

good living



good food guide awards

Hot in the city tonight

By Joanna Savill

We're a spoilt lot, we Sydneysiders. We can roam whole continents without leaving the highways and byways of this fair and sprawling city. As curious food consumers, we see it as our right and privilege, ever on the lookout for variety and diversity, as well as easy, good-value eating. But it's also part of our perpetual quest for spice.

"Spice adds an extra dimension to food," says Sydney's acknowledged spice queen, Christine Manfield of Universal. "It embellishes and it's sexy. And as your palate becomes more accustomed to the flavours of spice you tend to seek it out and notice when it's not there."

'Chilli is not just chilli. It plays a lead role in flavour.'

Christine Manfield, Universal

Sydney food travellers constantly find new ways to get their spice fix. Whether it's rings of fresh chilli to add kick to a bowl of pho, or that lingering tease of turmeric on the fingers after a hands-on roti canai session (flaky Indo-Malay flatbread served with rich curry gravy), it's the culinary equivalent of an adrenalin hit. As new-world food finds come and go, almost addictive combinations of ingredients and spicing set our pulse racing and keep us wanting more.

Top spice notes around town this year include Sichuan pepper or the prickly ash berry, setting our tongues tingling and pushing our salivary glands into overdrive. It's all over regional Chinese diners, such as Chairman Mao in Kensington,

where smoky, chilli, cumin and Sichuan pepper notes dominate stir-fries and braises alike, and in the rusty film of chilli oil on bubbling hotpots at Spicy Sichuan in both Haymarket and Glebe. Find it in the disturbingly moreish hot, sweet, sour and numbing pork at chef Neil Perry's Spice Temple restaurant and at Universal, in the master stock, in a grind of salt and black pepper to flavour meats and, of course, in Manfield's menu regular, Sichuan duck.

"It's one of our essential staples," Manfield says. "You get numb and just want more."

Also hitting its straps around the traps is chilli, playing a starring role not only in Sichuan, Hunanese and other lesser-known Chinese cuisines, such as Yunnanese. It plays a vital role in the south- and central-American cooking that is increasing its hold on the street-food side of town. "These cuisines are opening us up to a greater understanding of chilli and how it's used in different cultures," Manfield says. "We know about the peppers and chillis in Spanish dishes, but the new focus on South American and Latino food is teaching us about using different types to create different effects, from acidic to fruity to just plain hot. Chilli is not just chilli. It plays a lead role in flavour."

Explore those fiery flavour profiles in the ssam sauce (Korean chilli paste) spatchcock at Eat Art Truck, or in the tacos, burritos and chilli corn at Cantina Mobil – the food trucks that are taking red hot chilli peppers to the streets. If you prefer your street food in a more stationary position, it's tacos with beers at El Loco in Surry Hills (where the hot sauce really is ... hot), with plenty of tequila at Barrio Chino in Kings Cross or in spicy black bean baleadas (soft tortillas) and the finest Guatemalan filter coffee – or maybe the lethally good salted



The life of spice ... (clockwise from top) Barrio Chino; El Loco; Chinta Ria. Photos: Sahlan Hayes, Steve Lunam, Marco Del Grande

caramel milkshake – at Reuben Hills in Surry Hills.

Street food has come into its own this year in *The Good Food Guide*. It's in the po' boys at Hart's yard in Newtown; the city's best ramen at Ryo's in North Sydney; beans, slaw and hot dogs at Goodgod/The Dip (and any number of our Good Food Bars – see page 29). The Merivale group has upped the ante on the ever-popular Ms. G's – street-food central with its chilli mayo banh mi and a *Good Food Guide* hat – by opening the city's funkiest

fish 'n' chipper, The Fish Shop in Potts Point.

This grab-it-where-you-find-it world is great value, too. Eating is no longer a long-term commitment. If you want something a little more permanent, take a seat at Wilbur's Place in Potts Point for comfort food (warm panchetta salad or beef-brisket rolls) with a very comfortable price tag. Try the cute little Buffalo Dining Club in Darlinghurst (entrees about \$7, mains about \$17) for mozzarella every which way, or wolf down one

of the city's biggest and best burgers at Jazz City Diner down the road. And if you want fine dining with that, there's always the amazing three-courses-for-\$35 Friday lunch deal at the newly hatted the Devonshire in Surry Hills, or a similarly stupendous offer (\$45 and three hats) at no less than Mark Best's Marquee.

Whatever the budget, whatever the hot and numbing tolerance, whatever kind of spice you fancy, there's a great big wide food world out there waiting for you to explore.