

Mystery Meat 3: Dong Popo



“The place is swarming with Blue Tailed flies,” I told my man-secretary.

Jimmy Brisket looked around the elegant Dong Po dining room with its rich dark décor, subtle Shan Shui prints, and theatrical lace curtains, “Gee willikers, it seems pretty clean to me.” The poor rube swatted at imaginary insects buzzing in his brain.

“I’m talkin’ about the popo, flatfooted fuzz, constables, gendarme, heat, Johnny law,” I said sipping a spiced seafood hot and sour soup and wishing I had hired a henchman whose chest was broader than the Hunan duck he was devouring.

Appleton’s Dong Po restaurant had some of the best Chinese food in Wisconsin, and with a second shot of sake, I’d swear it rivaled Asian cuisine in the secret Lo Mein shacks of back-alley Chongqing. Chef Chen obsessed over each plate and a simple serving of Mongolian beef was perfectly seasoned with every sliver of meat trimmed lean. The place was named after Song dynasty calligrapher and poet Su Dongpo. Someone in the kitchen took the symbolism seriously and worked with a deft hand and artistic soul.

Cops crowded the sushi bar because a Kung Pao cook had been sliced and diced with a Ginsu knife and left for dead. It appeared the Fox Valley Butcher had a sense of humor.

“Stop rubbernecking and act natural,” I said, shoving an expertly executed Spider roll into Jimmy’s mouth. Composed of soft-shell crab, cucumber, avocado, and caviar, it stunned his taste buds. The divinity of the delicacy confounded the Midwestern pencil-jockey and his eyes grew large and grateful. We looked like a couple of honeymooners out for a night on the town rather than a detective and her Boy Friday. The last thing a gumshoe needs is the 5-0 getting wise.

The door bells jingled and I heard a cacophony of cicadas that turned out to be portly inner thighs rubbing against cheap gabardine trousers.

“Don’t look now,” I told Jimmy, “but I think Officer Landrace has arrived.”

My old nemesis was a Keystone cop turned lead detective. Built like a Saddleback sow, he was a pugnacious liver-spotted swine covered in black and white bristles and contaminating crimes scenes with his bumbling hybrid vigor. Landrace busted my chops and stuck his snout in every case I worked.

He caught my eye across the room with his talent for rutting truffles in the dirt.

A massive man, his dainty hoofs couldn’t have required more than a size five shoe. He rustled towards our table with the urgency of a pot-bellied pig squealing towards a trough.

I pretended not to see him snuffling over my cloud-like Shrimp Tempura lightly battered in air, “You know what they say about men with small feet, Jimmy? All the rest is mystery meat.”

Landrace laughed with a snorting chortle.

“Well, well,” he said, “We have a body about to be lowered into the ground wearing a wooden kimono and oddly enough you’re elbow-deep in Egg Foo Yung a few feet away from the corpse.”

I popped a pineapple prawn in my mouth and rolled my eyes.

He leaned his weight on the table causing a tsunami of cocktails and shifting tectonic plates of Tuna Tataki.

“I know you’re mixed up with Raymond Brawn,” he said, slamming his ham fist on the table at the mention of the Menasha millionaire.

I shrugged my shoulders and scanned the menu, “This sounds good. It’s the house special called Dragon and Phoenix. Looks like shrimp stir fried with chicken and vegetables. I imagine it’s the ideal dish for a short wimp who’s brain-dead.”

Landrace leaned in, “You’re in over your head. The Butcher reads the papers and follows the investigation. He’s playing games. If you don’t get out now, he’ll make sashimi out of you. You’ll be a bloody broad; a regular slice of Hokkigai.”

The a la carte listing identified the sushi selection as red clam.

I sat up straight in my seat supplemented by the strength of six Tsingtao beers, “You listen to me, Landrace. When the sirens die down and you stuff all these circus performers in your clown cruiser, I’ll still be here combing the Udon noodle for fibers

and lifting fingerprints off Infinity rolls. I'll find the Fox Valley Butcher while you're examining holes in walls and fumbling to find your ass with two hands."

The detective turned like Yellowtail tuna and his men followed him out the door. Soon the forensic team would descend and then the coroner. I grabbed Jimmy Brisket by a lapel and guided him towards the cadaver Rangoon.

Steam swirled from the kitchen as I collected post-mortem samples.

"You know, Jimmy, Su Dongpo was credited for inventing a slow-cooked pork dish that melted in its own juices. Legend speculates that the lone epicure, who began cooking when the loss of his beloved wife caused endless hours of boredom, prepared a pan of sizzling pig flesh one fateful eve. A friend stopped past for a game of Chinese chess and the stimulating scrimmage was so engaging, Dongpo forgot about his simmering boar. Hours later, the match was interrupted by a delightful fragrance of meat rendered in its own fat and stewed to perfection. From that day forward the dish became a staple on the menus of Chinese restaurants. Chef Chen's own variation is tenderly stirred with cabbage, green onions, and a fiery Chinese chili bean sauce."

Jimmy Brisket listened with rapt attention, "Is that what smells so strong and delicious? Are they making Dongpo pork?"

I looked down at the body of the dead Sushi chef and inhaled the scent of rotting stiff.

"That's not pork, Jimmy. It's man, the other white meat."