



From Budding to Rooting: Exploring the Localization of Sustainable Restaurants in China

Company/Organization

Xiao Lou Bistro & Bowl

Author of this report

Cong Yuanbo, Good Food Fund

Abstract

Founded in 2021, Xiao Lou Bistro & Bowl became the first restaurant in China to fully commit to the eight principles of the Good Food Pledge. While Europe and North America have established certification systems for sustainable restaurants, in China only a few consciously embrace this approach. As a trailblazer, Xiao Lou endured more than two years of pandemic-related challenges and emerged resilient, now poised to serve as a reference point for the industry's exploration of sustainability. Its journey—regardless of ultimate success or failure—offers valuable insights that merit close attention and reflection.

Keywords

sustainable restaurant, chef's leadership

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Case Introduction

Background

In China, chefs predominantly perform on the backstage. While internet-famous restaurants have mushroomed, their chefs rarely step into the limelight, a contrast to the Western world where many chefs engage directly with the public. Some build personal brands through variety shows or cooking classes, becoming celebrity chefs, while others focus on broader societal issues, particularly those on the food system and sustainability. Leveraging their social influence, the latter spearhead the transformation of the catering industry, advocating for upstream transitions to regenerative agriculture and fostering downstream trends that raise consumer awareness of sustainable dining.

The Good Food Fund, a trailblazing non-profit organization, was the first in China to spotlight the enhancement of chef leadership. In late 2019, it conducted a nationwide search for “Good Food

Designers”—chefs or culinary enthusiasts capable of translating the principles of sustainable diet into tangible cooking practices. The finals, held in January 2020, coincided with the launch of the Chef’s Leadership A1 Course.

Li Yan, formerly the head chef of a Western restaurant in Guangzhou, stood out in the competition, securing the top prize in the finals. Following this achievement, he actively participated in the production of Good Food’s “Mama’s Kitchen” project. Influenced by this experience, he resolved to establish Xiao Lou Bistro & Bowl, a sustainable restaurant in Dali, Yunnan, fully dedicated to embodying the principles of the Good Food Pledge. Through his personal example, Li Yan aspires to inspire a new wave of Chinese chefs to venture beyond the boundaries of the kitchen.

Case story

Stumbling Upon Passion and Embarking on the Culinary Odyssey

Li Yan, a co-founder of Xiao Lou Bistro & Bowl, stumbled upon his culinary passion by chance. At the age of 19, carrying the weight of his parents’ expectations, he set off to Ireland to pursue a medical education. However, he “accidentally” unearthed the kitchen as the true canvas for showcasing his talents during his part-time job in a local pizza shop.

Fueled by the newfound love and zeal for cooking, Li Yan embarked on a global journey, exploring diverse culinary cultures, and discovering the most straightforward yet delectable flavors.

Continuously refining his culinary skills, he gathered inspiration from a variety of cooking experiences. In 2010, he returned to China, assuming a role in a Western restaurant in Guangzhou. Together with A Niu, another co-founder of Xiao Lou, they clinched the title of “Best Western Restaurant in Guangzhou” for three consecutive years.

Over a decade of culinary practice, Li Yan has continuously sought a cooking philosophy that harmonizes with his aspirations. Ultimately, he found it on the stage of Good Food Fund. In 2019, Li Yan discovered the nationwide audition for the “Best Good Food Designer”, a collaboration between Good Food Fund and the “Xia Chu Fang”

app, through a friend's recommendation. Amidst intense competition, he secured the top prize in the "2020 Good Food Designer" competition with a Moroccan millet salad and handmade vegetarian dumplings. Subsequently, he delved into the "Chef's Leadership A1 Course" at the Good Food Festival in Xinzhuang, Beijing, gaining a profound understanding of the emerging international trends in healthy and sustainable cooking, sowing the seeds of sustainable cooking philosophy within him. Following that, Li Yan participated in the "Good Food New Year's Eve Dinner Challenge", at the Lunar New Year of 2020, crafting a dinner for his family rooted in the "plant-forward" concept at his sister's factory.

In the first half of 2020, as the pandemic dwindled customers at the Western restaurant where Li Yan worked, he took the initiative to organize a sharing session. Here, he shared insights from the Good Food Festival with the restaurant's owner and colleagues. However, Li Yan only received limited support from them. Feeling disheartened, he decided to resign and provide himself with time for reflection and charting his future course.

Coincidentally, the "Mama's Kitchen" project commenced during this period, inviting Li Yan as a permanent guest to partake in the project's filming. With enthusiasm, Li Yan agreed and completed the recording of four comprehensive episodes. Each episode saw Li Yan and a guest immerse themselves in a week-long exploration around one theme of the "Good Food Pledge". From Monday to Friday, they ventured into mountains, villages, and farms, engaging with local farmers and eco-life advocates, gathering culinary inspiration, and conducting creative dish development, culminating in a Saturday "performance", in which they presented a uniquely crafted feast to ten fortunate diners.

These transformative experiences deepened Li Yan's appreciation for the principles of a healthy and sustainable diet, sparking the ambition to establish his restaurant.

About Mama's Kitchen

In 2020, the Good Food Fund entered its Good Food Hub proposal in the Rockefeller Foundation's global Food System Vision Award competition and was formally declared as one of 10 #FoodVision2050 teams.

Mama's Kitchen is a healthy, low-carbon, and multifunctional community culinary space built upon the principles of Good Food Consensus and Good Food Pledge. The first Mama's Kitchen landed in Dali in September 2020, inviting Good Food chefs like Li Yan and like-minded culinary enthusiasts to explore food truths, co-create menus, and prepare healthy, natural dishes.

To promote Mama's Kitchen in the community, the project team expanded educational contents from 2022 to 2023, including the *Good Food Healthy Eating Toolkit* and *Good Food Mama's Kitchen Guidebook*. Besides, they organized workshops featuring healthy plate activities, bean recognition games, and low-carbon healthy recipe learning experiences with eco-chefs to enhance participants' food literacy.

Forging a Sustainable Culinary Haven Based on the "Good Food Pledge"

In the nascent stages of orchestrating the restaurant, Li Yan stumbled upon *The Third Plate* by Dan Barber, a trailblazing figure in sustainable culinary leadership in the United States. Within its pages, Dan Barber veers away from unhealthy fast food (the first plate) and, building upon the "farm-to-table" ethos (the second plate), advocates for sustainable food production in restaurants through practices like thoughtful ingredient selection and meticulous menu design. His vision is to influence consumers' dietary choices, fostering a harmonious relationship between humanity and the Earth for wholesome development.

Deeply moved by the principles embedded in *The Third Plate*, Li Yan aspired to be China's answer to Dan Barber, envisioning the creation of a Chinese counterpart to Blue Hill at Stone Barns, Dan Barber's esteemed restaurant. After months of meticulous preparation, Xiao Lou Bistro & Bowl, a restaurant inspired by the Good Food Pledge and guided by the ethos of *The Third Plate*, officially commenced operations in May 2021.

As the nation's pioneer restaurant devoted to wholeheartedly embracing the Good Food Pledge, Xiao Lou steadfastly champions the "plant-forward" concept, with the menu meticulously abiding by the principle of keeping meat content below 20%. Furthermore, the restaurant proudly stands among the early adopters of the "Meatless Monday" movement in China. Every Monday, the restaurant crafts "meatless set meals" or "meatless dishes" using fresh seasonal produce without animal dishes, aiming to inspire patrons to embark on a vibrant week through the palette of plant-based delights.

About Meatless Monday

Meatless Monday is a global public welfare brand promoting healthy lifestyles. Launched in 2003 by Sid Lerner and the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health, it encourages people to increase plant-based diets in easy ways, improving human health and the environment. In June 2021, the Good Food Fund became the official partner for Meatless Monday in China.

Xiao Lou remains unwavering in its commitment to the tenets of "animal welfare", "local and seasonal", and "preserving biodiversity" in sourcing ingredients. Meats are ethically procured from local non-industrialized farms, while vegetables, fruits, and other plant-based elements predominantly find their origins in local small-scale farms. Moreover, the restaurant tailors its culinary offerings based on the seasonal treasures of Yunnan, dynamically adjusting the menu to

provide an array of gastronomic choices for patrons.

When it comes to dish development and culinary craftsmanship, both Li Yan and A Niu uphold rigorous standards. Each dish undergoes meticulous iterations before earning its place on the menu. Their belief is rooted in the notion that patrons can only experience true palate satisfaction with plant-based dishes, allowing these offerings to authentically take the lead without succumbing to a subordinate role alongside meat. Notably, Li Yan and A Niu meticulously handle every facet of the restaurant's casual snacks, from the curry in curry dumplings to the buns in burgers. They insist on hands-on preparation and blending, utilizing natural spices and herbs over artificial seasonings to elevate the richness of flavors, dedicated to presenting patrons with a menu steeped in "healthy eating".

Simultaneously, Xiao Lou ardently practices "reducing waste" and "circular economy". The restaurant implements composting bins and enzyme bins, channeling the resulting liquid fertilizer directly to nurture the greenery within the establishment. Additionally, used cooking oil transforms and reemerges as hand soap, soap, and detergent, made available for communal use. In the sale of the restaurant's sauces and pickled products, Li Yan encourages patrons to bring their reusable storage jars, promoting a culture of sustainability through discounted offerings.

Furthermore, whenever the occasion arises, Li Yan shares Xiao Lou's practices with intrigued patrons, seeking to deepen their understanding and interest in the realms of healthy and sustainable dining.

Harnessing Chef's Leadership Influence to Convey Sustainable Principles

Li Yan envisions chefs of the future as well-rounded individuals, transcending the traditional confines of the kitchen and mastering a spectrum of skills beyond culinary techniques. While diligently overseeing the operations of Xiao Lou, he walks out of the kitchen, sharing the restaurant's story and advocating the principles of sustainable cooking among his peers.

From April to June 2022, Li Yan actively participated in the Good Food Eco-Chef Training program. During this period, he gave lectures on Xiao Lou's operational philosophy and menu design, sharing the restaurant's experiences with other participants. He aims to leverage his chef's leadership experience to assist traditional Chinese chefs in transforming into eco-chefs with a consciousness of sustainable development to co-create a healthy and sustainable dining environment.

Good Food Eco-Chef

The Good Food Fund has consistently emphasized the role that the catering industry and chefs can play in the food system reform. Over the years, it has organized Chef Forums at the Good Food Summit, hosted New Year's menu launches led by professional chefs, and conducted Good Food Chef Competitions. Additionally, the Good Food Fund has developed online courses designed to comprehensively enhance chefs' food literacy and cultivate them into eco-conscious chefs.

In 2021, the 6 magnitude earthquakes in Yangbi caused significant damage to houses. Li Yan and Jian Yi, founder of Good Food Fund, swiftly organized the collection of donated ingredients. They rushed to the disaster-stricken area, erected stoves on-site, and prepared a sumptuous dinner for local rescue personnel and residents. This provided a brief respite for those who had been anxiously enduring the aftermath, and showcased an alternative way for chefs to step out of the kitchen and exert a more profound social impact.

Beyond this, Li Yan has consistently developed his restaurant through collaborations with various institutions and partners. The restaurant has hosted children's summer camps, providing kids with the opportunity to experience the wilderness. They've conducted body-mind-soul study tours, illustrating the entire process from understanding food nutrition to its manifestation on the dining table. Additionally, Li Yan has actively participated in local eco-friendly markets, fostering connections through their snacks and expanding exposure of the restaurant to more audience.

Having gained local recognition through word-of-mouth, the restaurant has solidified its place among the locals. In 2022, when Hunan TV's "Delicious Saturday" program came to Dali for filming, Xiao Lou Bistro & Bowl caught the attention of the team. A Niu and Li Yan were interviewed at the restaurant, introducing the concept of "plant-forward" and the eco-friendly practices being implemented.

Remaining true to the initial aspiration, and moving forward

In June 2023, Li Yan traveled to the United States to participate in the 29th Chef Culinary Conference at the University of Massachusetts. During this visit, he also toured Blue Hill at Stone Barns and other Michelin-starred restaurants with a plant-forward approach. Witnessing how pioneers abroad fully leverage the chef's leadership influence in the realm of sustainable cooking prompted him to contemplate how he could both inherit and surpass such practices.

Regarding future plans, Li Yan and his team initially aimed to establish their own farm, cultivating fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables. They hope to bring delicious and nutritious sustainable dishes to customers using simple, natural cooking methods, embodying the "from farm to table" ethos.

However, the U.S. trip shifted Li Yan's mindset, prompting him to set more ambitious long-term goals. The changes Li Yan will bring to Xiao Lou upon his return and the potential development in

China's sustainable dining market are eagerly anticipated. As we move towards the future, all of this is worth keeping a close eye on.

Addressing the Good Food Pledge



Plant Forward:

Plant-based cuisine dominates over 80% of dishes in Xiao Lou. The commitment extends to observing "Meatless Monday", where no animal-based dishes are offered.



Animal Welfare:

The restaurant uses animal products by sourcing animal products from local, non-industrialized farmers.



Healthy Eating:

In alignment with the Chinese Dietary Guidelines 2022, Xiao Lou adheres to healthy eating practices. Natural herbs and spices are used for flavoring instead of food additives.



Reduce Waste:

Xiao Lou tackles food waste through careful portioning to minimize leftovers. Creative approaches are employed to make less conventional ingredients appealing and tasty.



Local and Seasonal:

The restaurant procures fresh, seasonal ingredients daily from local markets. This informs the menu, which is adjusted flexibly according to seasonal changes.



Circular Economy:

Xiao Lou contributes to sustainability by producing eco-friendly enzymes from kitchen waste that was used to nurture the restaurant's greenery.



Preserve Biodiversity:

Through continuous menu development and innovative ingredient sourcing, Xiao Lou maximizes the diversity of ingredients available in the local Yunnan market.



Food Education:

Xiao Lou actively engages diners in sustainable diet practices, collaborating with other organizations to host events such as parent-child summer camps and study tours.

Results and Impacts

- Restaurant Operations: During peak seasons, Xiao Lou consistently serves around 500-600 customers per week, gaining recognition among local specialty restaurants in Dali.
- External Collaborations: Beyond daily operations, Xiao Lou collaborates with various organizations to organize food education-focused events, such as children's summer camps and body-mind-soul study tours, contributing to the restaurant's influence. Regular participation in local cultural markets to share innovative cuisine further expands its reach.
- Media Coverage: In 2021, the restaurant was featured in CAAC Inflight Magazine with the article, *Lee and Restaurant Bistro & Bowl*. On February 26, 2022, the co-founders of Xiao Lou, Li Yan and A Niu, were invited by the Hunan TV's program "Delicious Saturday" where they introduced the restaurant's sustainable concept. In 2023, China Dialogue highlighted Xiao Lou's initiatives and the role of chefs in the context of food system transformation and climate goals in the article, [*Where China's food policies and climate goals meet*](#).

Future prospect

Although Xiao Lou has established itself locally, the lack of widespread enthusiasm for sustainable dining in the consumer market poses challenges for further growth. Additionally, the restaurant aims to engage more closely with food producers while the uncertainty to ensure that sourced ingredients meet organic standards still exists. In the future, Xiao Lou aspires to establish intimate connections with the food producers, seeking firsthand knowledge from farmers regarding the regional attributes, nuanced flavors, and cultivation methods associated with each ingredient. The aim is to seamlessly integrate the culinary expertise of the chefs with the agricultural practices of the farmers.

Discussion

Currently, the concept of sustainable dining in the Chinese food consumption market is still in its nascent stage. The majority of consumers remain more concerned about the taste and affordability of food, while the healthiness of the ingredients and their environmental impact is not being a primary focus for the mainstream. This requires sustainable restaurants to invest considerable effort in dish development. Even without prominently displaying the "sustainable" label, these establishments must excel in their culinary offerings to stand out among peers and secure customer allegiance.

Embarking on its culinary journey during the most challenging period for the restaurant industry, the pandemic, Xiao Lou Restaurant, now entering its third year of operation, has withstood this test. What is most commendable is that both co-founders of the restaurant were once adept at Western culinary. They

could easily have dominated a larger market share with their high-level meat-based culinary skills. However, due to their commitment to the principles of sustainable dining, they have chosen a more arduous and less expedient path. Quietly toiling away, they patiently await the era of sustainable dining.

Case Analysis

The current culinary consumption market's low awareness and acceptance of sustainable concepts poses significant challenge on implementing sustainable dining concepts. Operators must delicately balance meeting consumers' primary demands for delicious and affordable food with the exploration of sustainability.

According to Li Yan, only about 30% of Xiao Lou's clientele visits due to an alignment with the restaurant's sustainable dining principles. The majority is enticed by the exceptional taste and visual appeal of the dishes, often comparing their experience to Michelin-level food. This highlights the crucial foundation for Xiao Lou's survival—meeting consumer expectations for taste. In China, being a “sustainable” restaurant might not necessarily be an advantage, and operators of such establishments should not expect customers to pay solely for the philosophy, especially if it compromises taste satisfaction.

This necessitates that the culinary team of sustainable restaurants possess not only exquisite culinary skills but also the courage to break conventions continually. Only with such audacity can they craft plant-based dishes with ingenuity and distinctive flavors. Li Yan, of Xiao Lou, has globe-trotted to assimilate diverse culinary traditions and their unique approaches to ingredient handling. His proficiency in conjuring delectable creations in settings with limited resources bestows him significant flexibility and liberation in his cuisine, ensuring the distinctive

charm of Xiao Lou's culinary offerings.

Furthermore, the founders' determination and willingness to practice sustainable cooking have been vital factors in overcoming challenges posed by the pandemic. Despite having the capability to attract a larger customer base with their Western culinary skills, the founders embrace new challenges and continuous improvement—a quality essential for pioneers in any field.

Xiao Lou stands out by not confining its influence solely within the restaurant. Since its establishment, Li Yan has actively participated in various events related to the Good Food Fund, utilizing his expertise to collaborate with local non-food organizations for diverse experiential activities. This provides Xiao Lou with multiple identities and attributes, allowing locals to know and understand the restaurant from different perspectives.

However, for more sustainable restaurants to emerge in China's dining industry, efforts from restaurants alone are far from being sufficient. The current consumer market environment is restricting Xiao Lou's further expansion. For instance, if the restaurant aims to support local organic producers or welfare-oriented breeders through ingredient procurement, the cost of dishes would increase. Even if consumers understand the story behind it, they might not be willing to pay more, hindering the establishment of a positive cycle. Therefore, awakening consumer awareness and encouraging them to

pay a little extra for good food are crucial factors in determining the prosperity of the sustainable dining market. Xiao Lou’s response to the cost behind sustainability and affordability. In the

nuanced calculus of the costs behind sustainability and affordability, Xiao Lou’s response to its future development will be eagerly anticipated.

Dimensional analysis: levers of change employed in the case

Food production and supply	Conservation	Xiao Lou supports local eco-friendly agriculture through ingredient procurement.
	Livelihoods	Xiao Lou purchases ingredients from local small-scale agricultural producers to support their livelihoods.
	Affordability	Currently, Xiao Lou’s dishes are comparable to Michelin-level standards, yet individual prices are controlled within a range of a hundred yuan that most middle-to-upper-income customers can afford. Moving forward, Xiao Lou envisions crafting tailored menus for groups of 3-5 individuals, catering to families or gatherings of friends. This includes a bespoke vegetarian menu and a more universally appealing menu featuring both vegetarian and non-vegetarian options. The aim is to ensure the dishes remain irresistibly enticing while optimizing costs and pricing, providing an opportunity for a broader audience to embrace the experience.
	Social norms	Conquering palates through flavors, Xiao Lou endeavors to enlighten diners that sustainability and delectability need not be mutually exclusive, obviating the need for sacrifices. The restaurant has transformed stereotypes of healthy, sustainable, and plant-based diets, motivating more individuals to embrace these principles. Through word of mouth and various forms of external collaboration, Xiao Lou has endeared itself to a broader audience, attracting them to enjoy its culinary offerings.
Food demand	Information and education	During the serving process, Xiao Lou’s staff introduces the origins of ingredients, production methods, and the underlying sustainable philosophies to their clientele. The restaurant also collaborates with other institutions on family camps and retreats.

	Behavior change	Portioned thoughtfully, Xiao Lou's dishes seldom leave remnants, mitigating the occurrence of food waste.
	Product experience	The head chef, attuned to seasonal variations, flexibly adjusts the menu, allowing patrons to savor diverse gustatory experiences as the months unfold.

Addressing the pillars of sustainable development

PEOPLE Nourishing everyone for health and wellbeing	Xiao Lou's "plant-forward" menu aligns with the recommended balance of plant and animal-based foods in The Chinese Dietary Guidelines 2022. High standards for ingredient quality and seasoning ensure a delightful experience without compromising physical and mental well-being.
PLANET Producing in harmony with nature	Compared to restaurants where over half of the menu consists of meat dishes, often sourced from low-welfare industrial farms, Xiao Lou's "plant-forward" menu design and the use of higher-welfare animal products decrease the environmental impact of dining.
PROSPERITY Inclusive, transformative and equitable recovery for the 2030 Agenda	Xiao Lou can simultaneously cater to both vegan and non-vegetarian crowds, ensuring a pleasant dining experience for both groups. The restaurant prioritizes purchasing from small-scale agricultural producers, supporting various types of agricultural production.

Afterword

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How time flies. Xiao Lou has now been in operation for four years. Li Yan and his team have never stopped their exploration, and consistently bring us exciting breakthroughs.

In Baisha Village Ancient Town, Lijiang, Liyan, after meticulously refining his vision, established the “Liangtian Shiyue” restaurant (Fertile Land Nourishes Food Joy) which began its trial operation in the first half of 2025. Rooted in the core principles of the “Good Food Pledge”, the restaurant strives for excellence in the nutritional balance of ingredients and traditional cooking techniques. Drawing on traditional Chinese medicine knowledge for health, the restaurant tailors healthy diets suited for Chinese people, bringing traditions into modern life. More surprisingly, by leveraging its own farm, “Liangtian Shiyue” has upgraded its model from “farm-to-table” to “seed-to-plate”, incorporating the protection and inheritance of heirloom seeds into every step of its culinary practices.

During this follow-up interview, Li Yan was fully involved in the “Good Food Eco-Kitchen Youth Program”. This initiative aims to cultivate children’s awareness of health and hands-on skills through experiencing traditional lifestyles firsthand. By turning ideas into real actions, this activity ensures that the concept of “good food” is not just talked about, and the seeds of “sustainability” can truly take root, blossom, and bear fruit in their hearts.