

Two cheers for our restaurants

CONVERSATIONS

by Margaret Sheridan

JENNIFER Grieve is food's cheerleader. Now, if she could only find a team. The Melbourne-born chef and food consultant wants to get the young chefs of Hong Kong together — the Brits, Aussies, the Americans, the local Chinese in the 25-35 age group, those taking over the restaurant ranges and collectively re-defining the dining style.

"We can improve things," she says. "But we've got to talk to each other." A network of chefs and food people can influence change. "What passes for food here in most cases is pretty mediocre. And diners pay dearly for it. I rarely eat out in restaurants because I'm a tightwad."

Hong Kong doesn't have restaurant trends, says Grieve, who lives on Lantau. "We have restaurant openings."

Though she defends her approach as pushy and vocal, it stems from being passionate about food and a believer in change. Hong Kong is more interested in making money than improving quality. A network of chefs, working together, can lower food costs by supporting local markets and farmers, improve quality, nurture innovation and ultimately, educate the consumer.

"If we exchange ideas and share frustrations, that's the first step." Buoyed by a recent week-long holiday in Australia, she was impressed by the trends in Melbourne, her hometown, and Sydney. The 22 meals committed to memory and the qual-

ity of food available at retail incited her to return and rouse her colleagues.

"Maybe the first session would be a therapy one," she laughs.

"You can't compare those cities to Hong Kong. Their lifestyles are different. But there is an attitude in Australia about food and dining. It is regarded as important. Many people are producing excellent, innovative food and restaurants. Why can't we do that here?"

"I always took Australian food for granted. Now, after working here three years, I really appreciate it." And the cost. Diners can buy lunch including a bottle of wine for under \$200. "That's difficult in Hong Kong."

So is finding good cookbooks, an objective dining guide, informed consumer food writing and serious cooking schools. She wants more casual dining, such as American Pie in Lan Kwai Fong and Tutto Bene in Kowloon instead of more pretentious restaurants. The casual style of covering tables with butcher's paper, popular in Australia, is a practical alternative to tablecloths. Diners can scribble notes during a business lunch.

"Australia is becoming culinary-oriented. You can dine your way across the country. It's happened because the public is more demanding, more knowledgeable."

A dream for Hong Kong would be to have more chef-owned restaurants, such as Ste-



Grieve . . . 'We don't have restaurant trends, we have restaurant openings.' Photograph: David Paul Morris

fano Manfredi's in Sydney or Pellegrini's coffee bar in Melbourne, more delis and casual coffee bars where patrons can linger.

Hong Kong's spiralling rents and transient population are hurdles that prevent talented and capable chefs from opening restaurants. "In Australia, the people don't move around as much. Things are stable. If a restaurant changes, it's to present a new concept or change the cooking style. They install a wood-burning oven because they like the way a pizza tastes, not because it's trendy."

Salaries for chefs here and Australia are comparable, except in the upper echelons. An experienced senior chef makes around \$15,000 to \$20,000 per month; a junior, around \$10,000. But executive chefs can make \$40,000 or more, depending on the type of restaurant.

Hong Kong and London lure young Australians that same way it lured Grieve, the challenge, the attraction of a

duel culture. "Here you can be a big fish in a small sea."

"In Australia, there is no tradition of chefs over 40." The German-speaking mafia who have dominated the Hong Kong food scene since the 60s are no threat to the young chefs. "Many are middle-aged but some are adaptable to youth and change. We can learn to work together."

She laments the lack of variety in cookbooks at retail and wonders why more food writers and chefs aren't writing more food books.

"Sure, no one has the time. But, in Australia, it seems, those who really love food, make time."

Why does Ms Grieve bother to care so much. "I love food. It's my life. I want to inspire cooks here to change and improve. Let's give a good product at a reasonable price, not one dictated by the landlord."

"A small vocal minority can make a difference. Then, if we can put it on a plate, we've done our jobs."