

Wong Kei – One of the World’s Rudest Chinese Restaurants

Shôn Ellerton, December 2, 2020

A trip down memory lane of one of my favourite Chinese restaurants known for good food and very rude service.



I was thinking back the other day, would you go back to a restaurant with a good chance being hurled with abuse? Most cases, I would say not; however, if you've ever been a frequent visitor of, possibly, London's most notoriously rude Chinese restaurant, then I'd say you be up for more abuse, time and time again.

Welcome to Wong Kei Chinese restaurant, one of my most frequent haunts from my student days during the 90's. Since then, I've been back a couple of times and from what I have seen from photos posted on the Internet taken by other tourists, it looks like not a lot has changed at all. The décor, the menu, the same grotty atmosphere. But what really distinguishes Wong Kei from any other restaurant by a long shot is the combination of good Chinese food and speedy but rude or indifferent service.

For those of you that have deigned to dine here some time or another, this might strike up a memory or two but for those who haven't, allow me to humour you while I reminisce on this most extraordinary of restaurants.

Sitting in the heart of London's Chinatown is a five-storey restaurant by the name of Wong Kei. It's a big greyish-looking edifice of a structure constructed in a somewhat cheesy rococo style with curvy windows, ornate door portals with sculptured Greek heads peering down at you and a big clock—that I can never remember ever working—cantilevered off the building on an intricate

cast-iron support. The clock proudly adorns the words *Costumier Perruquier* (costumer and wigmaker in French) on either side of a Roman-numeral clockface.

I honestly don't remember how I came about this place, but I probably stumbled upon it by chance on one of my many ventures into Chinatown during my student days. Being a student, one was always after big helpings of cheap eats. And not only that but finding places which are always open. Wong Kei seldom closes.

Although the building is quite ornate looking from the front, it is nothing of the sort once one sets their foot into the establishment. Upon opening the smeary double glass doors, just over to the right next to the window is a hive of activity with cooks feverishly making little wontons, noodles and steaming choy sum greens with oyster sauce and cutting up flattened ducks hung up by the window, so characteristic of many Chinese restaurants. From the depths below must lie the kitchen as, every few minutes or so, one of the cooks would come up the stairs with two fully laden steel buckets of broth which would then be decanted into a massive vat of broth by the window. I found it an extraordinary sight in a restaurant with people standing around paying their bills or waiting to be seated near the front while this little guy swerved around them carrying two open buckets of broth. What if someone accidentally, or deliberately, dropped something in it, perhaps, like a set of false teeth by an elderly gentleman peering down into the broth?

If you come alone to this vast establishment, a waiter will question you with authority.

'One?'

You will be directed specifically where to sit amongst one of several parallel-placed glass-topped tables lined up end to end not unlike a Bavarian beer garden.

'You sit here!'

with a typical Chinese accent which, if I imitated these days, could be regarded inflammatory by our wonderful social justice warriors claiming that you are appropriating the Chinese culture.

You will not be alone on this table, because as you've come as *one* person, you will be seated with total strangers at the table. To most westerners, this is a peculiar and slightly disorienting situation, but one gets used to it.

The table gets a cursory wipe from a cloth that looks like it should have been resigned to the gods many years ago. A metal pot of tea, a cup, *one* (and only one) serviette and a pair of chopsticks is immediately plonked right in front of you just when you've sat down. The tea is oolong tea. Hot, refreshing, welcoming, unlimited and, best of all, free of charge. If you do not like tea. You specifically ask not to have tea. If you demand cutlery instead of chopsticks, you have to ask for it, and when you do, expect a disapproving look from the waiter as he fetches a set of very worn-looking cutlery and then sets it down noisily in front of you. After all, fetching cutlery takes an extra few seconds which might add unnecessarily to the precise time-keeping plan of their military-timed operations.

As soon as you sit down, the waiter sort of 'hovers' there for a moment or two because many Wong Kei patrons know exactly what they want. And this is great because if you do, you can order right there and then, which is great for the worker during his or her precious lunch break. Most waiters will stand there looking all around the room whilst waiting for you to order. They won't look you in the eye because that is not conducive to best use of time. They are planning out their next set of moves and looking you in the eye is, frankly, not of vital importance.

They take your orders using the traditional paper and pen way. They can do this without looking down as they write as they continue to scan the room. There are no iPads here. No computers. And, last time I was there, no credit cards. If you don't know what you want or hesitate for the next couple of seconds, they'll give you a menu which has never changed since I've been there, except for the creep in price over the years. Once you have the menu, the waiter won't automatically come back to you to take your order. You need to get his attention by signalling to him, without offending him, to muster him over to you. At this stage, it is strongly recommended you know what you want.

Looking around you, you notice other people sitting down and leaving the communal table throughout your meal. On occasion, one can strike an interesting conversation with a stranger but often, most are quiet regulars who have their usual dishes, some with books and newspapers, and of course, today,

mobile phones. The place is in dire need of an improvement in décor, but who really cares. As long as the food is good. There is no air-conditioning but there are several large extremely dirty and noisy fans situated in the upper corners of all the rooms irreversibly encrusted with years of detritus, comprising mainly of fat and dust.

No sooner than you take in the atmosphere, your food arrives. And let me say, I have *never* been disappointed with the taste of the food at Wong Kei. My favourite dishes are the soup noodle dishes. They are large, hot, fragrant and very satisfying. You can order all the dishes without noodles and you don't feel ripped off. For example, if you want wonton soup without noodles, you get a *lot* of wontons. My favourite soup dish is Yau Nam Noodle Soup which has brisket beef and choy sum greens. And when I mean brisket beef, there is a lot of it, and it is good brisket beef. Other favourites of mine include Singapore Noodles, Beef Chow Ho Fun (dry) and Fried Quay Due (the rice stick version of Singapore Noodles). The food is pleasing and worryingly addictive. I hardly went anywhere else.

Now you may be wondering where I'd be asked to be seated if I went with one other person. The answer was usually,

'Downstair!'

Unlike the ground level, the downstairs level is a little more intimate, darkened and boasts a sort of a waterfall fountain display on one side, but it is still very functional looking without any soft furnishings of any kind. The décor is still poor and tired but at least the flow of water adds an ambience to the place. The downstairs portion was closed off for some time and, to this day, not sure if it still is.

If you're in a party of two or more, there is a greater likelihood of being asked to go

'Upstair!'

After passing a sign, that's been there for years despite the obvious spelling mistake, pointing upstairs with the words DINNING ROOMS, one ascends a spiral staircase leading to the next floor where you await to be seated. If full, you may be asked to ascend another floor. These two floors are a little more convivial in atmosphere with respect to furnishings. They have big round tables, carpets (although well soiled), ornamental wall displays, and Chinese

chandeliers. The service is also a little more civilised than that on the ground floor.

When asked to be seated at one of the round tables, you could be asked to share with another group depending on your group size. Unlike being by yourself on the ground floor, it is often that groups around the table start to introduce themselves and have some sort of a dialogue.

Now, there were two occasions in which we invoked the wrath of the waiters unintentionally during our student days and both times involved one of my good friends by the name of Darren, who sadly passed away in 2011 from diabetes.

The first time this happened was when our small group got up out of our chairs after paying for the meal and just as we were about to descend downstairs to the ground floor to depart, this very angry waiter stormed up behind us shouting, holding up a penny in his hand.

‘What’s this?! You give me penny! Penny! You go now!!’

It transpired that Darren had, somehow or another, inadvertently left one solitary penny on the table and it is possibly the one occasion where none of us remembered to leave a tip behind. In any case, this waiter was, understandably, furious.

The second time occurred when we ordered quite a lot of food; however, there were two dishes which, unlike Wong Kei fashion, never arrived. We were getting quite full and we assumed that the two other dishes were simply forgotten by the cooks, but as soon as we were about to pay, lo and behold, the two dishes arrived.

At this point, most of us were probably thinking that we should accept the food or, at least, put it into a ‘doggy bag’ for later, but not Darren. He firmly indicated that the food never arrived on time and we ought not have to pay for it. This, of course, sparked the most heated response I’ve ever witnessed by an angry waiter.

‘You order! You pay!’

Darren exacerbates the situation, **‘We are not paying. The food never arrived!’**

‘You order!! You pay!!’

The rest of us gave each other nervous looks as to how this is going to end. Will there be an angry head chef storming out with a cleaver? It wasn't that much of a far-reaching thought.

Darren responds again, 'No'

The riled waiter declares an ultimatum with full aplomb.

'I remember every one of you! You! You! You and you!', whilst pointing an accusing finger as if the Grim Reaper would out to each person in succession.

We sheepishly paid for the meal minus the two belated dishes. It was clearly too late to make amends by paying the full amount with any shred of dignity. With the thought of a chef's cleaver in mind, we thought we should abstain from going to Wong Kei for at least a month for fear that we might be recognised but we cracked and went back the following week. Nobody recognised us, even the waiter who said he would remember each and every one of us. It was back to blissful normal.

Wong Kei clearly capitalise on being the 'Fawlty Towers' of restaurants, at least in terms of rudeness. One of my friends came over to see me a few years ago and gave me a bright red shirt which proudly displays Wong Kei London on the front and Upstairs/Downstairs on the back. It's nice to see such an establishment thrive without changing for the sake of changing. I've been to quite a few interesting restaurants in my time, but if there's one restaurant I would love to see closer to home, which is now Adelaide, it would be this one.