


You Can
Call Me Au

hen thinking about Chinese buffets in London, you are forgiven if the ubiquitous Mr. Wu's is the first to come to mind, as they have a firm grip on the market. There are no fewer than three branches around central London, and are easy to find and cheap. But for those brave enough to stray from the norm, a special treat lies in store at the establishment of the venerable Mr. Au. Yes, it's the same food (literally), and yes it even has the same font, but one letter makes all the difference.

As soon as the front door is closed, one feels a respite from the kaleidoscopic bustle of Leicester Square and Charing Cross Road by the minimalist décor. White everything might put one off and in fact would recall in most a sense of cold sterility. But a few well-placed flowers and an ingenious upper level where the food is kept create an atmosphere of patience, which is at once a pleasantly severe departure from the average buffet. One can imagine sitting down to a great meal, the smells of which tantalise simply by the apparent lack of actual food. There are no herds stampeding around your table, elbowing you in the face and dripping broth onto your lapels.

Of course it isn't a great meal; there are no mincing words about the food. Original and lovingly prepared? No. Good quality and satisfying? Yes. As with Mr. Wu's, start with some soup — heavy on the bean sprouts! Move to lo-mein with beef, avoiding the piles of near-useless onions and favouring the usually tolerable cabbage. Cleanse the palate and have some rice with curry chicken — again, light on the onions. Sample the sweet and sour pork if you wish, but lightly, and end the meal with some more soup and a little more rice. This isn't fine dining — it's not even fine buffet dining — but do it right and you get back more than the price of admission.



Atmosphere is what makes Mr. Au's separation from the parent chain make sense at all. You see it as you eat and observe the staff. They are within sight at all times, including the dishwasher. This creates an easy comfort in the diner, who then feels that nothing is hidden. The misery of the cleaners, the financial worries of the owners, the exhaustion of the hostess and waitress, are all apparent, so in turn, you know their clean appearance, pride in their work and laissez faire attitude towards what the customers do, are all true as well. What you see is what you get at Mr. Au's, and what you get is decent food at an even pace with no browbeating. Mr. Wu's veterans have grown used to being rushed in, then rushed out, but not before being shamed into buying twice their weight in Coca-Cola. One departs Mr. Au's pleasantly filled and only £4.50 lighter.



The city could be on the
verge of collapse
from stifled movement and
frenetic unresolved
anachronism. But it has
been doing exactly this
forever.