

Cats en Caron zwerven een week door Shanghai langs Westerse Culinaire Ambassadeurs en puur Chinese eethuizen of straatkraampjes. Ze hebben hulp van hun charmante gids Fran Tang, een Chinese van Maleisische komaf, die al sinds haar twaalfde op zichzelf woont en sinds een paar jaar in de grootste havenstad van de wereld. Twee keer Shanghai, twee verschillende werelden.

Fascinating Shanghai



For a whole week Dutch journalists Cats and Caron wander the streets of Shanghai past Western Culinary Ambassadors and authentic Chinese food stalls on the streets.

They are aided by their charming guide Fran Tang, a Chinese of Malaysian descent, who has been living on her own since the age of twelve and for the past few years, here in the world's largest port. Two sides of Shanghai, two different worlds.

Invited by Chaume Tapièce, president of the renowned restaurant and hotel chain Relais et Chateaux, Cats and Caron decided to pay Shanghai a visit. It is the large, sprawling, pur sang, capitalist counterpart of China's capital Beijing, where the communists are holed up and everything is square. Relais et Chateaux enters the kingdom of the future and made Sens & Bund, the restaurant owned by the Pourcel twins from Montpellier France, their first member in China.

The gold sign of Relais et Chateaux blends in with the rest of the Bund, the boulevard along the Huangpo River, where you find top brands like Versace, Gucci and Armani. The rich Chinese know what they want. The big BMWs and loud, flashy Buicks are proof of this. And in between you find thousands of yellow taxis - old model Passats and Fiats, which take you across

the city for little or no money, honking all the way. Or all the way to the airport, which is about 85 kilometers away, for only 18 euros. Try finding that in Holland.

Standing on the Bund, which is Anglo-Chinese for 'riverbank', you can see Pudong across the river: the flashy business area and its 500-meter high TV tower with two globes resembling giant gonads on either side of its base. But it stands in the shadow of the Hyatt Hotel, which is over 200 meters higher and practically hollow on the inside. The





rooms have been built in a cylinder around the open center. The location, however, turned out to be a mistake. Hotel guests need half an hour to get from old Shanghai to the other side. Imagine having to go to the bathroom or suddenly feeling the urge to get romantic with your sweetheart! At night all the buildings along the river are lit like a giant amusement park. One particularly large building serves as a TV screen. All the big international brands are represented in a cacophony of color: Nokia, Sony, Fugifilm, Carlson, Toyota, Epson, and even occasionally Philips. From the terrace of the Bar Rouge (also owned by the Pourcels) you have a great view of all this. On the

other hand, it is remarkable that all these neon signs - flashier than Las Vegas and Piccadilly Circus put together - are turned off at exactly 11 p.m. It's the Chinese frugality. They are pretty eccentric about electricity anyway. In the city you see enormous bundles of wires hanging above intersections. That could get kind of hot in case of a short circuit. In these parts, electricity is still produced from coal. Every year 6,000 workers die in Chinese coal mines. The first few days, Cats and Caron are amazed by the lack of hygiene and the surliness of the average Chinese. At least four times they stop and watch, almost impudently, how a woman shamelessly curses at her husband in

the middle of the street. Or they gaze at old ladies taking away their urine pails. Barely ten minutes away from all the neon signs there are no sewers and no running water, only the daily struggle of life. Old, stooped grannies grab your arm, begging. Of course you give them some money, but the stream of beggars doesn't stop and your arm gets tired from handing out alms. After telling them no ten times ('bui how') to no avail, you yell 'police'! Then they sneak off.

On TV there is a government broadcast that teaches the Chinese to be friendlier. To say 'hello' or 'thank you'. The Chinese are very introverted. They are

gave him a glass of warm water to take them. Within an hour his problems had disappeared.

In so-called 'rich' Shanghai, the part of the city that is packed with Western splendor and luxury, the streets are crowded with obnoxious vendors and beggars. All day long you hear 'watchy, watchy' (watches) and 'montablan' (pens). The street vendors also sell imitation traditional art made by art students, Ray Ban sunglasses (according to the little labels), laptops for 150 euros, yellow movies (porn), sex massages (I have velly nice bed, you know, sir. Velly, velly nice!), tongue massages and even massages by blind



friendly to family and friends, and that's about it. Sometimes, however, they will surprise you with their courtesy. Cats had bowel problems - here they call it 'the running hotchpotch' - and had to go to a pharmacy. Women with friendly smiles recommend some green pills, of which he had to take five. They even

folks. The Bund is a popular center to trade wares. But apparently you need a permit, because when the police find a vendor without one, they take strong action. A doll-like girl of five at the most steals Caron's heart. She spins around on a stage with a mouthpiece in her mouth, her feet bent backwards over her



head till they are in front of her face. The moment she spots our Frenchman she steps off her spinning tripod with a pirouette, then makes a few cart wheels and lands precisely with her hand in his. He gives her money. With a big smile she shows the 20 yen note (2 euros) to her parents who are watching over their own stall 15 meters further down. Ask me if Shanghai is fun, the answer would have to be: fun, no; fascinating, yes. The exploitation of children stays with you like a pungent odor. A man of around 50 who sends his two-year-old son to you in the middle of the night; the kid can hardly walk, but he tugs at your pants for money. These things leave a lasting and uneasy impression.

Chinese Shanghai...

As culinary journalists, Cats and Caron obviously wonder how this enormous number of people obtains food. In a city with as many inhabitants as the

Netherlands on a surface that is five times as small, this must be, at the very least, a small, daily logistical miracle. Picture Amsterdam, but then with four million residents - that would be a huge frying pan as well. On every street corner, on every porch, in shops, on markets, in malls and on the prestigious Bund, food is sold everywhere; people are frying and cooking everywhere. But how does the food get there? Who delivered it and where has it been prepared? And how do you know for sure they're not giving you dog, cat or rat? To see more of this entire process, Fran Tang has put together an elaborate program with plenty of eating opportunities. She wants to introduce C&C to the various Chinese cuisines in a short time, and takes them to markets and shops. There are five or six main trends. The Beijing cuisine is classic, Shanghai has many one-pan dishes, Sichuan is spicy, the Hotpot cuisine is more Mongolian-like with lots of fat,

and the Yangzhou cuisine could be called Mediterranean. Then there is the Xingjian cuisine, which we would call kebab. And then there are all kinds of variations in between.

Tourist do not go beyond the Bund, the French Connection Area which has been built especially for tourists, and the Yu Garden with its restored authentic Chinese buildings. Here it feels like Frankfurt, Vancouver, Lyon or any other big city. Starbucks, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut and McDonalds, they're all there. C&C tried a Big Mac Menu. It tasted the same as anywhere else and cost a penny, but that is still one tenth of an average monthly salary or ten times as much as a large cup of noodles, so it's not for the common resident of Shanghai. The average Shanghai Chinese goes to the market to buy his daily food, where they skin live eel, chop frogs as big as a kittens in two, swiftly remove the shell of a tortoise, cut the gills and tail off a fish when it's still alive, and sell fresh chicken. How fresh? Living fresh. And all this openly on the street, sometimes



barely covered by a piece of corrugated iron. Those who own a real stall have a huge advantage. At the Xian Yang Market, the chicken vendors dressed in coveralls, sit in what could be described as glass cabins with a little space for customers. The chickens are kept in wrought iron baskets. They can put their beaks through the holes. When you point one out, the vendor takes it out and shows you the thighs of 'your chicken'. It's a bit embarrassing, this rude intimacy. If you're satisfied, the chicken's throat is quickly slit and the blood is squeezed out. In one swift move, the butt is opened and the intestines are taken out. Then it is put in a tray with boiling water after which it is thrown into the spin dryer to be plucked. It comes out featherless. Then the claws are clipped with large scissors, it's put in a plastic bag and, voilà, fresh chicken.

All over town you can eat anything you like at street stalls and in tiny restaurants. Noodles with fried bees taste quite good. Noodles with fried



crickets are a little heavy. There are duck wings, fried pig snouts and chicken feet, sweet and sour ginger or hard-boiled eggs marinated in horse urine for two days. Horse urine? Yes indeed. When you peel it, a strange, shiny, blackish-blue egg appears, with a green yolk. It tastes like it's been boiling all day. With a little vinegar it is somewhat edible, but the intense aftertaste of the yolk sticks to your teeth for a long time. The white bapao buns, however, filled with steamed pork, are delicious. Or was it pork? It struck us that in a crowded restaurant people will stand right next to your table while

they come for the food. Big foreign restaurants like Sens & Bund, Vongerichten, Jeremy Leung and David Laris are starting to change that. But what do average Chinese doll-like girls know? Nothing. They serve the guests in their old-fashioned beige outfits with authentic white aprons, or walk around in bright colored jackets. They are quick to react. When you hang your coat over the chair, they quickly put a plastic bag over it - very inventive. It protects the coat against pickpockets and the waiters can't spill anything on it. If you don't finish your plate, they provide doggy bags. At Bao Luo on Fu Min Road, Cats



you're eating and wait for you to finish so they can take your chair the minute you leave. You don't ask for or order food, you demand it. If you want something taken from your table, you just hold it out from your table. Waiters make about 30 euros a month, so they rely on turnover and tips. There are many waiters walking around and they get to your table in a jiffy. Our guide Tang explains that working in a kitchen is not very prestigious in China. People don't come for the chef,

and Caron finish their plate and eat it, too. Fried sweet and sour cod, tender beef with sweet lemon sauce, crêpes with vegetables and lots of thick sauces, like the ones you get at Chinese restaurants in Holland. It is still very strange to see that the Chinese don't order their food, but shout out their orders. Will that be all? When they're finished, around 11 p.m., the restaurant is filled again with a new round of guests and even at this late hour, they'll bring their small children. Everything



takes place in some kind of old-fashioned mansion, with five hundred chairs in various small rooms, 49 cooks, 8 dishwashers and a serving staff of 45 going up and down the stairs, all day long. During their visit at the Tong Shuan fish market at nine o'clock in the evening, C&C buy a turbotin and a sea bass and have them prepared in restaurant Tien Hong ('heavenly fortune') by the Lao Da ('big brother'). The big brother doesn't find it necessary to invite them in his kitchen; the chef is not looking for recognition, he just cooks and that's it. Still, he has his picture taken with C&C and he's happy as a child when they give him a key chain with little wooden shoes. The fish is served with the head and the tail, in other words as tasty as possible. On the side they get beans, cilantro, peanut sauce, relish, peppers and Julienne

potatoes. The turbotin is steamed in yellow Chinese wine, Hai Lu, which gives the fish a somewhat sweet, nutty flavor. Lao Do's kitchen brigade consists of 13 people and they prepare food for an average of 960 people. The restaurant closes at 2 a.m., but the market just goes on and on - 24 hours a day. The Xiao Long Xia restaurant is an experience onto itself. Here you eat crayfish and yabbis prepared in ten different ways, that's all they have on the menu. The restaurant is always full. You have to take a number and wait outside. Once you're inside, you wonder why you even wanted to, since it's very crowded, not very clean and very damp. Everywhere people are gnawing at yabbis with a bucket on the floor beside them for waste and a box of paper towels on the table. The cooks prepare the food in small kitchens that have been built in the well between the



stairs. You walk on wet, trampled cardboard hoping a fire doesn't break out, because there's no emergency exit in sight. But how do the crayfish taste? Heavenly. You can taste the true Wow Keh, the heat of the fire, which is a sign of purity. Two large plates of yabbis, water, beer and wine, and the bill comes to 110 yen, which is around 11 euros. Dong Bei Ren, with a northeastern Chinese cuisine, is mainly vegetarian. C&C are having lunch there. Black mushrooms, kebab of pork, cucumber and rucola served on ice. The waiters and waitresses wear multicolored clothes with red, yellow and green baseball caps. It is reminiscent of the Peruvian colors. At Xingjian they eat kebab. It is the western Chinese kitchen that is ridiculed by the eastern Chinese in Shanghai. The mini pak choi cabbages fried in garlic and poached in chicken stock are very tasty. The fried apples were gobbled up in flash. They tasted just like Grandma's. They're quick-fried in the same oil used to fry bananas - which you can taste - and then cooled. You dip them in melted sugar, sprinkle some sesame seeds on them and just before you put them in your mouth, you quickly dip them in cold water. Simply divine. In fact, all varieties of authentic Chinese cuisine are really tasty. And if you can put your own prejudices about

hygiene aside, a visit to the original Shanghai can be an enervating experience.

The other Shanghai...

The big international chefs have emphatically announced their arrival in today's Shanghai. Has this lead to a mix in the cuisine? No, and it's not likely to happen. Of course the Chinese kitchen influences Western cooking, but dinner guests at Sens & Bund, Jean Georges, Mesa, New Heights, David Laris, Tee 8, M on the Bund and Shintaro (i.e. Japanese) come for their respective cuisines and not for chop suey or foo yung hai. But if you want to enjoy high quality Chinese cooking, in this case the Beijing kitchen, you go to the Bund, to the Li Family Imperial Kitchen or to Jeremy Leung's Whampoa Club. As guests of Relais et Chateaux and the Pourcels, Cats and Caron walk in and out of Sens & Bund. It's a six-story building with old-fashioned high ceilings, stately doors and windows, and a monumental stairwell like the ones you see in the movies. The first three floors house luxury shopping galleries. On the fourth floor there is a Chinese restaurant, on the fifth there's Sens & Bund, and on the sixth is the immensely popular Bar Rouge where, at night, all the ex-pats in town come to check each other out. The presentation of the first official Relais et Chateaux member is a happening that attracts a lot of press, radio, TV, and notables. In China, culinary journalists are always given an envelope filled with a few hundred euros, says colleague Jeremy Wayne of Tatler magazine. But C&C haven't seen

any envelopes and feel like outsiders. They attend the dinner gala including a spectacular show performed by thirty stunningly beautiful Chinese women. Where they come from is kept secret, but every single performer is a striking beauty who can sing and dance, and has a long-lasting smile. The food at the

when the place is packed, it doesn't feel crowded at all. Every table has its own intimate atmosphere. If you look through the big, red colored windows you can see the busy staff in the kitchen. Soon the Pourcels will open Brasserie T Sens, also on the Bund, in a former officers' club. These guys just go on and



Pourcels and their partner Steven Wang, a Chinese from Taiwan who owns shoe factories employing 60,000 people, is excellent. If you want to find something worth complaining about, you could say that the foie gras from China is a little slimy. Other than that, everything is perfect including the interior, which is an oasis of elegance and serenity. The Nouveau Riche are frequent guests. Every month as many as 3,000 bottles of champagne are served during the busy lunches and dinners. In the evenings,

on, and who can blame them? In France you make your investments back in twenty years; in Shanghai it only takes five years. But they have plans for Washington and Dubai as well, and nowadays the jet set can visit La Plage Rouge in Marrakech. A few hundred meters down you will find 3 On The Bund, an equally stately Bund-like building with lots of neo-classical characteristics. Here you find such names as Jean Georges Vongerichten, New Heights, Jeremy Leung, Nina Ricci,

Yahamato and an art gallery. Cats and Caron are welcome at Vongerichten. In this stately restaurant with the grandeur of an old-fashioned Oriental gentlemen's club, they feast on rather French-oriented dishes. The egg with caviar and vodka mousse tastes delicious, and the tiger prawn with cilantro, avocado and bacon should be on the menu of every top restaurant. Half of the guests of American chef Eric Johnson are business people; then there are the tourists. Also many of the foreign chefs working in Shanghai pop in regularly. His staff mainly consists of Americans, English and Australians. Chef Johnson defines the uniqueness of his kitchen by the freshness of the products. He gets his meat and game from Australia. You will rarely find lamb or duck on the menu, but plenty of beef and foie gras. Johnson is delighted with the herbs and spices in Shanghai. He offers C&C some fresh star anise to smell, and it's intoxicating. One floor up is Jeremy Leung's Whampoa Club with lots of plush, elegant curtains and color combinations. The entrance is like a

fairytale. A breathtaking array of light fixtures along the walls. The tables and mosaic screens are almost a century old. The authentic Shanghai cuisine is served with ingredients from the whole region. Take for instance the red dates, steeped in sugar, with cinnamon apple and foie gras. The free-range chicken Leung serves is cooked for ten hours on a low temperature and is tender as can be, and remarkably rosy inside. Practically all the dishes of this great cosmopolitan chef are both modern and traditional: Chinese cuisine with a 21st century touch. An average menu costs 50 euro. Another floor up you will find Australian David Laris. His restaurant has a Spartan atmosphere, very open and bright. It makes you feel like you're floating. Greek-inspired columns give it an almost sauna-like appearance. Laris' kitchen is characterized by plenty of fish dishes that stand midway between Nouvelle Cuisine and old-fashioned regional French cuisine. The sympathetic chef is proud of his chocolate laboratory where you can buy boxes of bonbons of almost six foot by



two. Bonbons filled with pepper, salami, herbs, spices, or caviar. What a feast! New Heights, on the top floor, is the casual brasserie of Vongerichten. Here, too, a spectacular view and a domed room that seats no more than ten people. There is a small attic in the dome, where two people can have an intimate dinner and more. The high curtain invites you to dream unworldly dreams. Tom Cruise frequently dined here when shooting Mission Impossible III. The other 'European' places Cats and Caron visited are Kabb, in the shadow of the McKinsey and Partners office, which serves European lunches exclusively, and opposite there is Vintage, for a breakfast with real French croissants and delicious espresso. Both establishments are not cheap. In the same district, on Taicang Road in the Fuchon Resort, there is Tee 8, owned by Stephen Wright and Walter Zammer, and it is definitely worth a visit. The open kitchen mainly serves top fusion dishes. OK, it is rather dark inside, but the food is superb. And when you have traveled all this way across the world,

you might as well try two different versions of tiramisu. Served in a small cup with a heavenly sauce; on the side are waffles, whipped cream made of mascarpone and homemade ice cream. By Shanghai standards the prices are high, but for 100 euros you can have a great meal for two. The staff is very dedicated and courteous, albeit a little stiff.

Visitors of Shanghai looking for Japanese food can go to Shintori on Julu Road. At night this district is crowded with girls looking for action and you have to know where the entrance to the restaurant is, but once inside there are two or, in fact, three surprises in store for you. First of all the food itself, which is out of this world: thoroughly Japanese with surprising sushi and sashimi. The rock-'n-roll salad of grated tuna is two thumbs up, as is the beef served on a hot lava stone allowing it to cook through and through. The interior is also quite original. It's mostly bare concrete with a floating mezzanine. A huge mirror offers everyone a look inside the open kitchen. But the room is sparse. The tables are separated by screens of plaited reed. The third surprise is reserved for male guests only. In the urinal you pee against a glass wall, with the lit garden behind it. A curious shock, because it feels like the on-looking audience can applaud you at any moment. Shanghai etches itself into your memory, and every now and then it entices you like a tired call girl. Will Cats and Caron go back? There are still plenty of other places on the list, but you never know.

