

DIVERSIONS

Hong Kong's Hot Tables

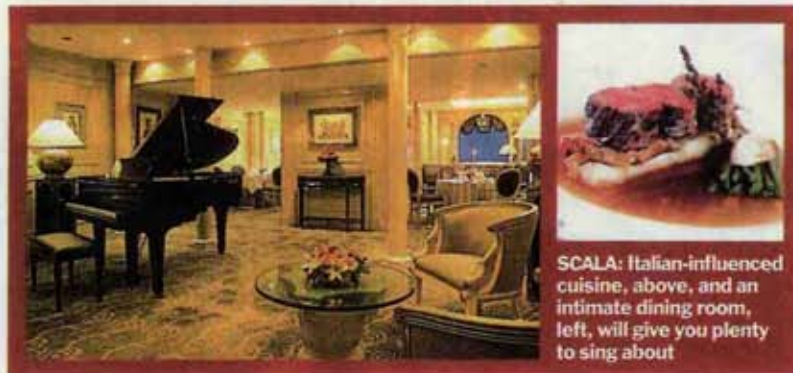
There are some bright new names in Hong Kong's dining firmament

By LIAM FITZPATRICK

HONG KONG'S RESTAURATEURS would rather draw a veil over the past 12 months. The effects of SARS on the domestic and tourist markets saw many a steel shutter come down for good. Hundreds of staff were laid off (or worked unpaid). And at the height of the outbreak, going out for a meal was like visiting a clinic: a sober experience of sterile swabs and face masks. The arrival of an international culinary superstar and the continuing emergence of local ones are therefore a much needed boost for the city's recovering dining scene.

Brand-new at the InterContinental Hong Kong hotel is Spoon, tel: (852) 2721 1211, the latest restaurant by Alain Ducasse, who has nine Michelin stars to his name.

Diners here can expect a free-form improvisation of flavors and textures, where the inspiration is just as likely to be Asian or Mediterranean as it is Gallic. The menu is also



SCALA: Italian-influenced cuisine, above, and an intimate dining room, left, will give you plenty to sing about

flexible: instead of sticking to a starter, main course and dessert, diners can tailor a meal from long lists of ingredients, accompaniments and sauces.

Spoon will be a formidable competitor to the city's other top-league restaurants, but other

contenders are emerging from unexpected quarters—among them the low-key Renaissance Harbour View Hotel. Located in the shadow of the more fashionable Grand Hyatt, the Renaissance is home to Scala, tel: (852) 2802 8888, a fine-dining restaurant that regulars say has long served the best Continental cuisine in Hong Kong but is only now starting to win critical attention. Chiefly responsible for this is the young, talented

Across the water in Kowloon, buzz is also starting to gravitate around Giampaolo Maffini, chef at the Harbour Grill, tel: (852) 2996 8433—a deceptively bland name for an astonishing restaurant in the mid-range Harbour Plaza Hotel in Hung Hom. Hong Kong's chattering classes might never summon up the will to go to this nondescript district of tower blocks and train lines—more fool them, for Maffini's talent is a rare one. His soups (oyster with Pernod; cauliflower with caviar) are masterful and original; the racks of lamb are so good they defy description; and his duck with Savoy cabbage is simply brilliant.

Don't bring guests to either Scala or the Harbour Grill if you're looking to show off Hong Kong's most fashionable rooms—you'll want Spoon for that. But if you're entertaining people who love fine food, you're in for a surprisingly good time at any of them. With any luck, there'll be more culinary discoveries over the coming year, too. It certainly couldn't be any worse than the last.

LONG HAUL

IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE LOUNGE?

Like delayed flights, health problems are an inevitable part of travel as well as being alive.

But what happens if you're stricken with toothache while waiting for your plane back to Kansas or Karachi? What kind of medical treatment can you expect at the airport?

Generally the good kind, asserts David Gamper, director of facilitation for the industry trade group Airports Council International.

"Most hubs, especially where there are long layovers, have sophisticated medical centers," he says. This includes equipment such as X-ray machines, C.T. scanners and defibrillators, as well as the doctors and nurses to work them. New

York City's JFK has a stand-alone clinic that offers vaccinations and general checkups. Tokyo's Narita Airport clinic even has beds.

Meanwhile, Singapore's Changi Airport has four clinics that can do everything from dental work to minor surgery.

Not all airports offer the same level of care, however. "While we try to ensure constancy, in real life there are differences," says Dr. Claus Curt-Christiansen, who heads the medical arm of the U.N.'s International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO).

That's because according to the ICAO's own regulations, signed by 188 countries, international airports are merely required to have a relationship with an external hospital and an ambulance on

standby. Luckily, most airports offer more than this bare minimum—even though air travelers tend to suffer fewer medical emergencies than the general population (according to a study at New Delhi's Indira Gandhi International Airport, where, incidentally, gastrointestinal disorders were the No. 1 health problem for departing passengers).

Airport health policies are also about to improve. One reason airports tend not to have on-site hospitals is to prevent diseases from spreading among travelers, but the outbreak of SARS earlier this year underscored the need for tighter screening and more consistent facilities. By the end of next year, new though still unspecified

ICAO regulations should be in place. In the meantime, if you're feeling out of sorts at an airport and the medical facilities are lacking, you could always head for that other place of succor—the bar.

—By Chaim Estulin



AIRPORT HEALTH: Done with check-in? Then swing by for a checkup