

Travel: China (excerpt)

Asking for wine at a Chinese meal causes severe confusion and developing a taste for beer is highly recommended. Requests for a chilled glass of wine may be interpreted as an order of the seriously alcoholic rice beverage which is light in color and has an acquired taste similar to saki in Japan.

It always makes me sad that so much attention was given to rice which is granted, useful, and so little to the comely little grape. It is hard not to take the absence of wine personally, a sort of curse: "Go forth to China and have thee nary a drop of wine to soften the blow of all things foreign!"

But ah, wait. Someone has suggested watermelon juice, fresh squeezed. It is regrettably non alcoholic but so tangy and immediate.

I am stiff with apprehension. China has had her way with me more often than I care to remember. I have been forced to withdraw from many a communal meal with hunger still sitting in the pit of my stomach.

But, today, the Gods are with us. No, they're with me! Course after simmering course makes its delectable entrance and all of it can be eaten by me. Today hunger shall be banished from my insides. In its place there will be all manner of edible foreign delights, distinct from the sadly inedible foreign delights.

Today I feast on fish that was swimming blissfully in a tank when I entered the restaurant earlier. From the taste of it there are no hard feelings. I doubt that I could be as philanthropic were the roles reversed and my flesh served simmering to a group of fish who just recently and casually passed me by.

There is shrimp done in garlic, egg yolk and some other yummy stuff that looked a bit like fish eggs so I nobly tried not to think about it. This was followed by a steaming plate of clams the size of a two year old's hand and laden with enough garlic to obscure its elephantine lines.

There were little glutinous rice balls, sweet and gummy that stuck to the roof of your mouth and then landed in your stomach with a dull thud. There was the typical plate of pork and chilies, chicken and chilies and something unrecognizable with chilies.

What was missing was the version of Cantonese food that I found impossible to eat and hard to forgive. The boiled, glutinous, cold stuff was mercifully absent. I was beginning to feel safe in China like it might not just be some kind of extended foreign fasting clinic.