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# The Fire Pot

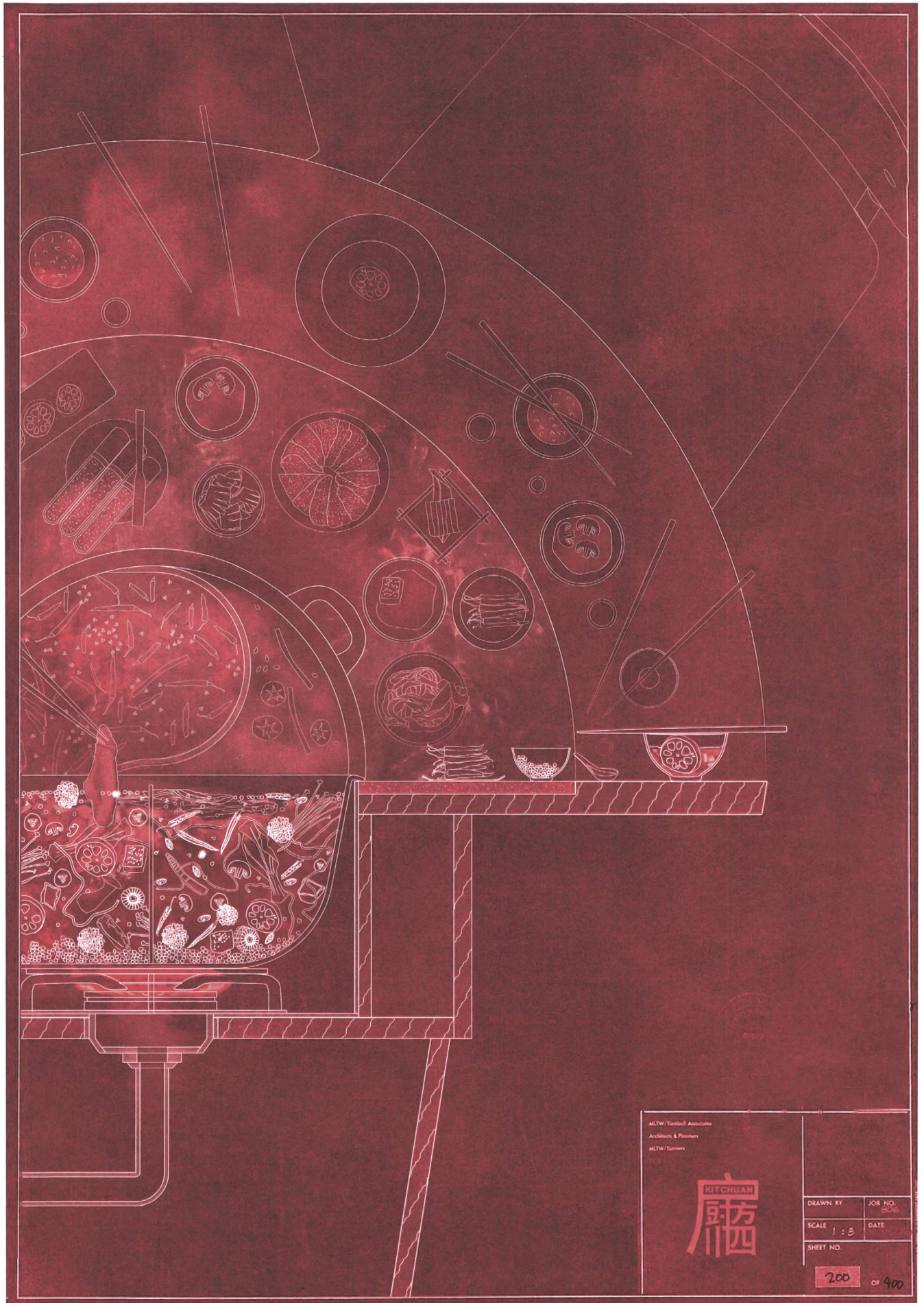
Blanka Major, Juliette Martin, Shen He

What grabs you first is the numbing and spicy smell. It permeates the street, functioning as the best advertisement for all the virtuoso Sichuanese hotpot restaurants. The climate inside is hot and steamy. The windows are veiled by the mist. The space is dark and loud, each table, lit by red lights and candles, appears like an island. Separated by trickling plastic curtains, groups gather around gleaming pots. The dinner unfolds on the table: its centre is carved out to make space for the fire. Above it, in a pot forged into a Taiji, two complementary broths are boiling steadily. As the red broth is numbing and hot, often overwhelming the non-local guests, it is accompanied by a mild broth. Tripe, duck intestines, pork aorta, lotus root, golden needle, bamboo shoots, konjak and tofu in all its forms – raw ingredients are laid out around the pot. They are thrown in, one after the other. When they seem cooked, guests fish them from the boiling broth, and dip them into a sauce made of sesame oil and smashed garlic. During the intervals of cooking and eating, chats and laughter, the fire crackles below the boiling pot. Eating hotpot can be brutal. Besides the raw flesh on display, it is also a physical challenge for all of one's organs: eyes watering, nose running, skin sweating, tongue burning, lungs coughing – an intense holistic experience taking on a new meaning when shared with others. The hotpot is not a solitary meal.

Community started around the fire. It creates a space to gather, warm up, and when the night falls, dance and sing in the radiance of the flames. Humans have been eating from boiling pots since the Bronze Age. The Sichuan variation can be traced back to a few boatmen from Chongqing. Looking to dispel the harsh



A



A Hotpot Table, section and elevation, Zurich, 2022. Plan: KITCHUAN



humid and cold winter, they debarked on the shore of the Jia Lin River. At the riverbank right next to their boat, they set a fire, boiled a broth with hot chilli and Sichuan Pepper, and threw in easily purchasable buffalo organs. The two spices merging on the flames cured the boatmen from the woes of the cold. Their simple recipe became a classic dish diffused all over East Asia, synonymous with celebration, pleasure and uninhibited togetherness. Contrary to most dishes we consume today, the hotpot is a relic of the archaic gathering around the fire: the act of cooking and eating are merged in one performative event, where the guest becomes the cook, where the meal becomes a feast. 火锅 (huǒ guō, literally «fire pot») takes fire into itself, spreads it into the bodies and heats them from the inside.

A simple manual to make hotpot at home:

**Broth.** Ready-made hotpot paste can be found in your local Asian grocery shop. Dilute the paste with broth for the red half; for the other half, add water, red dates, goji berries and some mushrooms for garnishing.

**Ingredients.** While the classics are organs and flesh, any ingredient is worth trying. The key is to understand the dynamic between different ingredients and the broth: meat products usually are added first as they enrich the broth; tofu and vegetables come second as they dilute the broth; Ingredients with rich starch – potato, pasta etc. – come last as they thicken the broth and terminate the boiling.

**Sauce.** The combination of crushed garlic and sesame oil makes a good base. Optional add-ups are oyster sauce, rice vinegar, coriander, spring onions or chopped bird-eye chillies.

**Table.** Use an induction stove to surrogate the fire. Lay out the pot and the ingredients.

Chinese alcohol, beer or sweet wine are recommended as liquid companions.