

# Taste of prosperity

Those who want to hold Chinese New Year reunions at home in style are turning to high-end caterers

By RAHITA ELIAS



PHOTO: MANDARIN ORIENTAL

**T**HE Horse is trotting back to its stable, and the Sheep is bleating eagerly for the run of the pastures. Yes, Chinese New Year (CNY) is upon us. For most Chinese Singaporeans, family reunion dinners are a highlight of the celebrations. It is the time for members of the extended family to congregate around the dining table to renew and strengthen the familial bonds.

Those who want to hold their reunions at home and do it in style turn to high-end caterers. Usha Brockmann, director of communications, Mandarin Oriental, Singapore, says: "Clients can book our catering services up to one month ahead, depending on the size of event."

Mandarin Oriental Singapore's home catering customers range from chief executive officers and managing directors of top companies to high-profile personalities.

Without providing details, Ms Brockmann says that the prices of the hotel's catering packages vary, depending on the menu, location and size of event. The menus are designed to suit the customer's needs. "Some may request for international or Western cuisines although it may be a Lunar New Year celebration."

Singapore-based on-demand chef service, Clubvivre, recommends booking one of their chefs at least one week in advance.

Maria Kuvshinova, who co-founded Clubvivre with husband Andries De Vos, cautions: "During periods like Christmas and CNY, chefs are getting booked very quickly, so it's never

wise to wait till the last moment."

However, the company does its best to cater to even last-minute calls. Ms Kuvshinova recalls: "We received a midnight inquiry from a stressed-out husband, who forgot the birthday of his wife, which was the next day. He asked to book a chef as a surprise for her, and we made it happen."

For holiday celebrations such as Christmas, Chinese New Year, Easter and Ramadhan, Clubvivre serves up a collection of up to 50 menus from different chefs. All the menus, supported by photos, are available on its website. However, adds Ms Kuvshinova, each menu can be fully customised to a client's needs and dietary preferences.

"We are often asked to design a menu especially for the client."

Ms Kuvshinova says that Clubvivre's clients, who are upper-middle class and high-net-worth individuals, are well-travelled and know what they like and what they want.

"They appreciate good service, good food and good taste."

Apart from festive celebrations, Clubvivre has also been called to cater for birthday and anniversary parties. In general, prices start at S\$30 per person for canape cocktail receptions and from S\$100 per person for sit-down dinners, with a minimum spend of S\$800.

Not surprisingly, the must-have dish on the reunion menu is *yu sheng*, a Teochew-style raw fish salad, that is synonymous with CNY in Singapore. But in the



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world of the glitterati, *yu sheng* is more than just a fish salad.

Ms Kuvshinova says: "Because *yu sheng* is traditional and has a ceremonial value, it forms an integral part of CNY. Each chef at Clubvivre has their own take on it, with a focus on fresh creations with their own sauces and spices, quality ingredients and unique personal touches."

She adds that Clubvivre taps the culinary talent of dozens of executive chefs in Singapore who specialise in more than 50 cuisines and culinary styles.

"This allows us to do anything, name it and we have it," says Ms Kuvshinova.

Mandarin Oriental's customers too view *yu sheng* as an essential dish at their reunions.

Ms Brockmann says: "*Yu sheng* is certainly a must-have dish for most clients. They often request for the *yu sheng* to be plated in a particular way, size and shape, like an animal, Chinese characters or digits. The ingredients do not just consist of mainly raw fish and vegetables, as they also include beef, seafood, fruits and other seasoning."

Another reunion favourite is the *pen cai*, a one-pot dish comprising a veritable smorgasbord of almost every meat, seafood and vegetable with significant symbolism for the Chinese.

Ms Brockmann says: "Last year, our Cantonese

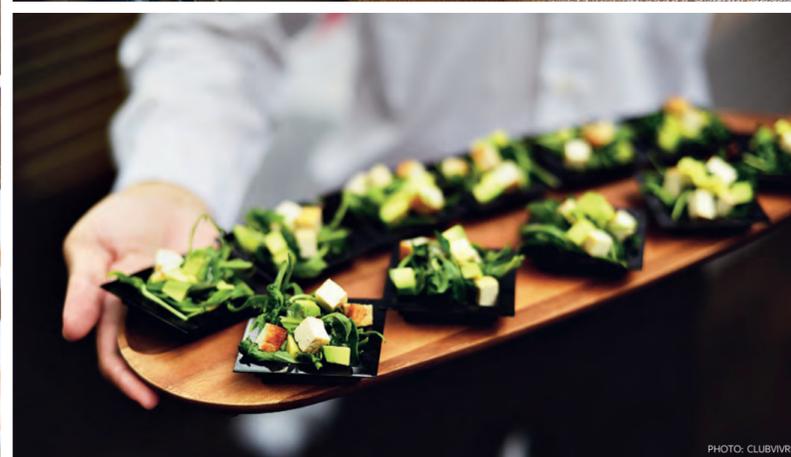


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## FINE DINING

(Main picture) Mandarin Oriental Singapore's *yu sheng*; (left) Cherry Garden Luxurious Pen Cai

## SPOILT FOR CHOICE

(Clockwise from below) Clubvivre's on-demand chef service; it serves up a collection of up to 50 menus from different chefs



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restaurant, Cherry Garden, introduced Singapore's largest *pen cai*, the Cherry Garden Luxurious Pen Cai, consisting of premium high-quality seafood, roasted meats and vegetables, which is also available for catering."

Other popular dishes among the hotel's CNY home catering customers include *nian gao* (rice cake), dried oysters, black moss and various auspicious-sounding seafood. Food items that have been requested for reunion dinners also include lobsters, abalone, scallops, bird's nest and truffles.

For Clubvivre's clients, Ms Kuvshinova says: "We have a wide variety of CNY menus available on the website. For discerning customers, we would suggest including premium ingredients – usually as part of the *pen cai* or prosperity pot – such as abalone, oysters, lobster, caviar, foie gras and sucking pig."

Beyond just the food, customers tend to be very particular about the theme and decor for their celebrations.

Says Ms Brockmann: "The decor of event set-up is extremely important, as some clients may prefer a specific colour scheme or designs, varying from minimalistic chic to rich vibrant oriental themes."

Ms Kuvshinova explains: "Table styling, flowers, menu printout, choice of tableware or linen napkins all form an important part of the epicurean experience. Specific styles depend on customers' preferences and home interiors. However, most CNY clients request traditional styling and tableware or classic white or black." ❏



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