



Enter the Dragon

Almost three years after it was announced, China Live is about to open its (massive) doors in Chinatown—really! By Rebecca Flint Marx

China Live's future marketplace dining area.



"I know it doesn't look like it'll be ready, but it never does," says George Chen. We're in an elevator somewhere between the second and third floors of China Live, the Chinese-food megaplex he announced to great fanfare in 2014. On a late-January morning almost two years after it was supposed to open, the four-level, 30,000-square-foot space is still very much a construction site, but one that Chen swears up and down will debut with a grand party in late February. Otherwise, he says, "we wouldn't put out an invitation, which is being sent out to all the socialites."

Should Chen's plans come to fruition, the socialites will have much to behold when China Live opens its doors on Broadway and unleashes its grand ambitions upon Chinatown. There will be a massive ground-floor marketplace replete with dumplings, dim sum, noodles, charcuterie, pastries, Peking duck, and teas that Chen

says he personally climbed the mountains of Taiwan and China to source. There will be a second-floor fine-dining restaurant called Eight Tables—a "Benu kind of experience," Chen says—where he and his chefs will serve delicacies like chrysanthemum salad with jellyfish and Taiwanese three-cup chicken made with con-fited Cara Cara oranges. There will be a lounge called the Golden Mountain that will evoke Chinatown's "glamour years, when Frank Sinatra used to go to the clubs," Chen says. There will be a third-floor kitchen just for banquets, an event space with an oval skylight, and possibly an omakase restaurant behind smoked glass, because why not. There will be no fewer than five bars where, China Live beverage director Duggan McDonnell reports, there will be "a lot of custom stuff happening."

But for now there are men wearing kneepads, crouching on the ground

COURTESY OF CHINA LIVE; EXCEPT ABOVE BOTTOM RIGHT BY ALANNA HALE



Left: China Live's chrysanthemum salad. Right: George Chen, China Live's ringmaster.

to lay tiles—Shanghai brick, as Chen is quick to point out. As he leads an entourage through the cavernous ground-floor space, his manner is part P.T. Barnum, part exasperated parent holding a checkbook. While Chen talks about the non-GMO organic black-bean soy sauce he'll sell under China Live's own private label, along with extra-virgin tea oil and 100-year-old vinegars he selected himself, Doug Collister, China Live's director of marketing and IT, notices that the lights have been installed above the future tea counter. "Oh, the xLights," Chen says. "They're so expensive, like \$6,000 apiece. Completely custom, because AvroKO"—the firm designing China Live—"wants everything custom. It's like, I understand, but do you know they cost six grand apiece?" Later, as we look at renderings of Eight Tables, I ask Chen what the floor is made out of. He laughs. "Oh my God. Eighty-five thousand dollars! It's dollar bills slapped on there."

The floor is actually made of Norwegian Junckers oak, but no matter: When you talk to Chen about China Live, it's impossible not to think about both its grandeur and its risk, which seem to exist in equal propor-

tion to each other. A longtime chef and restaurateur who used to own Betelnut and Shanghai 1930 and still has an American steakhouse in Shanghai, Chen envisioned China Live as serving a dual purpose: to provide both "very Chinese-centric" fine dining and a big marketplace restaurant. In his telling, it will be as much of a consciousness-raising project as a juggernaut, a place where he and his team "can educate and introduce Chinese food the real way." Most restaurant menus, he adds, "aren't really representing Chinese food; it's just beef with six different ingredients and the same sauce."

But doing this the way he wants to takes money, a lot of it. China Live's initial overall budget was \$8.5 million. Today it's ballooned to \$20 million. "We generally don't like to talk about money," Chen says, "but it's a big project with a lot of effort, a lot of R&D. Of course, it's not what I expected, but we kind of left nothing to chance." He attributes the project's metastasizing expenses to its literal growth: Over the course of construction, he added a second building that now contains China Live's future retail space. This decision to expand necessitated a second round of fund-

raising, and also yielded an almost yearlong construction hiatus. The cost of construction has also had an impact on the project: Over the past year or so, Chen says, it's increased by 15 percent. (Saylor Consulting, a construction support firm, estimated it at closer to 5 percent.)

As Chen explains this, McDonnell asks a question: "Has George shared his passion for crafting the narrative of how Chinese cuisine and wine interact with each other?" He has not, but McDonnell is happy to. We're now standing on China Live's roof, where we can take in both its stupendous 360-degree views and even more of the project's innumerable details: At the rear of the building is the alleyway entrance to Eight Tables, where diners will be greeted by a valet and then a hostess who will lead them down the alley, champagne glass in hand, to the freight elevator that will whisk them to the restaurant. To one side of the building is the rooftop of the retail space, which Chen says will eventually hold a garden—"like what Alice Waters did in Berkeley"—that will also be enjoyed by the residents of the SROs next door.

Back on the third floor, we pass a room that recently hosted a job fair;

Chen reports that he's thus far hired enough people to staff his entire back of the house. "I didn't poach anybody," he insists, for the third time in an hour. "But top guys in the Bay Area heard about us and they all came."

If Chen's outsize plans and claims make him the consummate showman, they also make him vulnerable to a certain degree of skepticism. "I think people are wary because it's an ambitious project and there were so many obstacles in their way before they were able to complete construction," says Betty Louie, a prominent Chinatown landlord. Louie has been vocal about the continuing need to bolster the neighborhood's economy—last year, she installed Mister Jiu's, Brandon Jew's modern Chinese restaurant, in the former Four Seas building. Although she visited the China Live site once, she thinks it's remained "pretty much a mystery to the entire community." That said, she wants "nothing but the very best of luck" for Chen—his success is Chinatown's success. "The only thing people want," she notes, "is something holding up the Broadway side [of the neighborhood] and hopefully bringing more people in. And that's what it's supposed to be doing."

In China Live's third-floor office, Chen is scrolling through an iPad slideshow of the food he's planning to serve at Eight Tables. There's whole edible fish, ginger-laced aspic with head cheese, hand-cut bean thread noodles, ibérico pork char siu—all ambitious, exquisitely detailed dishes that Chen and his cooks have perfected in Shanghai and Taipei. I ask him if Cecilia Chiang, the notoriously exacting Chinese-food doyenne (and a longtime friend of Chen's who consulted on his previous restaurants), has tasted any of it. "She's seen the pictures and goes, 'Oh! You're making it too fancy. Make it simpler!'" Chen says and laughs. "I'm like, Cecilia, you know, I'm not young anymore. If I'm going to do this, I'm going to give it all I've got." ■