



F.T. Marinetti in the uniform of the Italian Academy, of which he was a founder member, La Cucina Futurist

KITCHEN PROJECT: A GRAND TOUR

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Tourist. The word is usually spat out at slow moving individuals in sport shoes and khaki shorts. But what does it mean to be a tourist? Do we travel to see new things or reaffirm things we already know? What do we seek when going to new places?

From late February through to early March of 2012 Wang Wei and I journeyed from Beijing to Manchester to teach Chinese cookery classes in people's homes for an artwork entitled *Kitchen Project*. The project was a collaborative venture "cooked up" by Manchester-based experimental theater group Quarantine, with artists Wang Wei and myself. When planning the project we envisioned it would address ideas surrounding authenticity and food. After teaching five classes in various people's homes, we realized that *Kitchen Project* was also about tourism and capturing that amorphous state of being a visitor. We designed the project framework so that we, two perfect strangers (from a foreign land no less), would walk into a home that we knew nothing about, rummage

through people's cabinets; take over the kitchen, and share some home cooked food. Our objective was to disseminate information and share a meal with strangers, but also to evoke dissonance within familiar surroundings. We wanted to generate the feeling of visiting an unfamiliar place; of being slightly lost; of an unexpected discovery and of experiencing everyday things from a slightly different perspective.

The mini-curriculum for the *Kitchen Project* consisted of teaching northern-style Chinese dishes, which are characterized by rich dark sauces bursting with a kick of spice. For example, Mapo Tofu combines cubes of soft tofu with fiery red pepper and numbing Sichuan peppercorn seared in a thick garlicky sauce; perfect over a bowl of steaming white rice. The Dongbei Cabbage Salad is a refreshing starter of shredded cabbage, tofu strips, leeks and coriander dressed in sesame oil with a splash of soy, vinegar and rice wine. Twice cooked pork is the epitome of Sichuan cuisine with thick slabs of bacon in a fermented black bean and piquant red pepper sauce, garnished with a large handful of fresh green garlic shoots; satisfying sustenance for a cold winter's day.

During the course of the class we explained and tasted ingredients that are frequently used in northern-style Chinese cooking: different types of soy sauce, vinegar and rice wine. We demonstrated how to use a Chinese cleaver and everyone participated in



chopping ingredients for the meal. Seems like an authentic experience, doesn't it? Well, almost.

At the start of each class I explained that Wang Wei and myself are visual artists, and not professional chefs. I stated that we only learned to cook these dishes a month prior to our Manchester trip whilst attending a cookery class in Beijing. The Beijing class was taught in English and targeted tour groups and visitors. In Manchester, I described the dishes that we were about to cook as "Home-Style dishes," but I also explained that in reality very few people in Beijing actually know how to make these dishes, and if they do know, they would not normally cook them at home. Ironically, these dishes are standards on menus of ubiquitous "Home-Style" restaurants throughout Beijing. At some point during the class I also added that I am not Chinese from China, but a Chinese-American from San Francisco. I never ate these foods until I went to Beijing. These disjointed pieces of information are key to the *Kitchen Project*. We wanted to insure that the "ingredients" did not quite fit together. We believe that the essence of this work lies in these awkward in-between gaps.

Kitchen Project has been at least seven years in the making—an extended conversation that started in Beijing in 2005 and continues up to today. From the outset it was a conversation closely paired with food as a way of experiencing place.

During our first visit to Manchester, Quarantine's Renny O'Shea and Richard Gregory took us to all their favorite spots, plied us with amazing meals and arranged for us to meet various people around town. We ate thick fragrant curries and slurped Vietnamese noodles in rich broths. They cooked us Welsh Rarebit, a dish I had previously only known through Bugs Bunny cartoons, and salt baked fish. (If offered, one should never, ever turn down a meal cooked by Richard and Renny, trust me.) During that visit we met local DJs, war refugees, PR agents for Brand Manchester and a professor of gambling. One meeting spontaneously burst into a beat-box session and at another point we found ourselves at a racetrack, cheering for whichever dogs had the best names. At the end of our stay Richard and Renny said they were pleasantly surprised to see their city from our point of view, which was in essence, the point of view of tourists. It was not meant negatively; more that it expressed a sense of freshness, distance, and re-discovery; of seeing familiar things in a new way.

For Wang Wei and myself, *Kitchen Project* also evolved into a form of tourism. We discovered that the stovetops of Manchester became our *Grand Tour*. Our travel itinerary included various hearths, from a suburban ranch-style home to a women's shelter and others in-between. *Kitchen Project* granted us license to poke into the dark reaches

of kitchen drawers and furiously snap photos at our hosts' personal effects. It made us think about the kitchens we already knew and their respective owners. We compared and contrasted, trying to make sense of things, learning about people and their habits via their kitchens. It was an incredible way to experience a city and think about its residents. It was also a way to re-experience the food that we know outside of its usual environment. We witnessed the food change and evolve to fit the differing circumstances of each cookery lesson, and look forward to more transformations as the project progresses to other destinations. Back in Beijing, when we see these "Home-Style" dishes on a menu, we immediately think back to the kitchens in Manchester. For us, Mapo Tofu now conjures up homes in Chorlton and Withington. In the process of enacting the *Kitchen Project*, we inadvertently generated our own familiar dissonance.

Mapo Tofu (麻婆豆腐)

5 cups water
1 block soft tofu, cut into 1.5cm cubes

½ cup water or stock
½ tsp salt
½ tsp white pepper
½ tsp sugar
2 tsp light soy sauce
1 tsp dark soy sauce
1 tsp cooking wine

1 tsp Sichuan peppercorn
1 ½ oz. minced pork or beef
1 tsp fermented black beans

1 tbsp broad bean paste
2 tsp chili

2 tsp. minced leek
2 tsp. minced garlic
2 tsp. minced ginger

1 tsp Sichuan peppercorn powder

2 tbsp cooking oil for stir-frying

Bring water to a boil. Add tofu cubes. Bring water back to boil. Drain and set aside.

Create a sauce by putting the salt, white pepper, sugar, light soy, dark soy and cooking wine into a bowl. Set aside.

Heat wok on high and add oil. When the wok is smoking hot, add Sichuan peppercorns. When the Sichuan peppercorns begin to smoke, carefully remove from the wok. Add minced pork or beef and black beans. Cook through.

Add broad bean paste and stir. Add chili. Add leek, ginger and garlic. Stir-fry for 1 minute.

Add ½ cup water and stir. Add the sauce. When the sauce begins to boil, taste and adjust if necessary.

Add tofu and gently mix. Braise without stirring until the sauce returns to boil. Gently mix and remove from heat. Spoon into a serving dish; finish with a dusting of Sichuan pepper powder and serve.