



SWEET STATION UPDATES CHINATOWN'S DESIGN CLICHES

Digital Diner

By Michael Nagrant

CHINESE TEENAGERS ARE APPARENTLY STRUNG OUT ON THE INTERNET. Many news sources in the last couple of years reported that because of the one-child policy imposed on urban couples in 1979, the current generation of sibling-less teenagers and young adults is turning to the Internet and online gaming in record numbers for companionship. There's also a burgeoning crop of Chinese boot camps to treat Internet addiction if your child actually believes he's become his World of Warcraft avatar. The Chinese government, which believes among other things that high rates of teen pregnancy are related to Web surfing, has started shutting down rogue Internet cafes like Eliot Ness busting up prohibition speakeasies. I know all this because I too am addicted to the Internet, particularly Google, and I wanted to get a sense of the culture of folks I was dining with Sunday at the new Chinatown spot Sweet Station.

With its video-game-like iconography, black-and-white leather-button-studded banquettes, green apple, red and silver paint scheme, and translucent dividers filled with fake plastic apples, the interior of Sweet Station looks like the collaboration between Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and the graphic design team for Super Mario Brothers.

It also the antidote to the red-vinyl banquette, glittery waving cat, shoji screen and white-tablecloth-outfitted dining rooms found pretty much everywhere else in Chinatown. It's the perfect clubhouse for digitally obsessed Chinese teenagers strung out on bubble tea rocking anime t-shirts and spiky Japanese Harajuku-style hairdos. If there were a giant photo of Mao hanging here, it would be pixilated.

Sweet Station does maintain one Chinatown tradition: the "War and Peace"-sized menu, offering no less than 250-plus items including Hong Kong specialties and a smattering of Cantonese favorites like General Tso's chicken and Mongolian beef. As is also par for the course, the menu is full of fun English mis-translations like "crispy milk block" (deep fried tofu) or "persevered vegetable" which I'm pretty sure isn't a carrot that's lived a hard life. A friend tells me the actual Chinese name of the Sweet Station is misleading as it connotes the restaurant as a purveyor of sweet Cantonese dessert soups, none of which make an appearance.

There are also plenty of items that get lost in translation for an American audience in a "Fear Factor" sort of way such as "tofu skin, pig skin and fish head in hot pot." One dish like this for which you might check your squirminess is stir-fried chives and duck tongue in XO sauce. The glistening verdant sweet chives are a perfect foil to the slightly chewy rich chili-and-garlic-spiked tongues. XO sauce is made up of dried seafood, chili, onion, garlic and sometimes jinhua (Chinese-style prosciutto), and its name comes from the Chinese penchant for XO or "extra-old" style Cognac. If you want to verify this cognac obsession, just check out the new glinting Asian liquor shop next to Sweet Station, which has more Remy Martin and Courvoisier bottles than a rap video.

If you're not too keen on these myriad bits of offal, because of the wide offerings and the cheap prices (no item is over \$9), maybe the best way to approach Sweet Station is as your own personal all-hours dim sum shack. Sweet Station, is the perfect place to course out satisfying, more mainstream favorites you might eat at nearby Phoenix or Shui Wah while avoiding their long post-Communist breadline-like weekend waits. Good bets for this approach include cool, marinated, skin-on ginger-scallion-perfumed chicken, or crispy fried salt-and-pepper squid sprinkled with a savory MSG and a pile of piquant jalapeno and sweet stir-fried scallion.

Picking dishes smartly is important, though, for not even Escoffier could likely cook 250-plus items at a four-star level. One soup we tried tasted like the watery chicken broths you find in the juice-box-like packs at the grocery store. The tomato sauce on the Hong Kong-style baked rice tastes like gloppy sweet-and-sour sauce mixed in with Campbell's condensed Tomato soup, though it's remarkably deep red hue is as much or more mesmerizing than a Warhol painting of the stuff.

If, for some reason, you've brought a real squeamish diner with you, there are also plenty of chicken nuggets or stir-fried hot dogs to go around. To indulge in those treats might actually be more authentic, for the young Chinese crowd at Sweet Station, some fresh off hard studying at nearby UIC and others possibly refueling after a day-long session of multiplayer-online gaming, all seemed to be eating French fries anyway.

Sweet Station, 2101 South China Place, (312)842-2228, mysweetstation.com

TIP OF THE WEEK
TWITTERATURE



I hope we can all agree that Twitter is the most obnoxious of all social networks. Users seem to take advantage of Twitter to do one, or all, of these three things: 1) Remain "connected" with others simply by revealing innocuous information 2) Attempt to achieve correspondence with celebrities 3) Promote shit. All of this is depressing. I dislike most people and things, but Twitter makes me annoyed with the actual people I do like and respect. (Even you, Roger Ebert. Love the blog posts, but those are some crazy-ass tweets.) However, University of Chicago students Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin have created "Twitterature," a collection of hypothetical "tweets" that reduce classic pieces of literature into an assembly of average-length Twitter updates. Charming concept, sure, and one can easily see how a writer could have fun with it. Rensin and Aciman rely on quip-based humor to take down Shakespeare, Dan Brown and Kerouac in this short, pleasing affair. These two smart-ass 19-year-olds have great things waiting for them in the future, I'm sure. They almost make Twitter tolerable. Almost. (Tom Lynch)

Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin discuss "Twitterature" January 21 at Book Cellar, 4736 North Lincoln, at 7pm. Free.

READINGS

THU/21

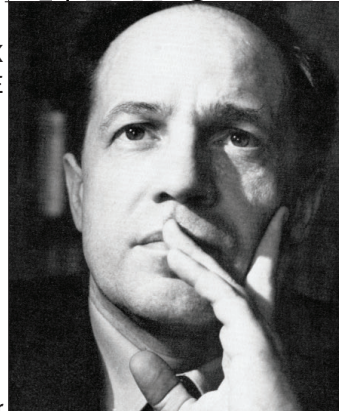
→ Alexander Aciman, Emmett Rensin

The authors discuss "Twitterature." See Tip of the Week. The Book Cellar, 4736 N. Lincoln, (773)293-2665. 7pm. Free.

TUE/26

→ The Nervous Breakdown Literary Experience

Featuring Claire Bidwell Smith, Greg Boose, Justin Bento and Billy Lombardo. The Whistler, 2421 N. Milwaukee, (773)227-3530. 7:30pm. Free.



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