



Secrets of Hong Kong cuisine revealed

HONG KONG -- Somewhere between the braised bamboo piths stuffed with bird's nest and the pigeon in Shaoxing wine sauce served with its head attached, I realize that all the Chinatown meals in the world haven't prepared me for my customized culinary tour of Hong Kong.

"You think you know Chinese food, but you really don't," says my knowledgeable host, Daisann McLane, founder of the Little Adventures in Hong Kong tour company and an American travel writer who has lived here part-time for eight years.

My private three-day adventure — a tantalizing mix of high dining and lowly street food, with a tasty serving of culture and history on the side — steeps me in the world of authentic Cantonese cuisine. From eye-popping markets to humble diners to five-star meals, it dishes up a local's insight into this moneyed food-obsessed city of seven million people — and 10,000 eateries.

Such gastronomic tourism is exploding worldwide, from multi-day backcountry tours to sophisticated urban dining experiences. "More and more people are interested in food travel as a manifestation of the local culture," says Erik Wolf, executive director of the World Food Travel Association. "Authenticity ranks high."



The 80-year-old Lin Heung Kui restaurant in Sheung Wan, Hong Kong's oldest Chinese district. This popular working-class eatery specializes in dim sum served from carts rolled in between tables. (Photo: Veronica Gould Stoddart, USA TODAY)

Day 1

We start our moveable feast at an 80-year-old working-class favorite where the dim sum is still rolled around on metal carts by aproned women, old-school style: the Lin Heung Kui restaurant in Sheung Wan, Hong Kong's oldest Chinese district. Packed with locals, it's yit naau, or loud and bustling — the sign of a good place, says Daisann.

Dim sum began as snacks to accompany morning tea, or yam cha, explains Daisann, as she demonstrates the proper way to serve it using two pots: one for tea and one for warm water. In a grazing culture such as this one, "people eat throughout the day, sometimes every two hours," she says, possibly the legacy of famines. Our no mai gai, or sticky rice with chicken and pork wrapped in a lotus leaf, and ham seui gok, or fried rice flour-stuffed pork, come from age-old recipes.

"If you're doing the archeology of dim sum, this is the first layer. It's not fancied up," Daisann says.



Dried persimmons, shrimp and other seafood in neat plastic sacks beckon shoppers from a stall on Des Voeux Road in Sheung Wan, Hong Kong. (Photo: Veronica Gould Stoddart, USA TODAY)

Just steps away along Des Voeux Road, we hit the city's largest wholesale dried-foods market. Vendors peddle their wares — from nutritious to medicinal — in open-air stalls as spotless as Chinese laundries: dried oysters, duck kidneys, shrimp, and sea cucumbers in neat plastic sacks; thin-sliced, air-dried ham, a kind of Hong Kong prosciutto; richly colored pork, duck and goose liver sausages; pressed duck legs and lizards splayed on sticks; goji berries and shaved yams; Mandarin orange peels and chrysanthemum flowers for tea. The royalty of ingredients are safely behind glass: dried fish maw (bladders), which sell for \$4,500 for 1.2 pounds; packs of bird's nest, considered good for women's skin; abalone from Japan (\$5,000 a pound); and the king of kings --shark's fin -- neatly arranged by size and quality.

"It's like a dried-fish jewelry shop," says Daisann of the diamond-like prices.

Following our market foray, we stop for a mid-morning snack at Hoi On, a 1960s Chinese-style diner of red wooden booths frequented only by those in the know. Over such curious Hong Kong comfort foods as cloud-light pound cake and peanut-buttered toast drizzled with condensed milk, I learn the principles of Cantonese cuisine.

"Chinese food is Chinese medicine," explains Daisann. The Chinese believe everyone has a different constitution: hot, cold, damp, dry. Food should be eaten to match your type.

Indeed, Leanne Chan, the publicist at the Shangri-La hotel, echoes this premise over breakfast the next day. "Our mothers taught us that eating too many fried foods produces heat in the body, which causes a sore throat," she says. "Then it's time for mother's remedy: mung bean soup to cool us down."

But not too much. "You never drink cold water so as not to shock your system," continues Daisann, which explains the cups of warm water that greet us repeatedly.

Daisann's lessons go down as easily as the strong and creamy naai cha, or "milk tea," we sip: "This isn't a spice culture. The Cantonese appreciate the pure intense flavors of foods," the fresher, the better. And "they don't separate sweet and savory. Often they mix them up."

I relish the sweet-savory mix at Fu Sing Restaurant in the Wan Chai district, popular with local businessmen and ladies who lunch. Hong Kong's unique "XO" sauce made from dried scallops and red oil welcomes us in a small dipping plate on the table.

After Daisann orders from the Chinese-only dim sum menu, out come the dishes, one by one, each a flavor explosion made by a dedicated chef: Dumplings with pork and pea shoots. Tangy-sweet barbecued chicken-walnut tarts with flaky crusts. Large flat noodles fried in XO sauce, topped with dried shrimp and green onions. And the signature dish: sweet baked barbecued pork buns – fluffy and flavor-packed. Dessert is a silky mango, pomelo and tapioca chilled soup. It's all washed down with mild chrysanthemum tea.

"Pork is the default meat here, it lurks everywhere" explains Daisann. More waits that evening at Kin's Kitchen also in Wan Chai. A modern, understated restaurant, it gives traditional dishes a new twist: Fried green beans stuffed with fish paste. Deep-fried harpoon fish prepared with seaweed. Double-boiled soup with pork, duck and 15-year-old tangerine peel ("Aging makes the difference. The peel mellows like a fine whiskey," says proprietor Lau Chun). Steamed pork belly cooked with sarcodon mushrooms and pickled chili. Pigeon garnished with pickled radishes and gizzards. And braised pomelo peel with dried shrimp roe.

"You have to have balance (of ingredients, cooking methods and seasons)," says Chun. "It's in the DNA of locals."

Day 2

We startl meet Daisann's associate, Hong Konger Janice Leung, at the Fa Yuen Street wet market in Kowloon's Yau Ma Tei area. A popular food blogger and founder of Hong Kong's first organic vegetable market, Janice guides me through the immaculate live-food section. Abalone, toads, mantis shrimp and geoduck (a giant clam) stop me in my tracks.

"There's a strong preference for buying live," Janice says. Even chickens, which are for special occasions, are butchered on the spot here.

On the second floor, artistic heaps of exotic produce — Chinese kale, taro, bok choy and lotus root — glisten in trays. "Chinese don't eat raw vegetables," Janice explains. "They're steamed or stir-fried."

Most end up in soup. "In a typical Chinese home we have soup with every dinner. It's considered restorative. If the flu is going around, we put in more red dates or ginger. If it's a cough, we put in crocodile meat."

"There's lots of mushy and bouncy texture in Cantonese cooking," she continues, which explains the popularity of cooked pomelo skin. "People think a lot about texture when they eat."

Still in Kowloon, we walk to lunch through boisterous working-class neighborhoods, where modern skyscrapers abut decrepit old buildings, and billboards dangle across the streets. We pass kitchen equipment stores, old-school noodle shops and bakeries, which are very popular, Janice says. "But eating a lot of sweets causes too much dampness in the body. We're taught from an early age what to eat and how in balance we are."

Balance is clearly on the menu at Tung Tak Sim, a simple eatery. The owner, Mak Tak Sim, a Tai Chi master, supposedly cured himself of terminal cancer by changing his diet. Now he's on a mission to evangelize his findings. Tibetan black truffles, thought to be a cleansing agent, find their way into his signature soup with fish maw, dried scallops and Mandarin orange peel; his vegetarian dumplings with wood ear fungus and pine nuts; and even the unexpectedly

delicious dessert of rice balls filled with black sesame and peanuts in a sweet broth.

That night, flavor not therapy is the star at the sleek Lung King Heen in the Four Seasons Hotel, the first Chinese restaurant in the world to win three Michelin stars. With Kowloon's lights twinkling across the harbor, we tuck into some of Hong Kong chef Chan Yan Tak's specialties: crispy scallops with fresh pear and caviar; a barbecued trio of duck, suckling pig and pork with three dipping sauces; and wok-fried prawns with black garlic and dried chili. And, yes, bird's nest (a bland, gelatinous substance cooked after the twigs are removed).

Day 3

Daisann, Janice and I hop the train to the town of Fanling in the New Territories to visit one of greater Hong Kong's few organic farms, run by food activist Teresa Chan and her husband. "Hong Kong produces only 2% of its food," Teresa explains, amid neat rows of lettuce, "and developers are pushing out the local farmers. By having a farm, we can spread the principles of sustainability." The produce — including the best tomato I've ever eaten — is sold at markets nearby and in Hong Kong.

Lunch in Fanling is at one of Daisann's favorite finds: Sun Hon Kee, which serves cuisine from the southern Chinese Hakka people. Though unpretentious, our meal of fish noodles with shredded vegetables, omelet with plump oysters and tangy chicken caramelized with rice wine, chili and ginger more than holds its own.



Fish noodles with shredded vegetables and an oyster omelet at the Sun Hon Kee restaurant in the town of Fanling, which specializes in Hakka food, the cuisine of the rural villagers who live in the New Territories. The restaurant uses only locally grown vegetables and mostly locally caught fish. (Photo: Veronica Gould Stoddart, USA TODAY)

Just like Cantonese cuisine itself.

Observes Janice: "We have lots of arable land, abundant rice and the sea — the luxury of more choice, compared to Northerners. My parents and grandparents would say, 'Oh, those Szechuanese just use chili because they have to. Or those from Beijing only eat wheat.' ... Cantonese are snobbish about our food." Based on the past three days, I'll drink a cup of Oolong to that.

Little Adventures in Hong Kong charges [by the] hour for custom tours of a minimum of four hours for up to three people. Meals and transportation are extra. littleadventuresinhongkong.com

