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Something to Sevva

STEPHAN PUDWILL, TANYA AKISHKINA AND STEPHEN WONG JOIN CHRISTINA KO AT HONG KONG'S NEWEST "IT" RESTAURANT, SEVVA, TO FIND OUT IF THE FOOD LIVES UP TO THE HYPE

PHOTOGRAPHY SAMANTHA CHOI, INTERIOR SHOTS COURTESY OF SEVVA

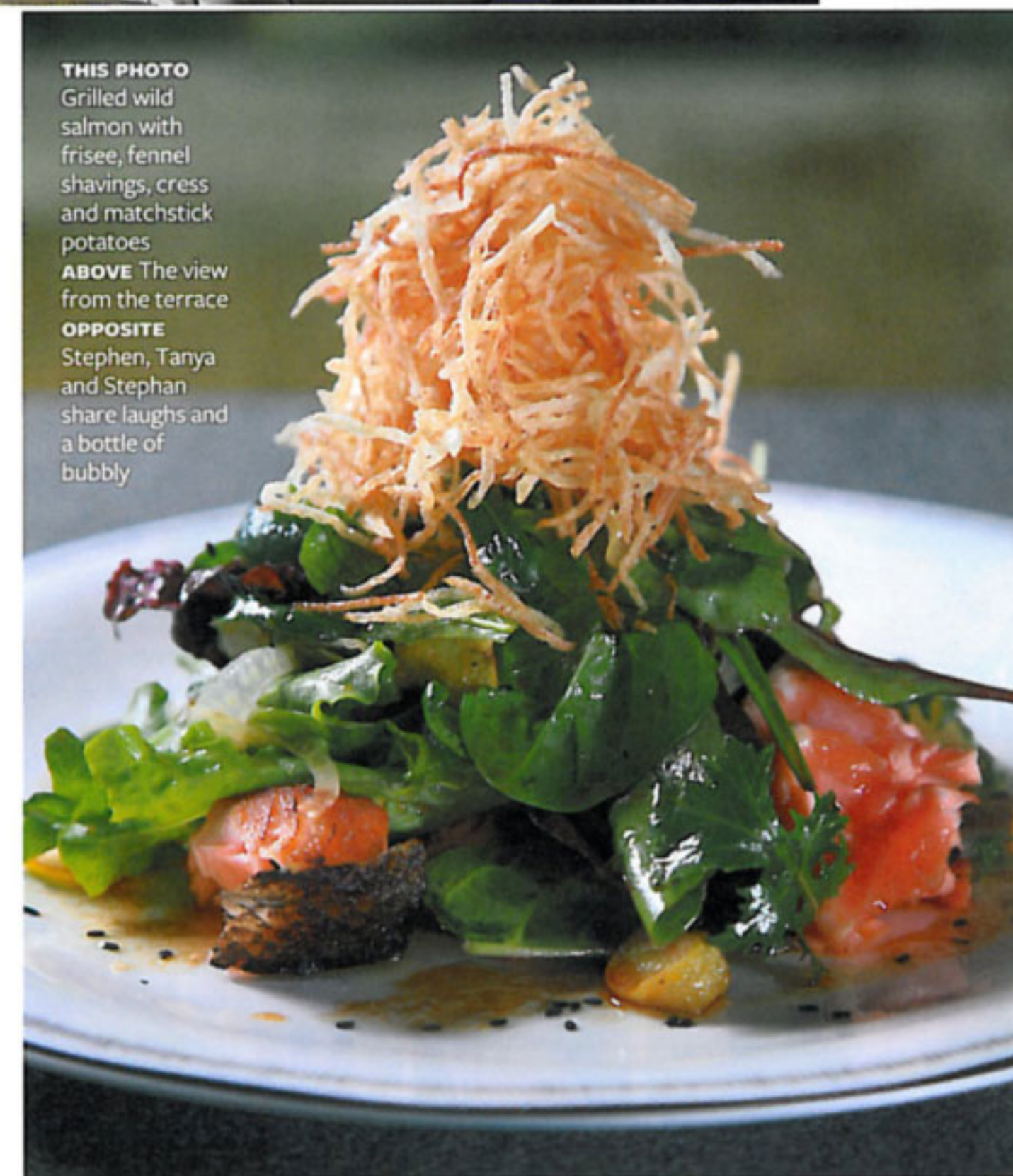


SINCE SEVVA'S OPENING in March, the restaurant has been the talk of the town. On a Friday night in mid-April, we decide to test the waters, but acquiring a reservation to this happening hotspot – even with a media namecard and a week's notice – requires some haggling and string-pulling. Our guests for the evening are Stephan Pudwill and his lovely partner, Tatiana Akishkina, who is better known as Tanya; also along for the ride is Stephen Wong.

All three have heard great things about the restaurant and cannot wait to start the parade of delectable dishes, which begins tout de suite with an amuse bouche, a duet of shrimp – in tangy hot and mango salad styles, bloated with juice and coated liberally in sauce. Before the champagne has arrived, the shrimp has magically disappeared, with only string trails of sauce across the plates to evidence they once existed. Another order is quickly delivered, and similarly quickly demolished.

We are seated in a cosy little alcove on the Harbour Side, the more casual half of the res-

THIS PHOTO
Grilled wild salmon with frisee, fennel shavings, cress and matchstick potatoes
ABOVE The view from the terrace
OPPOSITE Stephen, Tanya and Stephan share laughs and a bottle of bubbly



RIGHT The corridor leading to the Bank Side is lined with tables for casual drinks

BELOW Even while engrossed in conversation with others, Stephan and Tanya are a loving couple



restaurant. On this side, the walls are painted a sunny yellow, a stunning complement to Tanya's daisy-coloured top and matching graffiti-print skirt. The dark-wood tables are naked of tablecloths, lending a more carefree air to the area, and musicians play in the corner accompanied by a female singer crooning jazz-inspired renditions of Norah Jones and other soft hits. Above the music is the buzz of typical Friday hubbub – bankers unleashed for happy hour after a long working week, young hip couples on first dates, and the cream of Hong Kong society, here for a family dinner. The Loueys have a table directly opposite ours, while several Shaws are spotted en route to the washroom. Outside is the wrap-around terrace, a U-shaped balcony that once famously served as putting green and private party area for the space's former tenants, and now acts as a place to see and be seen. The other side of the restaurant, the Bank Side, is a more opulent affair, and the two halves flank corridors in a T shape, housing the Taste Bar, cake shop and a casual seating area highlighted by walls covered innovatively in grass.

The cuisine at Sevva is described as being "the DNA of Hong Kong." It's not entirely clear

Stephen unabashedly lifts his dosa off the plate and devours it. "Finger-licking good," he says

even to foodies what exactly that means, but we are about to get a taste of it, beginning with mini dosas, south Indian crepes stuffed with ratatouille, mozzarella cheese and caramelised onions. As Tanya begins sharing the story of her first meeting with Stephan, Stephen cleans his plate and polishes off half his neighbour's as well. Still unsatiated, he allows us to request another order. "It's really good," he manages to squeeze out while chewing. When the second one arrives, Stephen unabashedly lifts it off the plate with his fingers and devours it like a burrito. "Finger-licking good," he concludes.

"Stephan and I met in Hong Kong three years ago, when I was modelling here," Tanya shares. "I didn't know how to speak any English except to

say 'Hi, my name is Tanya, and I'm from Russia.' When I returned home, he sent me messages and I would use a dictionary to translate them." A collective "aww" is heard around the table and exclamations are made over the quick progress she has made – though accented, her spoken English seems almost fluent.

This conversation is interrupted by the arrival of the next course, a steaming portion of spiced butternut pumpkin soup drizzled with curry oil, served in a delicate metallic espresso cup. All talk of love and language is abandoned as polite slurping sounds fill the space. "This is delicious," Stephan pronounces.

The next dish to arrive is Sevva's signature baked crabmeat in shell, an impressively present-



ABOVE Upon exiting the elevators on the 25th floor, guests will see the impressive and irresistible cake counter

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In Good Company



ed crab shell covered liberally in breadcrumbs. The two gentlemen concur, heads nodding vigorously as Stephan repeats, "Wow! The food here is delicious. I will definitely come back." To prove his point, he waves toward the maitre'd and introduces himself while procuring a business card so that he can make a booking in the future on the thus far waitlist-only reservations calendar.

It's no surprise that the group enjoys the international cuisine as their backgrounds are culturally diverse. Tanya, of course, hails from Russia; Stephan is Canadian but grew up in Hong Kong and is "old pals" with Stephen, who is Hong Kong Chinese but grew up in Canada. Besides national affiliations, the two men also share a passion for Zegna suits, the occasional guilty cigar and Japanese food.

But, Stephan admits, his gastronomic paramours also include a strange little dish, basically consisting of white rice with Chinese soup poured over it. "My food tastes are so Chinese," he admits. Steamed fish, hainan chicken rice and wintermelon soup are some of his favourite dishes, and rice is the staple of his dinner table. "I must have rice," he says, much to Tanya's chagrin. "Why can't we have potatoes once in a while?" she pouts.

Tanya's pout is turned upside down by the arrival of the flame-grilled salmon

Her pout is turned upside down by flame-grilled wild salmon with frisee, fennel shavings, cress and matchstick potatoes moistened with a light soy-sesame dressing. It's a light dish for a main course; healthy but packed with flavour. There is some confusion when the next dish arrives, a trio of wagyu beef cheek and ox tongue pot pies to share, but though the guests protest a second main dish, their actions speak differently. When the puff pastry is removed and the steaming bowl of beef is passed around, everyone spears at least one piece. "Give the puff pastry to Stephen, he really wants it," Stephan tells our waiter. Stephen is only able to groan in response.

His food-induced reverie is broken by the appearance of two loaded trays of cakes and desserts. The three figures, by this time almost prostrated on the sofa chair, sit up and scoot forward to examine the colourful delights. The chocolate cake, a treat that few ladies can decline, finds its way onto Tanya's plate first. "This is my favourite," she says, although the look of bliss on her face speaks louder than any words in any language. Notable also is the crunch cake,

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CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT Indian dosa with sauces; a look at the tabletop; full-height windows affords views of the terrace and cityscape beyond



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Stephen surveys his food with the seriousness of a critic; crabmeat baked in its shell; a look at the Bank Side; a dessert platter to die for



a signature item that has been poached from the menu of Joyce Café.

Asked which dishes took their fancy the most, the threesome debates: the couple agrees on the soup and the chocolate cake, but Tanya prefers the salmon, while Stephan is as yet enamoured with the wagyu beef cheek. Stephen maintains a wistful attitude toward the dosas served early on, but attacks the chocolate and walnut cakes with hearty abandon.

Eventually, he sums up, "It's healthy, well-prepared food. The view is stupendous. You feel like this place is happening, but it's not suffocating. And, you can go out for a cigar on the terrace after dinner!" With that, he beckons the waiter to bring him a selection and disappears onto the terrace, signalling to his friend to join him. "Ten minutes," Stephan replies.

He and Tanya remain at the table, sipping wine, cooing at each other and exchanging covert kisses. It's clear that the fine wine and food have lulled them into a sleepy trance, one not so easily broken by the lure of a few puffs or a bird's-eye view of the city. As the waiter coyly interrupts to request final orders, we, too, mutter our excuses and leave them in private. ■

SEVVA

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