



"Fly Restaurants": Take A Bite of Chengdu's Culinary Heritage

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The Concept and History of Fly Restaurants

Got 5 RMB in pocket, that's fine. You can still find yourself a small table and stool. Typically, you should notice flies buzzing around, but all your attention will be caught by the bowl in front of you. Red chili oil floats and lifts chopped green onion, cubed pork intestines reach out from the top of sweet potato noodle. Your chopsticks will unconsciously break this harmony because your mouth can't wait anymore. When your tongue touches the spicy flavor, you will be conquered by the magic of fly restaurant.

Fly restaurant is a noun which Chengdu natives are familiar and in love with, while people from other places might feel confused about it. How can fly relates to restaurant? How can people eat something in a restaurant full of flies? Why Chengdu natives give their passion to it? Fly restaurant is not a restaurant with only flies but with slightly messy and small shop, simple and unwholesome cooking environment, extremely delicious and Chengdu-flavor but relatively low-priced food. Basically fly restaurant offers cost-equal food, service and environment which will not cause physical disease.

The concept of *Fly Restaurant* first emerged in the 1970s to 80s, a period called Old Chengdu Time. In that period, the economy of People's Republic of China just began the journey to develop and prepared for bloom. People's basic need is wearing warm and eat fully with less care about living quality. Based on this condition, food store owners paid little attention to ensure their stores' hygienic situation. So people named these restaurants following a commonly-seen creature there: fly. Strangely, this seemingly negative nickname had subtle, vivid and home-like meanings to Chengdu people: at any time, when mentioning *Fly Restaurant*, they rarely associate to images of unclean food-making situation. Instead, it is more about a familiar and welcoming store owner, a gang of laughing and chatting foodies who are all your acquaintances, and delicious dishes which have tastes of family and hometown.

But the definition of fly restaurant changes over these years. In early days, fly restaurant was the incarnation of bad hygiene condition but good taste. Nowadays, people increasingly relate fly restaurant to traditional Chengdu restaurant with tasty dishes. What led to this gradual change was the improving life qualities and sense of

traditional culture. People have both physical need in more hygienic food from small, street-side food stores and spiritual need in Chengdu local food culture. They shall never return to their innocent childhood, but luckily have the access to the taste preserving through time in memories. Fly restaurant is a chain, a chain connecting people's present life to the past, as well as a vehicle, a vehicle carrying their obsolete yet precious memory. As a result, evolving fly restaurants, with small and shabby shop but making safe and delicious traditional food, have not been faded away in history. Instead, they emanate even more dazzling light.

Local mass loves this atmosphere. Customers may chat with waiters or each other about weather, news, anecdotes or rumors these days like family members. Fly restaurants act as a second home kitchen for most people in Chengdu, not only offers tasty food with cheap price, but also a feeling of being at home.

Living with a high-speed pace in such a blooming-developed society, Chengdu people/natives would rather wait in lines for those fly restaurants after work. Foreigners may wonder why people wait to eat in the restaurants which are unhygienic after terribly 8-hours working. But if one takes a closer look at this kind of restaurant, the answer manifests itself immediately-- food from fly restaurant is one of the most delicious representation of Chengdu dishes.

The Charm of Fly Restaurants

In order to find the charm of fly restaurant, our team has been to the most famous fly restaurant in Chengdu called Mingting Restaurant to conduct a short interview with the workers here. Mingting Restaurant, which presents as celebrated Sichuan dishes, always attracts Chengdu people/natives to have all the pleasures of gluttony. Waitresses there told us that in order to preserve the original and immutable taste, chefs are well-trained and experienced master workers without much personnel change. In addition, special culinary training is the first prerequisite for people who want to be the chefs.



Taken in Mingting Restaurant, July 2018 (Photo by Cheng Yajie)

No matter how long to wait or how difficult to get there, but for love, customers, some of whom even come from the other cities, will not hesitate to have a meal in Mingting,. *“The customers come from all social classes. Some people drive luxury cars, while some ride bikes as well,”* one of the waitresses said.

The portions of dishes in Mingting are always medium with adequate food materials, while prices are relatively low which make consumers regard eating in Mingting restaurant as economical and practical. People who want to be refreshed in a relaxing eating environment and get rid of those bustling and expensive restaurants could have an unforgettable memory in fly restaurants like Mingting.

The secret of the popularity of Chengdu's fly restaurants is that food there has the taste of real Chengdu. It always recalls the deepest recollection of the old streets, the



pastoral buildings, and the poetic childhood. Holding the acknowledged title as the Paradise of Foodies, Chengdu spread the reputation for its hotpot, Chuanchuan (Stick ingredients on bamboo string and rinse them in boiled Hotpot), etc. So that travelers are quite willing to seek for food aroma here from fly restaurants located in deep alleys, to try both snacks or cuisines and the flavor of Chengdu.

Taken in the dining hall of Mingting Restaurant, July 2018 (Photo by Cheng Yajie)

According to our observation, nice cars bask together with normal bikes and messy trucks in the outdoor the parking lot. At Mingting, the flow of diners will reach the peak during the workdays from 12 a.m. to 1 a.m. and 6 p.m. to 7 p.m. However, Mingting has also met the problem that the flow of customers is decreasing rapidly.

“Many young people do not like our restaurant because the exotic culture has a promising market among them. They prefer Western cuisines over Chengdu local dishes,” a senior female waitress complained to us. When the sun went right above our heads, the diners walked in the restaurant in an endless stream. Most of them are nearby white-collar workers who handle official business in the office buildings. We

asked a 25 years' old young diner *“Why the young no longer like eating at the fly restaurants like before”*, and she said: *“From my perspective, the dishes are very hot in Chengdu’s fly restaurants which provide the pure traditional Sichuan dishes. Nevertheless, the young who faces heavy pressures today wants to have a healthy diet and light food. But I like it because today I want to reward myself for the good performance in my company.”*

During these time, we indeed have not seen many young people sitting on the chairs, who looked under 30 years old. It is true that many fly restaurants have confronted the same problem that the young diners are decreasing, including the popular restaurants like Mingting.

The Concern of Fly Restaurants

Less decorated and obscurely situated, with these traits, Jinjiang Restaurant appeared to be a typical fly restaurant in Chengdu. Under the plain signboard, neat tables and chairs stood on the faintly oily floor. Dishes and pickles were lined up and placed on table near the road. Meaty smell in the air caught every taste bud of unconscious passersby.

Jinjiang Restaurant was established in 1994 and the owner spent a couple of years in retail before starting his career in catering industry. *“Our boss decided to change his profession and become a restaurant owner due to the limited income of retail industry,”* said the employee Ms. Zhang, who has worked in Jinjiang Restaurant since 1996. Jinjiang Restaurant was relocated in 2016. According to Ms. Zhang, they have relatively a few guests in the first year after relocation because lots of old guests could not find the restaurant’s new address.

When we asked about the dishes, employees answered proudly that all their dishes were traditional and genuine Sichuan food, cooked by their own chef with exclusive secret recipe. Lotus Root and Rib soup, Stir-fried Pork Strips in Fish Sauce, Boiled Meat Slice and all the other emblematical Sichuan food are provided; guests can order any veritable Sichuan food they want.



Team members are interviewing the owner (Photo by Tian Xirui, taken in Jinjiang Restaurant, July 2018)

"I don't have any apprentices so far. Nobody is willing to learn these cooking skills right now, even my son is not interested, I guess engaging in a job with higher salary is more attractive for those young people now." said Mr. Wang, the chef of Jinjiang Restaurant, when he was asked about the culinary heritage.

Mr. Wang learned his culinary skills from the owner of Jinjiang Restaurant when he was twenty. *"I studied cooking because I like it, and it seemed to be the only way that I can maintain my family at that time. Our boss is full of passion, he treats me as his apprentice and has taught me with sincerity,"* Mr. Wang said.

Some of Sichuan food failed to be handed to next generation while some existing ones has lost its original cooking style and flavor. Twice-fried pork can be an example of it. *"Lots of people say the Twice-fried pork in restaurants is not as tasty as before. Cooking Twice-fried pork should be using pork belly instead of thigh, but using pork belly also require adept technics of cooking, which is exactly what is missing now,*

this can be attributed to businessmen 'acquisitiveness to money. No wonder it's not that delicious," an experienced cook said with apparent enthusiasm.



The Specialty Dish (Photo form the Internet)

The Outlook of *Fly* Restaurants

Walking on streets in Chengdu, fly restaurants are everywhere. But once stepping out the border of Chengdu, you can hardly find one except in some old towns. It is one of the biggest features of Chengdu. From an old saying that "The young should stay away from Sichuan, the old should stay in Sichuan Instead". Chengdu is well known for its leisure and comfortable life style which might possibly make the young lose striving spirit while the old enjoy life

But actually, people here pursue for living quality in every aspect. They would spend hours to travel across the city to take a fresh breath of Xiling Snow Mountain or just wait in the line for a bite of famous Xiaolongkan Hotpot. They would pay much for a limited edition Gucci bag or just squat at street corner to wait for an anonymous uncle who can make tasty baked egg pancake. It seems contradictory, but also makes sense: Fly restaurants represent tasty food and traditional Chengdu culture. Have a bite on any food, you can feel the charm and magic of Chengdu cuisines and traditional food

culture, find yourself a peaceful land with seconds of relaxing time in such a high-speed life.

Though the culinary industry flourishes in the glamorous city as various restaurants emerged like mushrooms after rain to meet people's improved living quality. There are plentiful delicate and expensive Westernized restaurants and decorated clean fast restaurant. But behind all these increase is the decrease of Chengdu's authentic taste and culinary culture. Fly restaurants, the less decorated, distantly located ones, yet with complying sanitation requirements, but, also the one which keeps the completely traditional taste of Chengdu entirely are in decline. Even few young generation wants to inherit and pass on the cooking skills, fly restaurants owners like Mingting Restaurant and Jinjiang Restaurant are still aims at providing customers with clean and authentic home-style food which is rare nowadays.

How to protect these priceless treasures will be a big issue to address in the future. Today, many famous fly restaurants already gain a lot of attention from people all over our country. People start to share their experience of eating in fly restaurants in social media like WeChat, RED and DaZhongDianPing... Surprisingly, when we search *fly restaurants* in RED, there are over 1000 posts. Using social media to attract more consumers who come from different cities or even different countries would be the most efficient and cost-efficient way.

Moreover, Government and fly restaurants can make a win-win agreement. For example, government can require fly-restaurants to reach environment criterion in order to provide customers with better environment and food based on food safety and healthy life style. Fly restaurants can seek for financial support even business cooperation with the help of government for local economic development. In this way, fly restaurants can be kept, Chengdu natives' memories can be kept, and Chengdu's urban planning would not be disturbed.

Based on the above solution, we bet that fly restaurants will be a potential market since food is the basic living need Thus, we should encourage young generation to join the group for the protection and sustainable development of fly restaurants.

As a unique food culture, fly restaurants, however, should be treasures for not only Sichuan people but also all human beings. We believe that this kind of culture has subtle attraction, yet be weaken due to current situation. But as long as everyone has

the awareness of Chengdu local food cultural protection, fly restaurants will come back with a brand new look welcoming more people to taste their food. There are tons of charms waiting for exploration; there are vast potentials requiring stimulation; there are plentiful vitality allowing excavation.