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BOB SCHNEIDER'S PELLEGRINO

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FAR LEFT: Chef Zhang in the midst of his swift and practiced motions
LEFT: An attentive class at Black Sesame Kitchen

Biting Into Beijing

REAL CHINESE TASTES AT THE BLACK SESAME KITCHEN COOKING SCHOOL

BY BECCA HENSLEY

It takes 50 noodles to fill a bowl for one person. No wonder Chef Zhang's arms look like they could move mountains; he does this all day. He lifts a chunky, handleless knife high into the air and swipes at an immense thimble-shaped statue of dough. His graceful hacking

causes long, thin and miraculously uniform ribbons to shoot through the air. They glide and hover, then plop into a sturdy pot of boiling water. His repetitive motions, as exact as choreographed tai chi, mesmerize us as much as the aroma of the sauces that simmer on the stove. A student asks Zhang if she can wield the knife, but the chef shakes his head. "First you must learn to knead the dough," he says via his translator, Jen Lin-Liu, Chinese-American master chef, author and founder of the **Black Sesame Kitchen**, a cooking school in Beijing where I'm sitting with a handful of other students to watch Zhang in action.

Chef Zhang, the experienced noodle master, taught young Lin-Liu to make noodles when she apprenticed in his noodle stand in Beijing. Now the roles have shifted. He's teaching Chinese cooking to students at her experiential school, situated in a typical hutong—an alley-like neighborhood with courtyard homes, once the domain of Beijing's 19th-century upper class.

We're in a century-old home, the kitchen ceilings so low they nearly graze our heads. When at last we slurp up the noodles, they're chewy yet succulent with a special porosity that soaks up Zhang's sauces. We can choose between a spicy pork topping and a tangy egg and tomato one. Most of us try both.

The school also relies on the expertise of a woman called Chairman Wang, another mentor of Lin-Liu's. (In China, "chairman" is a title of respect for men and women.) Tall, unflappable and perpetually bemused, she instructs us in the art of making dumplings. We create them after returning from a romp through **Xinmin Market**, which teems with items most of us have never seen before—black chicken, tofu noodles and unidentified animal parts too strange to name. This is how classes at the school work. You shop, you learn and you cook, all in one day.

Back in the classroom, we pay close attention to Wang. We start with flour and water in a bowl; most of us end up with dough that's too sticky until Wang corrects our efforts. When the

dough achieves the consistency of worn leather, we roll fat cigars of dough by hand, then divide and flatten, pinch and prod. Again, we imitate Wang's seemingly simple movements unsuccessfully. At last, she permits us to fill

our wrappers with spoonfuls of aromatic lamb and pumpkin seasoned with garlic and soy sauce. When we try to seal our dumplings with Wang's grace, we fail. Klutzy fingers make lumpy pillows—and mine are the worst. Even Wang can't rectify them. Still, when dipped steaming into vinegar and chile, my dumplings turn my shame to ecstasy. They are simply delicious.

We had traveled to the Black Sesame Kitchen that morning by bike—a quintessential way to join the throng in chaotic Beijing. Nicknamed the city of bicycles, Beijing abounds with locals on two wheels. We're off to a good start until one member of our group nearly crashes through the front doors of our hotel, the **Ritz-Carlton Financial Street**. But an elegant concierge comes to our rescue, fretting over our helmets and restoring lost confidence with a quick review course on gear shifting and brakes.

We cycle our way past de rigueur sites such as **Tiananmen Square**, with its portrait of Mao, and weave in circles around the immense pagodas of the **Forbidden City**, gliding by wizened old men selling sweet potatoes from wheeled carts and women minding bird cages. Most bikes whiz by us, their riders laden with bushels of sticks, mountains of boxes and inconceivably stacked sacks of food. It takes an entire morning to reach the crowded hutong where Lin-Liu organizes her cooking adventures. When class ends, we're far too full to pedal back. Thankfully, the hotel has whisked our bikes away and sent someone to collect us. Stuffed as dumplings, we stagger down the alleyways of the hutong to the car, a bit of the true China still settling in our bellies. ●

BEST BETS

Stay: Ritz-Carlton
Financial Street,
ritzcarlton.com

Fly: Cathay Pacific
Airlines (consider a
stopover in Hong
Kong), cathaypacific.
com/us

Do: Black Sesame
Kitchen, blacksesame
kitchen.com

Read: Jen Lin-Liu's re-
cently published book,
*Serve the People: A
Stir-Fried Journey
Through China*