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Recommendation: "Garden of Contentment"

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If you haven’t already stumbled across Fuchsia Dunlop’s piece in last week’s New Yorker on a Hangzhou restaurant that uses only local food, it’s worth a read. Dunlop, author of two Chinese cookbooks and the recently-published memoir Shark’s Fin and Sichuan Pepper, describes her trip to visit Dai Jianjun, owner of the Dragon Well Manor, which serves a prix fixe menu to diners (starting at about 300 yuan) “prepared with local ingredients according to the theories of Chinese medicine and the solar terms of the old agricultural calendar.” Here’s a short excerpt:

Dai’s main worry is that traditional farming and cooking won’t survive another generation. During two weeks that I spent in Hangzhou, in two different seasons, I accompanied him on visits to half a dozen or so rural suppliers, and in almost every household the parents and grandparents were keeping up the family farms, while the children had left for the cities. One fisherman who provides most of the restaurant’s fish and shrimp quipped that his son was more interested in shang wang—surfing the Internet—than in san wang: casting a fishing net. The oldest supplier is ninety-three years old.

Dai sees himself as a custodian of traditional skills. “My senior chefs are all officially retired workers, but they are teaching the younger chefs how to cook without MSG,” he said. “And when this place was built I made sure that there were younger workers around who could learn from the old master craftsmen.” He dreams of one day opening a self-sustaining farm where schoolchildren can learn about the origins of what they eat. “In the past, everyone who grew up in the countryside knew how to raise pigs and fowl, and understood the old agricultural calendar,” he said. “But things have developed so quickly, and we are losing touch with our traditions.” Still, he is aware of the limitations of his project. “We can only do this on a small scale,” he told me as we finished our tea. “China has so many people, and so little land. If everyone tried to eat this way, there wouldn’t be enough food to go around. But we must try to sustain our agricultural lore and culinary skills for future generations.”

Tags: food, Fuchsia Dunlop