

FOOD FOCUS

Chinatown Revival

San Francisco's historic neighborhood sees reinvestment and revitalization in its food scene

By Denise Clifton

Chef-restaurateur George Chen picks up bottle after bottle of soy sauce, describing them with words and phrases more commonly used on a bar menu: *12-year-old, bourbon-barrel-aged, infused*. The sauces, vinegars and jars of peppercorns crowding the table represent just a few of the flavors he plans to showcase in his 30,000-square-foot food emporium, **China Live**, scheduled to open this fall on the northeast edge of San Francisco's Chinatown.

Chen's vision is as grand as the views from the four-story complex's rooftop. China Live will include a retail marketplace, a 105-seat restaurant with an open kitchen, two bars, an event space, and a fine-dining restaurant called Eight Tables that will feature a private entrance and an eight-course tasting menu. Chen, who was at the helm of San Francisco's celebrated Betelnut restaurant for years, will use locally sourced foods to accentuate ethnic cuisines of China that he explored while traveling.

"Chinese food is one of the biggest and oldest cuisines—and one of the most undiscovered," he says. "I want to change the perception of Chinese food in this country."



Brandon Jew (above) is among the restaurateurs and investors who are reinvigorating cuisine in Chinatown, with dishes such as his roasted quail (left) exemplifying the innovative cooking at his new restaurant, Mister Jiu's.

China Live is the latest in a series of recent restaurant investments in Chinatown. Each offers a unique interpretation of Chinese cuisine, with a common goal: to bring new energy to the neighborhood by drawing in food-savvy locals and visitors.

"Chinatown is a tremendous resource that people don't know about," Chen says.

Last spring, San Francisco native Brandon Jew also made culinary news when he opened **Mister Jiu's** in the former Four Seas Restaurant location, which before that housed the Hang Far Low restaurant, dating as far back as the 1880s.

"This space deserved another life," says Jew, formerly the chef at popular Bar Agricole. For Mister Jiu's, he created a menu that embraces a sense of place. For example, one entree—roasted quail stuffed with sticky rice—features birds from a Vacaville ranch, sausage made with Mendocino-sourced pork and sauce highlighting Central California cherries. "I wanted to represent what San Francisco Chinese food is and how our ingredients here can transform Chinese food."

Jew hopes the menu attracts locals, as well as visitors to town. "I want to get people back to experience Chinatown."

The reborn **Sam Wo Restaurant** is also enticing new guests. The century-old restaurant opened in a new location on Clay Street in fall 2015 after a three-year

closure. It draws Financial District workers looking for budget-friendly lunches, and longtime patrons seeking familiar dishes on the unchanged menu. "People who used to come as kids are coming with their kids," says investor Steven Lee.

Famous for noodle rolls and *jook* (rice porridge)—and for the late Edsel Ford Fung, the "world's rudest waiter," who bantered with guests for decades—the restaurant aims to regain the late-night business of its heyday. Friday and Saturday hours now extend to 3 A.M. "I want to bring nightlife back to Chinatown," Lee says.

At China Live, Chen also envisions a bustling Chinatown nightlife. "There's been a revival here, and we're going to add to it."



A rendering shows plans for the retail food market space that will be part of the new four-story complex China Live, scheduled to open this fall in San Francisco's Chinatown.



DETAILS: China Live, opening fall 2016; 644 Broadway; chinalivesf.com. • Mister Jiu's, 28 Waverly Place; misterjius.com. • Sam Wo, 713 Clay St.; samworestaurant.com.

TOP: BRANDON JEW / KASSIE BORRESSON; INSET: CRESCENT CARASSO; BOTTOM LEFT, COURTESY: CHINA LIVE; BOTTOM RIGHT, COURTESY: SAM WO