



## *The Betty Letters*

*My Dear Grandchild,*

*Having achieved the highest level of any lady in the history of Hongkong, it was very gratifying for me to experience the treatment that was afforded to my person on a recent trip that I made to England, with Grandpa in tow. Even the London hairdresser, who specialises in curling and combing the locks of royalty, was deferential on seeing me for the first time. I noted that he bowed, graciously, when I entered his parlour in Oxford Street – which is, as it should be, in accordance with protocol, you understand. English food, as served in London, however, is terrible – as usual. And it is about food that I want to devote this letter. Hongkong has, always, been a mecca for the best food in the world. It still is, and especially so for Chinese food, as I have written to you in the past. Recently, however, the Continental cuisine, served up in some of the five-star hotels of the territory leaves a lot to be desired. Specifically, I must tell you that the food outlets at Conrad Hongkong are a long way off from their former glory. In truth, certain members of Management of this once wonderful hotel have, for some time, been ‘cheating’ its patrons when it boasts of serving Italian food at its single, fine-dining outlet, called Nicholini’s. The chef of this outlet is supposed to be a man by the name of Giovanni Greggio. He has been in the hotel since the Year Dot and, in my opinion, it is time for him to return to Italy, for good. The poor man is not in the best of health, in any event, but he is, also, very tired: He needs a good rest ... at least a decade or so. For about two months, he was not at his post, having had a bit of an accident, according to Mr Giovanni Viterale, Director of Food and Beverage at Conrad. (I am reliably told that, in spite of these two people, having the same first names – Giovanni – they are not related, except by ethnicity, that is, although they have been spoken of as ‘the two Giovannis of The Conrad’) My girlfriend went to Nicholini’s the other month and had a terrible meal, comprising a dehydrated (not freshly made) pasta dish, a cow’s cheek with some vegetables, and a cup of lukewarm coffee. She told me that the pasta was cooked with mushrooms and tasted quite nice – for dehydrated pasta – and the cow’s cheek was very tender, as one would expect a Chinese stew to be. What upset my girlfriend, however, was the fact that the baby carrots and baby zucchini had been ‘recycled’! I mean that, literally: Recycled! This is an old trick in cheap Chinese restaurants. First, the cook makes a soup, or a stew, or something, using vegetables and things, and, then, he scoops up the vegetables, out of the cooking pot, and uses them as a side dish. The trouble with this format is that the vegetables have had their goodness and flavours go into the soup, stew, or what-have-you. They have become insipid by the time that they are placed on a customer’s table, presented as a side dish, accompanying a main course, or even by themselves. And that was how the baby carrots and the baby zucchini tasted to my girlfriend. I can believe her description of this food because she has been eating in Hongkong restaurants for many years; and, she knows the difference between an Italian man and a Chinese man, just by listening to the way that they talk, with the Italians, being much more effervescent in their emotions and hand-talk. My secretary telephoned Mr Giovanni Viterale in order to confirm that the ‘cook’ at Nicholini’s had been absent for some time. This is what he told me, via Joyce, my secretary: ‘He (meaning Nicholini’s chef) had an accident to his back. He was absent for about two months.’ That reconfirmed my girlfriend’s report. Joyce, then, asked Mr Giovanni Viterale whether or not the outlet reduced the price of the Italian-style of food, served in this outlet, during the absence of cook Greggio. He sounded furious at the suggestion, Joyce explained, and told her, in an angry way, that the hotel maintains a certain standard ‘whether*

*chef is here or not!’ You would not believe what he, then, told Joyce. He said that many people underrate Chinese as cooks. Well! I’ll tell you, my dear Grandchild, I was livid when this was reported to me! I flew into a rage and was tempted to bring the matter to the Legislative Council, the place where important matters are discussed when things go wrong in Hongkong, these days – which is quite often, actually. How dare this Italian macaroni suggest that the people of Hongkong would underrate Chinese cooks! The Chinese are the best cooks in the world. They have had about six thousand years in perfecting the art and the preparation of food, fit for the table to any emperor or Chief Lady of Hongkong.*

*Mr Giovanni Viterale would not say that Chinese were better cooks than Italians, try as Joyce did to trick him into making the statement, but he explained to her that, in Tokyo, many Japanese cooks dish up Italian-style dishes in restaurants – and the Japanese love the food. I cannot, of course, be responsible for the mistakes of the Japanese, which, history has recorded, are numerous, culminating in the matter of the country’s surrender in 1945, thus ending World War II in the Asian-Pacific Region, but there is good reason that they eat, mostly raw fish: They have only recently – in the history of the world – discovered the joys of eating cooked food. Also, the Japanese are a lazy people and, so, they eat raw fish in order to save time and their energy. The laziness of the Japanese is legend, and is due, in part, to the fact that they are, generally, short in stature. So they have to conserve energy, as much as possible, otherwise, they could be blown away at the first gusts of wind of a mild typhoon. The favourite sport of the Japanese is sumo wrestling, which only requires the combatants to stand in a ring, nearly naked, and to push against each other, ever so slightly, in the hope that one of them would fall out of the ring – or collapse from exhaustion. I suppose you know that the reason that the Japanese invaded China in 1937, at Nanjing, was to try to master the art and preparation of Chinese food in order to bring the secrets, back to Japan, so that they could package the culinary arts of China and, then, resell them to the world under a Japanese brandname: Nippon food. That is history, you know, so there can be no question about that. Anyway, I am getting off the subject of Conrad Hongkong. This hotel has five hundred and thirteen rooms and, for the past five years or so, it has only employed an Executive Chef, in the shape of the rather plump Alfred Moser of Austria, Mr Giovanni Greggio, the Italian cook of Nicholini’s, and a rather handsome French Pastry Chef, Mr Chris Duvernois (he looks like an interesting and rather pleasant man and I have been thinking that he might like to come to one of our dinners in order to prepare a special Frenchee thing for me to sample). When Mr Giovanni Greggio was having his back trouble, there was no Italian cook at Nicholini’s, of course, but Mr Alfred Moser was supposed to be looking in on the outlet, from time to time, according to Mr Giovanni Viterale. In order to be absolutely fair to Conrad, I had my secretary telephone Management of JW Marriott Hotel Hongkong and discovered that this five-star hotel, which is, also, located at Pacific Place, has a total of six hundred and ten rooms, and engages the services of four European chefs – an Austrian Executive Chef, an Australian Executive Sous Chef, an English something-or-other Chef, and a first-class Japanese Chef. In addition, the hotel has, on its payroll, two very experienced Thai Chefs, two top-notch Indian Chefs, and a small army of Chinese Chefs. See the difference between the two hotels and the chefs at these hotels at Pacific Place? In terms of chefs per room, Conrad has one chef – even when Nicholini’s Italian cook is present – per one hundred and seventy one rooms. As for the JW Marriott, it has one Chef per sixty one rooms. Strangely, at the coffee shop of Conrad, there is sushi and sashimi on the buffet table – prepared by a Chinese person. I suppose Mr Giovanni Viterale will suggest that, in Tokyo, the best sushi and sashimi are prepared by Chinese – and the Japanese love it? One last item, which is very irksome to me, is that, if one wants to eat at Nicholini’s on any evening of the week, one has to brave, being engulfed in a veritable ocean of passive smoke because the outlet can only be entered through a walkway, which is used by cigar-smoking nuts, all intent on killing themselves by inhaling cancer-producing tobacco products.*

*You know, in 1997, I and Grandpa had dinner in a private room at Conrad. We, even, had a lift, standing by for our personal use, especially. It was very nice on that evening. Now, however ... Things have changed a lot in Hongkong since 1997, haven’t they?*

*Well, I must go.*

*Love you.*

***While TARGET makes every attempt to ensure accuracy of all data published, TARGET cannot be held responsible for any errors and/or omissions.***

*If readers feel that they would like to voice their opinions about that which they have read in TARGET, please feel free to e-mail your views to [editor@targetnewspapers.com](mailto:editor@targetnewspapers.com) or [targnews@hkstar.com](mailto:targnews@hkstar.com). TARGET does not guarantee to publish readers' views, but reserves the right so to do subject to the laws of libel.*