

At Home for the Holidays

JAMIE BARYS

Holiday dinners celebrated with overpriced set menus in crowded restaurants are hardly the way to pay homage to the upcoming barrage of feast days, and home-cooked meals always seem like a good idea until the preparation gets underway. Hunts for elusive ingredients, cramped kitchen counters and mountains of dirty dishes can be more of a headache than they're worth. Luckily, TALK has the perfect solution – a taste test of the city's independent home catering companies just in time for the upcoming holidays.

Flying Chef

What: Southeast Asian food for foreigners

Contact: www.flyingchef.cn

Why: You've always wanted your own private chef

Chef Li has been whipping up Southeast Asian feasts in the lanehouses of Shanghai's expats for the past four years and he has the home catering gig down to a science. Hungry foreigners simply fill in the online reservation form and select from an extensive menu of Chinese, Thai and Vietnamese classics, then he shows up two hours before dinner, grocery bags in hand. All diners need to supply is dishware, drinks and an appetite. In return, you get a stress-free, home-cooked meal that fills your house with tantalising aromas.

After a seven year stint running the kitchen of a Chinese restaurant in Germany, Chef Li knows the expat palate. He removes the bones from a sweet and sour Mandarin fish, stays far away from MSG and adds parsley and flowers for presentation points. He's not trying to reinvent the wheel with his homestyle Southeast Asian menu, but Chef Li's practiced hand has honed each dish to edible perfection.

The Vietnamese Spring Rolls (a treat he learned to make from his Saigon sous chefs in Germany) are stuffed with vegetables and shrimp, creating one satisfyingly crunchy bite. Skewers of chicken satay were heavy on the flavour, but light on the oil, while plates of sizzling beef with peppers were hearty bites of Northeast China. The highest praise was reserved for a plate of Peking Duck that rivalled the best *kaoya* houses in the nation's capital. Well, we concede it might not be the best taste-wise (if only our kitchen came with a wood-burning oven...), but when it comes to price and convenience, there's no doubt in our mind who takes the cake.

Fried bananas with honey melted into our already-stuffed stomachs, putting a sweet touch on the end of the evening. While I wouldn't say any one dish was mind-blowing, the entire experience turned out to be one of the most enjoyable nights in we've had in a while. The best part? Besides the fact he actually mopped the kitchen floor when he was done washing up, Chef Li makes enough food to feed a small army, so you're guaranteed that the leftovers will fly by night through your fridge and straight into your lunch hour.



Dinner for Six

RMB 220 per person includes:
two appetizers, four mains and a dessert

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Total: RMB 1,320