



ASIA

SPECIALISTS

SHANGHAI

Old Jesse

A shabby, old-school restaurant where the specialty is fish heads.

By CHRISTOPHER ST. CAVISH

Art by EWEN KAHR YU

Location

41 Tianping Lu near Huaihai Zhong Lu, Xuhui District (天平路41号, 近淮海西路)

Shanghai, China

What to order

Fish head (葱烤鱼头, cong kao yu tou), drunken chicken (醉鸡, zui ji), red dates stuffed with sticky rice (心太软, xin...)

Old Jesse is the shabby uncle of the Shanghainese food world. If they don't know you, the service can be gruff—sometimes, even if they do—and the place doesn't care for decor. It's like a split-level den from the 1980s. The spot has been in the guidebooks for a long time, so it gets a fair share of tourists (mostly from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore), but there are also plenty of Shanghainese who know where the getting is good. New Jesse is their other, fancier location, and it's also quite good—but this is the original.

The standard recommendation is for the fish head, which goes through a bunch of cooking steps but is basically braised and then covered under a thicket of fried scallions. The fried-scallion thing is very Shanghainese—the oil from frying turns up as a dressing for cold dishes or noodles—but

Old Jesse tricks the dish out by using a buttery cod head instead of the usual carp. You've got to reserve it, though, as there is no chance of just showing up and ordering this.

But if you can't get one, it's not a meal-breaker. The rest of the menu is a lesson in Shanghainese classics: drunken chicken, red jujubes stuffed with sticky-rice paste, hairy crabs every way they can be done (usually available off-season but best from October to December)—and a few things that aren't as common, like candied kumquat skins, hairy crab stir-fried with chewy starch noodles, or tiny sticky-rice dumplings filled with black sesame paste in a sweet alcoholic rice-and-osmanthus-flower broth.

CHICKEN, CHINA, FISH, HAIRY CRAB, SHANGHAI
