

YANGSHUO COOKING SCHOOL

MAY 25, 2007

HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

The town of Yangshuo in southern China is a popular stopping off point for travellers seeking a taste of rural life and a first-hand look at the scenic limestone-peaks that appear on the 20Yuan bank note. Rock climbing, balloon rides and bicycle tours can easily fill a week, but leave a spare day to learn a few techniques at the cooking school and you'll have a holiday to enjoy for the rest of your life.

Pomelo trees surround the kitchens at the Yangshuo Cooking School, filling the air with the scent of flowers and providing pleasant shade in the afternoon. Old farmhouses have been kitted out with working benches and wide folding-doors, opening out into the herb garden and a vista of the countryside. Adjacent fields are worked back and forth by bullocks, and as the sun climbs through the sky the more distant hills get lost in the haze.

We've spent the morning with a team of culinary experts learning to shop, cook and eat a Chinese banquet, southern style. Few places in Yangshuo could offer a more picturesque location to enjoy such a feast, all the more satisfying for having prepared it ourselves.

Our cooking adventure began with a trip to the local market for a guided tour of spices and vegetables. Markets in China are a feast of colour and excitement, and having a translator helps to clarify why one leaf is a vegetable and another is a herb. Knowing the names for some of the more exotic greens also makes it easier to buy them from your Asian grocer when you get back home.

We collect our vegetables and spices as we walk, completing the shopping list with a little pork and duck from one of the butchers – the live versions are also for sale around the corner, for those who prefer to chop their own. The vegetarian option is a good one, featuring locally made tofu or freshly caught fish pulled out of the Lijiang River.

Once all the necessities have been gathered we head out of town to the farmhouse to meet the rest of the team and get an introduction to chopping and wokking.

Pam Dimond started the cooking school three years ago, an unexpected destination after leaving behind a catering career in Sydney to do some travel. The rural setting was a big attraction for Pam, but equally the spirit of local women and their flare for cuisine. My instructor for the class, Jackie, takes great pleasure in seeing men do the cooking, "I think men are lazy and don't cook often for their girlfriends. Maybe now someone will marry you!"

Not only have some of Yangshuo's women found themselves careers at Pam's cooking school, but it is their very own recipes that are brought to life in the kitchen. Simple yet delicate creations, unique to the region and passed on through generations of families. Under Pam's guidance the recipes are expertly presented with a playful smile.

Southern style food in China has a distinct character that stands apart from the spicy themes of Sichuan, intense flavours of Mandarin and the more familiar Chinese menus influenced by the Cantonese. Dishes are very light and never oily, while reflecting the freshness of produce grown in the fertile valleys of Guangxi province.

One of my favourite recipes is fried eggplant dumplings. Mint leaves are the special ingredient to a pork mix that is sandwiched between thin slices of eggplant and lightly fried in a very hot wok. It's all over in a matter of seconds, and with a few clever tips the magic is easily repeated by novices such as me.

Aside from discovering new taste sensations that I would never have found elsewhere, the highlight of the day is to walk away a better cook. Learning a few techniques from the women of Yangshuo has done more for my ability in the kitchen than any book I own.

The week I returned home to Melbourne I invited a few friends over for dinner and cooked them a southern Chinese meal; steamed chicken with wild mushrooms and boxthorn-berries, Chinese greens and garlic in oyster sauce and hand-made dumplings with that extra bit of mint.

It was easy to imagine myself still in Yangshuo, cooled by the breeze and the shade of Pomelo trees.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY EWEN BELL



Left: Pam Dimond, Jackie, and a student in the kitchen. Right: A close-up of a bird's head, likely a chicken, in a traditional setting.

Yangshuo school of wok

A good cooking class is a chance to be big part of a holiday home with you.
writes Ewen Bell

YANGSHUO is southern China's most beautiful and peaceful area. It's a perfect mix of nature and culture. The town is surrounded by limestone karsts and is a great place to visit. The cooking school is a great place to learn about the local cuisine and the way of life. The school is run by Pam Dimond, a former caterer who has lived in Yangshuo for many years. She has a passion for the local food and the way of life. The school is a great place to learn about the local cuisine and the way of life. The school is run by Pam Dimond, a former caterer who has lived in Yangshuo for many years. She has a passion for the local food and the way of life.



Plowing power: bullocks still do the heavy lifting in the fields outside Yangshuo.

THE DEAL

Yangshuo is a beautiful area with limestone karsts and a great place to visit. The cooking school is a great place to learn about the local cuisine and the way of life. The school is run by Pam Dimond, a former caterer who has lived in Yangshuo for many years. She has a passion for the local food and the way of life. The school is a great place to learn about the local cuisine and the way of life. The school is run by Pam Dimond, a former caterer who has lived in Yangshuo for many years. She has a passion for the local food and the way of life.

Yangshuo is a beautiful area with limestone karsts and a great place to visit. The cooking school is a great place to learn about the local cuisine and the way of life. The school is run by Pam Dimond, a former caterer who has lived in Yangshuo for many years. She has a passion for the local food and the way of life. The school is a great place to learn about the local cuisine and the way of life. The school is run by Pam Dimond, a former caterer who has lived in Yangshuo for many years. She has a passion for the local food and the way of life.