



A Rat in my Soup

Looking for the best-tasting rodent in town.

By peter hessler

Do you want a big rat or a small rat? the waitress asked. I was getting used to making difficult decisions in Luogang, a small village in southern China's Guangdong Province. I'd come here on a whim, having heard that Luogang had a famous restaurant that specialized in the preparation of rats. Upon arrival, however, I discovered that there were two celebrated restaurants—the Highest Ranking Wild Flavour Restaurant and the New Eight Sceneries Wild Flavour Food City. They were next door to each other, and they had virtually identical bamboo-and-wood decors. Moreover, their owners were both named Zhong—but, then everybody in Luogang seemed to be named Zhong. The two Zhongs were not related, and competition between them was keen. As a foreign journalist, I'd been cajoled to such an extent that, in an effort to please both Zhongs, I agreed to eat two lunches, one at each restaurant.

Te waitress at the Highest Ranking Wild Flavour Restaurant, who was also named Zhong in Chinese, it means bell), asked again, Do you want a big rat or a small rat?

What's the difference? I said.

The big rats eat grass stems, and the small ones eat fruit.

I tried a more direct tack. Which tastes better?

Both of them taste good: Which do you recommend?

Either one:

I glanced at the table next to mine. Two parents, a grandmother, and a little boy were having lunch. The boy was gnawing on a rat drumstick. I couldn't tell if the drumstick had belonged to a big rat or a small rat. The boy ate quickly. It was a warm afternoon. The sun was shining. I made my decision. Small rat, I said.

The Chinese say that people in Guangdong will eat anything. Besides rat, a customer at the Highest Ranking Wild Flavour Restaurant can order turtledove, fox, cat, python, and an assortment of strange looking local animals whose names do not translate into English. All of them are kept live in pens at the back of the restaurant and are killed only when a customer orders one of them. Choosing among them involves considerations beyond flavour or texture. You order cat not just because you enjoy the taste of cat but because

cats are said to impart a lively jingshen (spirit). You eat deer penis to improve virility. Snakes make you stronger. And rat? It keeps you from going bald: Zhong Shaocong, the daughter of the owner of the Highest Ranking Wild Flavour Restaurant, told me. Zhong Qingjiang, the owner of the New Eight Sceneries Wild Flavour Food City, went further. If you have white hair and eat rat regularly, it will turn black: she said. And if you're going bald and you eat rat every day your hair will stop falling out. A lot of the parents around here feed rat to a small child who doesn't have much hair, and the hair grows better.

Earlier this year, Luogang opened a restaurant street in the newly developed Luogang Economic Open Zone, a parkland and restaurant district designed to draw visitors from nearby Guangzhou City. The

government invested \$1,200,000 in the project, which enabled the two rat restaurants to move from their old, cramped quarters in a local park into new, greatly expanded spaces—about 1,800 square feet for each establishment. The Highest Ranking Wild Flavour Restaurant, which cost \$42,000 to build, opened in early March. Six days later, the New Eight Sceneries Wild Flavour Food City opened, on an investment of 54,000. A third restaurant—a massive, air-conditioned facility, which is expected to cost \$72,000—will open soon. A fourth is in the planning stages.

On the morning of my initiation into rat cuisine, I visited the construction site of the third facility, whose owner, Deng Ximing, was the only local restaurateur not named Zhong. He was married to a Zhong, however, and he had the fast-talking confidence of a successful entrepreneur. I also noticed that he had a good head of hair. He spoke of the village's culinary tradition with pride. It's more than a thousand years old, he said. And it's always been rats from the mountains – we're not eating city rats. The mountain rats are clean because up there they aren't eating anything dirty. Mostly, they eat fruit – oranges, plums, jackfruit. People from the government hygiene department have been here to examine the rats. They took them to the laboratory and checked them out thoroughly to see if they had any diseases, and they found nothing. Not even the slightest problem.

Luogang's restaurant street has been a resounding success. Newspapers and television stations have reported extensively on the benefits of the local specialty, and an increasing number of customers are making the half-hour trip from Guangzhou City. Both the Highest Ranking Wild Flavour Restaurant and the New Eight Sceneries Wild Flavour Food City serve, on average, 3,000 rats every Saturday and Sunday, which are the peak dining days. Many people come from faraway places:' Zhong Qingjiang told me. They come from Cuangzhou, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, Macao. One customer came all J the way from America with her son. They were visiting relatives in Luogang, and the family brought them here to eat. She said you couldn't find this kind of food in America:'

In America, needless to say, you would be hard-pressed to find 12,000 fruit-fed rats anywhere on any weekend, but this isn't a problem in Luogang. On my first morning in the village, I watched dozens of peasants come down from the hills, looking to get a piece of the rat business. They came on mopeds, on bicycles, and on foot. All of them carried burlap sacks of squirming rats that had been trapped on their farms.

Last year, I sold my oranges for 15 a pound:' a farmer named Zhong Senji told me. But this year the price has dropped to less than 10' Like many other peasants, Zhong decided that he could do a lot better with rats. Today, he had nine rats in his sack. When the sack was put on a scale in the rear of the Highest Ranking Wild Flavour Restaurant, it shook and squeaked. It weighed in at just under 3 pounds, and Zhong received the equivalent in yuan of \$1.45 per pound, for a total of \$3.87. In Luogang, rats are more expensive than pork or chicken. A pound of rat costs nearly twice as much as a pound of beef.

At the Highest Ranking Wild Flavour Restaurant, I began with a dish called Simmered Mountain Rat with Black Beans. There were plenty of other options on the menu—among them, Mountain Rat Soup, Steamed Mountain Rat, Simmered Mountain Rat, Roasted Mountain Rat, Mountain Rat Curry, and Spicy and Salty Mountain Rat—but the waitress had enthusiastically recommended the Simmered Mountain Rat with Black Beans, which arrived in a clay pot.

I ate the beans first. They tasted fine. I poked at the rat meat. It was clearly well done, and it was attractively garnished with onions, leeks, and ginger. Nestled in a light sauce were skinny rat thighs, short strips of rat flank, and delicate, toylike rat ribs. I started with a thigh, put a chunk of it into my mouth, and reached for a glass of beet. The beer helped.

The restaurant's owner, Zhong Dieqin, came over and sat down. What do you think? she asked.

I think it tastes good:'

You know it's good for your health:'

I've heard that:'

It's good for your hair and skin:' she said. It's also good for your kidneys:'

Zhong Dieqin watched me intently. Are you sure you like it? she asked.

Yes:' I said, tentatively. In fact, it wasn't bad. The meat was lean and white, without a hint a gaminess. Gradually, my squeamishness faded, and I tried to decide what, exactly, the flavour of rat reminded me of. But nothing came to mind. It simply tasted like rat.

Next door, at the New Eight Sceneries Wild Flavour Food City, the Zhongs were more media-savvy. They asked if I had brought along a television crew. They looked disappointed when I said that I hadn't. Then the floor manager brightened and asked me how I'd liked their corn petition.

It was fine:' I said.

What did you eat?

Simmered Mountain Rat with Black Beans.

You'll like ours better, she said. Our cook is better, the service is quicker, and the waitresses are more polite:'

I decided to order the Spicy and Salty Mountain Rat. This time, when the waitress asked about my preference in sizes, I said, pleased with my boldness, Big rat:'

Come and choose it.

What?

Pick out the rat you want:'

I followed one of the kitchen workers to a shed behind the restaurant, where cages were stacked atop one another. Each cage contained more than 30 rats. The shed did not smell good. The worker pointed at a rat.

How about this one? he said.

Urn, sure:'

He put on a glove, opened the cage, and picked up the chosen rat. It was about the size of a softball. Is it O.K.? he said.

Yes:'

Are you certain?

The rat gazed at me with beady eyes. I nodded.

Suddenly, the worker flipped his wrist, swung the rat into the air by the tail, and let go. The rat made a neat arc. There was a soft thud when its head struck the cement floor. There wasn't much blood. The worker grinned. You can go back to the dining room now:' he said. We'll bring it out to you soon:'

O.K., I said.

Less than 15 minutes later, the dish was at my table, garnished with carrots and leeks. The chef came out of the kitchen to join the owner, Zhong Qingjiang, the floor manager, and a cousin of the owner to watch me eat. How is it? the chef asked.

Good.

Is it too tough?

No:' I said. It's fine.

In truth, I was trying hard not to taste anything. I had lost my appetite in the shed, and now I ate quickly, washing every bit down with beer. I did my best to put on a good show, gnawing on the bones as enthusiastically as possible. When I finished, I sat back

and managed a smile. The chef and the others nodded with approval.

The owner's cousin said, 'Next time you should try the Longfu Soup, because it contains tiger, dragon, and phoenix.'

'What do you mean by tiger, dragon, and phoenix?' I asked warily. I didn't want to make another trip to the shed.

It's not real tigers, dragons, and phoenixes, he assured me. They're represented by other animals: cat for the tiger, snake for the dragon, and chicken for the phoenix. When you mix them together, there are all kinds of health benefits. And they taste good, too.

Questions

1. Although the American who wrote this story visited Luogang's restaurants voluntarily, many international business practitioners working abroad involuntarily confront things they find odd or offensive. Suppose you had been invited by a very important customer to the New Eight Sceneries Wild Flavour Food City restaurant. What would you have done, if, like the author, you had been invited to pick out your dinner in the shed behind the restaurant?
2. Cultural values play an enormous role in shaping attitudes toward food. Are there any foreign foods commonly available in your home country that you or your friends simply will not eat?
3. Are there any aspects of your home culture that foreign visitors might find offensive? If so, what are they?
4. What measures can you take to protect your foreign guests from aspects of your home culture they might find offensive?