

EAST BAY MONTHLY
Real Food: Dim Sumptuous

Associations with *The World of Suzie Wong* and Jackie Chan flicks notwithstanding, Hong Kong means different things to different people. Some go for the bargains on everything from cameras to couture, others for the thumping nightlife and easy access to other parts of Asia. Politically conscious types visit to see how this former British colony is faring since it's 1997 return to China, although technically the city and environs are considered a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the mainland. And Hong Kong is faring quite well, thanks, with a booming economy and travel options to suit every budget.

To a glutton such as myself, however, Hong Kong means dim sum. In a city positively obsessed with eating, dim sum is perhaps Hong Kong's best known and most-loved culinary pastime. Dim sum, which is variously translated as "touching or pointing to the heart," refers to a variety of steamed or fried dumplings, rice flour rolls, and other small savory or sweet snacks. While Westerners have openly embraced dim sum where dumplings are concerned, some traditional dishes such as braised chicken feet (*foong jow*) and steamed beef tripe with black bean and chili sauce (*ngow pahk yeep*) have yet to catch on. The Bay Area, however, is rife with dim sum houses, and customers from all the region's diverse ethnic groups can be seen feasting on this most social of meals.

Although dim sum is Cantonese (regionally now referred to as Gaungzhou) in origin, today it reflects the multi-regional influences of Hunan, Shanghai, Beijing, and other provinces in various ingredients and styles, such as the inclusion of Hunan ham in a pan-fried root vegetable dish such as taro cake. There are over 2,000 types of dim sum. In addition to the aforementioned dumplings and rice flour rolls, there are spring rolls, pan-fried cakes, baked or steamed buns, crepes, steamed rice dishes wrapped in lotus leaves, bite-size meat dishes such as spare ribs or duck feet, soups, or sweet puddings of tofu with sauces ranging from black sesame to mango. Standard dim sum ingredients include dried Chinese mushrooms, sweet lotus seed or bean paste, water chestnuts, bamboo shoots, rice or wheat flour, glutinous rice, Chinese sausage, preserved pork belly, dried shrimp, chives, ginger, garlic, fish, shellfish, poultry, beef, or pork, although the Cantonese are widely known for eating "everything under the sun," so few animal or fish entrails or body parts or fluids are off limits. Blood is commonly used as a thickening and flavoring agent in soups or congees- rice gruels eaten as a breakfast, midday, or late night restorative.

Dim sum is thought to have originated during the Sun Dynasty of 960-1280 AD, when drinking tea at teahouses became a popular custom after a day of labor in the fields. The term *yum cha*, or "to drink tea," came to be synonymous with the supplementation of small snacks, or dim sum. Today, teahouses still abound throughout China, and Hong Kong has it's fair share. These are gathering places where locals can gossip, drink, eat, and relax, although many teahouses also cater to a more upscale clientele, or tourists. Here in the Bay Area, dim sum is beginning to catch on at tea houses as well, such as the

small selection of daily offerings at the well-received Imperial Tea Court in San Francisco's Ferry Building.

Although a variety of teas may be offered, the most common to drink with dim sum include oolong, jasmine, or daffodil tea. A charming tradition exists that is part of formal dining/dim sum etiquette in China, dating back from when the Emperor Qian Long paid a visit to the village of Jiang Nan in the 18th century. Dressed as a commoner to avoid detection, the emperor was impressed by the tea pouring skills of a local waiter (tradition mandating the tea be poured from a considerable height above the cup), and in emulating him, executed a flawless pour. The emperor's subjects, not wanting to expose his identity, developed a subtle form of bowing and kowtowing to the great man: they curled their fingers and knocked on the table with one hand. Today, it is considered good form to perform this action to display thanks and gratitude whenever someone refills your tea cup, which should never be empty during a meal.

Dim sum is traditionally meant to be consumed communally; diners pick what interests them from passing waiters who push carts loaded with bamboo steamers or domed platters- the entire steamer or platter will then be placed upon the table, and waiters will tally up the bill according to how many platters or steamers you accumulate. It is not considered bad form to pick morsels communally from the central plate, although you should place your individual choices into your own bowl or plate to catch any drips, or break apart large items using your chopsticks. Dipping bowls of sweet soy sauce, hot mustard (*guy lath*) and chili sauce (*lath ju yow*) are used communally as well, although it is also common to spoon some condiments onto your plate for personal use. Tea is always the beverage of choice with dim sum.

Joyce Jue, a San Francisco-raised and based cooking instructor of 25 years, is also a food writer and cookbook author specializing in Chinese and Southeast Asian cuisine. She regularly conducts Chinatown tours and teaches classes on dim sum. "One of the things I try to do on my tours is introduce people to the more unusual and delicious types of dim sum that they wouldn't normally try on their own. Steamed, then fried bean curd skin made into spring rolls, fresh rice rolls, turnip cakes, braised duck feet, glutinous rice puffs deep fried and filled with sweet bean paste or chopped pork, mushrooms, and bamboo shoots, shark fin dumplings. The tours are both cultural and culinary walks of Chinatown, but I love dim sum, and want people to see traditional dishes."

Dim Sum, Hong Kong Style

For an authentic teahouse experience in Hong Kong, although perhaps not the best dim sum, 72-year old Luk Yu Teahouse in the city's Central District is considered an historic landmark. Crotchety, white-coated old woman bustle about the small, marble-floored teahouse, carrying battered aluminum trays filled with assorted buns and dumplings around their necks. Over the din of dining Cantonese businessmen and families, ceiling fans lazily circulate and hazy sunlight filters through stained glass windows. Don't expect to know what you're eating, however. During my visit, I was the only Westerner there, and like most dim sum experiences even here in the Bay Area,

selection of dishes comes down to a game of point and choose. My winning pick was a giant, fluffy *cha sui bao*, or steamed bun, stuffed with sweet barbecued pork.

At the elegant Hoi Lee Fat restaurant in the Kowloon Hotel, I experienced a different type of dim sum meal, minus the noise and billowing steam from passing carts and trays. The *har gow*, however, were excellent, with the requisite translucent dough and sweet, briny crunch from the minced shrimp filling. Also excellent were the dim sum from the immensely popular, massive Super Star Seafood Restaurant in Kowloon, known for its whimsical, animal-shaped dumplings.

Super Star offers hands-on dim sum cooking classes by arrangement, and it was here that I learned how to pleat my *har gow* and *sek tau yu* (rockfish) dumplings. The shaping of dim sum dumplings is not only an art form that requires skill and dexterity, but the number and style of pleats or shape are specific to each type of dumpling; in the case of *har gow*, the “shark fin” pleat is said to replicate the shape of a gold ingot. Although my *sek tau yu* tended to resemble brain tumors rather than the goldfish they were meant to represent, the instructor was kind, and they still tasted wonderful; the airy filling redolent of ginger and garlic, the dough tender and whisper-thin.

In Jue’s cooking classes, she, too, tends to stick to more traditional dumplings, which appeal to students, but her primary goal is to teach people to enjoy cooking, as well as the art and tradition behind foods like dim sum. “I like to teach them the way it’s supposed to be, but if it’s not exact, that’s fine. What I’m trying to do is educate my students that there’s more than one brand of soy sauce out there; Kikkoman is Japanese, not Chinese. It’s a process of creating an awareness, people become more attuned to ingredients, but at least if they learn the product exists, I’m not so caught up in the origin.”

My favorite dim sum came from a much-loved Cantonese restaurant chain in Hong Kong called Tai Woo. At the Kowloon location I dined at, our meal began with several dim sum-style dishes, including a sweet, moist, steamed turnip cake (*loh baak gao*) studded with *lop cheong*, or Chinese sausage; and *cheung fun*, delicate, chewy rice noodle sheets rolled around pungent dried shrimp and chives, both accompanied by both peanut and hoisin sauces for dipping. *Cheung fun* can also be stuffed with whole shrimp, beef, or barbecued pork, and is often favored as a breakfast treat, such as the succulent shrimp ones I enjoyed from a food stall at the vibrant Yau Ma Tei market in Kowloon, a not-to-be missed street market filled with everything from produce, meat, and seafood, to vendors preparing sweet dumplings and slicing tofu to order on the spot.

For the adventurous food lover, Hong Kong has no shortage of culinary treasures to enjoy, be they in the back alleys or high end restaurants. Discover them all, or enjoy the experience right here at home.

For dim sum cooking classes, contact the Harbour City Super Star Seafood Restaurant at least one week in advance of your visit, Shop 4101, 4/F Harbour City, 21 Canton Rd., Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon, Hong Kong, Tel. 2116 2618, www.superstarrest.com.hk.

For Joyce Jue's Chinatown Tours and cooking class information at Bay Area cooking schools, email her at juekay@earthlink.net.

For more information on visiting Hong Kong, go to www.discoverhongkong.com.

Local dim sum dining: Be aware that most of the below restaurants only serve dim sum for breakfast and lunch, so call ahead to make sure of service hours.

Tin's Tea House: 701 Webster St., Oakland, 510-832-7661, Tin's Tea House Lounge, 1829 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Walnut Creek, 925-287-8288. The Oakland is an old East Bay favorite; popular sister restaurant in Walnut Creek opened in last year.

Yank Sing: 107 Spear, San Francisco, 415-957-9300. Bustling, efficient, traditional cart service, and tasty dim sum at this SF favorite, located in the atrium of the Rincon Center in the Financial District.

Ton Kiang: 5821 Geary, San Francisco, 415-752-4440. Elegant, with cart service during the day, dim sum menu at night.

Wing Lee Bakery: 503 Clement, San Francisco, 415-668-9481. Ultra-cheap, ultra-good takeaway or dine in in this tiny hole-in-the-wall in the Richmond.

City View Restaurant: 662 Commercial, San Francisco, 415-398-2838. This is Jue's top pick for exposing her Chinatown culinary tour participants to dim sum. "It's on the the edge of being contemporary, but without overdoing it," she says.

New Asia Garden Restaurant: 772 Pacific, San Francisco, 415-391-6666. One of Jue's favorites, this is a typically loud, frenetic, massive Hong Kong-style banquet restaurant. Owned and operated by a fourth generation Chinese family, they have traditional cart service.

Recipes

All Asian ingredients and equipment can be found at ethnic markets and speciality food stores.

Loh Baak Gau (Pan-fried Radish Pudding Cakes)

recipe from *Asian Appetizers*, by Joyce Jue, (Harlow & Ratner, c.1998, \$16.95)

Makes about 16 squares

One of Jue's favorite Chinese tea-house specialties is *Loh Baak Gau*, or pan-fried radish pudding cake. The inside is pudding-like and smooth, with little radish lumps, while the outside is crusty. Chinese radish looks like a white carrot and is best known by its Japanese name, *daikon*.

4 dried Chinese black mushrooms
one quarter cup dried shrimp (preferably tiny quarter-inch shrimp)
one and a quarter pounds Chinese white radish
1 cup chicken stock
1 Chinese sausage, chopped or ½ cup diced Chinese barbecued pork
2 green onions, chopped
one and a half teaspoons sugar
1 teaspoon salt
big pinch of white pepper
one and a half cups rice flour
peanut oil for pan-frying
Chinese mustard and light soy sauce for dipping

In two separate bowls, cover the mushrooms and shrimp with warm water for 20 minutes. When the mushrooms are soft and pliable, remove and squeeze out the excess water from the mushrooms. Cut off and discard the stems. Chop the caps and set aside. Drain the soaked shrimp and reserve 1/3 cup of the liquid. If large shrimp, finely chop and set aside.

Peel and coarsely grate the radish, about 4 cups. In a saucepan, combine the radish, chicken stock and shrimp soaking liquid, cover and simmer for 10 to 12 minutes or until tender. Add the chopped mushrooms, shrimp, sausage, green onions, sugar, salt and white pepper. Mix together thoroughly. When cool. Add the rice flour; stir to make a thick batter. Lightly oil the bottom and sides of 8-inch square cake pan. (Round works too.) Pour the radish pudding into the pan. Tap the pan gently on the counter to release air bubbles. Evenly smooth out the mixture with a spreader.

Set up a wok for steaming. Steam the radish pudding over medium-high heat for 1 hour or until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. While steaming, check the water level frequently and if needed, replenish with hot water. Let the pudding cool, then turn it out on to a cutting board. Cut into 2- x 3-inch squares.

Preheat a frying pan over medium-high heat. Add a thin film of oil. When hot, put the squares in the hot pan; pan-fry until lightly crisp and browned, about 3 minutes. Turn over and brown the other side. Serve with soy sauce and Chinese mustard.

Har Gow (Shrimp Dumplings)

Rather than using a rolling pin to flatten the dough for the dumplings, use the flat side of a cleaver to flatten the dough balls into a circle. It will take a bit of practice, but this technique will give you dough with the requisite thinness. The water used for the dough needs to be boiling in order to achieve the translucent quality prized in dim sum dumplings.

Recipe courtesy of *Super Star Seafood Restaurant*, Harbour City, Tsim Sha Tsui, Kowloon, Hong Kong

Makes 80 pieces

Dough

21 oz or 2 c. plus 5 oz. AP flour plus a pinch of potato starch

one and a third c. boiling water

Filling

One and a half lb. shelled shrimp, chopped medium fine- there should still be some small chunks

Three and half oz. pork fat or olive oil

One and a half t. salt

scant 2 t. powdered chicken bouillon

1 T. sugar

water and corn starch, mixed into a slurry (to seal dumplings)

In a bowl, mix the flour and hot water to form a dough.

In a separate bowl, mix the chopped shrimp until it becomes sticky and forms a paste. Add pork fat or olive oil and seasonings, and mix well.

Roll the dough into a rope about the thickness of a forefinger into small balls, about the size of a half dollar. With the flat side of a cleaver, flatten the balls until they are approximately the thickness of a crepe, and place a tablespoon of filling inside each. Wet the edges of each dumping with a small amount of corn starch slurry, and pinch dumplings closed, or use a pastry crimper. When finished, steam dumplings in batches in a bamboo steamer for four minutes. Serve immediately with dishes of soy sauce, chili paste, and hot mustard.

Scallion Pancakes

Recipe courtesy of *Dim Sum: The Art of Chinese Tea Lunch*, by Ellen Leong Blonder, (Clarkson Potter, c. 2002, \$25.00).

Makes 6 pancakes

One and a half cups AP flour, plus additional for dusting
One half cup boiling water
Two tablespoons cold water
4 to 6 scallions, white and green parts, thinly sliced
1 tablespoon vegetable shortening
salt
2 to 4 tablespoons peanut oil

Sift flour into a large bowl. Stir in the boiling water to blend, then add cold water. Knead dough on a lightly floured surface for four to five minutes, until firm and elastic. Shape dough into a ball, dust with flour, cover with plastic wrap, and let rest for 30 minutes.

Preheat oven to 200 degrees. Cover a baking sheet with paper towels and set aside.

Divide dough and scallions into six equal portions. On a lightly floured surface, roll out each piece into a seven and a half inch circle, spread with half a teaspoon of vegetable shortening, and sprinkle with one portion of the scallions to within a quarter-inch of the edge of each circle, and lightly press into the dough. Fold the dough circle into thirds, pinch ends closed, then roll up, jelly-roll fashion. Coil edges up into a circle, and flatten slightly into a five-inch circle. Repeat procedure with remaining ingredients

Heat nonstick skillet over medium-high heat, using one teaspoon of peanut oil per pancake. Cook pancakes one at a time, for two to three minutes per side or until golden. Serve hot.

*You may substitute toasted sesame or hot chili oil for the vegetable shortening.

Ha Choy Fun (Rice Flour Rolls with Shrimp)

Recipe courtesy of *Dim Sum: The Art of Chinese Tea Lunch*, by Ellen Leong Blonder, (Clarkson Potter, c. 2002, \$25.00).

Makes 3, 8 to 9-inch squares

*note you will need to have two separate water baths for this recipe; one to steam pancakes in, and one to cool down steamed pancakes.

Three-quarters cup rice flour (not glutinous rice flour)
1 tablespoon tapioca starch
one quarter teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon peanut oil
one half cup boiling water
approximately 21 peeled, deveined, cooked shrimp
chopped scallions for garnish
Oil nonstick 8 to 9-inch-square baking pan. Fill a separate roasting pan large enough to

accommodate baking pan with cold water until it is three-quarters full. You will need a lid large enough to cover oiled baking pan, or use a baking sheet or aluminum foil, in order to form a tight cover to steam the rice flour rolls.

In medium bowl, combine rice flour, tapioca starch, salt, and peanut oil. Add three quarters cup of cold water, and stir until smooth. Stir in boiling water and stir until smooth.

Bring water in roasting pan to a boil, then reduce to simmer. Float oiled baking pan in roasting pan to heat through, then ladle batter evenly into oiled pan, tilting to spread batter evenly. Cover baking pan and steam for three to four minutes. Transfer steamed pancakes to a baking pan set in a cold water bath.

Use a wide, flat spatula to loosen rice sheets from edge of baking pan,

To serve, place six or seven peeled, deveined, cooked shrimp on each rice sheet, then roll up loosely into a log and transfer to a plate. Continue to re-oil and prepare remaining pancakes as needed. Garnish shrimp rolls with chopped scallions and serve with sweet soy sauce and chili sauce on the side. Serve immediately.

Sweet Soy Sauce

Recipe courtesy of *Dim Sum: The Art of Chinese Tea Lunch*, by Ellen Leong Blonder, (Clarkson Potter, c. 2002, \$25.00).

makes one-third cup

2 tablespoons Chinese soy sauce
1 tablespoon sugar
2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil
2 teaspoons scallions, white and green parts, thinly sliced

In a small saucepan, combine all ingredients but scallions, and heat over low for one and a half minutes. Remove from heat, place in small bowl, and add scallions. Keep in refrigerator for up to two weeks, tightly covered.

Chili Oil

Recipe courtesy of *Dim Sum: The Art of Chinese Tea Lunch*, by Ellen Leong Blonder, (Clarkson Potter, c. 2002, \$25.00).

makes three-quarters cup

three quarters cup peanut oil
8-12 dried, red chiles with seeds, crumbled
1 garlic clove, peeled

In a small saucepan, heat oil for two and a half to three minutes over medium heat. Add chiles and garlic, and cook for one minute, or until garlic sizzles and begins to color. Remove from heat immediately, and allow to cool. Transfer to clean, airtight jar for two to three days, then discard garlic. Keep for up to two weeks.