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After so many different things, I wanted a simpler life — cooking for people away from urban pressures.

Chef and entrepreneur
Maik Juengst

What is certain is that the restaurant will feature farm-gate-to-table fare.

“I will certainly use local ingredients,” he said. “And the name of the restaurant will be Le 208.”

The 208 is from his house address and “Le” from the Chinese character for “happy.”

“I want this to be a fun project,” he added. “I can do this with no set plan because there is no pressure here. That would be impossible if you were opening a restaurant in a city, where everything has to be planned and set long before the place opens because you are paying a very high rent. If it fails, it will destroy you. Not here.”

Dongshe Village is about 50 kilometers from downtown Shanghai and 15 kilometers from the Zhujiyajiao Station on Metro Line 17.

The village, which is home to some 600 households and about a square kilometer of farmland, is little known, even to local Shanghai residents. It’s not a tourist destination — at least not yet.

What hardly looks like an ideal restaurant location doesn’t worry Chef Maik. The locals are certainly excited by the new venture.

Friends, villagers and strangers who learned about the project by word of mouth or on social media keep pressing him to give them an opening date. Then, too, there are those who express the sentiment “I wish I could do something like this, but ...”

“Many people are taking a greater interest in small towns, for tourism or even for shifting household,” he said. “I have some Chinese friends who drive down here every

weekend with their families.”

When he first arrived in the southern city of Shenzhen for a hotel restaurant job, he was enchanted by the city because “it had so much going on and so many things one can do.”

Now, as he stands by a decrepit tricycle that is his main transport in the village, he has a different perspective.

“Forget about the city, the future lies in villages.”

Venturing out of big urban areas, he said, opened his eyes.

“I’ve traveled to rural areas in Shanghai and neighboring Zhejiang Province, and there is construction everywhere,” he said. “So many people are building motels and restaurants in villages now, and they are very pretty and well-designed.”

Dongshe Village too is trying to transform itself into a resort venue for Chinese-style, rural homestays, and Chef Maik isn’t the only one seeing opportunities.

“The farmland, rivers, open space and the social texture of a small town really remind me of my childhood in Qibao,” said Lu Tingyi, who grew up in Shanghai’s Minhang District and moved to Dongzhuang Village next to Dongshe four years ago.

In her early 40s, she first opened a café in Dongzhuang. It failed, but her confidence did not. She’s now opening a bakery down the road from Chef Maik’s restaurant.

“Nothing changes overnight, but I have seen a lot of young people coming back to villages since I moved here,” she said. “You just have to believe there is a different side of Shanghai that people like me can’t live without.”



Chef Maik’s staff lunch in front of what calls the best view — Yao Minji



▲ Six weeks after he moved into the Dongshe village, the chef finally gets his mattress, and a shower room installed in the bedroom on the second floor. — Yao Minji

◀ The chef plans to use fire and local ingredients for Le 208. — Maik Juengst