

Recharge

LIFE BEYOND WORK

EDITED BY SUSAN SKELLY

Food

BY CLAIRE SCOBIE

Australia's quintessential Chinese cook has gone back to her peasant roots for a feast of flavours, with a dash of metaphysics.

Queen KWONG

ON FIRST appearances, acclaimed Sydney restaurant Billy Kwong could be mistaken for an aid agency meeting room. Inside is a stack of three-legged stools; instead of a menu in the window, there are two posters: one for fair trade, the other proclaims "Make Poverty History". The open kitchen behind suggests its true purpose, though: the production of authentic Chinese food in no-frills surroundings. For its proprietor, celebrity chef Kylie Kwong, the modesty makes sense. "I come from peasant stock," she tells *The Bulletin*.

With her trademark black-rimmed glasses and chunky beads, Kwong has become the familiar face of Chinese cooking-made-easy. Her books have sold [figures to come], the accompanying TV series (*Kylie Kwong: Heart and Soul* and *Simply Magic*) have been broadcast on the ABC and the Lifestyle Channel. Yet these days Kwong is more likely to be hosting food tours across China for World Expeditions than slaving over a hot wok.

In the past three years, the Australian-born restaurateur has visited China 14 times. The result, *My China: A Feast for all the Senses*, is a mouth-watering tour de force, which journeys from Kwong's origins in Guangdong province,

across the high Tibetan plateau to the mist-wreathed ramparts of Beijing's Great Wall.

Kwong's deeply personal account is part-meditation, part-travelogue, with the recipes listed by province rather than category. *My China* captures "all the things I love", says the 38-year-old. "The wonderful parts of Chinese culture - respect for the elders, tai chi, the metaphysical side of life, Buddhism, Daoism. It's about this country with a dark history and a complex political system and the modernisation of Beijing that is happening faster than the speed of light."

Freshly back from filming for the TV series that will accompany the book, Kwong is astounded at the destruction of traditional neighbourhoods - *hutongs* - once home to "the real Beijing-ers" and the best Peking duck. On the positive side, "a billion more trees have been planted and if you spit, you get fined. There's no rubbish anywhere. The whole place is under construction, so it's very much out to impress the rest of the world with the Olympics."

In contrast to the oppressive, overpopulated cities, Kwong also chronicles her return to her father's ancestral village, still without running water or electricity and surrounded by rice paddies. Stepping into the dilapi-



SPICE GIRL

Kwong brings a fiery touch to her focus on ingredients, culture and cooking

Travel

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▼ DONGPO PORK WITH BRAISED POTATOES



750g pork belly, cut into 1cm cubes
5cm piece ginger, cut into thin strips
4 tablespoons shao hsing wine
4 tablespoons peanut oil
375g potato, peeled and cut into 1cm slices
3 tablespoons shao hsing wine, extra
4 tablespoons light soy sauce
2 tablespoons dark soy sauce
2 tablespoons brown sugar
5 cups water

To remove any impurities from meat, place pork belly in a large pan or stockpot, cover with cold water and bring to the boil. Simmer for 5 minutes then drain, discarding water. Rinse pork thoroughly under cold running water and drain well.

Combine pork with ginger and 4 tablespoons of hsaio hsing wine in a bowl. Cover, place in refrigerator and leave to marinate for 1 hour.

Heat half the peanut oil in a wok until surface seems to shimmer slightly. Add half the pork and stir-fry for 4 minutes. Remove pork with a slotted spoon and drain on kitchen paper. Add remaining oil to wok with rest of pork and stir-fry for 4 minutes.

Return all pork to wok, along with potatoes, and stir-fry for 2 minutes. Add remaining ingredients and simmer gently, covered, for 50 minutes or until pork is tender. Serve immediately.

Serves 4-6 as part of a shared meal.

dated house of her great-grandfather, the first Kwong to emigrate to Australia in 1875, after the gold rush, was “life-changing”. Two months later, in December 2005, Kwong learnt her father had terminal cancer.

“It catapulted our family into total devastation.” She puts her head in her hands. “He ended up living for nine months. He always wanted me to keep going.” Reconnecting with her “father’s people helped relieve the pain of the loss”, as did her time in Tibet. “Experiencing the Tibetan people and their extraordinary views on life and death really helped me prepare myself for what was going to happen to him in a spiritual sense,” says Kwong.

A Buddhist, Kwong was inspired four years ago by her Zen-like maître d’, Kin Chen, to shift Billy Kwong’s menu to organic and biodynamic. Now Kwong is the Australian and New Zealand ambassador of Fair Trade – which promotes fair prices for producers in developing countries – and a spokeswoman for the Australian Marine Conservation Society, of which author Tim Winton is patron.

In August, Kwong hosted, with Winton, a 10-course Chinese banquet serving only sustainable seafood. By explaining where each fish came from – down to the king george whiting

being caught with a line from a 5m tinny, demonstrates that “we should really know the provenance of our food and not just blindly shop,” says Kwong. “Knowing that our choices as consumers directly shape commercial reality.”

Kwong learnt Cantonese cooking at her mother’s apron, before honing her craft at Neil Perry’s Rockpool and Wokpool restaurants. In 2000, she teamed up with Bill Granger to open

“ We should know the provenance of our food, not just blindly shop ”

Billy Kwong, though Granger left soon after.

These days Kwong is not interested in expanding her Shanghai teahouse-style eatery into a chain. Nor does she pay attention to complaints about the uncomfortable three-legged stools. “Oh, it’s so boring,” she rolls her eyes. “I think there are so many more exciting things to write about than stools.” ●

Kylie Kwong’s *My China: A Feast for all the Senses* is published by Penguin, rrp \$79.95.