

# Put this in your little red book

**CHAIRMAN MAO CHINESE RESTAURANT**  
189 Anzac Pde, Kensington  
Phone: 9697 9189  
Food: Hunan  
Service: No nonsense  
★★★★☆

**D**o you have a reservation?" says the man at the door, blocking our entry to Chairman Mao Chinese Restaurant.

It's 5.15pm on a Sunday so, no, we don't. I honestly didn't think we'd need one.

He frowns, consults a clipboard, and after much frowning of brow, decides we can enter, breaking into a smile when we promise to eat fast.

Apparently the word is out about Chairman Mao, a small jewel of a restaurant opened last year on the long, eatery-choked thoroughfare that is Anzac Parade, Kensington.

Chairman Mao falls into the category of what I like to think of as "new Chinese". That is, it serves authentic

provincial Chinese food that's virtually unrecognisable from the Cantonese-style chicken, veg and noodle combos that used to dominate Chinese cuisine in Australia.

Hunan food is about as far from long soup as it's possible to get. For one thing, it's spicy. Wow — I mean, really spicy.

Of the possibly hundreds of dishes on Chairman Mao's menu, probably 80 per cent mention chilli, pepper or hot spice of some sort.

Don't go with the expectation of an easy night out. Go with the expectation of being challenged, in the best possible way.

As we've promised to be quick, we start ordering immediately, selecting a veritable feast of Hunan delights.

The Hunan province — the birthplace, incidentally, of Mao — is in central China, where the weather is cold and heavy soups and stews are staples.

With imposing orangey-yellow walls and pictures of the Communist Party leader on the wall, it's hard to resist Chairman Mao's "favourite braised pork" (\$16.80) to start, and it arrives promptly.

It's a rich, sticky serve of red-black pork belly caramelised with sugar and cooked with light soy and rice wine.

It's an unctuous, delicious dish with the soft, rich meat cooked to flakiness.

While it — and a serve of Hunan fried rice (\$10.80) — are chilli-free, the next dish is a full-throated heat bit, as you might expect from pepper chilli king prawns (\$25.80).

Probably a full 15 huge prawns have been flash fried in fresh and dried chilli, shallots, black and white pepper, onion and more.

It is mouth-tinglingly good, and has us grabbing for the water bottle on the table.

A wintery tureen of lamb and celery soup is also spiked with chilli, but so hot were the prawns that the soup seems mild in comparison.

But it's good, being dense with lamb and celery stock and filled with very thinly sliced meat and tender celery

shoots. There's enough of it to feed a whole family, and with plenty for leftovers.

These four dishes, plus an entrée of shallot pancakes (\$3.50 each), are enough to leave us stuffed full. Which is a pity in a way, for there is so much more to try.

The adventurous might like the sound of chickens' feet, pig's hand or ears, black fungus with preserved chilli or dried bean curd with milk cream.

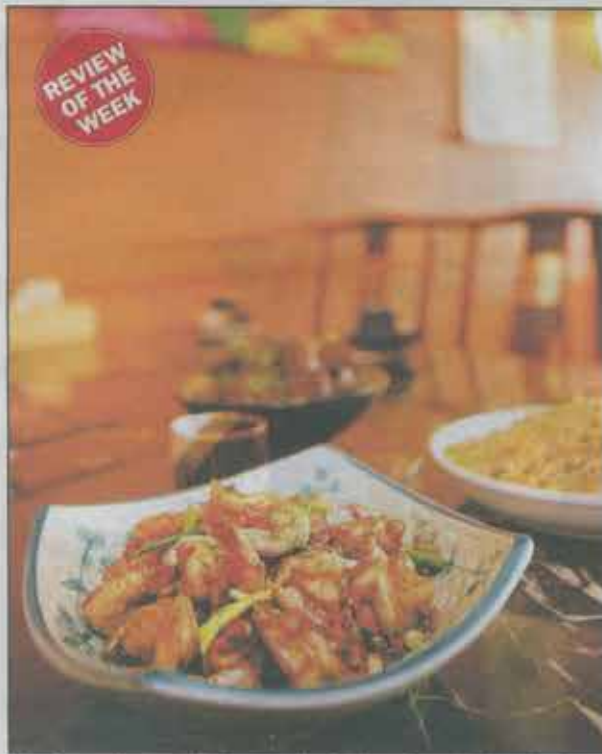
The menu abounds with offerings that are exciting and unusual and the cooking is precise and authentic. There's not much of a wine list but an OK beer selection.

Next weekend marks the Chinese New Year and there could hardly be a better way of celebrating the event than in an exciting venue such as Chairman Mao.

But be warned: book ahead or you may just miss out.

— ELIZABETH MERYMENT  
All meals are paid for and visits are unannounced.

**"It is mouth-tinglingly good, and has us grabbing for the water bottle on the table"**



Wow factor: Hunan cuisine isn't for the timid, and is best enjoyed under the Warhol-inspired gaze of Mao (below)  
Pictures: Rohan Kelly



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## HOT PRODUCT

### Love is a French bubble

HOW many words does it take to say I love you this Valentine's Day? Four: Perrier Jouté Belle Epoque.

At \$260 a bottle, this 2002 first vintage of the new millennium doesn't come cheap, but for a special treat on the most romantic day of the year, it's well worth the splurge.

Whether you're popping the question, or just the cork, this luxury brand bottle is the perfect accompaniment to any romantic brunch, lunch or dinner.

Available from all good bottle shops, this Valentine's Day treat yourself to a little touch of joie de vivre, as only the French know how.



## TOP 5

### Valentine's Day restaurants

By Elizabeth Meryment

**1 Manu at L'etolle.** An intimate French bistro at Paddington's Five Ways. [www.letollerestaurant.com.au](http://www.letollerestaurant.com.au)

**2 Forty One.** With breathtaking views and a sophisticated menu, this is one of the CBD's most special dining rooms. [www.forty-one.com.au](http://www.forty-one.com.au)

**3 Spice Temple.** Neil Perry's homage to Asia is a dark, broody, sexy number for those who like it hot. [www.rockpool.com.au](http://www.rockpool.com.au)

**4 Brown Sugar.** This candlelit bistro has a chilled Bondi atmosphere and a sassy menu. [www.brownsugarbondi.com.au](http://www.brownsugarbondi.com.au)

**5 Oscillate Wildly.** A tiny Newtown outfit with an avant-garde menu and an intimate atmosphere. Phone 9517 4700.

## WHAT'S ON



### Lots of food for thought

BARGAIN hunters celebrate, as the annual March Into Merivale extends itself for two months this year. Kicking off on February 15, you can get a \$33 dinner deal of main meal and glass of wine or beer. There will also be more than 50 events at Merivale's nine venues. From laneway dinners under the stars, a vintage champagne night at Ivy, to a gala dinner with rising chefs and live poolside dinner, there's something for everyone. Find out more at [www.marchintomerivale.com](http://www.marchintomerivale.com)



**BODEGA**  
216-224 Commonwealth St, Surry Hills  
NSW, 2010  
Phone: (02) 9212 7766

★★★★★

You may have already heard this is the best tapas in Sydney. It's true. Every plate is delicious and despite the ultra-cool vibe the staff are helpful and friendly and pretension free. It's not cheap but is definitely worth it.

Reviewed by:  
Chux D, Sydney

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