

# Cooking Irish in the People's Republic of China

## Getting Organized Is Boundlessly Good

The Friendship Hotel—top rotating restaurant, currently stationary, is almost full. It's 6:00 a.m. and smoggy light, aglimmer in steel, muted in concrete, hangs sharply over the roadlike Qiantang River. Barges progress in sluggish increments and lines of cars and people flow in straight tributaries through this busy, soundless world. Unfamiliar sky refracts spectrums through the pendulous window-cleaner's sagging lines of soap. The squeegee *eeks* and through taut lines of his creaking harness the wind rhythmically shrills. Seasick in the swell I headswim, look hard at the table, and moored to its surface, tune back into breakfast.

Clientele are solemnly attired businessmen and soldiers in classic fresh fatigues—strong Chinese men moving in orderly disorder among tables and chairs, gesticulating and smoking between spoonfuls of *congi* and gulps of tea. It's self-service. Waitresses in navy and white, skirts and tunics, clearing and replenishing, loop silently around. My colleagues aren't up yet. I'm going over plans for the day, before we go to the kitchen and start preparations for the evening's function. As soon as everything starts, there won't be a chance to think, or to eat.

## The Commune's Canteen Is Powerful, the Dishes Are Deliciously Made

Unlike the shoddy fare in mid-range hotels at home, in China breakfast is up-market. I eat Chinese wares—three kinds of savory and sustaining breakfast rice soup, gingered green vegetables, eggs boiled and stained in tea, giant steam buns—and American options—pancakes, bacon and maple, all consummated in fantastically cut tropical fruits, dainties from the mini-patisserie display, bloody watermelon juice and chestnut-hued coffee. Details of how tonight's event will run are vague. Futile as it seems, given the sparse information that has dripped my way, I finish prep-lists outlining everything I can think of and limiting myself to the headrush of one stubby Chinese cigarette, take the lift downstairs with a group of the smoking soldiers.

Moving in units—the tough guy, the joker, the clever-looking one, the silent one—broad, tall, clean-cut, the soldiers exude a blend of powerful masculinity and naïve schoolboyishness. Latent air, comedic and dangerous, hangs in the smoothly descending lift.

## Ride the Wind and Cleave the Wave to Realize a Great Leap Forward

More than twenty-four hours have passed in China before I first step outside, properly alone. The air is fresher indoors, and down here the subdued light falls slowly. Until now I have been on planes, fast trains, in cars and indoors with the delegation, among whom are the Lord Mayor and City Manager, from my home's city council and chamber of commerce (the purpose of the visit to sign agreements with local governments, expressing mutual interest in fostering trade and commerce). Alongside the signings of these memoranda of association, the team of chefs and restaurateurs (myself, Rebecca, and Eddie) will showcase local, Irish artisanal produce and represent the high-quality and diverse nature of restaurants in our city. My great friend and business partner, Frank, who initially proposed this showcase, is back home, looking after our bar and restaurant, which is experiencing critical times. I think of him as I look up at the hotel from beside the *porte cochère*. Feeling as far out of place as I've ever felt, I start walking.

Streets are precariously laden with push-bikers and electric motorcyclists. Noise-free, the stultified atmosphere absorbing all volume, this edge-of-city world seen up close appears no less remote—like an enormous, banal karaoke backdrop. Footpaths, wide as streets back home, are without feet. Beneath blank space, hovering silence, muffled vastness of edifice, of broad-arched boulevard, I become a dot.

Insignificant, yet conspicuous, I reach the corner of the block. It feels aberrant, pointless, to be out here, going for a walk. To turn around and go back, a failure of a walk, would be even more so, and I leave the teeming road to Hangzhou

(population: 9 million, “ranked first among Chinese Cities of Opportunity”) and walk in brisk long steps along fence-lined blankets of concrete, achromatic wasteland and treeless scrub. Here are plain government buildings, military-guarded. The sentries look, impassive. I nod. They are unmoved. I stride on, strangely thrilled by this terrifying landscape, searching for some profundity, a mental connection to copperfasten in memory this feeling of place and awe and futility. I find nothing. At the end of the block, I go back to the hotel. I have been gone for twenty minutes. I am greeted by the concierge, Sam. Hotel front-of-house staff have Western names like this. Mike, Sam, Shirley, Pam. They seem happy if I ask their Chinese names, laughing encouragingly at my pronunciation. “The Irish chefs, Edward and Rebecca, are awake, having breakfast,” Sam professionally informs. Golden radiance divinely emanates from the polished lobby’s marble and glass. I head for the lift.

### Sharpening the Knife, Day after Day, Intruders Must Be Annihilated

The innards of the Friendship Hotel are not as glamorous as its exteriors. I often find myself lost. Friendly staff often find me lost. The top of the building is arranged in concentric circles. Restaurant seating lies at the outer layer and curved partitions wall service and buffet areas into vectors toward the center of the maze. Below this, on a split-level, the kitchen imperceptibly rotates.

It is a galley aboard the goodship Friendship Hotel. Small, unmodern, quite dark, clatter is constant as one alloy clashes against another. Broad cylinders of gas-blue barrel from the stove, gripping tempered woks, spilling around edges and leaping forth in vermillion dragons of orange-tongued flame. The chefs work mirroring one another on either side of a range. Cooking, through whatever inscrutable system, progresses circularly throughout various stations. Six chefs crowd the main kitchen. To one side, in a glass-paneled pastry kitchen, work two white-toqued chefs.

An aged-looking, avuncular head chef, perhaps not so old, bows his head, avoids our eyes, assigns us to the sous-chef and returns to his dusty closet-office by the window-lit storeroom. Sitting by an ancient telephone, he smokes all day, breaking occasionally to shout at the kitchen, whereupon a cook hurriedly leaves his station and a lump of whitefish or purple side of beef is fetched and passed along the line to be defrosted in vats on the floor beneath the cooking area. Consternation subsides and with laconic-seeming ease, the chefs resume their demanding work.

There is something obscene and alluring about all the cramped chefs working in overpopulated harmony—proud,

flagrant, obstinate, reassuring. In all the lavish hotels with ambient vegetable carving rooms, live fish tanks and rows of cooks, each with round wooden chopping block and wok station, and for all the embarrassingly luxurious restaurants and impressive, almost religious, cookery schools that we are whisked to over the coming days of nonstop courtesy, food production techniques are resolutely artisanal. Value is given to cookery and its tradition. Something beautiful resides, great pride and life abounds within these hierarchies, this laborious commitment to expertise and arcane practices, yet another feeling lingers. Craft is favored as the superior method of production—even in the modern hotel housing our event in Shanghai or vast kitchens of government restaurants, chefs painstakingly coat chickens with clay, cleaverslice silken tofu into the finest brunoise, and hand-fashion mounds of mooncakes and tiny dumplings. It may speak of shows of strength, of wealth, or labor costs, but certainly of gustatory priorities.

Hotel kitchens in Ireland, operating on cost-based bottom lines, can be bleak. As little cookery as possible is performed and the skills of the overworked, underpaid, underinspired chefs stagnate. In good hotels, cuisine ranges from boring to outmoded to pretentious; always overpriced. Presented with cultures that celebrate cuisine, exacerbated by my own and Frank’s struggles for mere survival, I wonder. Has my beloved small, local, romantic, gastronomic restaurant, where the work fulfills and craft (without the luxury of many hands) is cherished, become a quaint notion? Is food in Ireland, as pleasure, as culture, valued at all? In the Chinese kitchen, methods and quality are paramount, to be upheld. Contrary to the world outside the hotel’s window, even beyond the kitchen’s swinging-door, progress is not a god.

### When the Dining Hall Is Well-run, the Production Spirit Will Increase

A plan unfolds, conveyed by management through our interpreter, a young, cool-headed Chinese woman, that an abridged version of our menu will be cooked by the hotel chefs and served alongside the standard hotel Asian/European buffet. Information surrounding this change of plan is hard-earned. There isn’t time to challenge it, scarcely enough to tailor our planned dishes to suit a hot buffet. Rebecca is overwhelmed, Eddie just wants to know what needs doing.

Chefs, management recording with smartphones, and the interpreter crowd around me. Pulling pads from back pockets, messing, jostling, glad of, but not impressed by the diversion, the chefs ask questions among themselves, never of me. There is only time to demonstrate and explain each dish once.

I'm frustrated at our efforts being marginalized and at how the food is to be prepared and served. I doubt I have conveyed myself properly, and can't help doubting the chefs. Generally gracious of our intrusion, they return to their stations.

### An Airplane Sprays Chemicals

Rebecca, flustered and awkward in chef whites, is struggling to weigh out soda bread and communicate with the white-toqued women she towers over. They shuffle industriously among biscuits, pastries, fruits, and glazes. I leave her, in the light, heat, and silence of the bakery, for the din of the main kitchen. Eddie, having found two large pots and a place at the stove, is lightly browning lamb for stew and getting potatoes peeled for mash. The day is spent with the chefs and an everchanging cast of hotel management and members of Bord Bia and Fáilte Ireland (Irish food and tourism agencies). I look for the interpreter, who is busy with politicians and business representatives ahead of the evening's ceremony. The Lord Mayor has picked something up traveling, and his luggage is lost. The chefs decamp to a disused room at the back of the kitchen, slouch around on stacks of furniture, broken equipment, and upturned buckets, pour tea, smoke, and look at their phones. A cup and flicked-open cigarette box is proffered. Profoundly welcoming this reprieve, I happily join.

### Boundless Confidence!

The chefs have done a good job, but the Irish food is hidden among the buffet, itself hidden at the center of the top-floor maze, away from the discussion and hubris of the ceremony. Television cameras watch as I present to an incurious audience a hastily cobbled cookery demonstration (another surprise) through a broken headset. Work finally done, I wash down our jet-lagged Lord Mayor's medicated, lackluster speech with two cold Chinese beers. He hunches in oversized corduroy alongside Hangzhou's soave and imperious

Vice Mayor. Behind them, pitched in night sky, arc slowly the diffuse lights of the prefecture.

### Scatter the Old World, Build a New World

Overlooking Hangzhou's West Lake, temples and pagodas spectral in the mist, we are taken to eat at a government restaurant. Ancient ink paintings and tapestries depicting nature—willow, bamboo, persimmons, plums (a poetic taste of eremitic sentiment)—line hardwood corridors that lead to individual dining rooms. The less important members of the delegation (of which I am one), accompanied by two party representatives, dine extravagantly and awkwardly under the coy surveillance of traditionally clad, smiling women. Last night's event is not much discussed, yet has been apparently well received.

Six days on and remote plains sweep by the window as myself, Rebecca, and Tim, Cork City Manager, are driven far out of Shanghai's Bund toward the airport. Complexes of tower blocks, cells erected to build and power the city, cast hard-edged shadows long into empty distances. I think of a crayfish head, moving above an iced bowl of its own sashimied flesh; of sticky swan's liver; the crispiest skin of duck; of orange, crystalline jellyfish; of Shanghai's park-loving denizens, flying kites, practicing tai-chi; and of our interpreter, of her matter-of-fact answer as we toured the swamps and watercourses of XiXi National Wetland Park. Standing together outside one of Hazy Fishing Village's traditional homes ("famous for the scenery of willows, haze, mist, and smoke from the kitchen chimneys"), I ask what became of the men and women who not long ago inhabited and made livings on these banks. She looks at me. "Oh, they were assimilated into urban sprawl." ☞

*Author's Note: The headings are inspired by a visit to a Shanghai apartment block, where a man displayed his collection of Chinese Communist Party propaganda posters from throughout the twentieth century.*