

FORK in MOUTH

Catch & Release*

Mark Gilchrist On This Planet Earth March, 2018 FIM - 1



By MARK GILCHRIST

"It's the strangest thing," he said, spinning his fork between his fingers, the tines squeaking on the plate as he rolled up a large mouthful of noodles.

"Can't be the strangest," she said, "remember Dubai? And the sand..."

"Tied for strangest," he said, the noodles now filling his mouth and hardly slowing his pace. "I mean, some of these Asian religious customs are pretty hard to swallow..."

"For a Westerner..." she said.

"Well, yeah, for the rest of the world — you starting in on me again?"

"Naw, too easy."

"Right. So, well, first of all, what's with all the burning things?"

"You mean, like candles?" she said. "All religions use them — they're pretty, and have wide symbolism."

"Right, right, yeah," he said, spooning a few chopped chilis onto his noodles. "Catholics love 'em, and then it seems that the farther east you go, the more the people love smoke. The Orthodox swing those, those..."

"Sensors."

"Yup, you got it, a ball and chain, like they actually want to fill the church with smoke."

"Well, they do..."

"But that's nothing. Have you been to Asia?"

"We are in Asia..."

"I mean..."

"Malaysia — it counts," she said. "Filled with Malay people, Chinese, Indians..."

"But in the temples."

"Like the ones we visited last week?" she said. "Do you even remember my name?"

"Sorry, I'm pretty emotional right now," he said. "You know how I get."

"Oh, do I..."

"Money — they burn money!" he said. "Not real, mind you, but that phony stuff they sell, and the paper 'gold' and 'silver' — heck, they'll burn anything."

"It's for their ancestors," she said.

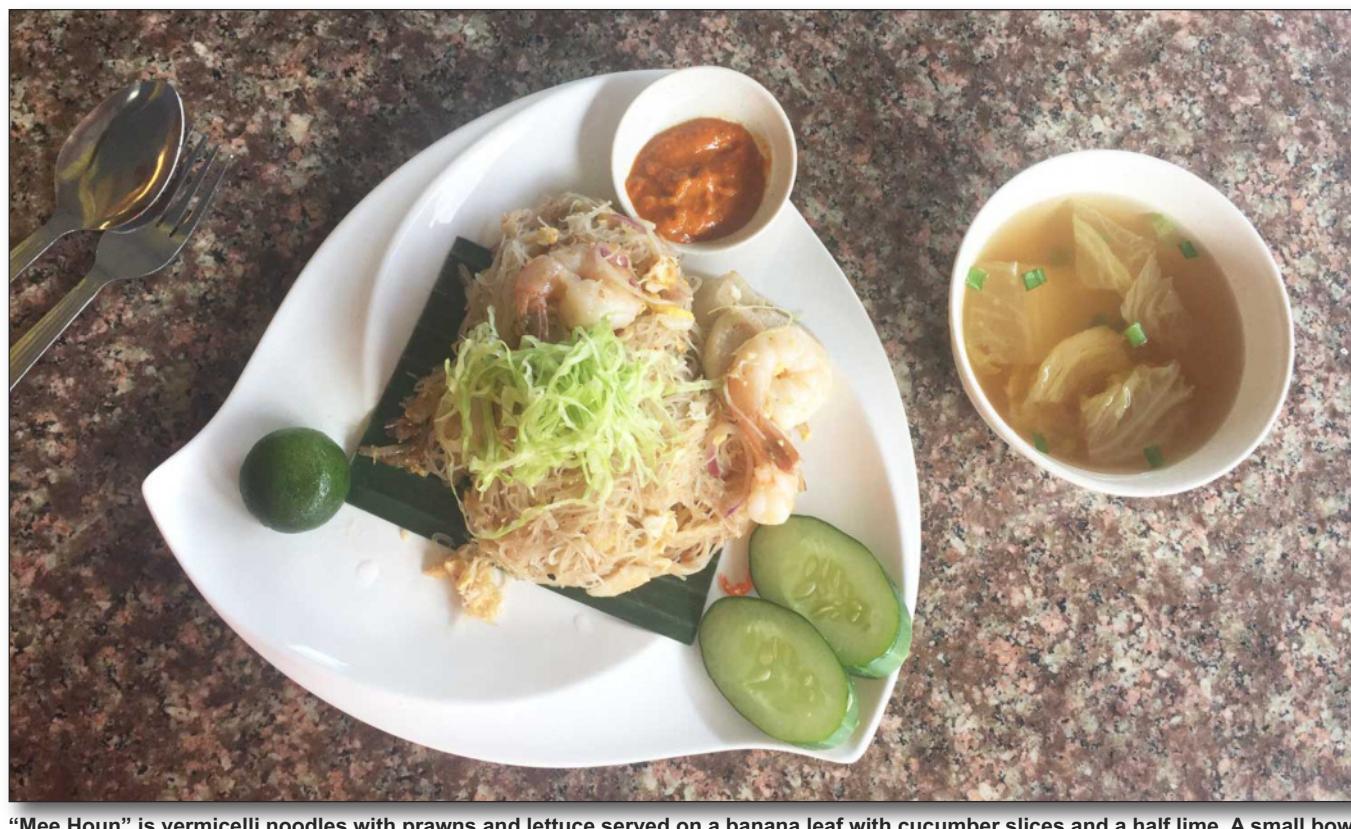
"Whaa?"

"Their deceased family. See, they believe that you will need wealth in the next life, and the only way to send that to them is to burn it."

"They need fake money in Heaven?"

"You got it all wrong, as usual..."

"Well, what I got right is that it sure is a waste of trees."



Mee Houn is vermicelli noodles with prawns and lettuce served on a banana leaf with cucumber slices and a half lime. A small bowl of chili sambal to spice things up, and a bowl of soup for variety.

You do have that right, and it is a big industry," she said, deftly using chopsticks to lift noodles from her bowl into a porcelain spoon. "I'm sure thousands of tons of paper are burned each year here."

"And the joss sticks! Okay, I understand they're useful for prayer, but must they burn for hours?"

"Do you actually understand?" she said. "or are you..."

"Well, what's to understand?" he said. "People are choking on the smoke! I can't imagine working at a temple every day. You see the vendors wearing paper air masks? I'd wear several layers of them."

"Wow, I think you'd look cute."

"I just don't... and, and then out front, they have those racks to hold dozens of the giant joss sticks! Five feet tall and

as thick as my head!"

"Fortunately not as big..."

"They burn for hours!"

"Or as hard..."

"I, I just don't know."

"You don't have to know, dear," she said. "Just let people worship. They're not hurting anyone — well, not much — and it makes them happy."

"And then there's the birds," he said, shaking his head.

"Oh, boy..."

"This just makes no sense at all."

"Yes, dear — I mean, no."

"I guess it's pretty, though," he said. "Makes people feel a little benevolent, maybe even downright heroic."

"Aren't humans interesting?"

"Yes, yes," he said. "If only they

were so sadistic as they help the other animals."

"'Other' animals," she said. "Cute."

"I actually watched it the other day, down at that big temple by the river? Saw the whole thing, well, the whole half of the cycle."

"You're talking in circles... again."

"So, a guy is there on a bicycle, right? And he has a stack of small cages on the back, each the size of a Kleenex box. Had about, oh, I don't know, about 20 of them."

"Right..."

"Each cage has a bird in it, see?"

"I saw, the other day..."

"Dozens of birds, all caged up."

"...with you..."

"And he just sits there, waiting for a customer. And someone will come up and 'buy' a bird."

"Is this going somewhere?"

"Well, yeah, the customer — worshiper — goes into the temple, see, with the bird still in the cage, and prays, and releases the bird."

"Beautiful," she said. "Sets it free."

"Yes, so sweet," he said. "Until you think about it..."

"Please don't..."

"C'mon, don't you see how contradictory that is?"

"I... I try not..."

"They're pretending to commit this heroic act, saving this bird from its caged existence and giving it freedom."

"Freedom!" she said.

"Freedom. Yes," he said. "But the very reason that bird was caged in the first place was so the man could sell it to worshippers..."

"That's business..."

"So they could then set it free," he said. "Don't you

think it's fun, and if they can get away with it?"

"There's a mouthful..."

"So, a guy goes out to the lake with a rod and reel..."

"And a really fast boat," she said.

"Gotta be fast. And he sits there for hours, baiting his hook, tossing it into the water just right..."

"Casting it..."

"Yeah, yeah. And he wants desper-

ately, I guess, to somehow prove that he

is actually smarter than a fish."

"You should try it sometime..."

"Funny. Ha ha," he said. "So, when a

fish bites his hook, he gets all excited

and then he fights and fights with that

little fish. He pulls and pulls, and reels

and reels, and boy, before you know it,

that fish just gives up and gets in the

boat."

"Yay!"

"And then the guy yanks that hook

right out of the fish's mouth, and tosses

it back in!"

"The hook?"

"He tosses the fish back in, swelled

with pride that he is a guardian of our

environment, a lover of the great out-

doors."

"The fish swelled? Wait..."

"Okay, you're making fun — fair

enough," he said. "Yes, this all really is

no big deal. Humans certainly affect the lives of animals in far worse ways; pollution, habitats, consumption. I just think it's a very curious human trait."

"Yes, it is," she said, before pulling a small roll of asparagus spears, wrapped in bacon, off a wooden satay stick with her teeth. Then, after sufficient mastication, she swallowed and continued. "Reminds me of pheasant 'hunting' in America."

"They shoot them and then release them?" he said.

"Ha ha. No, I visited this place where they had an old fire tower. Guys — yeah, mostly men — would stand around it with shotguns, looking up."

"Okay..."

"A guy way up at the top would have, like, a hundred pheasants, and he'd toss them..."

"Wait. Where did he get all the pheasants?"

"They raise them, in a huge warehouse nearby. So anyway, out they go, one at a time. And then, BLAM! BLAM! the guys would shoot the birds down."

"Now, there's some excitement for ya," he said.

"Yes, so someone with the operation runs around and collects all the dead birds, dresses and packages them, and I guess the 'hunters' take them home."

"At least they get eaten," he said.

"And when you think about it..."

"Oh no, again..."

"No, it's all right," he said. "What's interesting here is that they didn't really take the birds' freedom away."

"But, they killed..."

"Right. But first, they actually gave the bird a life — the only reason those birds were ever alive is so the humans can have some fun..."

"Nice life, cooped up..." she said.

"Yes, but better than no life, eh?"

"The breeder told me the oddest thing that day," she said.

"What, that he loves birds?"

"No. Well, sort of," she said. "We walked through his warehouse among thousands of little birds, and he picked

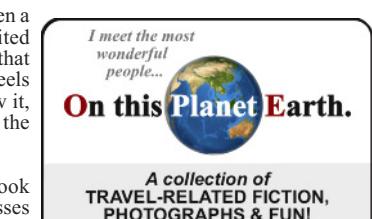


A Hindu woman holds a burnt offering during a procession in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

one up and showed it to me, holding it gently in both of his hands, and he said; "Look at this bird — isn't it beautiful?"

I looked at him just a little puzzled, and he said; "Well, who would want to shoot an ugly bird?"

*No animals were killed, injured, captured, eaten, insulted or even teased in the writing of this essay.



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Mee Goring: Wheat noodles with prawn, cucumber and sprouts.



Roti bakar is "fire bread" with half-boiled egg at a food court in Georgetown, Malaysia.



Asparagus wrapped in bacon, skewered on a wooden "satay" stick and barbecued at the night market in Johor Bahru.



Praying with joss sticks at the Tokong Kuan Yin Buddhist temple in Georgetown, Malaysia.



Joss sticks burn inside the Kuil Kek Lok Si temple in Air Itam on Penang Island in Malaysia.