

URBAN TACTICS

The Kings of Sweet and Sour

By ALEX MINDLIN

Published: December 12, 2004

IN a small cluttered room in a Canal Street basement, Wei Yao sat at a rickety table and proofread a Chinese menu. Red pen in hand, he fixed misspellings ("loster" to "lobster") and revised the list of dishes, consulting notes supplied by his client. Fried cheese got struck out. The price of sashimi rose \$2.

Upstairs, Mr. Wei's boss, Nelson Xu, a youthful 42-year-old with a thick black brush-cut, was reminiscing about a New Jersey restaurateur, one of the various eccentric clients he has encountered in his 15 years of designing and printing Chinese menus. "Usually in restaurants, they serve General Tso's Chicken," Mr. Xu said. "But he wrote down 'General Lee.' Our guys said, 'That's the wrong spelling.' He got the proof and he wrote it again - 'General Lee.' So I asked him why." Turned out that the restaurateur was a former soldier whose last name was Lee.

Mr. Xu is the owner of Jin Printing, one of New York's larger printers of Chinese menus, and he told the story while standing just outside the long room full of presses that is the hot, noisy heart of his company. As Mr. Xu walked about, compulsively clearing jammed sheets from the machines that print 100,000 menus a day, men in tank tops oiled cogs and daubed rollers with ink. At the center of the room sat the company workhorse, a 35-foot-long press that spat out menus at a rate of three per second, drawing paper from a giant roll 40 inches in diameter.

Come to Chinatown's Market Street any morning, and these rolls can be seen everywhere, being trundled out of trucks and into storefronts. Market Street, where Mr. Xu has an office, is the heart of the Chinese-menu industry. That such an industry exists in the nation's capital of Chinese restaurants is not surprising, but what is surprising is that their clients are far-flung. Thousands of Chinese restaurants east of the Mississippi, and even many west of it, have their menus designed and printed by one of the 15 or so large shops on or near the two blocks of Market between Monroe and Henry Streets, just below the Manhattan Bridge.

Samples displayed on the shop windows proclaim the printers' reach: one store, A-Graphic Printing, features menus from Sandy, Utah; Ripley, Miss., and Bamberg, S.C. These menus tend to feature exotically un-urban directions ("Come visit us near Sunnycrest Mall!"), and advertise features seldom seen in New York Chinese restaurants, like Italian food and all-you-can-eat buffets.

Each shop looks basically the same: a row of tired young people typing frantically at mismatched computers; a clattering press in back; and every spare foot filled with boxes or customers.

The frenzy is palpable. "They're always moving," said Jay Baez, a UPS deliveryman who has had the Market Street route for 10 years. "They bring the stuff to my truck in a heartbeat. They work so hard, they have no time for anything."

And the pace has quickened in the past decade. The number of Chinese takeout places has increased during that period, and many Chinese restaurants have turned to "flyering," or leaving menus, on doorsteps and in lobbies to promote themselves. "An American restaurant, 10,000 menus, they print it, and they can use it for two, three years," Mr. Xu said. "Chinese people, they print 10,000 menus, and it lasts two, three months."

The growing demand for menus has attracted more printers; the total in Chinatown has jumped from fewer than 20 to about 50. "There are too many printers," said **K.Y. Chow, of GM Printing, a former menu maker who has moved largely into mainstream printing. "It's a junk job market; they're undercutting each other and they don't care. They just make up the shortfall by hard work."**

The economics are challenging. In the past 15 years, the price of 10,000 menus has dropped to \$230 from \$320, Mr. Xu said, while in the last five years the price of paper has risen 25 percent.

Business is also tougher because restaurant owners are tougher. Decades ago, most owners were Cantonese and financially comfortable. Now more restaurateurs are from rural Fujian province, often desperately poor, and unwilling to pay an extra dime for their menus.