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BRIEFING

Trends, innovations
and events shaping
foodservice in the
Asia Pacific region

CORBIS

Battling China's obesity problems

The worrying rise in obesity among China's urban wealthy
seems to be fuelling an interest in raising nutritional
standards and healthy eating, reports Victoria Brownlee

China's collective waistline is getting bigger and bigger. As consumers move away from traditional diets, eat out more frequently as a result of busier lifestyles and are able to afford more luxurious foods, China's population is increasingly suffering from weight gain and obesity. Private operators are now stepping in to address a growing demand for healthy food and wellbeing services suited to the rapidly-changing lifestyles of the urban Chinese.

In *The Guardian*, Paul French, co-author of *Fat China: How Expanding Waistlines are Changing a Nation*, reported this: "In China, it is the cumulative change across the national diet that has made the difference…The diet has changed, and urban malnutrition is now virtually extinct, but not necessarily for the better."

In response to these growing pains, there is a developing market for foodservice providers offering healthy options, as demonstrated by market intelligence agency Mintel's *Menu Insights* reports for China in September 2014. Mintel research analyst Esther Lau says: "More than 70% of respondents believe the health benefits of the dishes (for example, which nutritional elements it contains, organic food or not) are the top priority when considering what to order."

Although the trend towards healthy eating is gaining momentum, many health food providers in China believe there is still a general lack of understanding of what this actually means. As such, providers that offer a more tailored approach – simultaneously educating customers on diet and nutrition while offering nutritious meals – are gaining momentum in the foodservice markets in major cities, with views to expand operations into other parts of China.

Healthy eating advocates

Sproutworks, a healthy restaurant that launched in Shanghai in 2013 now has four branches and hopes to expand into other Chinese cities. It offers pre-prepared salads, soups and sides that diners can pick and mix together. It's quick, efficient, affordable and convenient, providing a healthy alternative to fast food that's often a go-to option for stressed and busy consumers.

Kim Wong, general manager of Sproutworks, says its restaurants are centrally located so people can stop by after work or the gym and get a healthy meal in less than five minutes. Part of Sproutworks's appeal is its convenience and ability to offer healthy food fast. Also contributing to its success is its willingness to reassure customers on the origins of ingredients and how they're being prepared – an occasional cause for concern when consuming uncooked food in China. It also adapts offerings based on customer demand; it recently updated its menu to include a brown rice bowl as part of a lunch due to many Chinese consumers preferring to include a "staple food" in their meal.
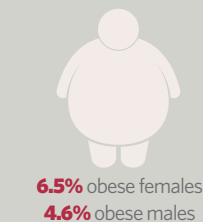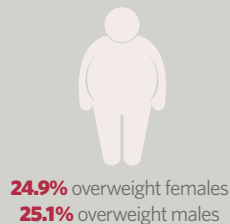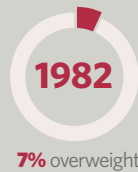
Feeding wellness

The Living Room by Octave, a wellness centre, aims to provide a supportive community environment where people can focus on their health and wellbeing. It's currently only operating in Shanghai, but also has plans to expand into other cities in the coming years. Its staff include naturopathic (alternative medicine) doctors,

nutritionists, physiotherapists, physical trainers and medical doctors. Tella Chen, a nutritionist at the centre, believes hectic city living and stressful work environments are contributing to the population's weight issue. Although she acknowledges that people living outside of China's major cities are not immune to weight gain, she feels that they are often able to eat more of a traditional diet and don't suffer from "wealthy eating" as much as their city counterparts – at least not yet.

Chen says her clients are often overwhelmed by the glut of information relating to healthy eating. Most consult her due to health-related issues or a desire to lose weight. However, they hesitate before changing their diet, expressing concerns over not wanting to eat cold food (including salads) and asking whether it's safe to eat uncooked or raw food. For some clients, work environments also contribute to unhealthy eating habits, as business is often conducted at the dinner table making it difficult to choose healthy alternatives.

The Living Room by Octave's restaurant and cafe puts Chen's nutritionist background into practice as she collaborates with its head chef to create "food therapy" meal options targeting specific health issues (for example, diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure and high cholesterol). By creating an environment dedicated to wellbeing, the centre is able to educate consumers on how to eat well, while encouraging consumption of its healthy meals.

Australian-raised Kimberly Ashton, co-founder and self-styled "chief sprouting officer" of Sprout Lifestyle (a health-food store, cafe and wellness class provider), has been living in China for 12

1982

7% overweight

2014

25% overweight
5.6% obese

24.9% overweight females
25.1% overweight males

6.5% obese females
4.6% obese males

years. She believes there are a number of elements contributing to the rising levels of overweight and obese Chinese citizens, including people's lack of cooking ability and a movement away from the traditional diet to one that includes a greater amount of meat and an increased consumption of sugar. She says Chinese people often believe "a fat happy person is better than a skinny person".

"It's like if they're well fed, they're well looked after. They don't see this link between diet, lifestyle and illness," she adds.

Ashton's aim is to increase awareness of what it actually means to eat healthily, educating people through classes, coaching and events on healthy cooking and adopting healthy products. She feels, "the words 'healthy lifestyle' are becoming very cool, but people don't know quite what it means. People look to the West and they think it's salad, some people think it means organic or vegetables. It's all of the above… they need to understand more of the basics of nutrition."

Despite being new to the food and beverage industry, Ashton launched the business' cafe to help demonstrate what healthy eating looks like, and to make safe and healthy meals available to her clients.

Lifestyle changes

As waistlines continue to grow, so too will the number of health-related illnesses forcing people to pay more attention to their dining habits. Although there is a market for healthy food operators catering to China's overweight population, businesses that are currently showing signs of success also play a role in educating consumers about healthy eating.

Healthy food operators in cities like Shanghai are introducing the idea of nutritious food being safe, tasty and convenient; something that is appealing to an increasingly busy population. These businesses are already eyeing other locations and over the next few years should be more widely available in other major Chinese cities. In the meantime, wellness centres and educators are teaching consumers about the importance of healthy eating and how to improve their diet, playing a significant role in making sure the health food trend becomes an ongoing lifestyle change. ■

Spotlight on obesity in China

According to author Paul French writing in the UK newspaper *The Guardian* in February 2015, the number of overweight people in China "accounted for approximately 7% of the population" in 1982.

By 1992, a new survey found that 15% were overweight and 30 million people were obese, said French, adding: "In other words, the number of overweight Chinese had doubled in percentage terms in a decade."

Now, the latest figures from the *Global Nutrition Report*, overseen by the International Food Policy Research Institute, suggest this upward trend has continued. The report's 2014 profile for China puts the level of overweight adults at 25% and the level of obese adults at 5.6%.