

Hong Kong's Food Culture

1. Introduction

Hong Kong's cuisine is not only an exotic fusion of Eastern and Western flavours, but is also a great variety of creative culinary delights with local characteristics, making the place a world renowned Gourmet Paradise.

Changing from simple stomach-filing food and drinks to gourmet enjoyment, from humble eateries to superb restaurants and from local Chinese tastes to exotic delicacies, Hong Kong's food culture has actually reflected the economic, social and livelihood changes that Hong Kong has undergone over the past hundred and more years. The success or otherwise of restaurants, the popularity of cuisines and the change of taste have not only marked the different expectations of food and drinks at different times, but have also become a collective memory of Hong Kong people. The essay aims at illustrating the change of Hong Kong's food culture over the past one hundred years.

2. From Self-sufficiency to Import Dependence

Records show that Hong Kong produced rice as early as in the 17th century. Until the mid-20th century, rice remained the primary agricultural product in Hong Kong. However, with the growth in population and a heavier demand on food, the government actively promoted vegetable farming. Livestock farming also developed quickly owing to increased demand.

Fishery has a long history in Hong Kong. Fishermen mostly worked in the neighbouring waters and along the southeastern shorelines of China. They also raised marine fish using floating net-pens, commonly known as "fish rafts". In Deep Bay in the northwestern part of the New Territories, oyster farming areas were found there as early as in the 19th century. Fish ponds also sprung up in the 1960s.

With the rapid development in Hong Kong over the past few decades, paddy fields for growing rice for sale are nowhere to be seen today and 90% of the fish catch is no longer from local waters. Oyster farming has dwindled and fish ponds have been replaced by high-rises. Rice, vegetables, livestock and fish now come mostly from imports. To have a taste of agricultural and fishery products genuinely "made in Hong Kong" is like finding a needle in a haystack.

3. The Change of Food Supply

Having been produced locally or imported from outside, food is transported to wholesalers before being marketed to retailers and subsequently sold to consumers in Hong Kong.

Wholesale vegetable markets under the "Vegetable Marketing Organization" coordinate wholesale marketing of locally-produced and imported vegetables while wholesale fish markets under the "Fish Marketing Organization" handle all the wholesaling of fresh marine fish. Other fresh and live, frozen, canned, packaged food are also distributed from producers or importers to wholesale markets or corporations.

To maintain a reasonable reserve of white rice at a steady price, a Rice Control Scheme

was implemented in Hong Kong in 1955. In 2003, the government relaxed its control and abolished any import quota on rice, showing that white rice is no longer the staple food, and that eating habits and tastes have undergone continual changes.

In the past, people used to go to the wet markets for goods such as vegetables, meat and fresh fish. Grocers on the other hand provided dry goods such as canned food, oil, rice and seasonings. Stores sold snacks, cigarettes, liquors and soft drinks. Nowadays, supermarkets provide the public with a one-stop purchase service that is efficient and convenient. With the redevelopment of old districts and estates, grocers and stalls are gradually disappearing.

4. Food Industries

The food industries prospered in the early 20th century, producing such foodstuffs as sauce, preserved fruits, assorted cakes and soda water.

Sauce products included soy sauce, fish sauce, oyster sauce, shrimp sauce, etc. Amoy, Oriental, Tung Chun and Lee Seng Heng were some of the famous manufacturers at the time. Their manufacturing plants were mainly located in Mong Kok, Aberdeen and Cheung Chau. In the 1950s, they were mainly found in Tsuen Wan.

Preserved fruits were mainly for domestic consumption before the 1950s, but exported later to the United Kingdom, the United States, Southeast Asia, etc. Famous producers included Man Lung, Tsai Lung, Wong Wing Kee and Hing Ah.

Cake making has a long history in Hong Kong. Tea houses such as Dor Nam, Tak Wan and Sheung Hei Lau used to bake their own assorted Chinese cakes for sale in their restaurants. Other long established bakeries included Dai Tung, Wing Wah, Hang Heung and Kee Wah. Hong Kong being a place where East meets West, bread, western cakes and biscuits have been on the market since the early days. Early famous manufacturers included M.Y. San & Co. Inc. and Chun Hing. Later there were Kapok, Garden, Pacific and On Lok Yuen.

The earliest soda water factory in Hong Kong was set up by a British, Dr. Watsons, in 1875. Dakin Soda Water Factory also produced soda water almost at the same time. China On Lok Soda Water Co. Ltd. was set up in 1904. In the 1950s, major local soft drinks producers included Chung Wah, Asia and Schweppes.



Hing Ah Co. Ltd.
1958
1999.12.2

5. Eateries Undergoing Transformation

i. Eating on the Street

Since the early days of Hong Kong, there were in the streets and alleys of Central and Sheung Wan districts food stalls selling congee, noodles, rice, preserved fruits, Chinese cakes and pastries, etc.

The standard of living was low in the early 20th century, and food stalls on the streets were very popular. Wooden boxes, stalls and awnings made up one “food street” after another.

From the post-war period, food stalls on the streets mushroomed. In order to regulate the operation of such stalls, the government introduced a licensing system, allowing stall operators to sell cooked food in the form of “Dai Pai Dong” (licensed stalls). Such licensed stalls appeared in great numbers in districts like Central, Sheung Wan, Wanchai, Yaumatei and Shamshuipo.

Talking of food stalls on the streets, “Dai Tat Dei Bazaar”, or “Ordinary People’s Nightclub”, must also be mentioned. At the end of the 19th century, it first appeared along Possession Point in Sheung Wan, forming an area of entertainment for the common folks. Later, it moved to Sheung Wan Pier. There also appeared a Kowloon counterpart in Temple Street of Yaumatei.

In 1956, the government stopped issuing new “Dai Pai Dong” licence and forbade licence transfer. Until recent years, the policy has been loosened in some districts. In the 1970s, to improve cleanliness and hygiene, cooked food centres were built and itinerant hawkers were not allowed to sell cooked food on the streets. “Dai Tat Dei Bazaar” of Sheung Wan also came to an end because of land development. Gradually, both “Dai Pai Dong” and food stalls on the streets faded out and sank into oblivion.

Roadside Food Stalls

During the first half of the 20th century, itinerant cooked food hawkers were seen everywhere in streets and alleys. From the 1960s onwards, they clustered outside public housing estates, cinemas, swimming pools, amusement parks and schools, wherever there were crowds. In earlier times, the snacks they sold included pickled fruits, preserved fruits, peanuts and even “fried beetle-like insects”. Chinese puddings, fish balls, hot sugarcane, ox offal and candy floss were some other popular food items on sale.

Some of the food and snacks sold by itinerant hawkers in the old days are now served in decent restaurants, forming part of their delicacies, or are sold in shops. This shows that snacks sold by itinerant hawkers have a certain level of market demand in Hong Kong.

Dai Pai Dong

A “Dai Pai Dong” is a kind of cooked food stall operated in streets and alleys. It is said that with their licences larger than any other hawker licences and the stalls being packed side by side forming a row of stalls along the streets, people call them “Dai Pai Dong”. (The word

“Pai” is a transliteration of two Chinese homophones meaning a “licence” or a “row”.)

“Dai Pai Dong” food stalls were very popular in the post-war years, providing food and drinks to the common folks at affordable prices. As the stalls had to move from one place to another, they were all fitted with large iron wheels. In earlier times, food stalls were made of wooden materials, which were later replaced by thin zinc plates during the 1960s and 1970s.

Nowadays, isolated “Dai Pai Dong” food stalls can only be found in districts like Central, Shamshuipo and Tai Hang, where we can still experience the distinctive ambience of such food stalls.



“Dai Pai Dong”
1920s to 1950s
1998.106.20



“Dai Pai Dong”
1950s to 1960s
2001.21.430

“Dai Tat Dei” Bazaar

“Dai Tat Dei” literally means a large piece of land. The earliest “Dai Tat Dei” Bazaar was found near Possession Point in Sheung Wan, but was later relocated to the vicinity of the piers in Sheung Wan where there was enough space to accommodate several hundreds of stalls. Similar kinds of mobile stalls could also be found in Temple Street in Yau Ma Tei, which could be regarded as the Kowloon “Dai Tat Dei” Bazaar.

At sunset everyday, cooked food stalls and other stalls started operation in the Bazaar until late into the night. The cooked food stalls were primitively furnished with long planks of wood placed on wooden boxes and a few stools at the side for customers to sit and take a hearty meal.

A wide variety of food was served, including fried clams, marine snails, Chinese hot pot, sweet soup, grass jelly and noodles. Apart from food, there were also street-performances. Hence, “Dai Tat Dei” Bazaar, the place where the common folks went for food, entertainment and leisure, was a genuine “Ordinary People’s Nightclub” and a tourist attraction.

Even though once the new “Dai Tat Dei” Bazaar has been set up, its mode of operation is different. The old “Dai Tat Dei” has become a memory of the Hong Kong people.



Roadside food stalls at “Ordinary People’s Nightclub”
1950s to 1960s
2001.21.64

ii. Tea and Banquet

Tea houses were the place for tea and *dim sum* while Chinese restaurants were for banquets where guests were treated. Famous tea houses of the early 20th century included Ko Sing, Luk Yu, Lin Heung and Dor Nam, while Tai Sam Yuen, Kam Ling and Heung Kong were well-known Chinese restaurants.

Between the 1930s and the 1940s, tea houses and Chinese restaurants prospered. Starting business during that time were tea houses such as Sheung Hei, Tak Nam, Lung Fung, Bun Sam, Yau Nam and Tak Yu, and Chinese restaurants such as Kam Lung, Ngan Lung and Kin Kwok.

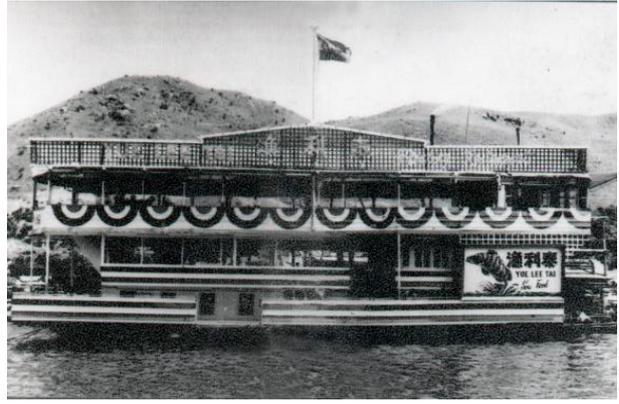
After the war, Chinese restaurants extended their business to include serving lunch, which was further extended to serve morning tea as well from the 1960s onwards. The distinction between tea houses and Chinese restaurants has become blurred.

The influx of immigrants after the war provided the then non-Cantonese and Hakka restaurants with more scope for development. Three Six Nine, Lao Ching Hing, Wing Lai Yuen and Tsui King Lau became typical non-Cantonese and Hakka restaurants. A floating restaurant specializing in seafood was also opened in Aberdeen at that time. Seafood boats of the first generation included Yue Lee Tai, Tai Pak and Fuk Seng. In the 1960s, the Sea Palace started business. In 1978, the Jumbo was also born, which has since become a landmark and a tourist hot spot in Aberdeen.

Owing to urban development, traditional tea houses and Chinese restaurants have been demolished one after another. In the 1990s, the closure of Dor Nam and Sheung Hei Lau marked the end of an era for traditional tea houses.



Ko Sing Tea House
1958
1993.52.8



Yue Lee Tai seafood boat
1953
2003.1.1

Tea Houses

In the early days only tea houses with two storeys or more were called big tea houses, with smaller and more humble ones known merely as tea houses, tea huts or tea rooms. Since neither air-conditioning nor fans were available, it was more comfortable upstairs and the place was therefore referred to as the elegant chamber, where tea price was higher. There was therefore the saying, “With money you go upstairs, with no money you stay on the ground”!

Customers who went to tea houses were all male at that time, which explains why tea houses bore such patriarchal names as “Tim Nam”, “Dor Nam” and “Tak Nam”, conveying their wish for “more males”, “many males” and “getting males” as customers. In the early days, tea houses served morning tea and lunch only. They held no evening banquets and provided merely tea and a few kinds of *dim sum*. After the 1930s, *dim sum* came in a much wider range of varieties, including buns, dumplings, pasties, crisps, etc. They came to be called “weekly delights”, as new delicacies were launched on a regular basis.

“Hong Kong-style tea house going” has not only become part of the Hong Kong culture, its impacts are felt far and wide on the mainland of China and in Taiwan, Japan, the United States, Britain, Canada, etc.



Serving utensils of Dor Nam Tea House
1950s



Cake box of Lin Heung Lau
1930s to 1950s
2003.28.6

Chinese Restaurants

Chinese restaurants in Hong Kong have its roots in Guangzhou (then known as Canton). In fact, some operators of restaurants in Hong Kong came from Guangzhou. From mid to late 19th century, most Chinese restaurants were found in the area around Possession Point of Sheung Wan. After 1903, the red-light district having been relocated to Shek Tong Tsui, many Chinese restaurants started operation there.

Chinese restaurants were places for high officials of rich merchants to hold feasts in the evenings, where “four big and four small” dishes were usually served as the “first round” followed by expensive gourmet delights known as the “eight big and eight small” dishes.

After the war, Chinese restaurants began to serve lunch as well. From the 1960s onwards, many also served morning tea. In order to boost income, many Chinese restaurants even provided afternoon tea after the 1990s.

Undergoing changes since the late 19th century, Chinese restaurants have witnessed the development of Hong Kong’s food culture.

iii. The Story of Western Meals

Western meals emerged in 1842 when Hong Kong became a British colony. Most Western-style restaurants were found in high-class hotels and their patrons were mainly foreigners. Other famous Western-style restaurant included Heng Yian Lau Restaurant and Wiseman Restaurant.

By the beginning of the 20th century, there were already quite a number of Western-style restaurants in Hong Kong catering to upper-class Chinese residents. There were Wah Lok Yuen, Wellington Café and M.Y. San & Co. Inc. Restaurant. At the same time, many sorbet cafés began operating in Central and Sheung Wan. On Lok Yuen, which sold highly popular soft drinks, ice-cream, bread and pastries, was the most famous.

In the late 1930s, the famous Tai Ping Koon Restaurant moved from the then Canton to Hong Kong. After the war, Western-style restaurants sprang up in various districts. Russian cuisine also came to get a slice of the cake, with Queen’s Café, Cherkoff Restaurant and Cockerel Restaurant among the most successful. After the 1950s, restaurants specializing in South-east Asian food also entered the market.

Tea cafés (Cha Chaan Teng) were derived from Western-style restaurants. In 1949, there was a tea café called the Grand Restaurant in Central. After the war, more and more tea cafés and sorbet cafés were to be found all over the territory.

Today, Western-style restaurants in Hong Kong are no longer confined to English restaurants. Eateries serving different cuisines like French, Italian and Spanish are common, while tea cafés can be found anywhere in the city.

From Sorbet Café to Tea Café

Sorbet café (Yam Bing Shut) and tea café (Cha Chaan Teng) were localized Western-style restaurants which charged less than the high-class Western-style restaurants, and were therefore more affordable to ordinary people.

In the early 20th century, there were many “sorbet café” around Central and Sheung Wan, selling beverages, soft drinks, bread and pastries to mainly lower and middle income Chinese residents.

After the 1950s, those eateries were often simply called “bing shut” (ice cafés) or “bing ting” (ice restaurant). They could be found anywhere in Kowloon or on Hong Kong Island, especially in the newly completed public housing estates.

Unlike sorbet cafés which sold milk tea, coffee and bread, tea cafés were licensed to sell congee, noodles and rice as well. In the tea cafés, set menus for breakfast, lunch, “ordinary meal” and “fast meal” were always available.

The origin of tea cafés is hard to trace. As early as in 1946, there were already eateries operating in the name of tea café. After the 1960s, tea cafés mushroomed all over the territory. Some sorbet cafés also changed their mode of operation to become tea cafés.

Today, there exist only a dozen or so sorbet cafés in Hong Kong, found usually in some old districts. Tea cafés, however, can be found all over the territory and have become a tourist attraction. The uniqueness of a tea café is evident in its blend of Eastern and Western food served, which are always changed to suit the taste and lifestyle of patrons. The popularity and success of tea café can best reflect Hong Kong people’s resilience and flexibility.



Tea café
1983
2003.4.23



Cake box of tea café
2002
2002.28.11

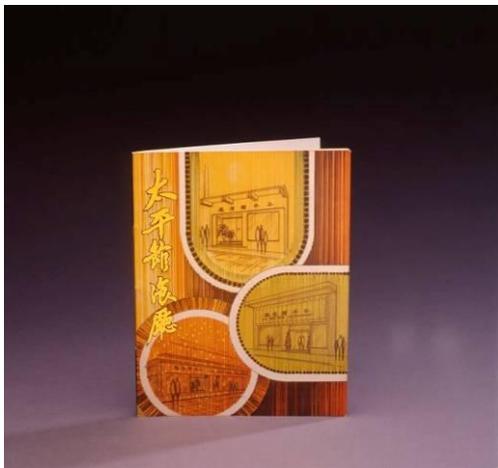
Western Style Restaurants

When Western restaurants first came to Hong Kong, they were expensive and classy, patronized mostly by foreigners. By the early 20th century, there were already Western restaurants meant for Chinese residents, which, though not as expensive as those in high-class hotels, were not affordable places for the general public to go.

When Western food first landed in Guangdong and Shanghai as early as in the late 18th century, it was known as “Western food in soy sauce” and “Shanghaiese foreign cuisine”. “Western food in soy sauce” meant that the Western dishes were cooked in the Cantonese or local ways with local ingredients. Seasonings were mainly soy sauce, sugar and ginger. Shanghaiese called Western food “foreign cuisine”. In the early days, Chinese operated Western restaurants in Hong Kong served “stewed ox tripe” and “chicken liver rice”, which were dishes modified to suit the Chinese taste.

In the late 1930s, Guangzhou’s Tai Ping Koon started their business in Hong Kong. After the Second World War, Queen’s Café in Shanghai also moved here, marking the coming on stage of “Western food in soy sauce” and “Shanghaiese foreign cuisine” in Hong Kong.

Today, Western restaurants remain an important kind of eateries in Hong Kong. But how many of them are serving authentic Western food?



Menu of Tai Ping Koon Restaurant
1970s
1999.8.1



Serving utensils of Tai Ping Koon Restaurant
1960s

6. Fast Food Culture

There used to be caterers that specialized in delivering meals to office and factory workers. With subsequent economic development and the faster pace of life, take-out and fast food business began to take root. In 1968, Café de Coral became the first local fast food company to start its business. In the early 1970s, Maxim’s and Fairwood came to the market one after the other. Kentucky, the first American fast food restaurant in Hong Kong, made its landing in 1973 and was to return some years later. In 1975, McDonald’s, the American fast food chain, began setting up outlets in Hong Kong. Since then, American and local fast food restaurants have made flourishing development along with an accelerated rhythm of life. For many Hong Kong people, taking fast food just to fill the stomach has become a part of their life.

Other fast food items such as instant noodle and pizza are also widely popular. Many traditional food items have begun to be made like instant food. Dim sum, dumplings (wonton), desserts, congee and rice are prepared in factories and transported to supermarkets

and convenience stores for sale.

7. Festival Food

To celebrate Lunar New Year, the older generations often like to make at home such snacks as deep fried dumplings in the shape of a horn, rice flour puddings and pastries. On New Year's Eve, all members of the family would dine together. Glutinous rice dumplings wrapped up in reed leaves are prepared to celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival, while moon cakes are the essential food for the Mid-Autumn Festival.

In the New Territories, relatively more such traditional practices are still being followed. The festive snacks they make are full of characteristics. On Lunar New Year's Eve, fried rice cakes are made at home. On the first month of the Lunar calendar, villagers celebrate the birth of baby boys. Some villages even prepare "lantern congee" and "lantern wine" and people from the same village are invited to join the celebrations.

In the New Territories, people get together and have "basin meals" on festive occasions, or when activities in connection with village affairs or ancestral worship are held. A great variety of food is placed in a large container. Villagers would gather inside the ancestral hall or on the hillside, where they sit on the ground, and eat together to their hearts' content.

During the Bun Festival (Tai Ping Ching Chiu Festival) on Cheung Chau Island, hundreds of thousands of steamed buns are prepared. Some of them are sold in shops while others are piled up to form "bun mountains" on the site where worship rituals take place. After the ritual, the buns are distributed to the villagers.

The festive atmosphere today is not as strong as before. But the distinctive food and snacks still remain an attraction to local and foreign visitors.

8. Food Extravaganza

There are now similar kinds of eateries clustering together in the same area, forming "gourmet zones" or "food streets". In Central, there are the renowned bar area "Lan Kwai Fong" and the "SoHo" (South of Hollywood Road) area of international cuisines. The sea front area along Stanley Main Street is famous for its alfresco cafés and bars, while Aberdeen, Lamma Island, Cheung Chau, Sai Kung and Lei Yue Mun are celebrated for their sea food. Kowloon City, home to many restaurants specializing in serving Thai and Chaozhou cuisines, is also a unique gourmet area.

In Hong Kong, the trend in food and drinks changes rapidly, with 'jumping on the bandwagon' being its most distinct feature. Japanese *ramen* noodles or Taiwanese drinks could be very popular at one time, and a short while later it could be Portuguese egg tarts or Macanese pork cutlet buns that are selling like hot cakes.

In recent years, a special kind of eatery known as "See Fong Choy" (private home cuisine) has mushroomed in Hong Kong. They are commonly operated in private flats upstairs in a building and customers have to book in advance. The food served in such "restaurants" is uncommon and the uniqueness of the chefs is their selling point.

9. Small Food Houses

Besides normal meals, many people in Hong Kong like to take a little extra snacks. There is a great variety of congees, rice noodles, noodles and desserts. Wontons with shrimp filling and *Fung Shing* meat dumplings are the attractions of noodle shops. Noodles used to be made by beating the flour with a long “bamboo stick”, and smaller wontons were always preferred. To attract customers, noodle shops today boast of wontons as large as a table-tennis ball. As for noodles, they are now produced by machines. “Wooden cart noodles” popular in recent years have originated from roadside noodle hawkers selling fried pigskin and fish balls in wooden carts. Yuk Yip Dessert, Gung Wo Bean Curb and Yuen Kee are among the names of the long-established shops selling sweet soups. Desserts have now become a kind of everyday refreshments for many, and there are specialized shops serving only desserts.

From the 19th to the early 20th century, as medical service was not fully developed, traditional herbal drinks such as “Twenty-four flavours”, sugar-cane juice, “Five-flower Tea” and “Fo Ma Yan” (fried marijuana seed) were the medicated drinks consumed on a daily basis. It was said that drinking herbal tea could prevent and treat various ailments. Such names as Wong Lo Kut, Wui Chun Tong and Chun Wo Tong were among the renowned herbal shops in those days. Following the broadcast of the “Rediffusion” radio and TV, many people liked to patronize herbal drink shops where they could listen to radio broadcast or watch television programmes while sipping their herbal tea. In those days, herbal drink shops served not only as a place for having herbal drinks, but also a place to relax and be entertained.



Tsang On Tong herbal teapot
1930s to 1960s
2007.2.1

10. Hunger Satisfied

In the early days, eating was for most people simply to satisfy their hunger. Whether the food cooked at domestic kitchens or restaurants was special or not, what the people concerned most was that everybody could get a share to fill the stomach.

Before the war, different types of eateries had their regular pools of customers. People of the upper class mostly dined at Chinese or Western restaurants that served good food while the general public dined at the more humble “Yi Lei Kwun” (cheaper restaurants), sorbet

cafés, Dai Pai Dong and roadside stalls. Different eateries had different hours and modes of operation.

From the late 1960s onwards, Hong Kong's economy boomed and people became more affluent, creating a new source of customers for different types of eateries. Under competition, distinction was blurred and the restaurants underwent constant adaptation and developed local characteristics. The food served at tea cafés, for example, is a blend of Chinese, Western and Japanese elements. However, many local eating habits are neither Chinese nor Western. Examples include eating "rice dishes" with knife and fork and chatting aloud at the dining table. They have become a part of the local food culture, as well as a local way of life.