

Food

'Chinatown Kitchen,' reviewed: I kept going back for more

By T. Susan Chang September 1

Heard of Lizzie Mabbott? Neither had I. She's a half-Chinese, half-English, 20-something blogger from Hong Kong and London with no cooking show, no line of potholders, no syndicated column. Her blog, [Hollow Legs](#), started as a search to re-create the Hong Kong dishes of her childhood using ingredients from London's Asian supermarkets. It's little more than a modest scattering of recipes and dining recommendations for South East London.

But her first cookbook, which was released here in July to very little fanfare, could change all that. "[Chinatown Kitchen: From Noodles to Nuoc Cham](#)" is a knockout.

It's not exactly a Chinese cookbook, as the sub-subtitle indicates. So while you'll find soy, ginger, garlic, rice wine and other ingredient friends from China, there's also lemon grass, fish sauce, lime leaf, coconut milk and about a million kinds of shrimp paste. Most of her dishes are easy, though some require a soak or a rest. Many seem quite new, and none are boring.

There's basically only one prep step in the Hoi Sin & Ginger Pork Ribs: Prepare the marinade in the blender. The recipe calls for a dozen ingredients, and I altered the order slightly so that all the thin liquids went in first with the onion, garlic and ginger, because my blender's not powerful, and the liquid was needed to help pulverize the aromatics. The resulting paste, heavy on the hoisin, was thicker than barbecue sauce and just as powerful. The eating was not pretty, but then it never is with ribs.

The rice stuffing for a roast chicken is insanely rich and almost too salty, filled with Chinese sausage, drenched in soy and brightened with citrus. (Whole dried mandarin peels were hard to come by, so I used some dried orange peel strips I had on hand.) Only half of the stuffing fit in the bird, but I saved the rest for the leftovers. The chicken itself got kind of a char siu pork treatment: soy and red fermented tofu, oyster sauce and honey. It was undeniably effective, although I kept wishing it were pork.

Shrimp With Thai Basil has flavors you'll recognize from Thai noodle dishes. Best of all is that aromatic lift at the end, when the herb and tomatoes hit the pan together, wilting and withering, releasing a heady perfume.

The clarity and simplicity of vegetable sides were welcome alongside the saucy proteins. Smacked Cucumber Salad is

coarse-looking and assertive and takes all of three minutes to put together, after you salt and rest the cucumber for half an hour, then let the flavors mingle for 10 minutes.

You'd be surprised how satisfying the puritan-sounding Cabbage in Vinegar Sauce is. There's not much to it: a smattering of the usual suspects (ginger, garlic, scallions), a judicious sprinkling of Sichuan peppercorn, some soy and a bit of black vinegar to balance it. But it's a good match for rich, sweet proteins, which abound in this book.

Mabbott has something of a noodle fetish, so "Chinatown Kitchen" features a glorious mosaic of noodle dishes. An eyewateringly pungent blend of shallots and spices and herbs and stinky shrimp paste — in short, a curry paste — lies at the heart of Malaysian Curry Mee. I cried onion tears near the blender, but they were forgotten as the mixture simmered away into sauce along with curry leaves and lime leaves, two of my favorite smells in all the world. The noodles and the tofu puffs and the vegetables were basically a vehicle for the curry, but I'd gladly get in that car every day.

It's not hard to make a home version of char siu, the pork that makes a roast pork bun sing. Mabbott's takes only 45 minutes of roasting (after a night in the marinade). The pork alone over noodles is almost austere, but a liberal shower of scallions and ginger and sauce pulls it together. It's a lot of meat for two people; you can double the noodles and have four people scraping their bowls instead.

Lots of Chinese people I know have a thing for scrambled eggs and tomatoes: "It looks kind of terrible," my aunt says. "But it tastes so good." The same can be said of Mabbott's Sichuan Preserved Vegetable, Egg and Tomato Noodles, which works best with the sloppiest, ripest tomatoes of summer. It looks like one hot mess coming out of the pan, so wolf it down with your eyes closed, if you want.

Xinjiang Lamb Skewers, the cubes of meat interspersed with scallions, get a spice rub glued together with chili bean paste, and the result is a wonder. The heat of the grill kisses the lamb and the scallions, fusing their juices; it's fiery and flavorful, and even as your eyes are stinging you're reaching for the next helping.

Only one time did I not see eye to eye with the shocking, in-your-face flavors of "Chinatown Kitchen." It was a spicy peanut and tofu puff salad that looked so delectable I tested it twice, even though I wasn't sure about the shrimp paste (hae ko, a molasses-like product that not even the biggest Asian store near me carried). First I tried it with pungent, hard-core, gray, muddy "belacan" shrimp paste, which can clear a room of uninitiated eaters the instant you open it. It was absolutely overwhelming, and I couldn't sell the leftovers even to my voracious teenager. The second time, I tried a sauteed sweetened Filipino shrimp paste — more accessible, but still a bit intense for company. If I ever find the hae ko, you can be sure I'll try a third time.

Often with Chinese and Southeast Asian cookbooks, I've been a sucker for the authenticity that comes with the hardest-to-find ingredients. "Chinatown Kitchen" tosses all such neuroses out the window. Enough of its recipes are

throw-together simple, and even so, they're an easy sell for the most jaded palate. I, for one, will be eager to see what future surprises Mabbott has in store.

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Chang, who lives in New England, regularly writes about food and reviews cookbooks for the Boston Globe, NPR and the cookbook-indexing Web site Eat Your Books. She is the author of “[A Spoonful of Promises: Stories & Recipes From a Well-Tempered Table](#)” (Lyons Press, 2011). Her blog, Cookbooks for Dinner, is at www.tsusan Chang.com.

Recipes:

[Smacked Cucumber Salad](#)

[Dry-Tossed Char Siu Noodles](#)

[Shrimp With Thai Basil](#)

[Xinjiang Lamb Skewers](#)

[Sichuan Preserved Vegetable, Egg and Tomato Noodles](#)

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