

At Treehouse, Christian Mongendre takes control of his own destiny



by: Nik Addams
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It was an off-hand comment that proved the most insightful. Standing in his week-old restaurant Treehouse, Christian Mongendre casually remarked that he 'didn't realise how much people in Hong Kong had missed' him. What could be mistaken perhaps for false modesty is indeed more instructive of the Hong Kong-born chef and eco-warrior having spent the better part of the last two years completely immersed in bringing to life his brand-new project, which is now open in Central's H Code.



Christian Mongendre is a natural poster boy for Hong Kong's plant-based eating movement.

For those of us on the outside, though, it probably comes as no surprise that Mongendre has built up quite a following in the city. One half of the team that opened Wellington Street's Mana! Slow Fast Food in 2012 – the pioneering fast-casual vegan concept that quickly became a favourite for the Lululemon-wearing, yoga mat-carrying crowd – before breaking out on his own to launch the larger-scale Home – Eat To Live with the backing of a fledgling (though, arguably, underprepared) hospitality group, the statuesque Mongendre has become something of a poster boy for the plant-based lifestyle in Hong Kong.

See also: [Chef Peggy Chan on her new restaurant, Nectar: "To stay in a place of comfort is to refuse to grow"](#)

Fans of Mongendre's past ventures won't be disappointed by what's on offer at Treehouse. If Home was a more 'grown up' Mana, we posit to him, can we expect that Treehouse goes that next step as well? "It's a continuation of my work before," Mongendre confirms. "I've always had the same mission, I've never varied. I've always wanted to do something that was plant-based, all made from scratch... and adapts to the Hong Kong need for speed."



Savana (HK\$128) features avocado, sunny side up egg, fried eggplant and chipotle sauce on a vegan sourdough bun.

This mission translates to a menu that features a varied and considered selection of flatbreads, salads, grain bowls – all fully customisable – and, perhaps most pleasingly, burgers not too dissimilar to the ones plated up at Home that developed something of a cult following of their own. It's all **meat-free** of course, but in a third-wave sort of way: Mongendre refers to his menu as 'accidentally vegetarian'. "We kind of want to go away from those [vegetarian] stereotypes and thought processes," he says. "We want to be about the food – you read it on the menu and it sounds exciting. Hopefully you don't even realise that you're missing the meat." A week in, his tried and tested formula is holding up, with fans old and new returning in their droves.



Salad bowls at Treehouse are fully customisable.

Despite what just about anybody else would consider setbacks, Mongendre remains philosophical about his journey to get to this point. Following the 2017 closure of Home, a detour to Lisbon to open a plant-based franchise restaurant there forced the chef to work at the more relaxed southern European tempo. "I couldn't bring the Hong Kong pace over there," he laughs. "And it was a wonderful thing. I got to slow down, relax, and also refocus on what I wanted to do, what I was trying to achieve, what my failing points were, what things worked, who I wanted to work with, trying to create my dream team... I didn't know at the time, but in retrospect it was exactly what I needed."

His time away also gave him a chance to get back to basics. "I've been cooking a lot more over the past two years than I have done in a long time," Mongendre says. "I went back to the love of why I was in this business in the first place – it's always been about the food, and I hope that's what people find at Treehouse, that at the end of the day, the food should be the speaker."



Treehouse also features a selection of raw vegan desserts.

On the 'dream team' front, Mongendre is confident that he's got that at Treehouse. While he retains a majority share – "I think that was the necessary piece for me to really protect the brand over time," he asserts – he's entered into a partnership with award-winning interior designer Stefano Tordini to bring the vision to life; at H Code to begin with, then beyond. "It's very much a collaboration... [and] we're hoping to scale in a way that we always wanted," he tells us. "I want to scale to the maximum here in Hong Kong and take it beyond that in Asia." Indeed, there's already talk of at least two more Hong Kong locations.

The ambitious plans speak to Mongendre's driving ethos that business can be 'a great driver of change'. "Business can get people together, it can build a community, it can show a route, and also it's more impactful," he says. "If big businesses were changing their habits, that would create a tremendous impact instead of putting it on the consumer."



Orchid (HK\$128) features avocado, choosy blend, flatbread chips, kale, romaine, pickled red onions and cashew sauce.

Mongendre remains optimistic that these ideals can translate to a city that has, for the most part, been slow to change its ways when it comes to doing good for the planet. "[Treehouse is] a good way for us to approach business-oriented people," he tells us. "Because if you see the world as a finite resource, which it is, then you can see it as a business. And it's bad business what we're doing with the planet. Through a restaurant you can touch a lot of people, and also they have a product that helps them experience what we're talking about. Because at the end of the day we want the food to be the transition – if you like the food and you feel good after and you feel like it's giving you more energy and more clarity, it will be much more powerful."

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