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FASHION CAFETERIA

Where everyone goes in Paris after the shows are over.

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

One evening not long ago, I wandered down the Rue de Richelieu on my way to a Chinese restaurant called Davé, which is recommended regularly by people in the fashion business. Like many popular restaurants in Paris, reservations are hard to get at Davé. So I wasn't surprised to find a *Complet* sign hanging over the lacquered red door. Inside, though, the place was practically empty—there was just one couple, sitting at a table near the window. A rumpled, unshaven Chinese man of indeterminate age emerged from the kitchen. He had wild black hair flecked with gray and was wearing an untucked pink cotton pin-striped shirt, a gray sweater-vest, seersucker pants, and lime-green silk slippers. This was the owner, Davé Cheung—but nobody uses his last name. He led me to a banquette and poured tea, and I asked him why he'd placed a "Sold out" sign on the door on a night when there were thirty empty tables.

"Are you kidding? Do you know what would happen if I took that sign off the door?"

"People might come in to have dinner?"

"Exactly! They would just walk right in. I would have to let anybody who wanted come and eat here. I would have no control. No control over my own restaurant!"

There are more than fifteen hundred Chinese restaurants in Paris—among them Cantonese, Szechuan, and Hunan. As a culinary experience, Davé ranks somewhere in the top half. Nobody recommends Davé for the food, however, which is adequate, or the prices, which, while always high, vary according to what the owner feels like serving. Or for the ambience. Davé is dark and claustrophobic even on the brightest day—hemmed in by quilted red walls and a velvet curtain inside the door. A tropical-fish tank, which sits in the middle of the front room, provides the only real source of light. Despite all that, Davé may be the most frequently and reverentially mentioned Chinese restaurant in France. It's certainly the most exclusive. Except on weekends, when he does not serve lunch, the place is open every day. Davé seats about eighty people, and on a busy night during fashion week it might serve a hundred dinners—much of them tofu and bok choy—at an average price of around sixty euros a person.

"I know you are saying to yourself, 'This is a restaurant in Paris, of all places—why would somebody go there if the food was not spectacular?' " Davé said. He threw up his hands. "It's simple. People don't come here for the food. They come for me. I offer my guests peace. They are tired and hassled and bothered, and this is where they can relax at the end of the day and be with each other socially. They don't want to be disturbed by a bunch of tourists." The word seemed to twist his face into a moue of distaste. "My job is to make fabulous people feel fabulous. I mean, really, anybody can serve a spring roll."

Davé is a restaurant that caters to writers, actors, filmmakers, and rock stars. Allen Ginsberg would wander in when he was in Paris, choose a quiet corner table, ask for a bowl of wonton soup, and read in the dark. ("I always worried he would hurt his eyes," Davé said. "We don't have that much reading here.") Bernardo Bertolucci has eaten at Davé, and so have Oliver Stone and David Bowie. Davé is always happy to see them, but when he talks about fabulous people he really means fabulous *fashion* people, because for much of his life fashion is all he has cared about. "At some point when I was younger, I became obsessed with fashion, with the drama of it—the look," he said. "In school, I would go through *Vogue* and *Elle* and I always wondered who was behind it and how did it work. Who was making these women look the ways they did?" He says that he never tired of watching the transformation of image to reality. "That is what fashion really

does. It's one of the great challenges of our modern life: it makes fake things real."

Davé makes fake things real, too. The restaurant functions as a sort of high-school cafeteria for the nomadic denizens of the fashion world, who traipse constantly between New York, Paris, and Milan. And, just as in high school, the food at Davé never matters nearly as much as the seating arrangements. People go there to assure themselves of their stature in a world where little else matters. Some of the most famous editors in the fashion business have stormed out of shows that they are paid to attend when they find, to their shame, that they have been assigned a seat in the second row. Ask why it matters and most will tell you that it is impossible to see the shoes from the second or—God forbid—the third row. In fact, what is impossible for them is to be seen as people who are not important enough to sit where they want to sit.

"Look, it's that new girl from Chanel," a Davé regular said one evening as she sat down to a meal of broccolini, tofu, and tea. "Let's see what he does with her." A tiny blond woman, dressed mostly in feathers and diamonds, and wearing cowboy boots, stood warily at the entrance. Diners openly stared as Davé moved, deliberately, toward the door. Where would he seat this woman? Certainly not in one of the alcoves at the front of the restaurant. Perhaps he would put her in the back room—a decision that would make the regular patrons feel better about themselves and confirm their suspicions that she was nobody. Davé seemed unsure at first, too, but in the French fashion world you don't mistreat the people associated with Chanel, so he gave her a table near the entrance. The young woman sat down and placed a napkin across her miniskirt.

Davé, the Paris fashion world's unlikely arbiter. Photograph by Michael Roberts.

"*J'aime bien*," she said. "*J'aime bien. J'aime bien*." The room returned to its food.

Later that evening, Davé faced a more complicated seating problem: a grand and difficult woman. Again, the room looked up. Loulou de la Falaise was the archetypal muse—the central inspiration for Yves Saint Laurent during his most creative years. Now in her late fifties, she owns a shop on the Rue de Bourgogne and still makes a regal entrance wherever she goes, and she goes everywhere. As we all watched, Davé led her to an inferior table. The crowd seemed pleased. "Loulou is always like a little girl," he told me later. "She is very, very childish and very grand. Nobody can look at anybody else when she is in the room or she begins to pout." He waved his arm in the air dismissively. "They say she is chic."

There could be few greater humiliations than to be exiled behind the wall separating the front room and the back room, past the fish tank and nearly into the kitchen. Some of the most powerful people in the fashion business treat Davé with a deference that they withhold from nearly everyone except those who can provide them with a good table. "There are some bitchy people in the fashion world," the designer Marc Jacobs told me one night. "But nobody is stupid enough to offend Davé."

During fashion weeks, the battle for a table can become even more absurd. "Leo and Gisele had to stand in the street for twenty minutes a while ago," Davé told me, with a mischievous grin. He was referring to the actor Leonardo DiCaprio and the model Gisele Bündchen. "Can you imagine that? Leo had come to introduce Gisele to *moi*, and he was not happy at all. But what was I supposed to do—tell my beloved friend Helmut Newton to get up and leave? Or should I have gotten rid of John Galliano? Gisele was really cute about it. But Leo was annoyed. And, you know, I owe a lot to Leo, because without him Tobey"—DiCaprio's buddy Tobey Maguire—"would never have come in. And now he is here all the time."

Davé was born in Hong Kong in 1953. His family was from a province in northern China, but when he was a teen-ager his parents moved to Paris. The family settled in an outlying neighborhood, and it didn't take him long to realize that his ambitions were larger than

"If you could time-travel back to any period in history, would your love for me keep you from going?"

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the few blocks in which he lived his life. Yet his father had a restaurant, and he and his brothers and sisters were expected to work in it. That was what the Cheung family did. "I understood right from the start that I was more a Westerner than an Oriental," he said. "When I was young, in my teens, I went to see an astrologer who was known to be the best in Paris. He looked at my charts and he said very simply, 'You belong in the West. The East is no good for you; nothing will work there.' And he was right. I am a very Western person.

"I was pushed, I think, by the usual fear of the immigrant," he continued. "So I worked all the time. And I still do. I don't take holidays and I don't go away for the weekend. I am here. Every day. Always." Late in the afternoon, he can often be found napping in his favorite banquette. He does have an apartment, just a few blocks from the restaurant, but he is rarely there for long. "When I go home, I am tired. I watch a movie or sleep. Watching DVDs is what I do for exercise. I used to read more, but I'm getting too old and tired to concentrate. In the past, I tried to watch mostly intellectual films. Now I prefer action. But mostly I am here, and my customers like that. They know I am not going to be in New York or on the Riviera when they call. These are people who like certainty."

Davé opened his restaurant in the summer of 1982, and two decades later he moved it to the current location, not far from the Comédie Française. "There is such a thing as luck in this world," he told me. The old restaurant was near the Jardin des Tuileries, where all the fashion shows were held. Helmut Newton came in, and so did Grace Coddington, the creative director of *Vogue*. "Everything followed from that. They came back with their friends. Then the rock people came; Duran Duran was there every day. And Azzedine, Yohji, and Rei"—the designers Azzedine Alaïa, Yohji Yamamoto, and Rei Kawakubo. "People started to have parties. It just went from there."

Polaroids of notable customers, and, in the case of Newton, Keith Haring, and a few others, pictures and drawings by notable customers, line Davé's walls. Davé will give a tour of those pictures with anyone who asks. "There is Naomi," he said. "And, look, it's Caroline, Karl, Keanu, and Kevin!" he shouted, giddy with delight. "There is Leo and *moi*," he said, pointing to a black-and-white photograph of a young DiCaprio. "And there is Leo in the 'Titanic' phase. And there he is when he was making 'The Beach.' " DiCaprio leads to Tobey Maguire, who leads to Gwyneth Paltrow. "She has come since she was a girl. Then me." After that, it's on to a self-portrait by Sting and then another of Maguire, with Davé next to him; then a photograph of Davé with Francis Ford Coppola. ("God, that guy loves to eat.") "Then another of Naomi and me. There is Tobey again"—as always, with Davé by his side. Davé speaks French, English, Cantonese, and Mandarin, and he uses the first person extensively in all of them.

"Look, it's Tom," he said, pointing to a picture of Tom Ford that was taken not long before he resigned, in April, as chief designer for Gucci—an event treated by some of Davé's customers at least as seriously as the war with Iraq. In the picture, Ford is dressed in a white turtleneck and a white velvet jacket with huge lapels, and he is wearing aviator glasses. Ford had attended a party in the restaurant the night before, and Davé was smiling broadly. "He was *wild* last night. I can say no more. Wild, do you understand me?" I tried to wrest some details from him. "*Non*, *non*, *non*. I can say no more." He concluded, "But, when Tom loses it, it is lost."

Davé tries to be discreet, but his opinions often overcome the effort. "Puffy is *so* insecure," he told me once. "I swear to God, he had his people calling me for a table ten times a day. I would say, 'Sure,' and they would call back an hour later to see if everything was still O.K."

"Stella," he said one day, referring to the designer Stella McCartney, "she is charming. She is cool. Maybe her clothes don't have a very strong image—maybe she wouldn't have the job she has if her last name was something else. . . but who am I to say?" I attended a Helmut Lang show last year with Davé. He and Lang are close. Still, he was not impressed. Lang sent out one of his models in a pair of pants that made him look as if he were wrapped in an Ace ban-

dage. "This is just ridiculous," Davé said. "Ridiculous. Why would he do it? It's not clothes. It's not art, it's a joke. Designers have to be so outrageous these days that they forget to make a decent dress."

Fashion week is trying for Davé. In the midst of the women's collection last fall, I found him dressed in a shiny black Comme des Garçons outfit. He was sitting on a banquette and looking weary. He took a large leather folio from the podium near the kitchen; he uses the podium to orchestrate the restaurant's movements. The folio is his reservations roster, and for that night it was more than full. "Look," he said to me, dragging the book in front of my face. "This is a table for *Women's Wear Daily* and that is a party for French *Vogue*." Jonathan Newhouse, the chairman of Condé Nast International and a frequent visitor to the restaurant, had also reserved a table. Then, there would be a party for Douglas Lloyd, the president of a well-known advertising and design firm. "It's one of those nights when everyone plans to be here"—and by "everyone" he means people he actually wants in the restaurant. Elizabeth Saltzman Walker, a fashion director at *Vanity Fair* and a longtime Davé habitué, called to confirm the plans for the Lloyd party. "Yes, baby," Davé cooed. "Of course. Of course. I will have everything and everybody you want. Yes, come after the show. Just come when you can. I will keep everything for you." After he hung up, he looked at me and smiled. "She is very close with Tom, you know," he said. "Very close."

The phones rang every few minutes. Although Davé can be unctuous when it is required, he also enjoys the power that comes with saying no. Here is his side of a fairly typical conversation: "No. We have nothing." Pause. "No, not at any time." Pause. "We have nothing." Pause. "Not tomorrow, either." Pause. "I don't want to say yes. Of course you can call back. I don't want to say yes." Pause. "I can't encourage you." Pause. "No, we don't get many cancellations. I don't think so. No. Not really. Goodbye." He hung up. "Sometimes American visitors will call every day. And I will say, 'No,

there is nothing.' And they will call back the next day and the day after that. I respect that. They are so pushy and aggressive. I can't be that way, but I respect that. It's part of what makes America so great."

Davé is his own rope line. If you dial his number, he will answer. If you want a table, you will need to get it from him. "There are some people for whom I will always have a table," he continued. "They know that. And that is the way a restaurant has to work. I answer the phone and try to be nice. I say I am sorry. I say, 'You can call back later.' But I am working sixteen hours every day and the people call several times and they will wait for the other person to answer the phone. But I am the other person. I am always the other person." People don't drift into Davé. They are either all there or all someplace else. That's because the fashion crowd moves as a highly regimented herd, bouncing constantly from shows, to the Ritz, and to a few chosen restaurants. One evening last fall, at nine-forty-five, three tables at Davé were occupied. By ten-ten, not one seat was empty. John Galliano's show, which featured models wearing what appeared to be elaborate baby-doll outfits, had ended moments earlier. "Just what we need," Carine Roitfeld, the editor of French *Vogue*, said as she entered the restaurant. "Three-thousand-dollar outfits that make us look like nineteenth-century hookers." Davé rolled his eyes and laughed. "Oh, baby, oh, baby," he said, to nobody in particular. The next person through the door, a tall blond woman, surprised Davé. "Who?" he mouthed quietly to a small group of people who had suddenly materialized behind him. "It's Amy," somebody shouted at him. "She is the queen of New York night life." Amy Sacco, who owns the clubs Bungalow 8 and Lot 61, had arrived for the Lloyd party, still jet-lagged from a flight taken the night before. You could literally hear Davé exhale with relief. He doesn't like surprises, and at least she was part of the club. Sacco took one look at the portion of spring rolls that had been deposited on the table in front of her and said, "Can you get a drink in this place?"

This is not a crowd that is famous for its gustatory instincts. "The fashion people eat mostly vegetables these days," Davé said. "When they eat. Besides bok choy, it's broccoli. Steamed vegetables and tofu. They're so afraid of carbohydrates. Deathly afraid." And what about rice, the staple of Chinese food nearly everywhere? "My God," he laughed. "They act like it's poison." Many Paris chefs rise at dawn to scour the markets for the freshest ingredients. Davé does not. He closes his restaurant each night around one. Most mornings, by the time he gets out of bed, all the best vegetables have long been sold to other customers. He doesn't need to hunt for them anyway, because Davé pays a service to buy food for him. The food is delivered two or three times a week. His kitchen is basic and minimally staffed. Davé doesn't believe in menus, and few of his regular customers have ever consulted one. "I have been going there for thirty years and I never even knew he had a menu," Grace Coddington, one of the people who, by their constant presence, helped insure his success, said. "He just knows what I want to eat, and if I want something different I tell him." Davé confers with his diners when they arrive, and if they have a request he will honor it. Usually, he just says, "Let me bring you something good"—lemon chicken, for example, or bok choy, and usually spring rolls and spareribs, too. "They don't want to decide. They make general comments, suggestions," he said. I asked about his anti-menu stance. "Too much stress," he said. "That is why I don't use them. We don't talk about bills, either. It's rude. Just come and sit with your friends and I will bring you food. And drink. Put the cost out of your mind for five minutes"—which is not hard, since so few of his customers actually pay for meals with their own money. A typical meal for two, with a bottle of wine, can cost a hundred and fifty dollars. "Basically, the people don't care. Nobody comes here and complains about the prices. I charge depending upon the food and what people are drinking, of course. People don't need to look at a piece of paper to decide what to eat. They have confidence in me." One afternoon, I noticed two women sitting at a table, each looking at something smooth and long and gold with red lettering. I approached their table and there were two menus, each written in French, English, and Chinese. Davé came to greet me, and I asked him why, after telling me how little regard he had for menus, those women had got them. He stared back at me and laughed. "But they

NIGHTGOWN

To be inhabited.
To float from room
to room raving, waving my arms.
To be tossed by unfamiliar dreams,
and then to lie limp and slack on the bed.
To be folded, without a thought,
and put away in a dark drawer.
Or to hang in a closet, shapeless as a sack,
knowing the terror of form dissolving into formlessness.

Someone is inside me.
Someone is continually dreaming
dreams not my own
so that I am pulled this way and that!

I have always been attracted to the moon.
To a place where I shiver but do not freeze.
And although I, unlike you, must make do
without head or heart, I can imagine a future
you cannot: where, filled with a wild winter emptiness,
I fly over a streaming patchwork countryside
to see what has so far eluded me:
the white world written on with white writing!

—*Elizabeth Spires*

are *nobodies*," he said. "How could I possibly know what they want to eat?"

In January, the photographer Helmut Newton died, at the age of eighty-three, in Los Angeles. His widow, June, and Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue*, decided to hold a memorial service during the couture shows at the beginning of July in Paris. The service took place at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal, just around the corner from Davé. Karl Lagerfeld, dressed in knee-high crocodile boots and a leather choker, was one of the principal speakers. So was Tom Ford. Manolo Blahnik, Anouk Aimée, Charlotte Rampling, and Mario Testino were there. Jane Birkin, Josephine Hart, Stella McCartney, and Newton's friend Bobby Short all flew in to attend. Afterward, eighty people were invited for spring rolls, spareribs, and lemon chicken at Davé. "My God, it's a fashion restaurant!" Blahnik screamed in mock horror as he stepped inside. "Can you imagine anything more ridiculous than the concept of a fashion restaurant?"

Davé was genuinely upset by Newton's death—they were particularly close. "We spent last Christmas together," he said. "June, Helmut, and me. Just the three of us. In the restaurant. I feel so sad. Helmut was a wonderful person, and he did what he did alone. There was no ego about him. No entourage. No staff. He just loved to take pictures. All that has changed now. I saw it change before my eyes. When I started, fashion was more for an élite. Now, with the media the way they are, it is seen every day. The shows are broadcast live all around the world to billions of people. It's marketing. Business. Money. They are selling celebrity."

Slowly, the guests filed in: Ford, Donald Trump's fiancée, Melania Knauss (who was in town to hunt for a couture wedding dress), Pierre Bergé, for many years Yves Saint Laurent's right-hand man. They all nodded to Davé, whose eyes were brimming with tears. As people found the seats assigned to them, the telephone rang at the podium from which Davé directs his daily traffic.

"Yes," he said. "No. I can't. Not tonight. We are closed.

"Well, no," he continued. "I can't promise tomorrow, either. No. We are very busy. It's the fashion time, and we really don't have room for other people." ♦