

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



FEAST FORWARD Mr. Jiu's, a modern Chinese restaurant from chef Brandon Jew, occupies a former Cantonese banquet hall.

ALANNA HALE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. ILLUSTRATION BY LIVI GOSLING

Undoing the Time Warp

In San Francisco, the country's oldest Chinatown—long dismissed as a touristy relic—is stirring up a culinary revival

BY JAY CHESHES

ON A RECENT Friday night, China Live, the new food and drink complex on the edge of San Francisco's Chinatown, throbbled with diners. "We have eight different cooking stations, four distinct cooking types," said founder George Chen, leading a tour past open kitchens surrounding a dining room sparkling with luxurious materials—river rock, marble, a cityscape mural in blue and white tile.

In the adjoining room, shoppers browsed a marketplace stocked with fancy cookware and gourmet ingredients (extra virgin tea oil, housemade XO sauce with Cognac). Upstairs hid a plush speakeasy bar and another restaurant, serving \$225 tasting menus to just eight tables a night. "The perception of Chinese food has to change," said Mr. Chen. "Americans have to get over that mystery brown sauce in a white box cliché."

To get his message across, this veteran restaurateur bet big on one of San Francisco's most perpetually troubled neighborhoods, launching his 30,000-square-foot, \$20 million Chinese version of Eataly, as he describes it, along a strip of cheap takeout restaurants and cluttered souvenir shops.

The country's oldest and largest Chinatown suffered through years of economic decline, plagued by graffiti, petty crime and shuttered storefronts, with whole stretches looking increasingly like abandoned movie sets and little life left behind their historic facades. But while the district's central thoroughfare, Grant Avenue, lined with sleepy gift shops, remains frozen in a tourist-trap time-warp, new signs of life were stirring in the area even before China Live opened last spring.

In recent years, other newcomers



have begun tiptoeing into the district's restaurant scene, while young heirs to iconic establishments have started re-energizing their parents' and grandparents' businesses. Community leaders, meanwhile, spurred by a long overdue subway station project slated to finally open next year, have been working to bring traffic back to the neighborhood with improved lighting and beautification schemes.

A maze of bright murals has sprung up in recent years, a result, mostly, of landlords replacing tagged walls with commissioned street art. Terracotta warriors climb the walls of one building on Grant Avenue, while around the corner a somber piece depicts alleyway gambling in the late 19th century. Both murals are by Francisco Aquino, a local artist who signs his work Twick—and has enough street cred to keep vandals at bay. Betty Louie, a local property owner, commissioned both pieces. Ms. Louie has also been working to attract new food ventures to the area. A new fast-casual dim sum parlor from Bay Area restaurateur Chris Yeo will soon fill one of Ms. Louie's historic restaurant spaces, the pagoda-topped former home of Cathay House on California Street. "We



HOT PROPERTY Clockwise from above left: A chile-rich fish fillet at Z&Y; the scene on Grant Avenue; bartender Sacred Mitchell at Cold Drinks Bar at China Live.

hope...we can draw maybe a different population to Chinatown," she said. "Not only the tourists, but maybe the locals will come back."

Another neighborhood booster, Albert Cheng—who works with San Francisco's Friends of Roots organization, which brings Chinese American to China in search of their ancestral homes—points out that Chinatown's food is becoming much more diverse: "This area used to be all Cantonese, now you see a blend of Hong Kong, Shanghai, Hunan, Chongqing." He's been eating here since the 1960s, when glamorous supper clubs and banquet halls drew the city's smart set. "The old places were absolutely stunning," said Mr. Cheng. The Empress of China, the last of those opulent eating palaces, shut down a few years ago, and its landmark building's fate remains in limbo. Here, a brief guide to the neighborhood's newer dining and drinking establishments.

China Live Market Restaurant The anchor restaurant at China Live serves a market-driven menu of Chinatown classics—juicy pork dumplings, Cantonese roast meats, rice casseroles in clay pots—subtly upgraded with top-shelf ingredients (including produce grown for the restaurant on its own farm plot in

Sometimes Old Fashioned includes duck fat-washed 10-year-old Speyburn and a very big cube of ice. 644 Broadway, chinalivesf.com

Lai Hong Lounge The best dim sum house in Chinatown, an offshoot of the popular Hong Kong Lounge that opened a few years back in the city's Richmond district, is hidden behind a barely marked facade on the neighborhood's edge. Instead of the usual rumbling carts, you tick boxes on a vast illustrated menu to order. The steamed and fried dumplings come in a bewildering array of shapes and fillings, from crispy swans filled with durian custard to bundles of purple yam and chive. The waits can be very long on weekends. 1416 Powell St., lhklounge.com

Mister Jiu's Growing up Chinese-American in San Francisco, Brandon Jew knew the Four Seas restaurant well, an iconic banquet hall where he celebrated big family occasions. In 2016, Mr. Jew, a veteran of top restaurants in the city, took the helm of the extensively renovated space and turned a classic dining destination into one of the city's most contemporary. His creative riffs on traditional Chinese dishes—chicken feet terrine with chile and lime, rice noodles with sea urchin, Wagyu beef and tuna heart fried rice—pack the house every night. A cocktail lounge will soon open upstairs. 28 Waverly Pl., misterjius.com

Red Blossom Tea Company Alice Luong took over her parents' venerable herb and tea shop, a mainstay on Grant Avenue, a few years back, updating the space and launching a thriving online business. Ms. Luong, who sources the teas direct from farms across China and Taiwan, offers guided tastings on site, explaining the difference between a vintage pu-erh, say, and a bug-bitten oolong. She also sells an assortment of delicate ceramic sipping and steeping vessels. 831 Grant Ave., redblossomtea.com

Z&Y Li Jun Han, a former state chef for two Chinese presidents, is a master of *ma la*, the tingly-hot heart of Sichuan cooking. His Chinatown flagship—he owns a second restaurant across town—specializes in foods showered in hot oil and buried under dry and fresh chilies. (President Obama once picked up takeout there.) His offal dishes are particular standouts—try the tendons, kidneys or tripe. Mr. Han, an unofficial ambassador of Chinese culture, recently brought in a tea master who dances through the dining room pouring tea from a long-spouted brass pot. An offshoot, Z&Y Bistro, focused on skewered meats, will open this summer across the street. 655 Jackson St., zandyrestaurant.com

