

EATING

top picks

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Shànghǎi is most alive at the end of the day, when workers pour out of the offices, the neon flickers on and the restaurants begin to fill up. As in the rest of China, food is at the centre of social life here, and even the most straight-laced individuals loosen their ties once dinner is served. Restaurants are where people go to meet friends or dates, to hold family reunions, to celebrate or drown their sorrows and to clinch business deals. It's over a meal that the Chinese are at their most relaxed and sociable, and, suffice it to say, eating out is one of Shànghǎi's great highlights. If you get a chance to eat with the locals, jump at it.

In true Shànghǎi style, today's restaurant scene is a reflection of the city's craving for foreign trends and tastes, whether they come in the form of Hunanese chilli peppers or French *amuse-bouche* (bite-sized hors d'oeuvre courses). Most visitors will be interested in the Chinese end of the spectrum, of course, for that's where the best cooking is as well as the most variety. On a single strip you might find Shanghainese seafood, explosively hot Sichuanese, a Cantonese tea restaurant and MSG-free Taiwanese soup noodles – and that's just on your first night out. Still, Shànghǎi has become a magnet for both global superchefs and less-established international talents trying to make a name for themselves, and it's worth taking note of their presence; there are some fine meals to be had here.

But while a dinner overlooking the Huangpu River or safe in the Xintiandi bubble makes for a nice treat, real foodies know that the best restaurants in China are often where you least expect to find them. Part of the fun of eating out in Shànghǎi is stumbling across those tiny places in malls, metro stations or down backstreets that offer an unexpectedly memorable dining experience. Nor should you be put off by eating in chain restaurants; many of Shànghǎi's better eateries have branches scattered across town. The downside of this admirable lack of snobbery is that Chinese restaurants aren't great for romantic meals; they're often brightly lit, large and noisy, with in-your-face waiting staff. If you want a romantic soirée, go international.

Of course, the major obstacle for foreigners trying to enjoy authentic Chinese meals has long been the indecipherable menus that can be as thick and overwhelming as a 14th-century martial-arts novel. But Shànghǎi continues to improve on this account, and we are happy to state that almost all of the places listed in this chapter have English menus (some also have picture menus which are an enormous help) unless noted, and although they aren't always as comprehensive (or comprehensible) as the Chinese version, you'll no longer feel trapped into ordering *kung pao* chicken at every meal. In any case, if you see a dish on someone else's table that looks absolutely delicious, just point at it when the waiter comes – no one will think you're being rude. Shànghǎi's restaurants reward the adventurous, so be brave, because some of your most memorable experiences will be culinary ones. Just do what the Shanghainese do and dig in with those chopsticks.

ETIQUETTE

Strict rules of etiquette don't apply to Chinese dining; table manners are relaxed and get more so as the meal unfolds and the drinks flow. Meals commence in Confucian fashion – with good intentions, harmonic arrangement of chopsticks and a clean tablecloth – before spiralling into total Taoist mayhem, fuelled by incessant toasts with *báijiú* (a white spirit) or beer and furious smoking all round. Large groups in particular wreak havoc wherever they dine, with vast quantities of food often strewn across and under the table at the end of a meal.

A typical dining scenario sees a group of people seated at a round table, often with one person ordering on everyone's behalf. At Chi-

nese restaurants, group diners never order their own dishes, but instead a selection of dishes embracing both *ròu* (meat) and *cài* (vegetables) are chosen for everyone to share. Rice normally comes at the end of the meal. If you want it before, just ask. At large tables, dishes are placed on a lazy Susan, so the food revolves to each diner, occasionally knocking over full glasses of beer and causing consternation.

The mainland Chinese dig their chopsticks into communal dishes (in Hong Kong, people are more fastidious), although some dishes are ladled out with spoons. Don't worry too much about your chopstick technique; many Chinese are equally fazed by knives and forks. There's no shame in being defeated by a dumpling or bamboozled by broccoli.