

RESTAURANTS



May Wong May-ping reopened Yixin Restaurant in 2003 after it was forced to close the previous year. Wong was a police officer in Hong Kong for 16 years. Photos: Jonathan Wong, SCMP Pictures

FORMER CRIME FIGHTER A DAB HAND AT SERVING FOOD

May Wong May-ping has revived her father's restaurant, using the skills she developed as a police inspector to turn it into a thriving business

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For former police inspector May Wong May-ping, the crime-fighting skills she picked up on the force have proved just as useful in reviving her ailing family restaurant.

As a police officer, Wong excelled in physical exercise, discipline and observation. When she reopened her father's shuttered Yixin Restaurant in 2003, those abilities were useful in maintaining the family's reputation for quality food.

"I needed to act as kitchen hand, waitress, cashier, receptionist and food buyer at the wet market," said the 57-year-old former law enforcer.

"It was long, hard work but it was fun as nothing compares to a smile and a compliment from customers after they have enjoyed their meals."

A policewoman turned restaurant owner may be a rarity, but speaking

at her crowded Wan Chai restaurant, it is clear Wong has proven herself. After investigating wrongdoers for 16 years, she is now happy to get her hands dirty in the kitchen.

Yixin Restaurant has a storied history. Co-founded by her father Jim Wong Jim-wan with partners in 1963, it became well known as a "canteen for tycoons", serving a mixture of traditional Chinese and newly-created dishes. Famous dishes include chicken in lemon sauce, roasted duck pipa-style and smoked pomfret.

The restaurant moved several times to different locations in Wan Chai and Causeway Bay, but continued to serve dim sum lunches, deluxe banquets and dinners for tycoons, bankers and movie stars. Of particular interest to Wong as a child was the fact that many customers were also senior police officers.

"I grew up in the restaurant and met many uncles who were working in the police force," she said. "I ad-

mired the fact that this was an interesting job."

After graduating with a psychology degree in Canada, she returned to Hong Kong in 1977 and joined the police force that same year.

Earning HK\$3,000 a month, Wong considered herself highly paid at the time as most fresh graduates, including her boyfriend and now husband, earned only half that amount.

Besides the monetary rewards, the investigation, surveillance and arrest of criminals proved to be an interesting job. She stayed with the force until 1994 when she quit to take care of her three children.

During this time, Yixin Restaurant became not just her father's business, but a place for her children and her eight siblings to get together for festivals and family gatherings.

Despite the restaurant's popularity, high rents and some partners' retirement led to its closure in 2002.

"I felt so sorry when it closed as it had been up and running for over 40 years," Wong said. "Some of the signature dishes were unique and made with secret recipes. They did not serve them in any other restaurant. It was only after its closure that I real-

ised how much I loved the dishes and the restaurant."

Her passion was so strong that she and her husband decided to reopen Yixin in Happy Valley in 2003.

"We recalled all the chefs back. We had thought of the option of having an upstairs private kitchen to escape the high rent on a ground-floor shop. But the head chef opposed the idea as he insisted a restaurant, especially an old brand like Yixin, must be on the street level to attract passers-by," she said.

The reopening with the original chefs and menu proved a huge success, so the restaurant had to move to bigger premises. The present shop in Wan Chai can serve 200 people and the couple will lease more space next door from next month.

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MAY WONG MAY-PING

Her father witnessed the success of the new generation before he died in January 2008, aged 92.

"The customers' reaction was better than expected and we did not have enough staff to serve them all. I have had to help wash dishes, take orders, serve food," she said. "It is a much harder job than investigative work in the police force."

But her many years of experience as a police officer has proved to be useful in her new role as a restaurant owner.

"Just like in the police force, I require all staff in the restaurant to wear uniforms and to follow discipline," she said. "They must not swear or come late and leave early. That is a team and all should do their best to serve the customers."

As a restaurant owner, Wong now has to face the same challenges as other retailers, including soaring rents, long working hours and staff problems.

"It is difficult to compare the job at the police force and a restaurant business because they are different in nature. I do find both jobs interesting and challenging and I have a lot to learn," she said.

"The restaurant business is also not very profitable. However, it has a different type of satisfaction as this is a continuity of my father's business. I am proud to be able to succeed him."

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