out. The cash is there, but people increasingly want to spend it on unique experiences served alongside plates of top quality food. And that means injecting the fun back into haute cuisine.

要改變一個行業的現狀，必須要有毋庸置疑的遠見、披荊斬棘的氣魄、超卓的聲譽和敲鑼打鼓的大肆宣傳。而說到不變，沒有一個行業像高級餐飲般能那麼長時間以來一直靜如止水。

自20世紀初以來，頂級美食就等同於在枱布和餐巾燙得平滑無痕的漂亮餐廳內，用多不勝數的餐具，花數小時享用由態度高傲的侍者端上來的多道菜式和佐餐美酒。直至近年，終於有食評家及大廚等相關人士開始對這個概念提出質疑。

有過當你還在為該用哪把叉子吃開胃菜而猶豫不決時，旁邊的侍應已第14次為你添水，就會明白高級餐廳的拘謹氣氛為何令許多人望而卻步。

不過，情況正在改變。過去十年，供應頂級佳餚但氣氛悠閒的餐廳如雨後春筍。這些餐廳一般採用開放式廚房、共用的大餐桌，餐單偏向簡單直接，不會要求客人穿著正裝，也不用預先訂座。結果，外出用餐時不必要的儀式也就越來越少了。

問題是：為何會出現這樣的改變？為何是現在？這與金錢無關，「休閒高級餐廳」的收費與傳統高級餐廳無異；這些餐廳的消費者，也不會在金錢上斤斤計較。2018年美國學生貸款公司LendEDU的一份調查報告顯示，1,000名千禧世代的美國人中，有49%的外出用膳花費較退休儲蓄多。萬事達卡2015年的調查報告也指出，在亞太地區中，香港人外出用膳的花費最高，每人每月平均約花1,700港元。由此可見，錢不是問題，問題是消費者愈來愈希望在享受頂級美食的同時，也能夠獲得獨特的體驗，也就是說，高級餐飲必須加入有趣的元素。

“Casual fine dining means the food and the wine basically are the same, but the whole thing around it is different,” explains Dutch chef Richard van Oostenbrugge of 212 in Amsterdam. Together with sous-chef Thomas Groot, van Oostenbrugge gained two Michelin stars in three years serving modern French cuisine at Bord'Eau in Amsterdam. But in 2017, the duo left to open 212. With its stated aim to “rid high-end food of all avoidable etiquettes,” the open-plan kitchen, creative presentation and counter seating at 212 has seen it strike a chord with patrons and critics alike – it was fully booked months before opening, and swiftly gained a star in the 2019 Michelin guide. (And, as of January this year, van Oostenbrugge has also opened sibling restaurant Table65 in Singapore.)

“I’m not saying going out for dinner isn’t nice any more, but there’s a market for something else more relaxed,” he continues. “It’s about seeing service from another perspective. Sometimes at 212, we take guests into the kitchen and show them what we do. There’s a relaxed atmosphere, but the food will not be of lower quality. We are very passionate about what we do. We want to push the limit, but I don’t associate that with the standard etiquette associated with fine dining. Ultimately, this is dinner; it’s just food – it shouldn’t feel like taking an exam.”

Despite his credentials, van Oostenbrugge admits striking out into the arena of casual fine dining was a leap of faith. “I was scared!” he says. “I was lying awake every night – we went to the bank, we took out a massive loan, and we put everything on red. If people didn’t like it, we’d have been effed for life.”

It was arguably pioneering French chef Joël Robuchon, who passed away in 2018 after a battle with cancer, who took one of the most significant early gambles on the fine-dining revolution. In 2003, Robuchon came out of a 10-year hiatus to open L’atelier Joël Robuchon in Saint-Germain-Des-Prés, Paris. Offering Chef Robuchon’s renowned eclectic French fine dining cuisine ‘tapas style’ from an open kitchen, surrounded by a dimly-lit, intimate Japanese-style dining bar, L’atelier ruffled feathers. It didn’t take reservations, and the food and the setting seemed at odds – in a *New York Times* review from 2003, critic RW Apple Jr called it “a restaurant that breaks more rules than Bill Clinton,” while at least one critic alluded to the black and red decor as reminiscent of a sex den.

But, of course, it was a huge success and later branched out into other cities including Tokyo, New York and Hong Kong. “I’m betting on Mr Robuchon,” concluded a sage Apple Jr. “I think he’s right in judging that most people today want real food, full of flavour, but not needlessly complex, served without ceremony in a good-looking space by agreeable people.”

And, when the man hailed as ‘chef of the century’ – the most Michelin-decorated chef in history – decides its time to bring guests in a new direction, who’s going to argue?



阿姆斯特丹212餐廳的荷蘭籍主廚Richard van Oostenbrugge解釋：「所謂休閒高級餐飲的意思是，食物和酒基本上維持高級餐飲的質素，但氣氛和環境完全不同。」van Oostenbrugge與餐廳的副總廚Thomas Groot合作多年，他們曾一起為阿姆斯特丹的現代法國菜餐廳Bord'Eau取得三年的米芝蓮二星榮銜。2017年，二人離開Bord'Eau，一起創辦以「剔除多餘的高級餐飲儀式」為宗旨的212。餐廳採用開放式廚房、創意擺盤及吧枱式座位，瞬即受到消費者及食評家歡迎，在開業前幾個月所有座位已預訂一空，並於2019年的米芝蓮指南中取得一星的榮譽。（今年1月，van Oostenbrugge更在新加坡開設同類型的Table65餐廳。）

他續說：「我不是說外出用膳不再隆重其事，不過有人想要在更輕鬆的環境下用膳，我們只是從另一個角度看待服務這回事。在212，有時我們會帶客人參觀廚房，讓他們了解我們的工作。餐廳氣氛輕鬆，但食物質素一點也不會降低。我們對自己的工作充滿熱忱，也希望在廚藝上不斷精進，只是我不想把這些跟高級餐飲的標準禮儀連在一起。歸根究柢，這是餐廳，關鍵是食物，不必給人如臨試場的緊張氣氛。」

儘管有亮麗的往績支撐，van Oostenbrugge坦言，自己是抱著不成功便成仁的決心，縱身躍進休閒高級餐飲這個領域。他說：「我很害怕，每晚躺在床上眼睜睜等天亮。我們跟銀行借了一大筆貸款，背上一身債，如果大家不喜歡，我們就完了！」

2018年因癌症逝世的法國名廚Joël Robuchon，大概是首位為改革高級餐飲而冒險的廚師。2003年，Robuchon封刀十年後復出，在巴黎Saint-Germain-Des-Prés區開設L’atelier Joël Robuchon。餐廳採用開放式廚房、日式用餐吧枱的設計，在微暗的燈光和親切的氣氛中為客人提供西班牙小吃模式的法國高級菜餚。它不設訂座，食物與佈置都有點奇怪，令許多人以為然，食評家RW Apple Jr於2003年在《紐約時報》發表的評論這樣寫道：「這家餐廳所打破的常規比Bill Clinton還多。」另外最少有一位食評家拐彎抹角地指餐廳黑和紅的裝潢猶如妓院。

儘管如此，餐廳獲得空前成功，分店開到東京、紐約及香港等地。機智的Apple Jr在結語說：「我看好Robuchon，我認為他的判斷是正確的，今天的客人多數都希望在裝潢漂亮的空間裡，不必注重無謂的繁文縟節，接受態度親切的侍應招待，輕鬆享用味道豐富的真正美食。」



Opposite page, from left: Chef Richard van Oostenbrugge; his restaurant 212 in Amsterdam

This page, from left: Jim Löfdahl; Frantzén’s Kitchen in Hong Kong where he is head chef

對頁左至右：廚師Richard van Oostenbrugge；他位於阿姆斯特丹的212餐廳

本頁左至右：廚師Jim Löfdahl；他擔任總廚的香港餐廳Frantzén’s Kitchen



Life has become increasingly hectic in the years since L’atelier opened, as our information age becomes the too-much-information age, and casual spaces are seen as a way to switch off from the pressure of life.

“People, particularly in the big cities are always on the go,” says Yenn Wong of Hong Kong-based restaurant group JIA. “They’re up early, and from when they leave the house to return after work, it’s non-stop. Possibly, it’s that at the end of the day, clocking off is easier in a casual place. We see that at our casual and very much cemented spots, Chachawan and 22 Ships – they’re no reservation, no fuss. Delicious and easy.”

JIA Group’s restaurants span the gamut from casual neighbourhood spots to the high-end, Michelin starred Cantonese restaurant Duddell’s, which has recently opened an outpost in London, and Wong clearly understands the appeal of the classic fine dining experience. “Fine dining for me will always have a special place,” she says. “When I was younger, I would anticipate special dining experiences with my parents, possibly as a reward for doing well at school at the end of a semester. Obviously, from an early age, they knew dining out was a great way to motivate me! But I think the definition is changing.”

The increasingly fluid definition of fine dining is something Jim Löfdahl, head chef of Hong Kong’s Frantzén’s Kitchen, a modern bistro serving innovative Nordic cuisine, also recognises. “Fine dining can feel complicated when it comes down to your own expectations,” he says. “For me, it means exceptional experience: this can be defined from person to person, but in general, every single moment presented from the restaurant should be at the highest point.”

I believe in a personal touch, a great ambience and always giving customers a 'homely' feel at its highest standard

我喜歡人手創作的東西、良好的氣氛，永遠要讓客人感到絕對的賓至如歸

– Jim Löfdahl



當這位有史以來取得最多米芝蓮星星的「世紀名廚」決定帶領客人進入新的餐飲時代，有誰還有異議呢？

L’atelier開業最初數年，我們剛好由資訊時代走進資訊泛濫時代，生活因此變得異常忙碌，休閒空間正好成為遠離生活壓力的地方。

香港JIA飲食集團的黃佩茵表示：「大城市的人每天都營役，一大早就得起床，由出門到放工後回到家裡前沒有一刻消停，大概只有在下班後、處身休閒的空間才比較容易放鬆下來。這情況在我們已站穩陣腳的休閒餐廳Chachawan及22 Ships明顯可見，這兩家餐廳都不用訂座，沒有煩人的禮儀，食物也可口、方便。」

JIA集團旗下有林林總總的餐廳，由休閒的鄰家食肆，到最近在倫敦開設分店的米芝蓮星級粵菜餐廳都爹利會館，各適其適。黃佩茵十分明白傳統高級餐廳的吸引力，她說：「高級餐飲在我心中永遠佔有特別的位置，我還年輕時會期待父母帶我到高級餐廳享用特別的美食，作為我在學期末取得優良成績等的獎勵。顯然，他們早就知道外出用膳是激勵我的好方法。不過，我覺得高級餐飲的定義正在改變。」

Jim Löfdahl是香港供應創意北歐料理的現代小餐館Frantzén’s Kitchen的總廚，他亦留意到高級餐飲越來越沒有劃一的定義，他說：「你會覺得高級餐飲複雜，是因為你有自己的期望。對我而言，它只是難得的體驗，其定義可以因人而異，不過一般而言，在高級餐廳的每個時刻都應該是至臻完美的。」

Löfdahl, who spent eight years at the three-Michelin-star Restaurant Frantzén in Stockholm before heading to Hong Kong to launch Frantzén's Kitchen in 2016, helped oversee every aspect of the venue – from the interiors to the menu. Guests in the chic Sheung Wan space can choose to be seated at a table or the kitchen counter, and menus are presented as charming hand-drawn sketches of the dishes and their ingredients. “I believe in a personal touch, having a great ambience and always giving the customers a ‘homely feel’ at its highest standard,” he explains.

“To me, fine dining means attention,” opines LA-based restaurant manager and food writer Patric Kuh, who wrote *The Last Days of Haute Cuisine*, a book exploring the history and ongoing transformation of the restaurateur business in modern America. “It’s become more open to influences other than European, and it’s ever more accessible. Atmosphere certainly plays a role in the dining experience, but ultimately it’s human skill and warmth that makes people return to a place ... The restaurant that sizes people up at the door doesn’t really have much of a future today.”

There’s no question that the most revered dining guides, including Michelin, Grands Table du Monde and World’s 50 Best, still favour classic haute cuisine restaurants serving exquisite tasting menus of European food and located in Europe – a glance at their listings confirms this. But moves away from these tropes are occurring.

Take New Punjab Club, by Hong Kong’s Black Sheep restaurant group. Upon opening in 2017, this boisterous venue on Wyndham Street serving upscale Punjabi cuisine in a casual fine dining setting was met with complaints about the high price point.

“I get this complaint maybe twice a week, even from our regulars,” Black Sheep co-founder Syed Asim Hussain told Hong Kong Airlines’ magazine *Aspire* a few months after the opening. “But we welcome that reaction. Why should we keep ethnic food in the gutter? It’s a premium experience. And we are going to charge a fair price for that experience: the service, the talent in the kitchen, the artwork, the entire sensibility from which the restaurant is constructed. To be honest, we actually enjoy it when people



complain about the prices. We like being controversial. We like rattling the cage.” Just over a year later, New Punjab Club became the world’s first Michelin-starred Pakistani restaurant. People have stopped complaining about the price.

So, is fine dining dying? “I don’t think it’s dying, no,” says van Oostenbrugge. “I still like that Parisian style, the three stars. The food there is super expensive, but it’s good food. They’re not trying to be avant-garde, they’re cooking for guests, and I really love that.”

“I don’t think the place for fine dining will move away,” agrees JIA Group’s Wong. “I hope it remains, partly because to create a fine dining experience is such a focused pursuit. When it’s executed well, it really does deserve praise and respect – it’s elevated and for the guest, a diary date, to look forward to and possibly work towards.”

If fine dining is defined as a concept built around crisp table linen and ties being compulsory for gentlemen, then perhaps it’s fair to say that interest is waning, just as tides of interest in anything ebb and flow over time. But if fine dining is defined as the conceptual creation and presentation of food as an art form, then we’re arguably in one of its most exciting eras in history; one where skilled chefs feel free to liberate themselves from tradition and create fun gastronomic worlds from the ground up, without losing prestige. It’s an ongoing debate, and one to continue having – perhaps over a drink at the bar in 212. It’s got subwoofers built into it. 🎧

Cummins: Is fine dining dying? ??????????

Opposite page, from left: Looking in on JIA Group’s 22 Ships; the interior of one-Michelin-star New Punjab Club

This page: Tandoori Machli at New Punjab Club

對頁左至右: JIA飲食集團旗下餐廳22 Ships; 米芝蓮一星餐廳New Punjab Club

本頁: New Punjab Club餐廳的烤魚配茴香辣醬

Löfdahl在斯德哥爾摩米芝蓮三星餐廳Frantzén工作了八年，2016年才來港協助開設Frantzén’s Kitchen，負責監管由室內裝潢到餐單等大大小小的事務。這間位於上環的時尚餐廳，設有一般餐桌及圍繞著廚房的吧枱。其餐牌以素描繪出各道菜式及其食材，他解釋：「我喜歡人手創作的東西、良好的氣氛，永遠要讓客人感到絕對的賓至如歸。」

洛杉磯廚師兼美食作者Patric Kuh在他的著作《The Last Days of Haute Cuisine》裡，詳述了現代美國餐飲業的歷史及演變。他表示：「對我而言，高級餐飲的重點是細節。美國高級餐飲業除了開始受到歐洲以外地方的影響，還變得更平易近人。氣氛是用餐體驗當中重要的一環，最終能讓客人回頭的，是人與人之間的接觸和感受……在門口就開始對客人評頭品足的餐廳注定沒有將來。」



毫無疑問，舉足輕重的飲食指南如米芝蓮、Grands Table du Monde及全球50最佳餐廳等，仍然偏重供應精緻歐陸口味餐單、位於歐洲的傳統高級餐廳，只要看一下它們的名單就一清二楚。不過，這些指南也漸漸開始偏離這個軌跡。

以香港Black Sheep飲食集團的New Punjab Club為例，這家餐廳於2017年在雲咸街開業，環境休閒舒適，供應高級旁遮普菜式，卻屢遭投訴價錢過於昂貴。

Black Sheep創辦人之一Syed Asim Hussain在餐廳開業數月後曾在香港航空機艙雜誌《Aspire》的訪問中提到：「我每星期都接到兩宗有關的投訴，有些甚至來自熟客。不過，我們十分歡迎這些意見，為什麼其他民族的食物就一定要收費低廉？我們提供的餐飲體驗，由服務、廚房的工作人員、裝飾的藝術品、餐廳營造的整體感覺，均是上乘的，因此這只是合理的收費。老實說，我們很高興有人投訴，因為我們喜歡這些爭議，喜歡與客人討論。」一年多以後，New Punjab Club成為首家獲頒米芝蓮一星的巴基斯坦餐廳，顧客再也沒有投訴價錢太貴。

那麼，高級餐飲是否正逐漸衰落？「我不認為高級餐飲正在沒落。我仍然喜愛巴黎傳統色彩濃厚的三星餐廳，雖然價錢超級昂貴，但食物美味。它們不會追隨時尚潮流，只專心為客人提供美食，我喜歡這樣的餐廳。」van Oostenbrugge如是說。

JIA集團的黃佩茵亦贊同：「我覺得高級餐飲的地位不會動搖，我也希望這傳統能延續下去，部分原因是提供高級餐飲體驗是專心致志的追求，成功的話，值得大家的讚賞和尊重，這是高尚的情操。至於對客人而言，那是令人期待甚至努力爭取的重要日子。」

如果高級餐飲等於平滑無痕的枱布，以及紳士必須打領帶出席的話，那人們對高級餐飲的興趣在降低的說法是合理的，因為任何潮流都會隨時間消逝。不過，如果高級餐飲是關乎創作及以藝術形式呈現美食，那麼我們毫無疑問正處於飲食歷史上其中一個最令人興奮的時期，廚藝超卓的廚師可以從傳統的束縛之中釋放出來，從零開始、無所顧忌地創造趣味盎然的烹飪世界。有關的辯論相信仍會繼續，或許會在內置超低音喇叭的212餐廳的酒吧，一邊品嚐美酒一邊款款而論。🍷