

EATING

top picks

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A chef from Hong Kong planted the city firmly in the world's culinary firmament by becoming the first ever Chinese chef to receive the top ranking of three stars from the début *Michelin Hong Kong and Macau* guide in 2009. The French bible of gastronomy also gave seven restaurants in the city two stars while fourteen received one star. Despite cries about why most of the inspectors were not local Chinese and the bias towards French restaurants, most Hong Kongers were at least a little pleased with the results.

It came as no surprise that the top honour went to the chef of Lung King Heen (p177), a restaurant specialising in Cantonese cooking. Hong Kong's Cantonese cuisine is the best in the world. It's a cuisine known for its obsession with fresh ingredients. Seafood restaurants display tanks full of finned and shelled creatures enjoying their final moments on *terra infirma*. Housewives complained about the 'fridge taste' of previously frozen chicken when Avian Flu forced them to forgo buying live chickens. Cantonese dishes are characterised by delicate and balanced flavours, obtained through restrained use of seasoning, and light-handed cooking techniques such as steaming and quick stir-frying.

In Hong Kong, Cantonese cuisine refers largely to the culinary styles of Guangdong (Canton) province, as well as Chiu Chow (Chaozhou) and Hakka cuisines. Chiu Chow cooking reflects a penchant for seafood and condiments. Deep-fried soft-boned fish comes with tangerine oil, and braised goose is accompanied by a vinegar and garlic dip. Hakka cuisine, known for its saltiness and use of preserved meat, was popular in Hong Kong in the 1960s and '70s. Salt-baked chicken and pork stewed with preserved vegetables fed many hungry families and workers from the city's construction sites.

Though originating in Guangzhou, Cantonese cuisine underwent significant development in Hong Kong. Dim sum, for example, has expanded to include mango pudding, egg tarts and other delicacies. Hong Kong's chefs also pride themselves on innovation. They will seize upon a new ingredient and find ways to use it. For example, asparagus is a vegetable little known in the rest of China, but Hong Kong chefs serve it every day, combining it with baby abalone and olive oil or with caviar and preserved eggs.

In the last half century, Hong Kong has developed into an epicentre of international trade. The lifestyle of its population has become cosmopolitan, and so have the things people eat. In Western dining, hotels play an important role. As it lacks an established culinary institute, Hong Kong has always relied on resource-rich hotel groups to bring in trained non-Chinese, although such dependence has decreased with the development of many stand-alone restaurants.

It is hard to have a conversation in Hong Kong without mentioning food. Many greet each other by asking, 'Láy sik-jó faan may?' (Have you eaten yet?) Dim sum lunch on Sunday is a way of life for many families, and the thickness of the dumpling skin and the colour of the green vegetable are all part of the discussion. Office workers debate the choices of the *Michelin Hong Kong and Macau* guide, while armchair gourmands post hundreds, even thousands, of restaurant reviews on www.openrice.com, a foodies' website. Food is so much more than a necessity in Hong Kong. It's a tangible and tantalising piece of its culture, a means through which a people who have had little say in the larger matters of their home and future explore the world and express themselves.

HISTORY & CULTURE

The modern history of Hong Kong begins with the First Opium War (p22), but the roots of its cuisine go much further back. The local inhabitants who dwelled here ate what they could herd and grow or catch from the sea. Certain ancient food traditions from these peoples remain, most notably walled village cuisine (see the 'Dah Wing Wah' boxed text

on p200), including the 'basin feast' (*poon choy*). The story has it that the last emperor of the southern Song dynasty (AD 1127–1279), fleeing from the Mongols, retreated to a walled village in Hong Kong with his entourage. The villagers, lacking decent crockery, piled all kinds of food into a large basin to serve the royal guests (see Basin Feast, [opposite](#)). *Poon choy* has become a dish for festive occasions in the New Territories ever since.