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Fired Up 人間煙火

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From Argentine asado to Japanese yakitori and Cantonese char siu, the practice of cooking with fire has long been embraced by many world cuisines. Today, thanks to the passion and efforts of international chefs and culinary experts, this ancient tradition is still very much alive. 由阿根廷烤肉到日式雞肉串燒以至廣東叉燒，用明火燒烤的菜式在世界各地料理之中都由來已久。今天，有賴國際名廚、料理專家的熱忱和努力，這種歷史悠久的烹調傳統仍然深受歡迎。 **By Tama Miyake Lung**

Fired up

人間煙火

Look up “fire” in the dictionary and you’ll find “one of the four elements in ancient and medieval philosophy and in astrology”, a reference to the astrological signs of Aries, Leo and Sagittarius. You’ll also find “a collection of fuel, especially coal or wood, burnt in a controlled way to provide heat or a means for cooking”. In essence, two definitions that trace modern-day philosophies and practices to the very distant past.

“Until very recently, pretty much *all* cooking, around the world, was cooking with fire. So in a sense, the human history of handling flame, embers and ash encompasses much of the methodology of converting ingredients into food,” says Paula Marcoux, food historian and author of *Cooking with Fire*.

Indeed, the act of cooking food over a fire has been an integral aspect in the development of many world cuisines. Whether barbecuing pigs on a spit or roasting ducks in a brick oven, each style has arisen over thousands of years as a response to its unique conditions of place and time. “For example, in a culture that subsists on hefty dense foods like tubers and pigs, and has a large supply of rocks and fleshy plant material,

在英文字典裡查看Fire（火）一字，你會看到「古時及中古哲學和占星術（白羊座、獅子座和人馬座又稱火象星座）裡的四種元素之一」，以及「煤和柴等燃料燃燒時產生的熱力或是一種烹煮方法」這樣的解釋。由此可見，火與現代哲學和煮食習慣的聯繫可追溯至久遠的從前。

研究飲食歷史的學者兼《Cooking with Fire》作者Paula Marcoux指：「直到近年，全球各地大部分菜式都是明火烹調的。基本上，人類自從學會操縱火和灰燼，就學會使用這種將食材轉變為食物的方法。」

事實上，火煮在世界各地的廚藝發展史上均佔有一席位。不管是用鐵桿架著豬來燒還是將鴨子放在磚爐裡烤，無論是哪種方式都是因應獨一無二的地理和時間條件發展而成，並經過幾千年錘煉。Marcoux以太平洋島嶼文化為例說：「舉例說，在一個地方以塊莖和豬等大件食物維生，並有大量石頭和肉質植物，又如果當地人恰好熟悉大自然的地熱活動，這地方就很大機會發展出成熟的『坑煮』技術。」

「如此類推，在小麥盛產的中東及中亞地區，就會找到各種用金屬淺鍋烘烤的烤餅。這是最適合游牧民族的烘烤技術，因為他們的生活模式需要輕巧的煮食工具，而環境亦提供了樹枝、禾稈草和乾動物糞便等適合燃點烤盤的天然燃料。」

Yakitori on the grill at
Yardbird Hong Kong
香港餐廳Yardbird的
雞肉串燒



COURTESY OF YARDBIRD HONG KONG

and where, perhaps, the people are familiar with natural geothermal activity, the perfection of pit cooking makes sense,” Marcoux says, referring to Pacific Island cultures.

“Similarly, from the Middle East through Central Asia, the homeland of wheat development, we find many sorts of amazing flatbreads baked on metal griddles. This baking technology is perfect for nomadic peoples, whose lifestyle requires light and compact equipment, and whose environment supplies small scrappy fuel like twigs, straw and dry animal dung, all of which can fire up a griddle perfectly.”

In Argentina, the national tradition of asado can be traced back to around 1556 when the first cows arrived in the Viceroyalty of the River Plate. “As time went by, and with the increase in the number of cattle in the country, the gauchos began to eat roasted meat. With the *facón* (a big, traditional knife) they made a hole of about eight inches in the ground, lit a small fire and cooked the meat,” explains Gonazlo Sabaté, Consul General of the Argentine Republic in Hong Kong and Macau. “Some like their asado well done, others rare, but there is no doubt that for the vast majority of Argentines, asado is a classic food. Nowadays there are even championships and groups of meat fans who only get together to share cooking techniques.”

Asado is no doubt much more than a beloved national dish. “Asado in Argentine culture represents unity. A good way to define asado is an excuse to be close to those we love the most,” Sabaté says. “The ritual begins early, lighting the fire and, in some cases, sipping a glass of wine in the meantime. Setting the charcoal, firewood and waiting attentively for the spark show is a ‘sacred’ process.”

The simple act of building and cooking over a fire promotes togetherness in other cultures outside Latin America, even as far away as Japan. “I love the perceived simplicity that when people eat yakitori, they don’t have to think. They can just focus on enjoying the food, the drinks and their company,” says Matt Abergel, chef and co-founder of Yardbird Hong Kong, which specialises in the Japanese dish of skewered chicken grilled over binchotan charcoal. “Cooking yakitori is very focused and even peaceful – I don’t have to worry about plating, garnishing or interpretation. It’s chicken on a stick.”

For Abergel, who grew up in Canada and worked in Japanese restaurants in Vancouver and New York before moving to Hong Kong in 2009, preparing and cooking yakitori is more craft than art. “The technique always evolves. Very subtle changes of how you stack your charcoal, how you position your skewers, sharpening your knife to a different angle, the time between flipping skewers depending on the level of heat and so on,” he says. “Much like a craftsman, the way we get to the end result is always the part that evolves. Our final product has to consistently be the best we can make it – which, of course, can always be better.”

Likewise, for chef Lee Man-sing of contemporary Cantonese restaurant Mott 32, the long tradition of Chinese roasted meats can only continue to improve. “With better sourcing of meats and a wider spectrum of spices and condiments, as well as better techniques acquired from other cuisines, our understanding of Chinese roasted meats has deepened over the years,” says the graduate of the Master Chef Course

在阿根廷，傳統的asado烤肉可追溯到1556年，第一批牛抵達拉普拉塔總督轄區那年。阿根廷駐香港及澳門總領事Gonazlo Sabaté指：「隨著時間發展，阿根廷的牛隻越來越多，高楚人開始吃烤肉。他們用傳統大刀*facón*在地上挖出八吋深的洞，然後點火煮肉。有人喜歡吃熟透的asado烤肉，有人喜歡較生的，但不論如何，對大部分阿根廷人來說，asado烤肉是傳統美食。時至今日，甚至發展出烤肉比賽，以及聚首一堂切磋烹調技巧的烤肉迷群組。」

Asado烤肉不只是備受喜愛的國家名菜，Sabaté指：「Asado在阿根廷文化裡代表團結，亦是跟自己最愛的人共聚的好藉口。烤肉聚會通常很早開始，聚餐者在生火的同時，有時亦會小酌一杯。將木炭和柴擺放好，然後點火並專心等待火燃燒起來，是『神聖』的過程。」

在拉丁美洲以外的地方，包括遙遠的日本，架起爐火煮食這種簡單的烹調方式同樣有促進團結之效。香港餐廳Yardbird以用備長炭燒烤的雞肉串燒聞名，其大廚兼老闆之一Matt Abergel說：「我喜歡大家吃雞肉串燒時不用想太多的簡單心思，只需專心享用食物和飲品，好好跟朋友相聚。烤雞肉串時會十分專注，心無旁騖——畢竟只是用竹籤將雞肉串起來而已，不用擔心擺盤、裝飾或解釋什麼。」

在加拿大長大的Abergel曾任職溫哥華和紐約的日本餐廳，2009年才移居香港。他認為雞肉串燒的準備和烹調過程是一門手藝多於藝術：「日式串燒技術不斷在演變，無論是如何堆放木炭和擺放雞肉串，以至將刀鋒磨至不同的斜度及根據熱力程度掌握翻雞肉串的時間等，都一直在細微地變化。這工作跟匠人很相似，當中過程會不斷地演變，以達至最後的成果，我們的最終出品必須保持在最佳水準——當然，這總是可精益求精。」

當代粵菜餐廳周二公館的大廚李文星亦有同感，他指歷史悠久的中式燒烤也必須與時並進。這位畢業於中華廚藝學院大師級中廚師課程的名廚表示：「由於市場上可採購到更優質的肉類和選擇度更廣的香料和調味料，再配合從其他菜系領悟所得的改良技術等，這些年來大家對中式燒烤也有更深入的了解。烤肉在（我們的飲食文化裡）舉足輕重，人們對烤肉的期待和受歡迎程度不斷上升，可見承傳這個菜式的重要性。」





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我喜歡大家吃雞肉串燒時不用想太多的簡單心思，只需專心享用食物和飲品，好好跟朋友相聚



- Matt Abergel



*This page, clockwise from top:
Ham-wrapped scallops on the grill;
Matt Abergel at Yardbird Hong Kong;
Argentine parrilleros preparing asado
in an archival image from 1929*

*Opposite page: A pita cooks on
a simple griddle over a live fire*

*本頁頂圖起順時針：烤火腿帶子卷；香港餐廳
Yardbird老闆Matt Abergel；攝於1929年的
asado阿根廷烤肉盛況*

對頁：簡簡單單地用明火和淺鍋烤得包

THIS PAGE, RIGHT: COURTESY OF YARDBIRD HONG KONG



*This page: The Signature Iberico Pluma Char Siu at Mott 32
Opposite page: The restaurant's expert in roasted meats,
chef Lee Man-sing*

本頁：卅二公館招牌菜伊比利亞黑毛豬叉燒
對頁：餐廳的燒烤達人李文星大廚

☞ The expectations for and popularity of roasted meats is ever increasing,
which shows how important they are to preserve

人們對烤肉的期待和受歡迎程度不斷上升，可見承傳這個菜式的重要性 ☞

– Lee Man-sing

in Chinese Cuisine at the Chinese Culinary Institute. “Roasted meats play an important role [in our food culture] and the expectations for and popularity of such meats are ever increasing, which shows how important they are to preserve.”

As Lee explains, there are two main schools of roasted meats in Chinese cuisine. “In the North, you have Peking duck, in which the ducks are roasted in brick ovens using wood harvested from fruit trees such as lychee or longan,” he says. “In Southern China, including Hong Kong, roasted meats are a very important part of the local cuisine. Char siu, suckling pig, roasted goose, ducks, chickens and various cuts of pork can be roasted through different techniques to become their own iconic dishes, including diminishing flavours such as ‘gold coin chicken’, ‘duck web wraps’ and ‘roasted pork ribs.’”

While Peking duck is often cooked in a custom-built brick oven that traps heat and the charcoal’s woody aroma, southern Chinese barbecue uses a barrel-shaped oven similar to an Indian tandoor in which meats are skewered and hung over the heat source at the base and centre. “This allows the fat to melt as the meats gain colour and a smoky aroma,” Lee says. “This type of oven can reach up to 350°C, and the heat is live fire directly roasting the meats.”

Preparation and seasoning also play a big role in the taste and texture of Chinese roasted meats, from the sugared vinegar solution used on suckling pigs to the preserved crushed soybean paste, hoisin sauce, garlic, preserved black beans and egg Lee uses to marinate the always popular char siu at Mott 32.

“All around the world people have developed distinct ways of cooking with fire. I think that today people tend to identify only a few sorts of foods with live fire, but of course, you can make everything from fried eggs to cassoulet to pad Thai over fire,” says Marcoux, who is well known for the eclectic assortment of traditional cooking apparatuses in her backyard as well as her lack of a microwave or gas grill.

“You can learn a lot using a cast-iron pan, an old grill grate and a few wooden tools. You don’t need a fancy fire pit, just a little dent in the ground. A few bricks or rocks are handy to prop up your cookware. Be sure to have a decent shovel to manipulate the coals. Ask your grandmother or another elderly person if they remember important things about cooking with fire, and try out what they tell you.

“I think a lot of people are interested in experimenting and learning physical skills for themselves, and for those of us who love to eat well, cooking with fire is a prime skill to study!” 🍷

據李文星指，中式烤肉主要有兩個流派：「北方的北京烤鴨以磚爐燒烤，並以荔枝或龍眼等果樹為柴。在南方包括香港，燒味是本地菜式的重要部分。叉燒、燒乳豬、燒鵝、燒鴨、豉油雞和燒肉等各自有不同的烹調技巧，每種都可以做成獨當一面的招牌菜，包括已日漸少見的金錢雞、鴨腳紮和燒排骨等。」

北京烤鴨所採用的磚爐設計獨特，藉著烤爐內的熱力將鴨烤熟，並吸收木炭的木香；南方的燒味則採用桶狀的烤爐，用鐵杆吊著肉類並放在爐底正中的熱源上。李文星說：「這樣肉裡的脂肪會隨著熱力上升而融化及變色，並吸收燻煙的香味。這些烤爐的溫度可以高達攝氏350度，燒烤的熱力直接來自明火。」

事前的準備和使用的調味料也在中式烤肉中扮演著重要的角色，可大大影響烤肉的味道和質感，不管是燒乳豬使用的甜醋，還是李文星用來醃製卅二公館招牌叉燒的豆瓣醬、海鮮醬、蒜蓉、豆豉和雞蛋，均舉足輕重。

Marcoux家裡沒有微波爐和煤氣烤爐，但後院卻設有各式各樣的傳統烹調設備。她說：「全球不同地方的人都有自己獨特的火烹方法，然而今天大部分人知道的火烹食物卻為數甚少，但其實由炒蛋、豆燜肉到泰式炒河等所有食物均可以用明火烹調。」

「使用鑄鐵鍋、舊式烤格和一小部分木製工具的經驗會讓你獲益良多。你毋需生一個豪華的火堆，只要在地上挖個小小的洞，再加幾塊磚頭或石頭架起鍋具便可；別忘了準備用來加減煤碳的鐵鏟。不妨向祖母或其他長輩請教明火烹食的要訣，然後學以致用。」

「我相信很多人都樂於親自去嘗試和學習這些實用技巧，至於我們這些饕客，用明火烹調美食更是必備技能。」 🍷

