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Adding to an actor's collection

BYLINE: Seventies British television ubiquity **Gareth Hunt** sticks his chopsticks into some tasty regional dishes at The China Tee Club with Victoria Finlay

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The China Tee Club is the kind of place you have always vaguely known about, even enjoyed the idea of, yet somehow never taken seriously as a lunch destination.

It is a private club, but allows non-members to "sample the atmosphere" before they have to pay \$ 1,200 for membership.

Which means you can have lunch there beneath the swishing ceiling fans once, twice maybe, before being banned for being too mean to join.

After a week of dinner performances as the crooked cop in Funny Money at the Conrad last month, with Derek Nimmo's touring company, actor **Gareth Hunt** was ready to explore a lunch venue that was not the Conrad.

"It's been fantastic using all the restaurants - I've had to be strict to make sure I don't eat too much," said Hunt, a familiar face in Britain - although rather more familiar 20 years ago - for roles in Upstairs Downstairs, as Gambit in The New Avengers, in television commercials and stage plays.

A columnist in London's Daily Telegraph wondered recently whether any TV show of the 1970s did not feature **Gareth Hunt**.

The menu, with its mix of Asian standards like curry and spring rolls with European staples like filet mignon, seemed coincidentally nostalgic for that decade.

It was beautifully presented, with a chopstick holding the pages together. Just the kind of thing, Hunt said, that he would have his eye on for his collection.

Almost everywhere he goes he picks up something to remind him: "Objects can be more vivid than pictures. And they're more personal. You are the only one who can remember."

So from Cheung Chau he picked up a piece of sea-smoothed glass. He did not have as many items from Hong Kong as he had hoped. Weather and rehearsals had kept him inside. But in his few hours off he had become fascinated by the backstreets. His "highlight" had been the fish market in Yau Ma Tei. "I liked it because I wasn't looking for it."

Rather like the China Tee Club, we agreed. It is a charming place: ceiling fans, palm trees, an unfounded sense the windows are open and the colonial breezes are wafting in.

We shared the chicken satay (\$ 55); golden and almost suspiciously tasty, like China Tee McNuggets on a stick.

Hunt did not have such an instant entree to acting, even though he had wanted to be an actor since he could remember.

"I wanted to act but I didn't go to the kind of school that produced actors. I was told I could be a policeman, with my height, but I didn't want to."

He spent six years in the merchant navy. He wears the souvenir - a blurred tattoo - on his right arm.

"I never came to Asia - we did the other side, the Pacific, the Caribbean.

"That's why I'm doing this tour really, because I've never been to these places."

We didn't order alcohol. "I don't drink before a show. After a couple of drinks I feel it."

He had yet not seen The Avengers movie starring Ralph Fiennes and Uma Thurman, but had read the unanimously critical reviews.

"Friends have seen it". And the verdict?

"That I should save my money. I will see it, but it's not my number one priority."

His number one priority in Hong Kong was to try all things Asian, so we ordered chilli prawns (not quite generous enough for \$ 120: fortunately not too chilli) and laksa (\$ 105).

It has been hard to find a decent laksa ever since the Grand Hyatt took theirs off the menu. While not reaching Grand Hyatt heights, this is a good contender - plenty of chicken, prawns and fried beancurd, in a thick soup.

"Television, chews you up and it spits you out" continued Hunt, not doing the same for either of the main courses.

"If you don't appear on it for a while they think you're washed up. I remember appearing at the National one night, and realising that in one night on TV more people will see you than in a lifetime at the theatre."

He has not been acting as much in the past few years as he used to - few actors in Britain manage to continue as they start. It's given him time to indulge in his favourite sport - golf - but he is also a toxophilite, he said, and grinned. "It means I like archery," he said. "Don't ask me to spell it."

He started when he was playing an American Indian in a play, Ducksong, for the Royal Shakespeare Company. "The RSC sent me to learn how to fire an arrow, and I was hooked."

He has spent the past few years trying to put forward a plan to improve on Spotlight - the Who's Who (and who's not yet who) of the acting profession.

"We realised that computer technology could revolutionise the way casting can be done. You can decide you want to talk to someone who's got blue eyes, speaks Greek and has a knowledge of Hong Kong. We get back to you with not only their names and CVs, but pictures, and a video clip."

The company was franchised too early and went bankrupt he said. "But I still think it's a good idea."

He remembered his most ghastly of inappropriate auditions. It was for a beer commercial, playing a shipyard worker hearing "the call of the beer".

The auditioner had a pint ready to test him out.

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"I tried to drink it and spilled it everywhere. I was so embarrassed I turned round and walked into the broom cupboard."

We had double espressos (a hefty \$ 48 each). Coffee, in its instant incarnation, is something of a trademark for Hunt. For 10 years he appeared on British TV shaking a handful of coffee beans. "It had a rather unfortunate action," he acknowledged.

"You could build the Great Wall of China with this," Hunt said of our cheesecake. It was baked, solid, and although the top was worth the calories, we agreed the biscuit was not, and left it.

As we left, after paying a bill of \$ 530, Hunt picked up the beer mat - complete with nostalgic picture - and put it in his pocket. It would be perfect for the collection.

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