

The Poons are bringing edible love to London



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Heritage beckons. Amy, the daughter of Michelin-starred Chinese master chef William, aka Bill Poon, comes from many generations of chefs on both sides of her family. She launched a three-month pop-up in London in February 2018. The launch was like a fireworks display with many write-ups. Bill Poon was described in various media outlets as “legendary”, a “Chinese food legend” and “renowned Chinese chef-restauranteur” and Poon’s as “iconic”.

Amy says: “My aim is to challenge and improve people’s perception and experience of Chinese food. There is so much more to Chinese cuisine than sweet and sour pork and fried rice.” She plans to bring on “a Chinese culinary revolution” and is looking to open a permanent restaurant.

Bill Poon is said to have put Cantonese food on the map in London. He became a celebrity chef whose restaurants were frequented by Mick Jagger, Barbra Streisand, Frank Sinatra, Sean Connery and Roger Moore. A wise-looking man in his 70s, Bill retired in 2006 but came out of retirement, acting as a consultant to the Poon’s pop-up. Bill said that he fell ill soon after retirement, as he “desperately missed the buzz of the business”. Twelve years on, he cooked a 13-course heritage dinner at Poon’s pop-up, where he showcased classic Cantonese dishes an experience he “really enjoyed”.

Bill’s father was a famous chef in China but floods seriously depressed fish stock and the family moved to Macau. He started cooking aged 12 in his father’s restaurants in Macau and Hong Kong where he learned techniques in barbecuing, stewing and wind-drying. He introduced his wind-dried sausages (a Chinese salami) to the UK in the 1960s and this became his signature dish. At 16, he learned to craft dim sum from a dim sum

master.

Bill’s mother became known for her accurate knife skills. She started cooking aged eight in her father’s kitchen. He recounts how her tiny frame would stand on a stool, with a massive Chinese cleaver in her hand and chop up a whole goose beautifully in minutes. Her great grandfather, a Hong Kong chef, invented using cloths to soak up soup, drying the cloths and remaking the soup by rehydrating them to release flavours from the soup wherever he travelled.

Knowing the importance of being able to learn from others outside his restaurant, his father advised Bill to leave and “learn from other people and do as you are told by others”. He left, aged 17, and honed his patisserie skills at a hotel in Hong Kong. In 1967, he followed Amy’s mother to England, where she was studying nursing. He soon opened his own factory, making wind-dried meat from his father’s recipe. In 1973, he opened his first restaurant in Chinatown. Bill fondly remembers customers waiting in a pub next door for a table at his restaurant. His second restaurant followed in Covent Garden, the first Chinese restaurant outside of Chinatown.

Bill was one of the first to have a kitchen in a glass box right in the middle of the restaurant. Food critic Fay Maschler recalls: “chefs worked and wokked in a large glazed box.” This was long before it became trendy to have an open kitchen. His friends loved Chinese food, but they often didn’t dare to eat at Chinese restaurants. Chinese restaurant kitchens had a reputation of being dirty. To demystify this misconception, he designed a glazed kitchen, “like a zoo”, Bill laughs. Such openness and theatre in the kitchen drew admiration (and wine) from diners, many of whom became friends.

He also claims to be the first to introduce the concept of set menus in Chinese restaurants, as he realised that Chinese menus were overwhelming. Another pioneering concept was his clay-pot rice – topped with wind-dried meat in a clay pot.

"In 1980, Bill Poon's Covent Garden restaurant won a Michelin star. He was so busy working that he hadn't noticed the envelope from Michelin in the post..."



I tried its reincarnation at the recent Poon's pop up, the rice was full of flavours of the wind-dried meat.

In 1980, his Covent Garden restaurant won a Michelin star. He was so busy working that he hadn't noticed the envelope from Michelin in the post. Bill only learned of the news from the manager of a nearby restaurant who read about it in the papers and dashed over to congratulate him.

His restaurant empire expanded, totaling four at one stage. Bill eventually gave his first restaurant to his older brother to run, having applied for him to migrate to the UK. Success also enabled him to put his younger brother through college – "being a traditional Chinese man, family is important to me," he explains.

Bill sold all his restaurants in 2006 but his wind-dried meat is still available in UK supermarkets. He has remained friends with many chefs that he trained, having them over for supper every week. One comes over a few times a week "to check if I am still alive," he chuckles.

Amy is passionate to continue the Poon legacy. Her vision is to bring well-cooked, home-style food to London, like "mothers cooking for their kids", food that is "healthy and simple – steamed, flavour-some and homely, giving a warm feeling with edible love". Her food "comes from the heart" and her restaurant does not add MSG. Bill chimes: "There is no need to add MSG, as long as the ingredients are of high quality and cooked properly, using the right techniques."

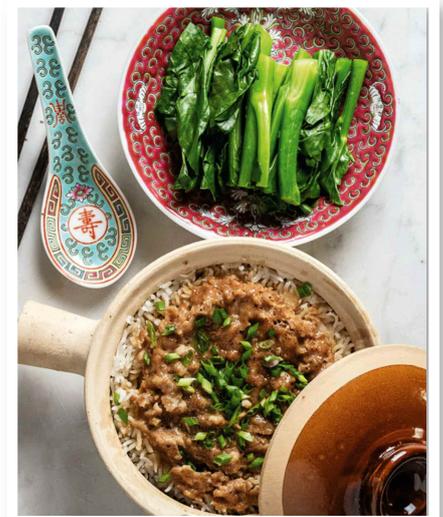
Intriguingly, Bill claims to know more

than 200 ways of cooking duck and obviously has an in-depth understanding of the functions of ingredients. His wish now is to help his daughter fulfil her desire to continue the Poon legacy and "pass on my knowledge" by training more chefs, Chinese or not. "The more people who get into this career, the more the industry will thrive," he said.

Poon's is as much about family as it is food. Their mutual respect was obvious, with the father admiring the steely determination of his daughter who in turn recognised her parent's genius (and 65 years of cooking experience) – "he's like Van Gogh," she says.



Amy as a young child with her parents



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Terry Tong, a Hong Kong Chinese living in London and a former lawyer, is the founder of Yippie Limited. Its website, yippieonline.com has reviews on Pan Asian restaurants across London with recommendations on dishes and blogs about latest restaurant openings and chef interviews.