

KITCHENWISE



Cultural Evolution

A Chinese cook finds fresh inspiration in the vestiges of Beijing's past

BY GEORGIA FREEDMAN PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSH WAND

LAST SPRING, ON A warm, cloudless morning, I made my way through Beijing's historic Dongcheng district, past old men playing mah-jongg on tables outside their shops and women bicycling home from the market, their baskets full of greens and tomatoes. My destination was a small home off a narrow *hutong*, or lane, where Chunyi Zhou, a 36-year-old with a quick smile, was teaching a cooking class in her open-air kitchen. When I arrived, Zhou had gathered her three students—expatriates

from France, Belgium, and Hong Kong—around a long table set in the middle of her shady courtyard and had started to show them how to prepare the ingredients for gong bao ji ding, the classic dish known to Americans as kung pao chicken. She watched as they sliced ginger, garlic, scallions, and dried chiles and diced chicken breasts into small pieces, “the same size as the tip of your finger”.

Zhou, a former chemist from the southern city of Guangzhou whose passion for food led her to culinary school and, ultimately, to

a change of career in 2006, told me that her apartment was actually one part of a building that had once been a single-family dwelling of four rooms surrounding a central courtyard. Like many of the residences in Beijing's historic

Above, clockwise from top left: Chunyi Zhou and her students in her courtyard kitchen; Zhou slices chicken for gong bao ji ding; a ceramic pot for storing used cooking oil; Zhou's serving ware, along with a functional collection of strainers, spatulas, and other tools; the pantry; steamed fish with scallions.

hutong districts, the house had been occupied by one family for hundreds of years, until the 1950s, when sweeping governmental decrees forced multiple families to share houses like this one, dividing them up into apartments. The home's original kitchen would have been an interior room adjacent to the main living area, built around a large wood- and coal-burning stove with a metal wok set into its top—a far cry from Zhou's breezy, open-air situation, which

W More photos and a recipe for steamed fish with scallions at SAVEUR.COM/ISSUE111

bears a greater resemblance to the kitchens she was accustomed to in the south of China.

As the students prepped ingredients, I poked around the simple, utilitarian kitchen, which makes up half of her apartment's private courtyard. In one corner of the courtyard, Zhou had created an alcove with counters and wood shelves, a small sink, and a two-burner propane wok range that delivers the powerful heat needed for stir-frying. Her pantry is nothing more than a pair of folding tables, just outside the alcove, on which Zhou stores bottles of oils, vinegars, and soy sauces; plastic containers filled with dried spices like sichuan peppercorns; and jars of chile sauces and pickled vegetables. Next to them, a sturdy, three-by-six-foot wood table serves as a work surface. To provide shade and protection from rain in the summer, Zhou erected a simple "roof" of straw screens and corrugated plastic over this half of the courtyard; in the winter, she encloses the entire space in this way to keep it heated. At the other end of the courtyard, which is filled with potted flowers and plants, Zhou set a low tea table and a collection of wicker chairs, where she and her guests may eat and relax.

Like all traditional Chinese chefs, Zhou uses a minimum number of tools in her cooking, relying on an arsenal of classic cooking techniques rather than on appliances and fancy equipment to create a wide variety of shapes, flavors, and textures. Her kitchen contains only two woks, a few ladles and strainers, a rice cooker, some mixing bowls, cutting boards, and cleavers, and an assortment of plates, bowls, and utensils.

Instead of teaching her students traditional Beijing-style cuisine—which, like all northern Chinese food, was historically based on wheat, in the form of steamed buns and pancakes, and richer meats like mutton and duck—Zhou focuses on foods from Sichuan and her home state of Guangzhou, which are lighter and spicier and contain more seafood and rice. Dishes representing other regions of China have become more

and more commonplace in Beijing in the past half century, as people from all over the country have moved to the capital, bringing their traditions with them, and as the means of transporting perishable foods have improved.

The dishes Zhou's students prepared the day I visited reflected the greater range of foods from different regions available in Beijing today. Once they had prepped all their ingredients, each took a turn at the stove to make his or her own gong bao ji ding, a Sichuanese specialty, as well as a simple preparation of moist, white-fleshed butterfish steamed with ginger and strewn with scallions, a dish from Guangzhou. As the work progressed, Zhou coached her pupils, explaining how to toss the ingredients in the wok so that they would cook evenly and telling them when to add the sugar, salt, and MSG. When the dishes were finished, we took our seats around the tea table, in the shade of the pomegranate tree that grows next to the house's front gate, and Zhou explained to the students where they had gone wrong—meat cooked too slowly or a pepper cut too thick—and what they'd done right.

"I wanted to live in the *hutongs* because they are the soul of the city," Zhou said as we began to eat. Like most Beijingers, she feels that these crowded lanes and buildings, some of which date to the 13th century, preserve the traditional Beijing lifestyle. They are home to a diverse mix—longtime residents, immigrants, the newly wealthy, and elderly pensioners—all living in close quarters. "There is community here," Zhou said, describing how neighbors gather outside, share food, give unsolicited advice, and rarely knock before entering someone else's house. "In the *hutong*, you never close the door, because then the neighbors think something is wrong." (For more information about Chunyi Zhou's cooking classes, see *THE PANTRY*, page 108.)

Would you like to share your own kitchen design ideas with other SAVEUR readers? Send us photos of your kitchen, both overall and in detail, along with your name, address, and a few lines telling us what's special about it. Please note that unused submissions cannot be acknowledged or returned. Our address: Kitchenwise, SAVEUR, 15 East 32nd Street, 12th Floor, New York, NY 10016.

NEIGHBORHOODS OLD AND NEW

Despite their historical significance, approximately 80 percent of Beijing's *hutong* neighborhoods have been torn down over the past three decades to make way for high-rises. And those, like Dongcheng, that haven't been razed are changing dramatically, as the government and private homeowners demolish old structures and build new ones, often in an "ancient" style, that become boutiques, bars, and luxury homes, complete with modern, stainless-steel appliances, designed for foreigners and Beijing's growing upper-middle class. Throughout the *hutongs*, however, remnants of the city's past are still visible. —G.F.



When most single-family courtyard homes became multifamily buildings in the 1950s, each family was given only one room to live in. To expand their spaces, residents built bedrooms and kitchens that extended into public lanes; these ad hoc structures have since become permanent parts of *hutong* homes.



Though gas officially replaced coal fuel in Beijing homes in the 1980s (when soaring pollution from coal fires forced the government to take action), most people living in *hutongs* still use pressed-coal "honeycombs" to heat their homes. These also keep a kettle or a pot of soup simmering all day long.



Because of the high cost of living in Beijing, a great number of *hutong* residents live in small apartments with enough space for only a bed, a table, and a television. In lieu of a full, indoor kitchen, many keep a propane stove just outside their front door, where they can stir-fry their meals quickly.