

**ABY ROSEN**

# **SURFACE**

ISSUE 109  
JUNE / JULY 2014

POWER 100





## A designer looks to cinema to set the scene for a new Hong Kong restaurant with a historic past.

BY AILEEN KWUN

For a new outpost of Pak Loh Chiu Chow restaurant—located on the 10th floor of a high-rise shopping center in Hong Kong's Causeway Bay neighborhood—the owners asked architect Nelson Chow to craft a space that would meld Pak Loh's midcentury heritage with modern-day elements. It was important for the restaurant to reference its history and the opening of its first location in 1967, when "Hong Kong was experiencing a lot of changes—a riot as well as an economic boom," Chow says. "Citizens held on to some of their Chinese traditions, while embracing new cultural elements from the West."

To inform his approach, Chow and his team looked to other restaurants from the era for inspiration—particularly Café de Goldfinch. Fans of Wong Kar-wai's dreamy, color-washed nostalgia trips are likely to identify the local institution from the 2000 film *In the Mood for Love*, in which co-stars Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung exchange brooding glances across the dining table. Outfitted with neon lighting, floral green wallpaper, and

wood-paneled banquettes, Café de Goldfinch has remained virtually unchanged to this day, making it a storied pilgrimage for cineastes and romantics alike.

At the new Pak Loh, the atmosphere is decidedly more upscale than kitsch and not easily linked to a specific time period. Custom brass lighting fixtures, patterned Maharam wallpapers, rounded banquettes, and wooden seats upholstered in olive-green velvet give the space the warmth of a vintage photograph, while streamlined structural elements lend it a contemporary feel. Glass wall sconces project radial light patterns, and the restaurant's vaulted ceilings are lined with a series of intricately ribbed walnut-veneer arches. The simple repetition creates a visual complexity that gives depth to the space and efficiently insulates sound for intimate gatherings.

The merging of old and new that characterized Hong Kong's midcentury aesthetic appears in even the smallest details of Pak Loh's design—down to staff uniforms by local designer Melissa Bui and the bowtie- and gown-wearing caricatures that illuminate the restaurant's restroom signage. They're a nod to a time when women still wore traditional *cheongsam* dresses alongside men in Western tuxedos, says Chow, who happens to have studied menswear tailoring at the Fashion Institute of Technology, in New York. "We believe that these small elements often make the dining experience a special one."



PHOTO: NATHANIEL MCMAHON





## Dish by Seamus Mullen

### INSPIRED BY PAK LOH CHIU CHOW

#### *Sugar snap pea salad*

The design of Pak Loh Chiu Chow restaurant is a sparing celebration of soft palettes, feminine curves, and 1960s Hong Kong. It's a tribute to the unforgettable color fades of Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*, one of the most visceral films I've ever seen. Moving from one room to the next in the restaurant lends the same magical realism of Wong's set. Colors fade, suits change, but the dreamlike sequence of scenes seems to proceed without interruption. I found it appropriate to focus on a single ingredient that might dominate the plate in the same way the draping of fabric dominates the dining rooms and creates a mood—perhaps a mood for food, or, dare I say it, a mood for love. This salad of *guisantes lagrimas* or “teardrop peas”—a name that could have been sourced from a Gabriel García Márquez novel—felt right in this anachronistic dining room. This salad is all about the sugar snap pea, a descendant of the snow peas ever present in Chinese cuisine, with a pinch of Aleppo pepper for heat, some fresh ricotta cheese for richness and texture, and edible flowers for color. It packs a sense of nostalgia and newness in a single sitting, much like Pak Loh Chiu Chow restaurant.

#### Serves Four

- 1 pound fresh sugar snap peas
- 1 bunch radishes
- ½ cup fresh ricotta cheese
- ≈ fresh peppermint leaves
- ≈ salt
- ≈ freshly ground black pepper
- ≈ juice of 1 lemon
- ≈ olive oil to taste
- ≈ Aleppo pepper or red pepper flakes
- ≈ handful of edible flowers, such as pea blossoms or nasturtiums

#### Process

With a sharp knife, trim the tips of the sugar snap peas on both ends, remove the strings if they bother you, and cut some in half lengthwise. Blanch the peas quickly (about 30 seconds) and shock in ice water. Slice the radishes thinly into coins or half-moons. Combine the peas, radishes, cheese, and peppermint in a large bowl. Season with salt and pepper and toss with the lemon juice and olive oil. Serve with a sprinkle of Aleppo pepper and garnish of edible flowers.