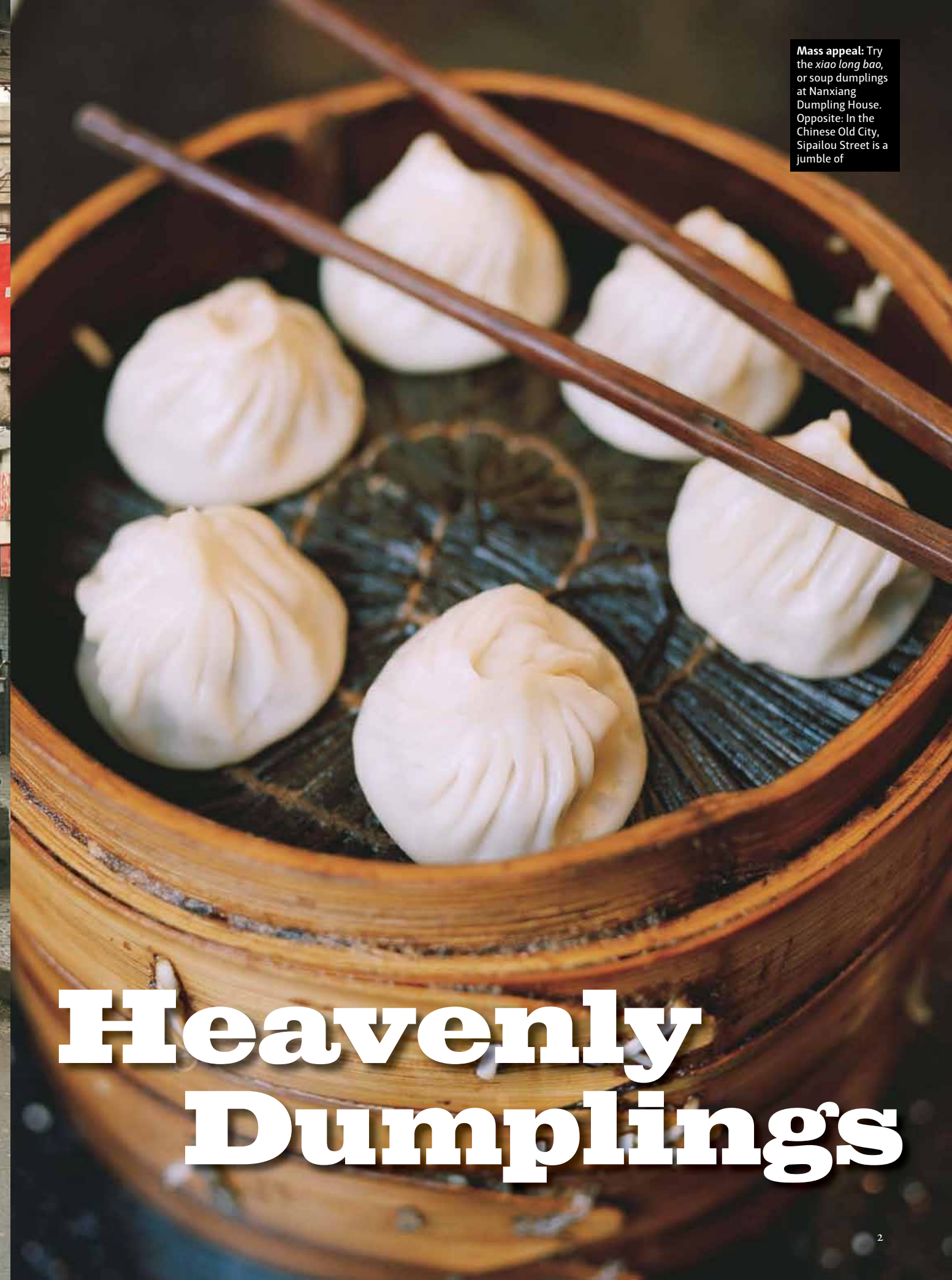


# The Street of

Shanghai reborn is once again a city of discerning tastes. But star chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten shows Emily Prager that sometimes the best eats are found in the city's

Photographs by Andrew Rowat

Mass appeal: Try the *xiao long bao*, or soup dumplings at Nanxiang Dumpling House. Opposite: In the Chinese Old City, Sipailou Street is a jumble of



# Heavenly Dumplings



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## IF YOU WALK DOWN XIANGYANG

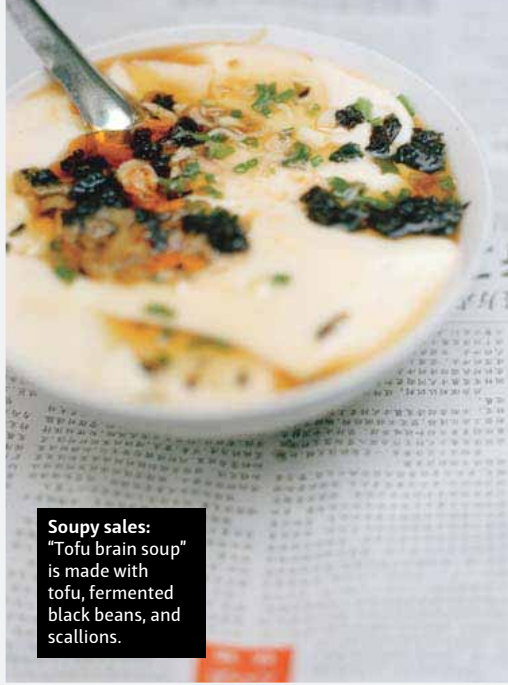
Road in the French Concession, past the ballroom dancers in Xiangyang Park, past the vegetable stand with its Chinese-red tomatoes and its round, dark-green watermelons, past the duck and duck-parts store, you will come to a crossroads that at first might look rather ordinary. Shabby storefronts with streaky windows, tradesmen smoking on the sidewalks, dim cramped rooms with cheap plastic tables and stools spilling out onto the street—all are emblematic of the nondescript kind of Shanghai street, one quickly traversed and barely registered as more than an indistinct grayness. But in the morning before ten, at lunchtime, and around six P.M., this little area suddenly surges to life, for it is TK, one of the city's food streets and not just any food street but the one at which Jean-Georges Vongerichten, the illustrious chef and restaurateur, must eat when he visits here.

The food street is an institution in Shanghai, something that is discussed in detail, with attention paid to which one is best for what and where. Food streets follow the city plan that the Shanghaiese, like the French, love best—clustering—so you might come upon a street entirely of shoe stores or traditional dressmakers or, my personal favorite, one devoted only to maternity, with mother-to-be clothes, baby goods, and a maternity hospital with floor-to-ceiling windows through which you can see newborns in circular tanks of water swimming in tiny inner tubes. So the food street houses only restaurants, food vendors of different types, waiters, delivery boys, and, of course, great chefs, which is most assuredly why Jean-Georges feels so comfortable there.

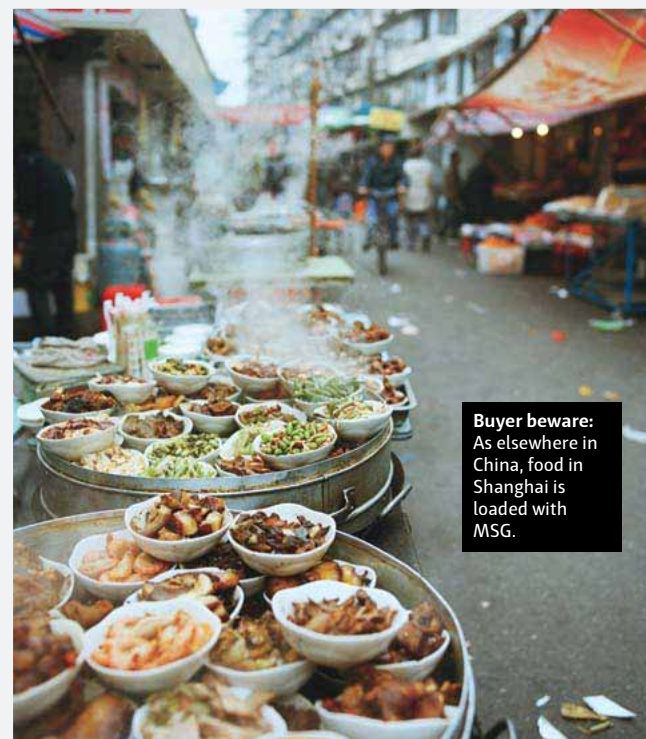
On a recent morning, as I hurried along to meet Jean-Georges, I was drawn to thinking about the difference between the austere little food street and the coppershit elegance that is Jean-Georges's establishment here in Shanghai. Those burgundy leather banquettes, the burled wood shimmering in the warm light, the serene room with the crystal clear windows looking out on the Huangpu River, the perfectly prepared food with its sublimely tasteful presentation and its finely balanced tastes, the pristine service, all seemed a far cry from the dogged earthiness I approached. Except for one thing that I could see even from afar: All the chefs were wearing white.

I hadn't quite realized the real purpose of these outfits until I saw Jean-Georges in his restaurant wearing one. They have a slightly Asian-scholar feel with their high collars and their buttons on one side of the chest—also a touch of nuclear containment facility worker, doctor on grand rounds, sailor in dress uniform, and a bit of priest cassock in the long apron that flaps as one walks. Jean-Georges changes into these whites immediately upon arriving at his restaurant. He does not enter the kitchen before casting off his street clothes as

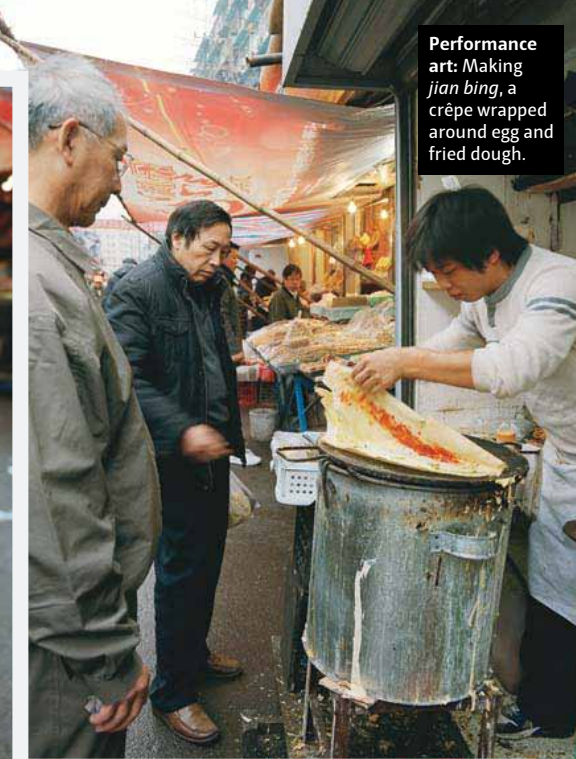
**Scents appeal:** Buying oranges on Sipailou Street. The next stall is selling fermented "stinky tofu."



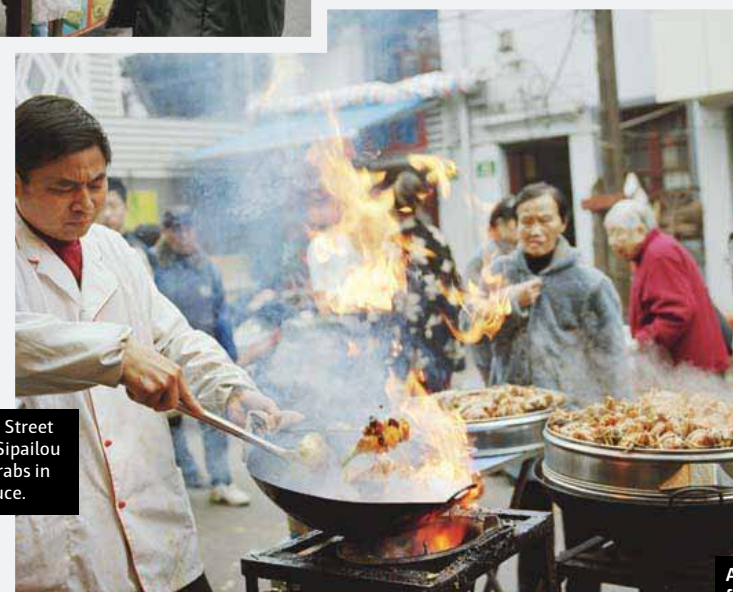
**Soupy sales:** "Tofu brain soup" is made with tofu, fermented black beans, and scallions.



**Buyer beware:** As elsewhere in China, food in Shanghai is loaded with MSG.



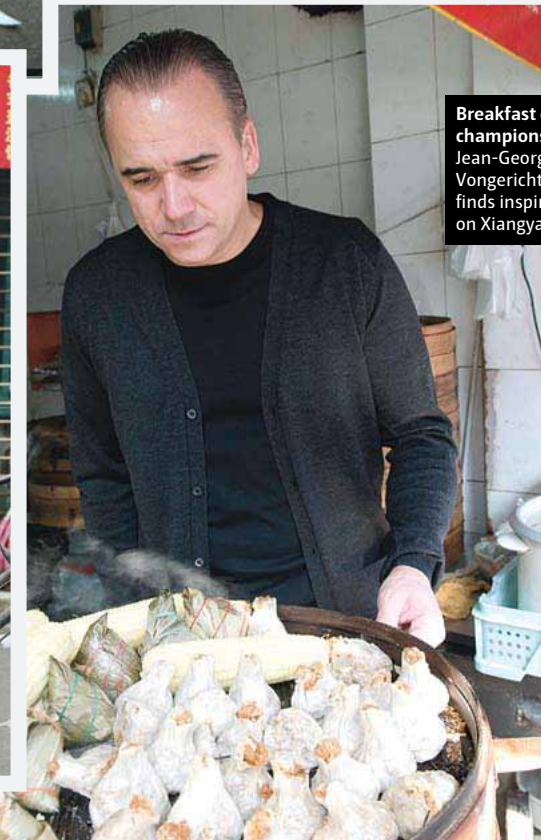
**Performance art:** Making jian bing, a crêpe wrapped around egg and fried dough.



**Wok on!** Street chef on Sipailou sautés crabs in spicy sauce.



**A moveable feast:** The government sporadically cleans up the streets, but



**Breakfast of champions:** Jean-Georges Vongerichten finds inspiration on Xiangyang



**Chinese doughnuts:** You tiao, fried dough, is a favorite breakfast treat in China. Cost: twenty-five



**Full steam ahead:** Xiao long bao at Nanxiang Dumpling House.



**Daily bread:** Selling scallion-laced fried pancakes and you tiao near Yu Gardens.

Credit: tk



if shedding one rather normal persona and quickly re-inhabiting a slightly eccentric other. Jean-Georges is, after all, not just a cook but an alchemist long studied in the science of human taste, an herbalist, a graphic artist, a kind of shaman, and, when he is feeding you, definitely a maternal presence.

He is also, in that way that only Frenchmen can be, extremely handsome, fifty-four years old, with a throaty French accent, a widow's peak of black hair, and kind black eyes that have a sexy sparkle. Though he seems a calm person, he is wont to whip suddenly into those highly focused, intense spurts of energy common to the supremely accomplished. He is not tall, five feet seven inches say, but he is sturdy and emits a gallantry as he stands quite firmly connected with the ground, taking, as actors put it, the stage with grace and managing, as he looks at you, to maintain a genuine interest in what you are saying.

It was eggy and soft, and yet the waffle, which was salty, added a wonderful crunchiness. The chili sauce left just a bit of hotness. Jean-Georges told me that this *jian bing* was the street food that inspired him. "I tried to do it, but I couldn't," he said ruefully. "I couldn't figure it out. There are five elements to it, and it must have a flat stove. You can't make it in a pan. I couldn't get the balance." He looked as if he was listening to the taste.

Behind Chef Ma, his assistant—a man in his early twenties wearing a chef's cap—told me that he had come to Shanghai from a poor province. He wasn't much interested in cooking but he was interested in having a job, and so he worked from 2 A.M. to 10 A.M. every day frying *you tiao*, the baguette-shaped doughnuts that are crispy on the outside and popover-ish on the inside, and browning the round *shao bing*. "I use more than two hundred pounds of flour every day," said Ma proudly, cooking so fast that he seemed to defy gravity. The sun-

yes," he told me, "they are so discerning. Very picky eaters. They are used to everything so fresh. In New York, you know, the fishing boat comes once a week and we buy, but here, a day-old fish is unacceptable."

**F**IVE YEARS AGO, YOU couldn't find decent Western food in Shanghai, and I was curious about how Jean-Georges gets his high-quality milk, meats, and seafood. His chicken is perfection, and chickens here tend to be scrawny and tough. "Well," he said, "we were constructing the restaurant when, suddenly, a young Chinese woman appeared in the doorway carrying a number of wooden cages of live creatures—chickens, rabbits, ducks, pigeons, fish—all squawking and quacking and chirping and flapping. We were amazed, and she cried, 'What do you want? I will get it for you!'"

Minolta is her name, and she is Jean-Georges's supplier of ultra-fresh foods. "She is the lobster mobster, a rock star!" he exclaimed, jolted by an energy that shoots into him when he talks about food. "She goes to the source to Mongolia to get us Mongolian beef, to Dalian for the crabs. She asks me, 'What do you want the farmer to feed the cows and chickens?' And they do it! It's a chef's paradise!"

Wang's *xiao long bao* were much better than the other *xiao long bao* I have had. The skin was more deli-

cate, thinner, the pork mixture more toasty, the soup divine. Wang makes eighty pans of dumplings a day. His head chef stood in the restaurant window, painstakingly pinching the ends of hundreds of little white pork pockets and setting them down in round rattan steamer baskets about two feet wide. A crowd of on-lookers watched him closely, and Wang's little son toddled happily around them, crowing.

The dumplings are eaten with a mild vinegar, Jean-Georges explained. "Otherwise, they would be too fatty. The vinegar adds a sourness to it. It balances the food." Wang said it had been an arduous week. Thousands of high schoolers had come to Shanghai for the one college exam that is given once a year in China. The fate of each student would be determined by this test. The small hotels were filled with parents who will visit Wang's to take dumplings to their studying children. These parents wait outside the test venues for hours—it happens every year.

Next door to Wang's, Chef Tan Zhouqing was stirring a huge drum of soup in the window of the Beautiful New Eating Store. Her restaurant serves *ma la tang*, a kind of spicy soup. The excitement here is that you can pick what goes into your soup yourself. Along the back wall is a stand with little baskets of mushrooms, parsley, cabbage, and spinach, and you take what you want and she stirs it into the (Continued on page 000)

The Shanghainese are "very picky eaters," Jean-Georges says.

"They are used to everything so fresh. In New York, the fishing

boat comes once a week, but here, a day-old fish is unacceptable."

But on our outing, he was, as befits an eminent New Yorker, wearing all black and seemed quietly happy to be out and about in Shanghai and in the position of the fed and not the feeder.

At the eastern end of the food street, Chef Ma Jingwei, a man in his early forties, stood outside the Lucky Business restaurant before a black iron cylinder, much like an oil drum, fitted with a flat, black iron top, which served as a griddle. He was cooking, and the scene was festive. Next to him was a makeshift table; a few boxes with a big metal pan balanced on it, which contained neat rows of browned, disk-shaped buns, each about four inches in diameter; and some metal vases with foot-long breads that looked like elongated doughnuts. A few workmen waited on line impatiently. A woman standing by a cart filled with green melons sang out her wares to passersby. "Melons. Ripe from the country. Melons."

Ma was making Jean-Georges's favorite street food, *jian bing*, a kind of pancake. "It reminds me of France," murmured Jean-Georges. "You know—crêpes, but it's made with rice flour. It's so good." Working at top speed, Ma scooped up some batter and poured it sparingly on the flat griddle. Then he broke an egg onto the hardening batter and swirled it around. He sprinkled chopped scallions, then a dollop of chili sauce, then with a scraper deftly shoved it under the cooked, wafer-thin pancake and half-folded it like origami. He then reached behind him and retrieved a crisp fried waffle of some kind and placed it on top of the folds. Another scoop of brown sauce and he finished folding it and cut it in half.



Style setter: Chef Ming Kin Lam serves diners at Jean-Georges's restaurant, designed by

baked workmen shifted from side to side and talked loudly. At the edge of the sidewalk, an old man shuffled by taking his black songbird in a square wooden cage for a morning stroll.

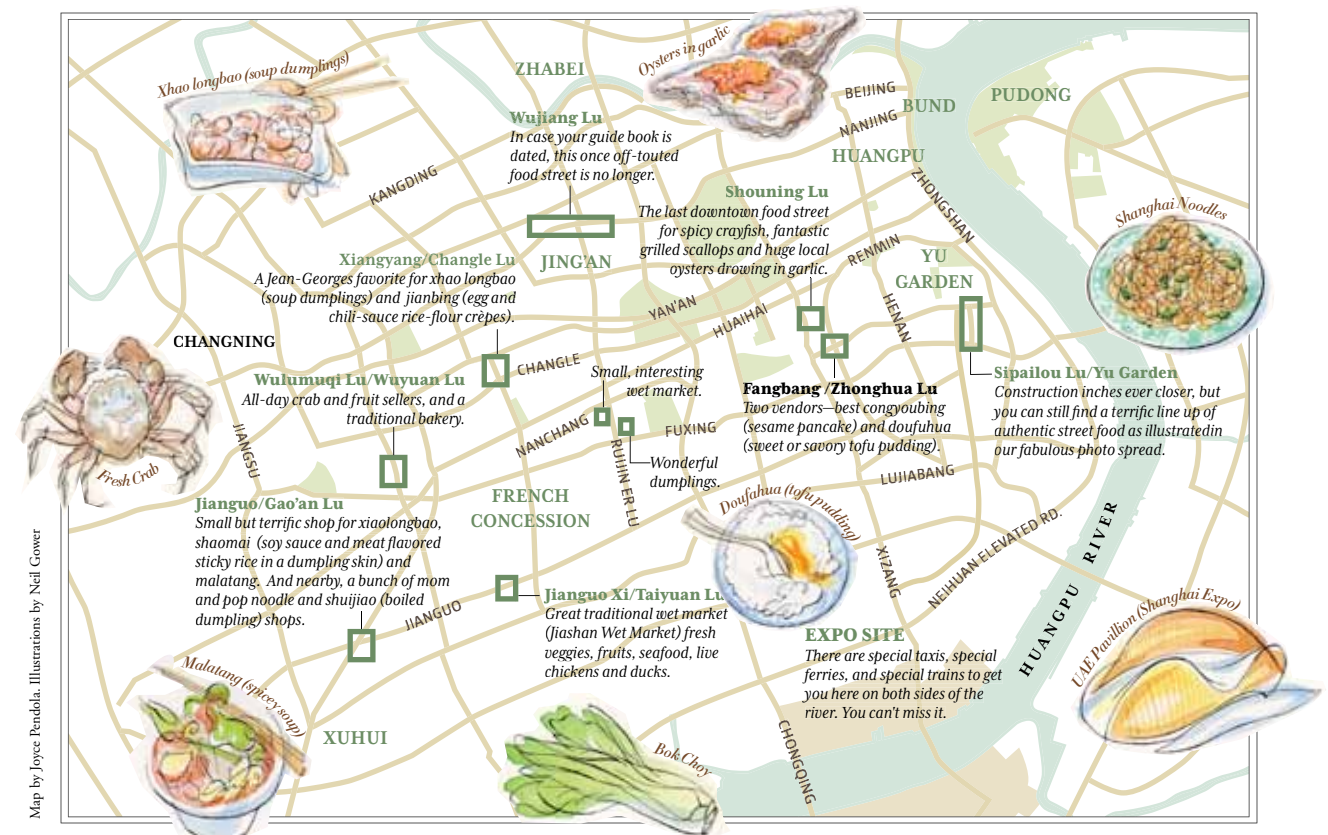
Ma rents the Lucky Business restaurant only in the mornings. When he leaves at 11 A.M., it reverts to its owner, Chef Wang Yeda, who also owns the Peace Harmony Dim Sum restaurant next door.

Wang is renowned throughout the Concession for his dumplings. At lunchtime, there are lines of white-shirted office workers stretching out

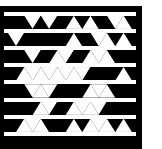
into the street waiting to eat, and his delivery boys rush to and fro with little white boxes of his delicious *xiao long bao*, Shanghai's signature soup-filled dumpling. You can get these dumplings all over the city, so I asked him what made his so special. Wang sat down at the one table in his tiny establishment, which has a kitchen that is about four feet by six feet and can barely fit two people. The place is grim and barren, and the floor is so sticky from frying oil that your feet adhere to it. It has one grimy little window at the back that looks out on ragged undershirts hanging from bamboo poles. But the aura is bright and busy. "My soup is more original," he confided. "And it's the ratio of pork to dumpling skin to soup that's important. The balance. Some pork is not as good, or there is too much sugar or too much MSG."

I had heard about the MSG problem at Jean-Georges's restaurant. "It is a world raised on MSG," said the head chef of the New York restaurant, who was in Shanghai with Jean-Georges. "So a lightly salted dish tastes very bland to the people here." I asked Jean-Georges if there was any difference cooking for a Chinese clientele. "Oh,

**Street Smart** As host of the World Expo this summer, Shanghai is hopping—some seventy million tourists are expected to visit. The best way to get a feel for the city is to walk—and sample the food in—the raucous streets. The food is generally safe, but be careful: Eat only what's cooked in front of you. Here's a guide to the city's colorful markets and snack stalls.



Map by Joyce Pendola. Illustrations by Neil Gower



**DUMPLING DELIGHT** To watch a video of Shanghai's street-food scene, snap this tag with your smartphone. (For instructions on downloading the free app, see page 00.)