

CHILL out

More restaurants are offering alfresco dining to help busy Hongkongers unwind, writes *Vicki Williams*



WOOLOOMOOLOO PRIME AT SOUNDWILL 11 IN CAUSEWAY BAY



PRIME RIB-EYE WITH SAUTÉED POTATOES AND ONIONS WITH BLACK PEPPERCORN SAUCE AT THE CHOP HOUSE

PHOTO: EDWARD WONG

The sweltering heat of summer is fading and, over the next three months, Hong Kong will experience some of the best weather for alfresco dining. While the city is often considered as lagging behind its Asian neighbours in terms of alfresco options, this is beginning to change with more restaurants opening that have outdoor dining areas.

These new establishments – and long-time favourites – can be found mainly in urban areas, with vistas of a *Blade Runner* cityscape rather than a picturesque paradise. Often these restaurants are not on the ground level nor obvious to passers-by, adding to the unique appeal of this city-style alfresco dining.

One of the newest is The Envoy, on the third



ASPARAGUS WITH POACHED EGG AND HOLLANDAISE SAUCE AT QUAYSIDE HARBOUR FRONT RESTAURANT & BAR

floor of The Pottinger, a boutique hotel in Central. Its 1,500 sq ft terrace can seat 50 guests and has been designed to have a relaxed lounge ambience. “Being in The Pottinger, the whole setting has an elegant yet relaxed mood. The terrace is perfect for afternoon tea, innovative cocktails and snacks, as well as alfresco dining,” says managing director Charlene Dawes.

The menu consists of international dishes that hint at fusion, such as the Caesar salad with crispy wonton, crispy French corn-fed chicken with lemongrass jus, grilled Iberico chop with Chinese sweet vinegar and ginger sauce, and the crowd-pleasing grilled prime rib-eye with a cep cream sauce.

In Causeway Bay, The Chop House – the latest opening from the Wooloomooloo Group – has an outdoor area that also measures 1,500 sq ft (and is also on the third floor), with full-menu dining for 80 people. “The terrace is definitely a popular option for dining, particularly the tables with our unique self-serve beer taps that allow guests to pour their own pint,” says Kay Ip, director of sales and marketing for the





SUNDAY BRUNCH AT ZUMA



ZUMA FEATURES A 3,000 SQ FT TERRACE.

restaurant group. Outdoor foodies enjoy pairing their drinks with international dishes such as mussels marinier, plus a range of burgers, steaks, ribs, grilled seafood and pasta. Ip says The Chop House is an inviting and relaxing destination “where guests can enjoy a good meal in a stress-free environment”.

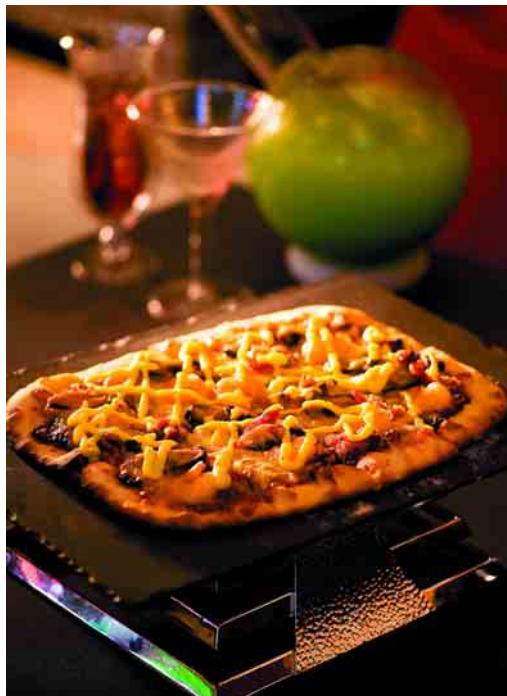
Leaning towards French bistro fare on its European menu is Quayside Harbour Front Restaurant & Bar at Fenwick Pier in Wan Chai. The casual-chic restaurant’s attractive alfresco area measures 1,000 sq ft and consists of a wooden deck with tables and chair seating, lounges – some shaded by trees – and high-stool seating along the front, providing options to suit all alfresco needs, with a dining capacity for 60

people. The menu changes every two weeks, with signature dishes including warm green asparagus with hollandaise and soft poached egg, duck liver “torchon” with baked fig, walnut and fig rye sourdough toast, fettuccine “nido” with truffle oil and summer truffle, and classic steak and fries.

The restaurant also introduced a Sunday brunch in mid-August with alfresco dining in mind. “We expect that as the temperature drops, the alfresco area will be more popular,” owner Christophe Bouvresse says.

A restaurant that has long attracted a regular crowd to its 3,000 sq ft terrace is Japanese restaurant Zuma. Seating just 48, the spaciousness is part of its appeal. Imran Khaleel, deputy general manager, says: “Guests enjoy





BOUILLABAISSE DECONSTRUCTED PIZZA AT THE BACKYARD AT LANGHAM PLACE HOTEL



THE BACKYARD'S ALFRESCO SPACE IS A RARITY IN MONG KOK.

dining in the open air with its more casual atmosphere. At the same time, [they get] great service and top-quality dishes."

Dishes that keep diners coming back for more include cedar wood-roasted baby chicken marinated in barley miso and crispy lemon sole with spicy ponzu, in addition to the restaurant's comprehensive brunch.

Khaleel says Hong Kong diners are beginning to appreciate the alfresco experience more as they have more options, but they still end up at their favourite dining spots. "It's always comforting to go somewhere familiar where you are guaranteed good food, good service and a fun atmosphere."

In the heart of bustling Mong Kok is the calm oasis of The Backyard at Langham Place Hotel, with its spacious 6,000 sq ft space seating 110 diners. Assistant manager Gabriel Leung says it's not easy to find an alfresco dining

destination in the area. "The Backyard is an outdoor paradise with its sweet scented mango trees, chill-out music and water features. It offers a relaxing atmosphere that blends sophistication and contemporary chic to create a uniquely alluring outdoor experience."

One of the culinary hits is its appropriately named "Lazy Daze" package that includes three hours of free-flow beverages, including Champagne, and gourmet pizza. Guests who are not in the mood for tapas and pizza but still want to be outdoors can order from an extensive a la carte menu. In December, the restaurant is bringing back its "Barbecue under the Stars" buffet, which was a huge hit the previous year.

Leung believes more people are turning to alfresco dining venues than in previous years, but at the same time, their expectations are higher due to the range of options. "Guests will compare the menu, price, and food and drink



CRISPY WONTON AT THE ENVOY

options before they select a particular alfresco dining outlet."

The Envoy's Dawes thinks that more choice means more thought going into customer satisfaction. "I think operators are making it easier for guests to enjoy the outdoors – for example, by providing fans and appropriate seating, and creating a comfortable environment for them to enjoy. Therefore, guests know what to look for."

What they are looking for may extend beyond the food. Ip says ever since the indoor smoking ban came into place, a lot of smoking guests have been looking for outdoor dining and drinking spaces. "And, diners, including non-smokers, often prefer a quiet, outdoor space to



THE ENVOY'S TERRACE IS SET AMID CENTRAL'S SKYSCRAPERS.

[relax from] their busy working life. Hong Kong is a very dense city, so the key to a popular alfresco dining space is that it's away from the crowd and bustling streets."

In this increasingly competitive environment, points of difference come into play. At The Envoy, this involves introducing inventive concepts such as an afternoon tea with cocktail pairing which highlights and uses tea in the food and the cocktails.

Sure to be the next big alfresco venue when it opens around late November or early December is Ku Dé Ta. Taking up the top two floors of the California Tower in Lan Kwai Fong, including a 250-square-metre rooftop that can accommodate 50 seated and 30 standing customers, it promises to set new alfresco standards. "There is a very exciting twist that currently I cannot comment on," says spokesman Simon McKinless. X