

Welcome to our first column by Bob Young

Tales from Tasmania

Greetings all the way from Tasmania - if you look at a map of Australia, it's that little island underneath the "big island." It often gets left off maps, so hopefully yours is a complete one. We here sometimes retaliate by leaving the "big" island off our maps.

Why a column from Tasmania I hear you ask? Tasmania exports lots of things – apples, cherries, vegetables, meats, seafood such as crayfish and abalone, fish, cheese, wines, truffles and tulips to name but a few. An export column may be a first though.

There is a Canadian link as well. Some 37 years ago I had the good sense to marry a wonderful Canadian lady. She also happens to be the mother of the Editor of this newsletter -- it's true that it pays to know people in high places when it comes to getting published.

So what's this upstart from Tasmania going to write about in a column for seniors, their families and friends? Well certainly on some universal themes, with a sprinkling of experiences gained travelling around mainly Asia and Australia, Europe and North America. Perhaps we'll leave Australia for a bit, after all Oprah did a pretty good job highlighting what is uniquely Australian. Oprah – now there's someone who really does reach everyone in the Universe.

Where to eat in Hong Kong

When approached by the Editor I was asked to write a food column. I guess she thought that having eaten food all my life I would be qualified. Plus having owned a restaurant overseas that was voted among the top 10 bistros in Hong Kong.

I quickly used my little influence – I have as little as anyone (ouch!) – to seek to widen the parameters to ramble on about other things as well that might be of interest, and was given permission to do so. With that "victory" under my belt, I'll concentrate on a food theme this month.

My first draft sounded a bit like a list of do's and don'ts – so I said, heck that's not what anyone wants and did the electronic equivalent of tearing up the draft.

What I wanted, I told myself, was to start an exchange of ideas – telling of the things that I have learned over the years that I think are important, and hopefully getting similar advice back from you to share with others. Send your experience and findings to me at bob@elder-zone.com. Not sure if the magazine budget extends to a prize for the best advice received – but at least you'll be sharing valuable information.

Good food is one of the joys of life – be it the fresh and tangy flavours of Asia, the wonderful yum cha dim sums of Hong Kong, the rich sauces of France, the fine pasta dishes of Italy, the pungent curries of India, vegetarian treats as prepared by Buddhist monks, simple stews and crock-pot dishes or any of the unending variety of dishes from around the world and all its regions.

We all know food not only brings family and friends together for joyous and celebratory times, but good food also provides enjoyment for more intimate groups and for individuals.

Getting to know you . . .

It's no surprise that good food starts with good ingredients. That's why good restaurants spend so much time sourcing quality produce. And we should all do this whenever we can ... not only get to know our greengrocers, our butchers, and bread-makers, but also where they get their raw materials from, and spend time at local produce markets. It's all good fun.

Meat animals that have been reared in ideal farm conditions and treated with respect and in a caring way will always be a better product than an animal that has been badly treated and regarded by their owners as nothing more than a factory product.

Vegetables and fruit should be seasonal and fresh, which usually means dealing with a greengrocer or visiting the fresh produce markets. If vegetables are not that fresh they will have little nutritional value and you will be better off with frozen or canned vegetables which have been processed at the peak of their goodness.

Some frozen and canned vegetables taste better than other . Beans and peas taste good frozen, carrots ... well admittedly they taste better fresh. Onions are a bit of a disaster frozen.

Love those farmers' markets!

If you have the time and space, growing your own ensures the freshest quality of all. I tried going down that path a few times but the result was always the same: The best fed bugs in the neighbourhood, and our “crops” ripening at the same time you could buy buckets of the produce for pennies at the Sunday markets.

No matter what you are preparing – simple or elaborate – one thing I have found indisputable, and that is the love you put into the preparation will be reflected in your final dish. Good energy and bad energy are very contagious, and the vibrations are easily picked up by the food you are preparing. That's why you'll hear a lot of chefs include love as one of their ingredients.

So smile while you're cooking.

Prepare food the way you like to eat it – just because a chef may like his meat nearly raw, that doesn't mean you have to. Experiment to find what you like.

I once threatened one of my waiters with the sack because he kept telling people who had ordered their steak well done that they were doing the wrong thing. He couldn't get it through his head that we were there to give the paying customer what they wanted, not what he wanted.

Rare enough for ya?

Although I will admit I blanched a little when a regular American snake-hunter customer used to ring up in the morning asking for a steak to be put in the freezer for him that night, then when he arrived to just sear it 30 seconds on each side and serve it to him still frozen in the middle. But, hey, he was the paying customer. He did say nobody else would serve him a steak the way he could get it at our place.

I love to experiment when cooking at home and to substitute ingredients or quantities to achieve different tastes. There is one cardinal rule in cooking – continually taste as you go along and adjust flavours and seasoning to suit. You'll get some amazing results and admittedly some lessons in what doesn't work – but it's all good fun. The basics apply, the rest is up to you.

Well there you have it for this month. Hope it's given you some food for thought.