

entered the profession because they have a missing male member in the family. Some have come into it due to the scourge of alcoholism. "Our men spend all their earnings on booze, what should we do to support our children?" asks Rasakka.

It is these issues that shape the growth and spread of aquaculture and allied industries, providing opportunities to fisherfolk. A few kilometers from Sadaimunivalasai, between Mandapam and Pudukottai, men and women have organised themselves into self-help groups. Around 1,500 of them, supported by seaweed processing companies and concessional loans from the government, cultivate '*Kappaphycus alvarezii*' an exogenous weed brought from Indonesia and Philippines.

"It is very good business as one can earn upto 20,000 a month, and 5,000 to 8,000 during off-season. Besides seaweed processing companies support us with compensation during off-season period," says Seeni Salabudeen, a cultivator from Munaikadu near Mandapam.

They use two methods, monoline and raft of cultivation. "While monoline needs minimum investment, at least 1,200 is required for each raft made of bamboo," says Ajmal Khan, a cultivator. "Moreover, it has given us an alternate income and we don't have to venture into Palk Bay and fall into the hands of the Sri Lankan Navy," says Khan. However, here, women don't enter the sea. They limit themselves to working on drying and cleaning the harvested seaweed.

## Some Like It Raw

### The Chinese really like to Eat their Food Uncooked

NEHA DARA

The Chinese eat early and they eat long. Dinner normally starts at 6 pm and last until past 8. When they eat out, which is often, they order one dish of every kind—plant, animal, fish and the odd crustacean.

All the food is placed on a rotating glass top at the centre of the table and everybody gets a set of chopsticks. As the glass top is rotated slowly, you can reach in and pluck out of a bowl whatever you want.

For all the excess, food habits of the Chinese are rather healthy. Apart from the obvious benefits of an early dinner, there was the fact that almost all their preparations were sautéed with minimal oil and subtle spices or were grilled and roasted. I don't think I had a single fried dish during the trip.

I'm a great believer in local food. I think it is one of the best ways to experience a place and in keeping with that, I avoided the KFCs and the Pizza Huts like plague. The range of street food available was mind-boggling. For one there were the many types of dim sums, from the famous rice cakes of Xian (thick doughy creations) to the towers of the dim sum steamed in the bamboo containers that I found outside Yu Yuan garden in Shanghai.

At places like Beijing's Wangfujing Street, there were the candy sticks of meat, like kebab skewers, some a little too bizarre for even me to experiment with.

If I thought I was done with the hotpot though, I was wrong. The culmination of my Chinese food trail was my second encounter with that stove of boiling water. Ticked silly by my dad's recounting of my experience at the hotpot joint, a friend of his decided I should get a guided tour. So he took us to his favourite joint in Jiangyin, about two hours outside of Shanghai, and sat us down to a table of raw food. I made the mistake of mentioning my fondness for seafood,

so a lot of the raw food was still alive.

Brown shrimps jumped in their jug, making water splash out on my arm. On a bed of ice, there was a clam-like thing, shell on one side and sinuously-moving mass of flesh on the other. My voice was several octaves higher as I asked our host, "I'm, ulpp..., supposed to eat this?"

As he replied in the affirmative, I chose from a tray the garnishings that would go into my stove of boiling water—some garlic flakes, coriander, and chilli, a few dried prawns and a pinch of salt. I decided to take things slow, so first to go into my pot were leafy greens that turned out tasting incredible. Emboldened by this early success, the shrimps went in next, jumping and dancing their way into the stove, where they were covered and allowed to cook. They turned a bright orange and actually tasted quite delightful.

The big hurdle was still to come though. The unnamed clam thing went into the pot next. In less than a minute, it wound up in my plate, and I heard myself asking plaintively, "Are you sure it's cooked?"

My fears were dismissed and it was cut and served. With that the ice was broken, and I could begin to enjoy the meal. There was sliced fish, oyster and chicken, and I have to admit that food was very delicious and super healthy (no fears of too much oil, or overcooking and losing all the minerals eh?).

If reading this has convinced you that local food is the way to go, then my work's done. But before we part, as a cautionary tale, here's the recipe for a dish that was really popular in China a few years back and I didn't try: Drunken Prawns.

Put a dozen live prawns in a pitcher of vodka. Leave covered for a couple of hours. Use tongs to pick out a prawn, place deep inside mouth and then, with a backward jerk of your head, swallow.