

GREEN GOURMET

Hong Kong chefs are putting their creativity to the test with deluxe vegetarian menus to tempt even the hardest meat-eaters.

STORY RACHEL READ

COURTESY TATE DINING ROOM & BAR / TA PANTRY / NUR / TOSCA

This shooter of tomato *longjing* tea with dried plum is from Tate Dining Room & Bar's 'Ode to Tomatoes' seasonal dish.

Which ingredients come to mind when you think of fine dining? Foie gras, caviar, oysters and venison, right? Well, think again.

In our contemporary culture of detoxes and dietary restrictions, fine dining has not only begun to cut its use of rich meat and seafood choices, but also started to offer deluxe vegetarian fare.

Vicky Lau, chef and owner of Tate Dining Room & Bar in SoHo, Central, has noticed a definite increase in the number of guests who are opting for vegetarian degustation menus.

“I think diners are looking for quality restaurants that source good quality products and offer healthier and more nutritious options,” says Lau, who was recently named Asia’s Best Female Chef 2015 by Veuve Clicquot, as part of its Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants programme. “Lots of people are becoming more conscious of food sourcing, and object to the unethical treatment of animals.”

Model-turned-chef Esther ‘Tata’ Sham of private kitchen Ta Pantry, in its new location on Wanchai’s Electric Street, has been asked for bespoke vegetarian options for other reasons. She cites short-term detoxes, dietary restrictions for certain religions, and food intolerances.

But rather than grumbling about these limitations, Hong Kong chefs are embracing the chance to come up with creative vegetarian dishes. Nurdin Topham, founder and chef of Privé Group’s one-star Michelin restaurant Nur in Lyndhurst Terrace, Central, is

02 Tate’s ‘5 Elements’ canapé pays homage to metal, wood, water, fire and earth

03 Vicky Lau, chef and owner of Tate Dining Room & Bar



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– Vicky Lau, Tate Dining Room & Bar



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one such optimist. Basing his concept on the idea of “nourishing gastronomy”, he considers the crafting of purely vegetarian items to be “a challenge that any modern, conscientious chef who cares about the future of our planet should relish – to create interest and balance, and fulfill the need for satiety.”

INGREDIENT IS THE KEY

When it comes to vegetarian dining, these chefs believe that focusing on seasonal produce is essential, rather than jumping on the latest-ingredient bandwagon (kale, anyone?). Pino Lavarra, head chef of The Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong’s two-starred Michelin Italian restaurant Tosca, emphasizes that it’s always best to stay seasonal and make use of the highest quality ingredients at their peak condition.

“The nobility of the raw ingredient is all,” agrees Topham, who bases Nur’s vegetarian menus around this ethos. An example is Nur’s tomato course, which features whole tomatoes and tomato essence. Topham says that this simple dish relies on sourcing the very best tomatoes, and has quickly become one of their signatures on both vegetarian and regular degustation menus.

Chefs take their inspiration for such dishes from the ingredients themselves. Lau spends time at wet markets to discover new and in-season products, and concoct new plans. “I only need to walk through the wet markets to get ideas for new dishes and canapés,”

04 One-star Michelin restaurant Nur in Lyndhurst Terrace, Central

05 The ‘mushroom’ course served at Nur consists of maitake mushroom and mushroom broth.

06 Nur’s ‘tomato’ dish uses heirloom tomatoes, basil and tomato essence.

07 Nurdin Topham, chef and founder of Nur, managed by the Privé Group



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“THE NOBILITY OF THE RAW INGREDIENT IS ALL”

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says Lau, who also runs Butler, a luxury caterer that develops customised menus for events and parties.

Thanks to Hong Kong's location and culture, the city is particularly well placed to offer a wide variety of fruit and vegetables.

"Cooking here offers a great opportunity to access wonderful plants that grow well in sub-tropical climates, such as lychees, papaya, aubergines, roselle, a great variety of brassicas, and different cucumber varieties," says Topham. "There are also interesting local herbs such as rue, lemon marigold, lemon balm, lemon grass and turmeric."

Sham's favourite ingredients include a unique Asian mushrooms, including shiitake or Japanese forest mushrooms, *eringi*, and Korean enoki.

Hong Kong's melting pot of nationalities means that pathways to high quality Asian and Western groceries are ever-forming. Lavarra credits veteran top-class chefs for "opening up a lot of channels for beautiful products from around the world." He has himself developed relationships with organic farms around Asia, which supply Tosca with fresh Western vegetables.

Topham has done the same with farms in Hong Kong's New Territories, which now grow seasonal European produce in addition to their usual Asian crops.

EXCLUSIVE DEGUSTATION DINING

Ingredients are only one element behind the detailed development of degustation menus, and every chef's approach is different. "I try to express an ingredient's nature and essence by drawing out memories or evoking a scene," says Lau. "Tasting menus should have a nice flow to them, making sure one dish connects to the next, yet still has a progressive increase in intensity."



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In Lau's new six-course Special Sensualist and eight-course Spring Gastronomy degustation menus, the chef offers new flavour profiles from seasonal and locally sourced ingredients. This is obvious in her amuse-bouche 'Ode To Tomatoes', inspired by a poem by Pablo Neruda. Lau creates the dish from tomato-infused *longjing* tea with dried plum, served in a shooter glass.

Another Lau creation, the '5 Elements' canapé, represents the five elements of Chinese philosophy: metal, wood, water, fire and earth. Each corresponds to a taste, and the chef's delicate bite-sized creations, such as coconut water gel, bell pepper panna cotta, and mushroom tart, showcase her gourmet flair.

Lavarra's tasting menus at Tosca are meticulously planned and evaluated through internal tasting sessions with both Asian and Western staff. "They are designed to take diners on a journey through

08 Model-turned-chef Esther Sham of Ta Pantry

09 Cheesecake with tomato jelly at Tosca, The Ritz-Carlton, Hong Kong

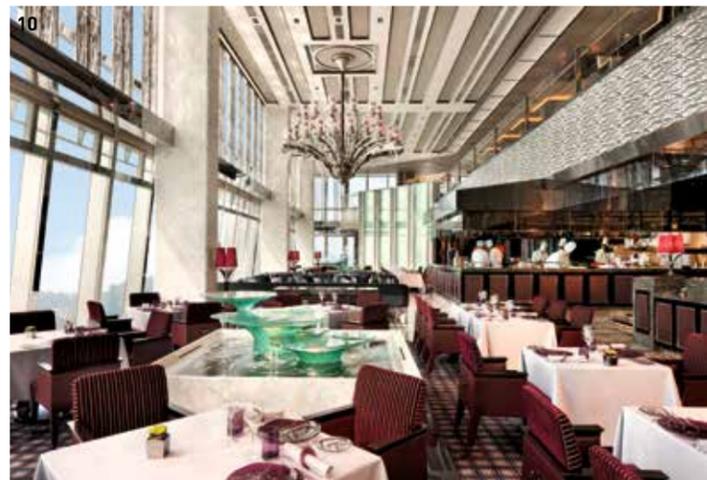
10 Tosca offers southern Italian cuisine in a dramatic space.

11 Stuffed gnocchi with tomato seed, also from Tosca

12 Pino Lavarra, head chef at Tosca



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- Pino Lavarra, Tosca



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my style of cuisine, my research of ingredients and my approach to food," says Lavarra. He also seeks inspiration from his southern Italian background, in which he finds abundant vegetarian recipes.

Throughout Lavarra's culinary career, he has also created other vegetarian dishes that are even more personal. For instance, he has featured the birth years of his children in his cooking. For 'Pomme Alessio 2000', he fashioned rose-shaped new potato served with spring onion. For 'Delizia Nicholas 2004', he paired smoked eggplant with hazelnut crumble, green tomato and pure silver. And for 'Pomo D'Oro 2008', Lavarra reassembled tomato filled with tomato salad and topped with 24-karat gold.

There are more practical issues to be addressed too. Ta Pantry's degustation menus are often led by individual client's preferences, and Sham says that requests from different types of vegetarians - such as the absence of meat-based stocks - can affect her final menu. Nationalities matter too. Asian guests, she says, almost always request pasta or rice.

In keeping with Nur's nourishing gastronomy philosophy, Topham pays close attention to the nutritional value of individual ingredients. He also evaluates the composition of his menu as a whole, ensuring that vegetarian guests get an equivalent value from their meal as those diners opting for the regular degustation. The perfect degustation menu involves "food pairings that bring harmony, interest and satisfaction to a dish," he says.

Lau similarly highlights her use of more starchy dishes towards the end of her vegetarian menu to guarantee that customers leave feeling full.

Nevertheless, the ultimate aim, as Lavarra says, is to "ensure that the vegetarian options on our menu are so tempting that even non-vegetarians would choose them." 🍴