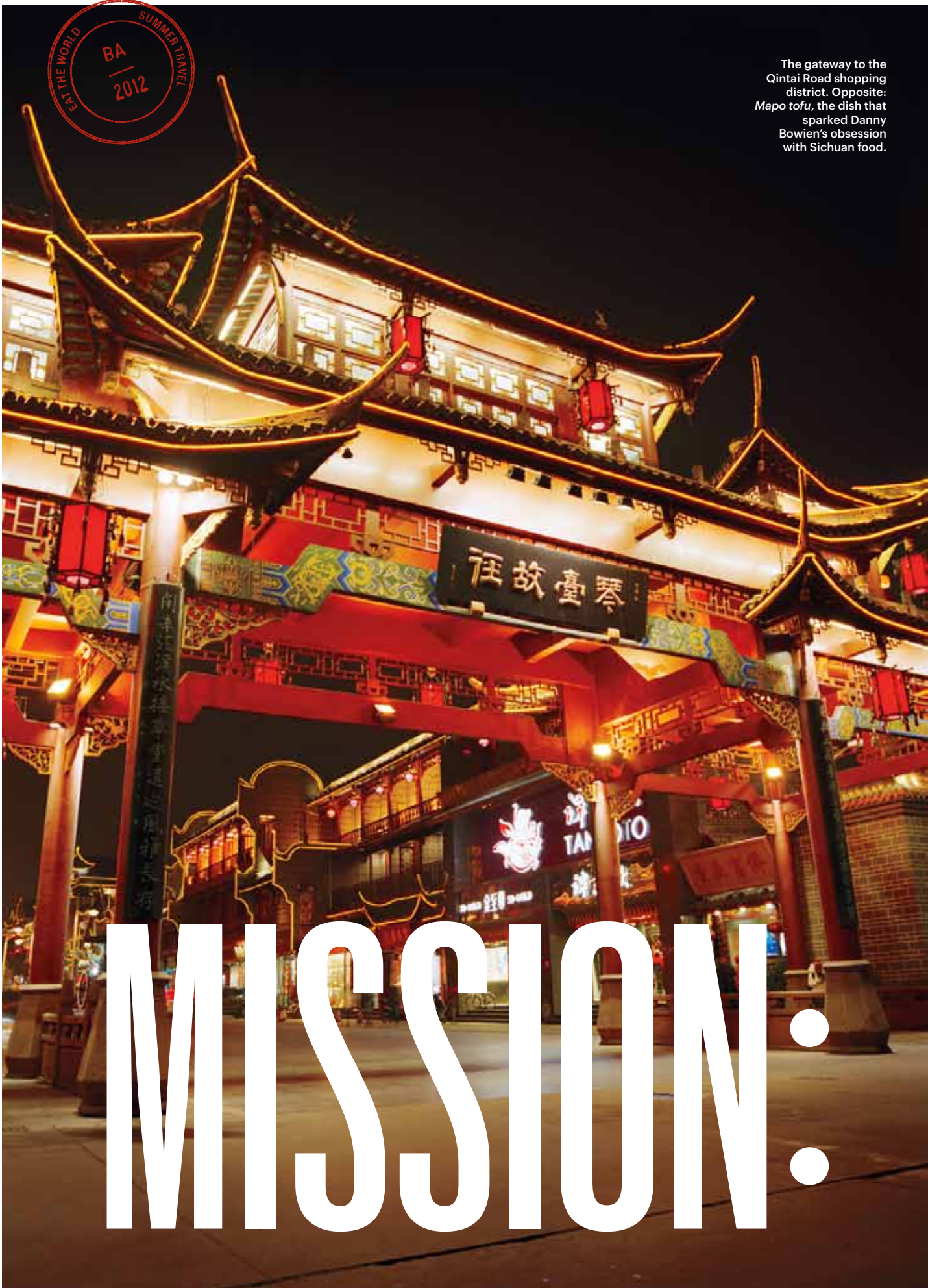


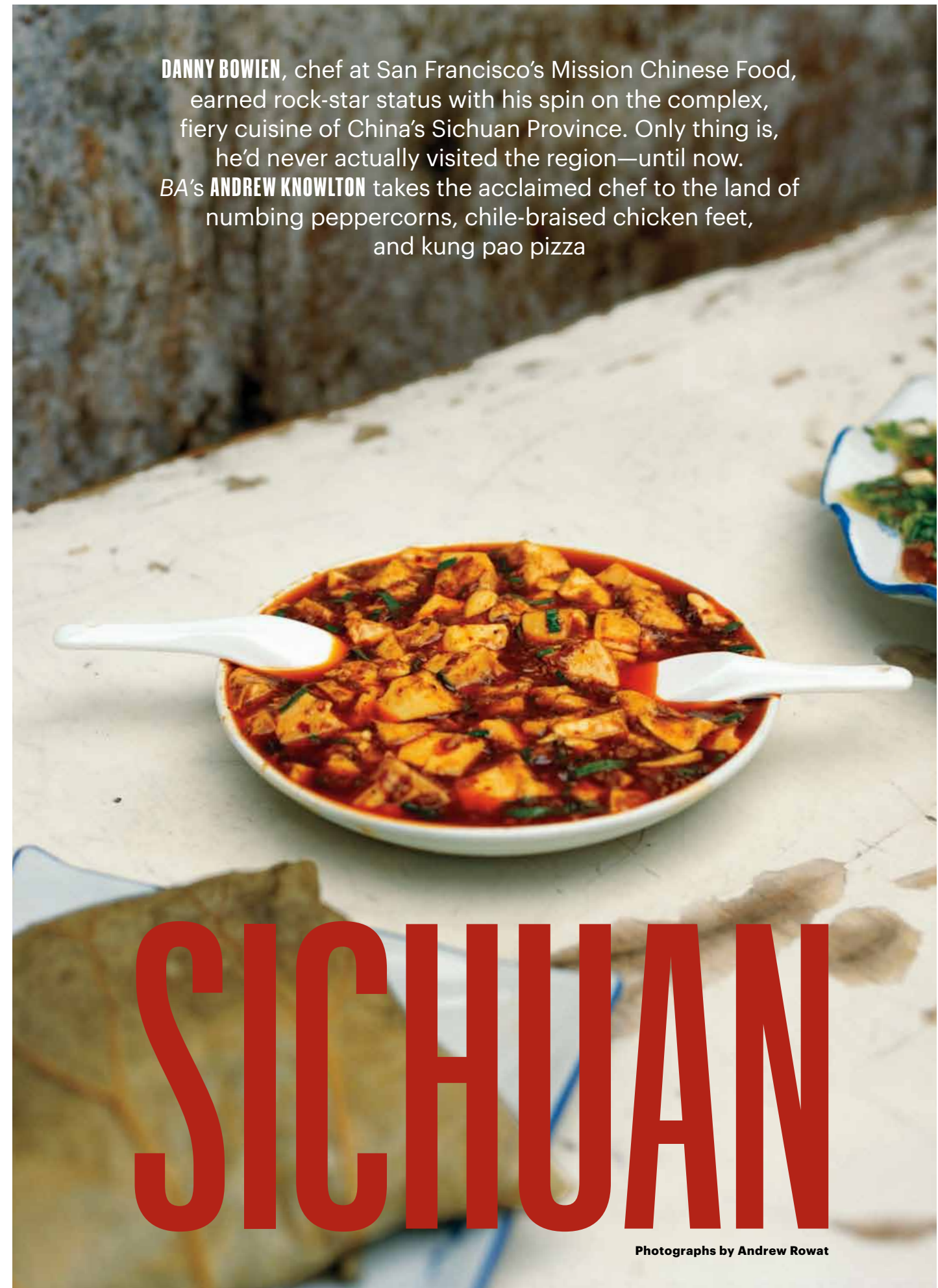


The gateway to the Qintai Road shopping district. Opposite: Mapo tofu, the dish that sparked Danny Bowien's obsession with Sichuan food.



# MISSION:

**DANNY BOWIEN**, chef at San Francisco's Mission Chinese Food, earned rock-star status with his spin on the complex, fiery cuisine of China's Sichuan Province. Only thing is, he'd never actually visited the region—until now. **BA's ANDREW KNOWLTON** takes the acclaimed chef to the land of numbing peppercorns, chile-braised chicken feet, and kung pao pizza



# SICHUAN

Photographs by Andrew Rowat

# DANNY BOWIEN IS STARTING TO SWEAT.

We're at dinner, our ninth meal of the day if you count the pig ears, and the cause could be any number of things. Is he on the verge of a chile and peppercorn overdose? Are the 20 offal-heavy dishes (think rabbit stomach, pork kidneys, and duck intestines) piled on the lazy Susan finally taking a toll on *his* insides? Is it the effect of the local sorghum-based booze called *baijiu* that we've been toasting with all night? Or is it the fact that our dining companions, one of whom happens to be the guru of Sichuan cooking, keep asking him what a chef who was born in Korea and raised in Oklahoma is doing cooking Sichuan food in San Francisco? Maybe it's all that and more. After a week in China, everything makes you sweat.

Most visitors to Chengdu, a rapidly industrializing city of 14 million people in southwest China's Sichuan Province, come for one of two reasons: to access the country's western frontier, including Tibet, or to see giant pandas in the nearby reserve. Danny and I have come to eat. Among those who cook or eat for a living, Sichuan has gone from a somewhat obscure regional cuisine to one of the world's most celebrated food traditions. My obsession with Sichuan's chile-laced dishes has sent me to countless strip malls and Chinatowns across America. In 2010, UNESCO named Chengdu a City of Gastronomy. Paris and Rome aren't on that list.

Danny's love of Sichuan cuisine—specifically *mapo tofu*, an often incendiary dish of soft tofu and ground beef smothered in chili oil and other spices—led him to launch Mission Chinese Food (MCF) in San Francisco two years ago. At this no-frills spot, he's doing for Chinese food what Momofuku's David Chang has done for Korean: He's updating it, putting his stamp on it, and winning accolades. (Last year, I named MCF one of *Bon Appétit's* Best New Restaurants.)

Danny looks more rock star than rock-star chef. His hair is long—really long, with a blond streak running through it. He trained at

some fancy places in New York and San Francisco, but when it came time to open his own restaurant, he said, he wanted “a place my chef friends could afford *and* where they'd want to eat on their days off.” This spring, Danny and his business partner, Anthony Myint, will open a second MCF, this time in New York City. But right now he and I are in China for a week, ready to eat our way through the Sichuan food we know and love (dan dan noodles, Danny's adored *mapo tofu*, fiery hot pots, twice-cooked pork) and stuff we've never tasted. This is my first trip to China; it's Danny's second but his first pilgrimage to Sichuan. We're here to be inspired by the cuisine that inspires Danny every day.

“DO YOU WANT SOME?” Danny asks, passing me a large brown paper bag. It's our first day in China and we're at a stand in Huanglongxi, a restored historic town 30 miles outside Chengdu. It's midmorning and time for a snack. I peek into the bag and see a mix of spicy fried mini crabs, dried shrimp, tiny fish, and some bugs I can't identify (Danny paid a few yuan extra for the insects). It's good, and we eat it like popcorn. A few hours later, we're at a country-style restaurant drinking bottles of Snow, the local beer, like it's water and sharing braised pork shoulder slathered in Sichuan's ubiquitous spicy fermented chili-bean paste (*dou ban jiang*), as well as a bubbling pot filled with what looks to be small catfish, dried chiles, chili oil, and Sichuan peppercorns. It's our first encounter with the cuisine's hallmark flavors: *ma la*. *Ma*, or “numbing,” comes from the legendary Sichuan peppercorn, which has an effect similar to that of novocaine. This is helpful in dealing with the *la*, or “hot,” which comes from local chiles used in the cuisine. The *ma* softens the *la*, allowing you to keep eating. (Beer doesn't hurt either.) It's kind of the yin and yang of Sichuan cooking, and it's what drew us here.

A lazy Susan ready to spin diners' heads at Tian Qiao Tu Lian Yu, a family-style restaurant an hour from Chengdu.





Chef Danny Bowien, of Mission Chinese Food, several beers into lunch at Hui Jiang Lou restaurant in Huanglongxi Old Town.

Before coming to Chengdu, we hit up every friend we knew for tips on where to eat. Recommendations didn't come easily. There's no Chengdu Zagat guide to help you get your bearings, no Web site dedicated to hole-in-the-wall noodle joints. You're pretty much on your own. Normally, I'd welcome the challenge, but Chengdu intimidated me. Neither of us read or spoke the language. And that rule about how a Chinese restaurant must be good if there are Chinese people in it? It doesn't work in China.

So, while we'd set up a few appointments with locals, we mostly were forced to go with the flow. For the record, "the flow" in Chengdu moves slowly if you're in a car, way too fast if you're on a bike, and very dangerously when on foot. As cities go, Chengdu ain't pretty. There aren't many spots where you stop and say, "Wow, that's beautiful!" Construction is under way everywhere. The weather can be muggy, oppressively hot, and what the locals call "foggy" but the rest of us would call smoggy. Even the name, Chengdu, is drab, translating as "successful city."

To combat this chaotic grayness, the locals embrace their food enthusiastically. Few cities I've visited love to eat as much as Chengdu. There's a noodle or bun shop on every block. At night, hot-pot restaurants come alive with people dunking all sorts of flora and fauna into bubbling, spicy broth. By Day 2 we'd figured out that the best places were what are known colloquially as "fly" restaurants, a reference to their often casual approach to hygiene. These open-air mom-and-pop spots fall somewhere between a beach shack and a street vendor's cart. The chairs and tables are small and plastic.

Ambience is nonexistent. In other words, they're the kind of places that food nerds go nuts over. Our favorite was one we hit on Day 3 called Ming Ting Fan Dian. Its specialty was *mapo tofu* with pig brain. (And no, you really can't tell the difference between soft tofu and brain when it's in your mouth...which is comforting.) In all of the dishes—including baby eels with wheat noodles and pork kidneys with spring onions—the *ma* and *la* were in full effect, though the heat from the chiles was subtler than we'd expected.

If it sounds like Danny and I went out of our way to eat the oddest things possible, we didn't. You don't find offal in Chengdu; offal finds you. It's hanging in restaurant windows, it's on display in markets, and if it's not on your table, it's on a table nearby. There's no distinction between the meat of an animal and all the odds and ends. Nose-to-tail eating isn't a culinary fad; it's what you do. By the end of our visit, Danny and I were wondering what they did with all the chicken breasts in China because we saw (and ate) plenty of feet, necks, gizzards, and livers. White meat? Not so much.

By Day 4 we welcomed the offal onslaught, but we were a bit out of sorts from the constant tingly throat caused by the liberal use of MSG. Neither of us is opposed to MSG, but you definitely notice it when it's in every meal. Even at the cooking class that we took, students were using the "gourmet powder." Another thing that threw us while at the woks: The students' food wasn't super-dependent on chiles. It was delicious, sure, with a bit of heat, but the tongue-searing that defines this cuisine back home wasn't present. Maybe we were missing something. Most of what Danny and I knew about



Duck is the main attraction at Lao Zi Hao Kao Ya Dian restaurant.



The chef at Jiang Jie Chao Cai, one of the author's favorite "fly" restaurants.



A hot-pot stand selling the classic street food of Sichuan Province.



The Jin River runs through the heart of Chengdu. (Yes, the haze is typical.)



Hand-pulled noodle dishes at Xiao Ming Tang Tian Shui Dan Dan Mian.



Lunchtime at Xiao Ming Tang Tian Shui Dan Dan Mian.



Jia chang mian (home cooking-style noodles) at Yu's Family Kitchen.



Danny Bowien and chef Yu Bo sample Sichuan peppercorns at a market.



A street-side steamed-bun (bao zi) stall in downtown Chengdu.



Yellow spicy fish at Hui Jiang Lou restaurant in Huanglongxi Old Town.



Students at Chengdu's vocational trade high school.



Chicken wings and feet at Chengdu's Yu Lin market.



A local, likely on his way to eat at one of the thousands of spots in town.



Outside the "fly" restaurant Jiang Jie Chao Cai.



Dried chiles at Wu Kuai Shi market.

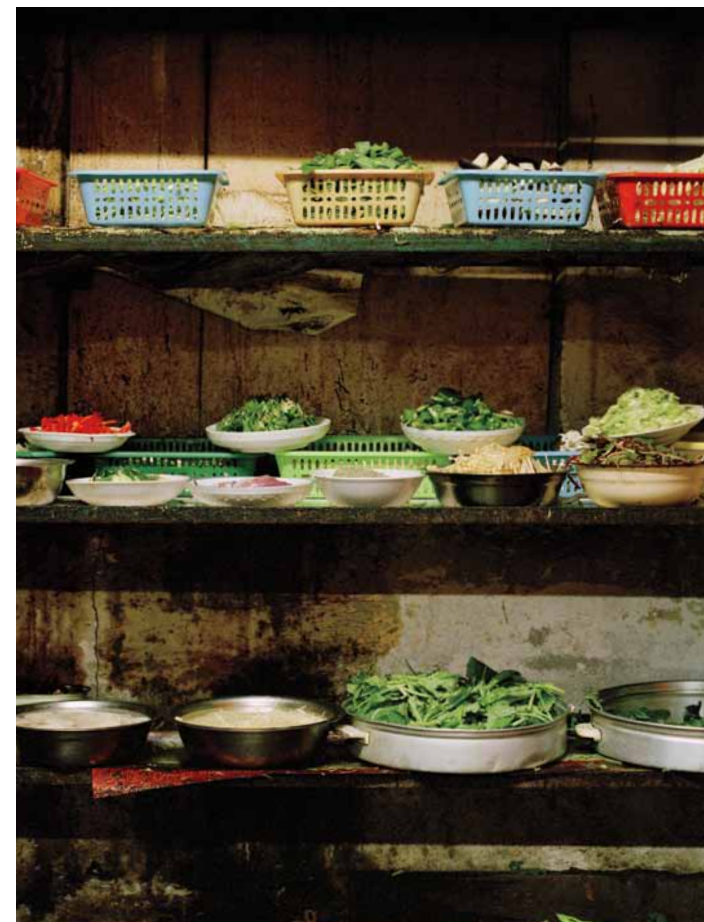


Chopping the roast duck at Lao Zi Hao Kao Ya Dian restaurant.

Who knew that Sichuan cooking features 56 cooking methods, including all kinds of frying styles: raw-frying, cooked-frying, small-frying, dry-frying, and something called “explode-frying”?



Culinary students at Chengdu's vocational trade high school.



Prepped ingredients ready for service at chef Jiang Jiancheng's “fly” restaurant, Jiang Jie Chao Cai.



A poultry stand at Chengdu's Yu Lin market, selling chicken (including black chicken), duck, and more.

Sichuan food we'd learned from Fuchsia Dunlop. The British writer's 2001 cookbook, *Land of Plenty*, introduced the cuisine to many in the Western world. But who knew that Sichuan cooking has at least 23 identifiable flavors, from “fish fragrant” to “hot and numbing”? Or that the cuisine features 56 cooking methods, including frying styles like raw-frying, cooked-frying, small-frying, dry-frying, and something called “explode-frying”? Even Danny had a lot to learn. We were Jedis looking for enlightenment. We needed a Sichuan Yoda. Fortunately, we'd arranged to meet one.

Yu Bo is to Sichuan cooking what Ferran Adrià is to Spanish cuisine: an infinitely creative chef who stretches the boundaries of tradition. Danny and I liked Yu Bo from the moment we all sat down in a restaurant specializing in roast pig parts—from ears to face to intestine to belly. The guy was a chain-smoking encyclopedia of Sichuan cooking, and we loved him for helping us dive beneath the surface of Chengdu's food scene. He took us to a “secret” restaurant that served the best pork dumplings I've ever tasted. After that, we visited the restaurant of one of his protégés, where we ate fresh tofu, nibbled on roast rabbit heads (think ribs with eyeballs and two long teeth), picked the flesh off tiny river fish, and drank *baijiu*. Yu Bo also took us to a tea tasting and an outdoor market for a tutorial on the legendary Sichuan peppercorn. More important, our time with him helped us ditch the caricature of the cuisine that we'd unknowingly brought with us.

At Yu's Family Kitchen, which Yu Bo runs with his wife, Dai Shuang, everything came together. We began our meal with 16

exquisitely plated vegetable dishes that riffed on classic Sichuan preparations. It was the start of one of the most memorable lunches of my life: alligator soup with radish, house-smoked pork belly stuffed with sesame paste, and Sichuan-peppercorn ice cream. These were complex, multilayered dishes rooted in a culinary bedrock dating back generations, but their flavors and presentation were most definitely modern. That single meal showed us where Sichuan cooking had been, where it is now, and where it's going. It had the breadth of a world-class cuisine, all in one sitting.

“The first time I visited China, it was about validation,” Danny told me on the plane home the next day—validation that the mash-up version of Chinese food the Korean-born, Oklahoma-raised guy cooked (kung pao pastrami, please) was worthy of the flavors, tradition, and spirit that it referenced. This second trip, he said, was about education and inspiration. I think it was a success. During our stay we were mesmerized, energized, and a bit shocked by a part of the world that constantly pushed us out of our comfort zones. We learned plenty. For instance, that you could in fact eat too many pork buns for breakfast. And that you can get pizza topped with kung pao chicken, and that that pizza is not very good. But most of all, we learned to embrace the balance of *ma* and *la* not just in the cuisine, which is way more varied and exciting than we'd imagined, but also in our quest for inspiration. Like much of modern China, Sichuan food can be tough to swallow at first (hello, rabbit heads!). But in the end, a little sweat from a perfectly balanced *mapo tofu*—or from pushing yourself outside your comfort zone—is a very good thing. ■

Snakehead fish two ways—smoked and fried—at Yu's Family Kitchen.



## Bringing Home the "Ma" and "La"

These Sichuan-inspired recipes from Danny Bowien's *Mission Chinese Food* rely on the traditional balance of hot chiles and numbing peppercorns, plus a twist that makes them distinctively MCF. For a guide to his key ingredients, see *Prep School*, page 149.



### Mouthwatering Chicken

**6 SERVINGS** A bracing vinaigrette is the backbone of this dish. Build the sauce's foundation by frying the spices in chili oil, which develops their flavor.

#### POACHED CHICKEN

- 2 lb. skinless, boneless chicken breasts
- 5 Tbsp. kosher salt, divided
- 1 2" piece ginger, peeled, sliced
- 2 scallions, trimmed, cut into thirds, smashed with the back of a knife

#### NUMBING VINAIGRETTE

- 1 Tbsp. chili oil
- 1½ tsp. cumin seeds
- 1½ tsp. fennel seeds
- 1½ tsp. Sichuan peppercorns
- 2 scallions, thinly sliced
- 2 Thai chiles, chopped
- ½ cup finely chopped peeled ginger (from two 4x1" pieces)
- 1½ tsp. (packed) light brown sugar
- ½ cup soy sauce
- ¼ cup finely chopped garlic
- 3 Tbsp. chinkiang (black) vinegar
- 1 Tbsp. fish sauce (such as nuoc nam or nam pla)

#### ASSEMBLY

- 1 head iceberg or romaine lettuce, torn into pieces
- 2 cups bean sprouts
- 2 cups (packed) fresh cilantro leaves with tender stems

**POACHED CHICKEN** Season chicken with 2 Tbsp. salt; let stand for 15 minutes. Bring remaining 3 Tbsp. salt, ginger, scallions, and 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot; add chicken. Reduce heat to medium-low; simmer for 8 minutes. Remove from heat; let stand for 20 minutes. **DO AHEAD:** Can be made 1 day ahead. Transfer chicken to a medium bowl. Add poaching liquid to cover by 1". Cover and chill chicken. Reserve ½ cup poaching liquid.

**NUMBING VINAIGRETTE** Heat chili oil in a medium skillet over medium heat. Add cumin, fennel, and peppercorns; fry, stirring often, until fragrant, 1–2 minutes. Add scallions, chiles, ginger, and sugar; cook, stirring often, until fragrant, about 2 minutes. Stir in reserved ½ cup liquid from poached chicken, soy sauce, garlic, vinegar, and fish sauce. Transfer to a small bowl and let cool. **DO AHEAD:** Can be made 1 day ahead. Cover and chill.

**ASSEMBLY** Remove chicken from poaching liquid. Thinly slice. Toss lettuce, sprouts, and cilantro in a large bowl to combine. Divide among plates. Arrange sliced chicken over. Drizzle with numbing vinaigrette.

### Mapo Tofu

**8–10 SERVINGS** Tofu isn't just for vegetarian dishes. Bowien's take on a traditional recipe combines it with slow-cooked, fall-apart pork shoulder in a spicy, chile-laced sauce.

#### SPICE BLEND

- ¼ cup dried Tianjin chiles or chiles de árbol
- 1 Tbsp. black peppercorns
- 1 Tbsp. cumin seeds
- 1 Tbsp. Sichuan peppercorns
- 2 green cardamom pods
- 2 whole cloves
- 1 bay leaf
- ¼ cinnamon stick
- 1 Tbsp. kosher salt
- 1 Tbsp. sugar

#### BRINE

- 2 Tbsp. plus ¼ cup chili oil
- ½ cup tomato paste
- 4 cups low-salt chicken broth
- 4 cups dry white wine
- ¾ cup fish sauce (such as nuoc nam or nam pla)
- ½ cup fermented black beans (from one 4-oz. can, rinsed, drained)
- ½ cup pepper oil

- 2 lb. boneless pork shoulder (Boston butt), cut into 1" cubes

#### BRAISE AND ASSEMBLY

- ¼ cup (packed) fresh cilantro leaves with tender stems plus more chopped for garnish
- ¾ cup red Thai chiles
- ½ cup chopped garlic
- ½ cup chopped onion
- ½ cup grated peeled ginger (from two 4x1" pieces)
- ¼ cup sliced scallion (about 1)
- 1 8x4" piece kombu
- Kosher salt
- 2 lb. soft (silken) tofu, cut into 1" cubes
- Pepper oil
- Scallions, sliced thinly on a diagonal
- Chili oil

**INGREDIENT INFO:** Pepper oil, made with Sichuan peppercorns, can be found at Asian markets. Kombu (dried seaweed) can be found at natural foods stores and Asian markets.

**SPECIAL EQUIPMENT:** A spice mill

**SPICE BLEND** Stir first 8 ingredients in a large dry skillet over medium heat until fragrant, 4–5 minutes. Let cool. Discard bay leaf; finely grind remaining toasted spices in spice mill. Transfer to a small bowl; stir in salt and sugar. **DO AHEAD:** Can be made 1 month ahead. Store airtight at room temperature.

**BRINE** Heat 2 Tbsp. chili oil in a large pot over medium-high heat. Add tomato paste; stir until mixture turns brick red, 5–6 minutes. Remove from heat. Add broth and next 4 ingredients; stir, scraping up any browned bits. Add pork; stir to coat. Cover and chill overnight.

**BRAISE AND ASSEMBLY** Process ¼ cup cilantro and next 5 ingredients in a food processor until finely chopped; add chile mixture and spice blend to pot with pork. Bring to a boil over high heat, stirring to dissolve spice mixture. Add kombu; cover. Reduce heat to medium-low; braise until pork is tender, about 1½ hours.

Uncover pot. Continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until liquid is thickened and reduced by half, about 1 hour longer. **DO AHEAD:** Can be made 2 days ahead. Let cool slightly. Chill uncovered until cold. Cover; keep chilled. Rewarm before using.

Bring a pot of heavily salted water to a boil. Add tofu and poach for 2–3 minutes (tofu will firm up a bit). Using a slotted spoon, transfer tofu to a paper towel-lined plate to drain.

Add tofu to pork. Simmer until completely warmed through, about 10 minutes. Season with pepper oil. Garnish with chopped cilantro, scallions, and chili oil.

PHOTOGRAPHS: THIS PAGE, ALANNA HALE; FOR MORE DETAILS, SEE SOURCEBOOK.



#### SEEN OUR TABLET APP?

Watch exclusive video of MCF chef Danny Bowien cooking Sichuan with Andrew Knowlton in the BA Kitchen, and get bonus recipes. [bonappetit.com/go/tablet](http://bonappetit.com/go/tablet)