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CONTENTS



6 Craft Beer: a Passion, Not a Fashion

The number of breweries, and pubs offering their product, has been growing rapidly.

By Timothy Ferry

10 Exploring Taipei's Speakeasies

The drink of choice is usually Japanese whiskey, sometimes in innovative cocktails.

By Matthew Fulco

16 On the Hunt for Chou Doufu in London

After around two decades in Taiwan, a TOPICS contributor returned to live in the UK. Within weeks, he was missing “three-cups” slow cooking, kongxin cai, and perhaps most of all, stinky tofu.

By Mark Caltonhill



20 From Night Market Treats to Food Court Fine Dining

The evolution of Taiwan's mass market eating establishments has speeded up over the past decade to meet developing tastes and higher expectations.

By Jules Quartly



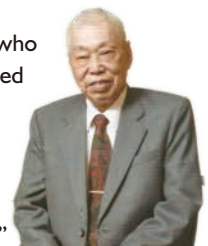
24 Two Ends of the Celebrity Chef Spectrum

Famous foreign personalities like Jamie Oliver bring business expertise, but in the long run it is local master chefs like André Chiang who will carry the torch.

By Jules Quartly

Mourning the Passing of Chef Peng

Peng Chang-kuei, the innovative master chef and restaurateur who invented General Tso's Chicken and other dishes now considered (at least outside China) as staples of modern Hunan cooking, died Nov. 30 in Taipei at the age of 98. Peng and his cuisine were featured twice in TOPICS' Wine & Dine editions – in the 2007 report “Dining Spots That Have Met the Test of Time” and last year's “General Tso's Chicken – No Search Necessary.”



28 Taiwan's Growing Appetite for Beef

The steakhouse market has moved upmarket with the arrival of some new restaurants.

By Matthew Fulco



32 Despite Controlled Heat, Sichuan Cuisine Burns Bright in Taipei

Chefs have toned down the spiciness to accommodate local taste.

By Matthew Fulco

37 Islamic Flavors Blending Well in Taipei

More Muslim tourists means more demand for *halal*-certified restaurants.

By Scott Weaver

42 Getting a Handle on the Taiwanese Hamburger

The humble *guabao* is now gaining popularity among food lovers on other continents.

By Steven Crook and Katy Hui-Wen Hung



46 Fungus Among Us

Taiwan has a long history of growing a wide variety of mushrooms, and was once a major exporter.

By Steven Crook and Katy Hui-Wen Hung

COVER SPONSOR



Fubon Financial Holdings Overview

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PHOTO: 55TH STREET BREWERY

CRAFT BEER: A PASSION, NOT A FASHION

The number of breweries, and pubs offering their product, has been growing rapidly.

BY TIMOTHY FERRY

Only a few years ago finding craft beer in Taipei was a bit of a challenge. Only a handful of bars had them in stock, and even fewer offered craft beer brewed in Taiwan.

Nowadays, you could hardly throw a rock in Taipei without knocking over someone's Cucumber Islander Sour, Pumpkin Spice Ale, or Munich Dunkel. The business of craft beer – beer brewed in small batches by independent brewers – is booming in Taiwan, with new breweries, brewpubs, and bars continuing to open. At last count, more than 25 independent breweries were operating on the island.

“There’s a lot of beer entering Taiwan

right now, incredible amounts being imported and being made here,” says Mark Poppelwell, founder of BeerGeek Micropub Taipei, who has been involved in the local craft beer market for the past five years as both a bar owner and distributor.

Kai Strohbecke, a senior executive at a leading international technology firm who did an in-depth analysis of the craft beer market in Taiwan for his dual-degree Executive MBA with Beijing’s Tsinghua University and international business school INSEAD, observed in his thesis that the “local beer market is at a tipping point, and craft beer will soon be a significant and highly attractive segment

of the local beer market.”

Comparing the current market in Taiwan to the situation in the United States in the 1980s, Strohbecke noted that in Taiwan, a small but growing legion of homebrewers, microbreweries, and passionate beer connoisseurs is currently reshaping public perceptions of what beer should be, and is gradually but inexorably advancing the cause of fresh, crafted beer over the mass-produced variety.

Yet uncertainty remains as to whether sufficient demand for craft beer exists in this market. “The business side of the craft beer scene is very eager and is taking a lot of giant leaps,” says Poppelwell of

BeerGeek. “We just have to make sure that there are enough customers.”

Beer sales in Taiwan in 2015 amounted to US\$2.5 billion, compared to US\$12.9 billion in South Korea and US\$35.1 billion in Japan, according to market analytics firm Euromonitor. These differences are partially explained by Taiwan’s smaller population, but it may be more significant that drinking-age Taiwanese adults drank around 25 liters per capita in 2015, compared to over 50 liters for Koreans and nearly 60 liters for Japanese. Even Chinese out-drink the Taiwanese, exceeding 40 liters per capita in 2015.

Beer prices in Taiwan are average for the region, around NT\$150-200 (about US\$5) per pint/500ml, roughly equivalent to prices in South Korea and Japan, although far lower than Hong Kong’s average of US\$7 or Singapore’s US\$14. Modest prices and moderate beer drinking result in annual per capita expenditures of only around US\$100 in Taiwan, compared to over US\$300 in South Korea and nearly US\$400 in Japan. The high prices in Hong Kong and Singapore, where annual per capita consumption mirrors Taiwan, bring annual expenditures to US\$250 and nearly US\$400, respectively.

In the United States, by contrast, consumers drank over 100 liters of beer per capita in 2015, spending around US\$4 per pint, for an annual expenditure of over US\$450.

Despite the small market size, craft brewers find cause for optimism in the declining dominance of Taiwan Beer, produced by the government-owned Taiwan Tobacco and Liquor Corp., combined with forecasts for slight increases in consumption and a growing tolerance for higher prices. (Euromonitor forecasts a rise in average prices to US\$6/500ml by 2020.) Taiwan Beer’s market share has dropped dramatically in just the past few years, falling from nearly 80% in 2009, according to Taiwan’s Ministry of Finance, to what Euromonitor puts at just 63% by volume in 2015.

Big-brewery imports comprise most of the remainder of the market, with Heineken alone commanding some 18%. But high-end imports, including craft beers, as

well as locally made craft beers are rapidly gaining prominence. The craft beer segment is still so small that it doesn’t yet register on Euromonitor’s metrics, which records the category of “Other” as taking a 1.7% Taiwan market share. A 2014 report by the U.S. Foreign Agricultural Service estimates that Taiwan’s craft-beer segment has been growing by about 20% annually in recent years.

Another reason for optimism is that Taiwanese tend to enthusiastically follow international trends and embrace global brands, particularly those from the United States. Craft beer sales continue to surge in the United States, rising 16% alone in 2015, and now account for a 21% share, worth US\$22.3 billion, of the total market, according to the U.S. Brewers’ Association.

This optimism, however, glosses over the very real challenges that any particular brewer or pub owner might face trying to succeed in the market. As Strohecke cautions: “Most current local craft-beer makers have pursued marketing and brand positioning strategies that are not necessarily optimized for sustained success in the market.”

Historical background

Craft beer is not exactly new in Taiwan, dating back to liberalization of the laws in 2002 to open the market to imported beers and independent breweries. Several breweries that started in those early years, including the popular Jolly and Le Blé D’or brewery-restaurant chains and North Taiwan Brewery (NTB), continue to operate.

The initial burst of interest in the market failed to build momentum, but the early entrants paved the way for the current wave by establishing several independent breweries that operate as “contract brewers.” The leap from home brewer to commercial enterprise is expensive, and the existence of contract brewers enabled most of today’s crop of craft brewers to get started without substantial investment in manufacturing capacity. It also helped them get their product into the market quickly, allowing them to concentrate on perfecting their recipes and then on sales and marketing. Among the leading contract brewers are DB Brewery and USB Brewery, both located in Taoyuan.



PHOTO: TIM FERRY

Munich-trained brewer Roland Bloch at his brewery in Bali, New Taipei City.



Highway 11 produces not only craft beer, right, but also meads, left.

PHOTOS: HIGHWAY 11 BREWERY

Brian Curran, owner of Highway 11 bar in Dulan, Taitung, as well as the craft beer brand of the same name, says that “the barriers to entry are pretty high,” noting the stringent regulations governing ventilation, capacity, and waste disposal. “The official equipment that will get you a license to start a brewery – that stuff’s not cheap,” he notes, and the capacity requirements were higher than the demand he anticipated.

Jagger Su, owner of craft beer bar/restaurant bEEru, says that employing a contract brewer allows him to offer more complicated beers likely to be beyond the capability of a novice brewer. Beers come in essentially two types: ales and lagers. Since the invention of beer 5,000 years ago in ancient Sumer (and some suggest even earlier), most beers have been ales, brewed from wild-origin Eurasian yeasts that ferment grains and sugars into the mildly alcoholic drink.

Lagers, which now comprise more than 80% of the global market, weren’t developed until the 16th century in Germany. Despite their poor reputation in the craft-beer scene, lagers are actually more complicated to make, as they are cold-fermented from yeast strains that seem to have originated in the Patagonia region of South America (although that is disputed). Employing the services of a

contract brewer, Su says, allows him to offer two lagers, one of them a Pils or Pilsner (so-called due to the malts that derive from the city of Pilsen in the Czech Republic), along with a more typical craft beer, a pale ale.

Yet employing a contract brewery also has its drawbacks. As Strohecke notes, the variable costs per batch are higher, and the lack of control over the brewing process can lead to issues with quality control. Most crucially, though, owning a craft-beer brand but not a brewery may cast doubt on whether the product is a “real” craft beer. Many of the breweries that started operations by using a contract brewery have since taken the leap to engaging in their own production.

Redpoint, for example, now operates its own brewery in an industrial zone in Taoyuan (breweries are considered industry in Taiwan, and in most cities and counties can only be located in industrial zones). According to Redpoint co-founder Spencer Jemelka, operating its own brewery has allowed the company to reduce costs and increase revenues, leading to lower retail prices. “People are surprised at how affordable our beer has become because of the new brewery,” he says. The price of a pint of Redpoint’s LongDong Lager has now dropped to NT\$150 in many bars in Taipei, com-

parable to Taiwan Beer prices, while its TaiPA ales now retail for NT\$180-\$220.

Jemelka says that eventually building their own brewery was always the plan from the time he and Doug Pierce established the brand in 2014, based on the anticipation that craft beer was on verge of a boom. High investment costs and the risk of excess capacity, however, will likely deter many brewers from operating their own facility.

Channel distribution

Getting the beers to market is another challenge. A number of breweries have opened their own pubs to provide a retail channel. Zhangmen Brewing Co., for example, operates its own brewery in New Taipei City and three pubs – on YongKang Street in Taipei and one each in Taichung and Kaohsiung. #23 Brewing Co. also recently opened up its own pub, called 23 Public, and the Beer and Cheese pub offers beers brewed by affiliated breweries 886 and Evil Twin. BEEru likewise showcases its beers through its pub/restaurant.

Other brewers, such as Redpoint, are opting to sell their beers directly to the retail sector, which is allowed in Taiwan, unlike the United States, providing more flexibility in terms of marketing and sales. Recent startup Sambar Brewing likewise employs the model of direct sales to “on-trade” retailers such as restaurants and bars.

55th Street Brewing Co. focuses on Taiwan’s plethora of coffee shops. “There are so many small and independent coffee shops in Taipei,” says founder Jack Yu. “They have to distinguish themselves, and selling craft beer is one way.” He adds that many of the youthful “hipsters” that frequent coffee shops are also a key consumer demographic for craft beers. Comparatively loose regula-

When You Drink, Don’t Drive

tions that permit coffee shops to sell beer without a liquor license also help.

Strohbecke notes the risks and rewards associated with both channels. Selling through third-party on-trade restaurants, coffee shops, and bars makes it harder to stand out among the dizzying array of craft beer labels, both imported and locally brewed. Building brand value and loyalty in such circumstances is difficult, says BeerGeek's Poppelwell, who notes Taiwanese consumers' interest in novelty. "They want to try all the new brands coming out," he says. To stand out, brewers are getting increasingly creative with their labels, and few will be surprised to learn that cutesy, cartoony labels can help move product off shelves in Taiwan.

Owning a pub to market the beer not only allows the brewer to keep more of the profits but supports brand building – something Strohbecke considers crucial in an increasingly diverse market. Citing the success of Starbucks in popularizing a foreign brand and drink in Taiwan, he observes that the comfortable environment in the shops, combined with the hip, aspirational brand, are at least as important as the actual coffee. On the other hand, the demands of managing a bar are quite different than those of running a brewery, requiring specific skills and carrying different risks, all of which might distract the brewer from the core mission of brewing excellent beers.

In Taiwan, 75% of all beer is sold through "off-trade" channels such as supermarkets and convenience stores, but so far few of the local craft brewers have been able to meet the stringent requirements of the off-trade market. While charging substantial sums, convenience stores demand low prices and high turnover to justify the shelf space, and brands will quickly be replaced if they don't perform. Steve's Kraft Brew is one of the few local craft brewers to carve out a niche in the off-trade market, with beers sold through Costco as well as Family Mart. This feat is exceptional, however, and less than a quarter of the craft beer in Taiwan is sold through off-trade shops, and nearly all of that is imported.

Considering the relatively small size of Taiwan's beer market, many of

the brewers are targeting exports as the source of growth. Roland Bloch, founder of Bloch Brewing Co., in fact is not aiming at the Taiwan market at all, despite brewing his beers in Bali, New Taipei City. "There's no need for (selling) it in Taiwan," he says. "They are already importing so much craft beer."

Instead, Bloch is selling to Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong, with an eventual plan to export around the globe. Trained as a brewmaster in Munich, Germany, Bloch was brewing beers in Japan when the Fukushima nuclear disaster happened, and he wrongly assumed that Japan would no longer be a major source for consumer goods. He then looked for another location for "a facility that met my standards and I was lucky to come here."

Bloch operated through a contract brewer before establishing his own brewery. But after winning the World's Best Beer award and ASEAN's best fruit



Bars catering to craft beer fans, such as Alphadog in Taipei City, are becoming increasingly popular.

beer and best bitter, all in 2014, he found he needed a bigger operation. Word of mouth led to a partnership with another craft brewer, Magic Aladdin, founded by former rice wine maker and industrial engineer Beer Cheng. Magic Aladdin had actually started as a manufacturer of brewery equipment and established its own craft-brew line as a way to showcase the equipment.

Recognizing that large-scale equipment sales don't come along every day, the firm has since renewed efforts to produce craft beer at its Bali facility, which doubles as a machining shop for manufacturing brewery equipment. The partnership consists of Bloch brewing Magic Aladdin's beers in exchange for access to the manufacturing capacity for his own line. According to Bloch, this arrangement, as well as hiring a new brewmaster from Ireland, will allow him to spend more time on international sales and brand development.

Redpoint, North Taiwan Brewery, Sambar, and others are also either currently exporting or are mulling plans to do so.

One brewery that seems to be taking on the challenge of being a major contender in both the Taiwan and international markets is Taihu Brewing. Taihu – the name means "Taiwan Tiger" in Chinese – employs over 50 staff and operates two breweries, including a multimillion US dollar facility in New Taipei City. It also has three "Tasting Rooms" in Taipei where it offers 20 different craft beers on tap, both imported and self-brewed. Peter Huang, Taihu president, says that along with the local market, the company is focused on delivering a quality, luxury product to the global marketplace, and has already developed strong relationships with distributors in the United States and China.

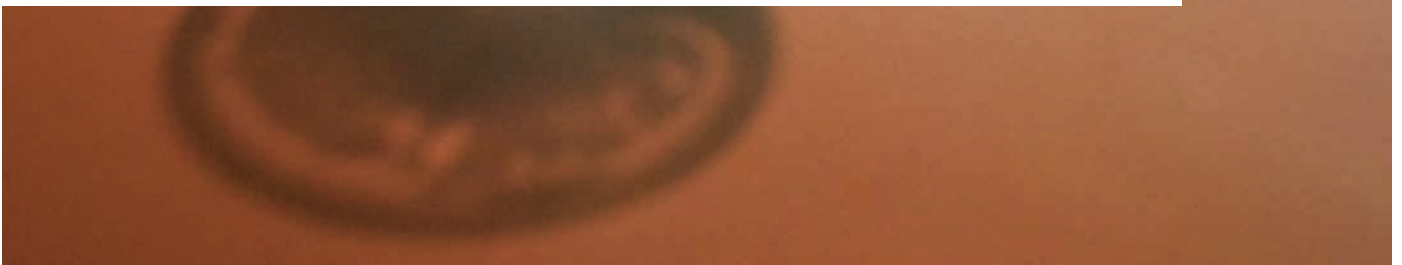
The craft-beer market looks set for strong growth, with a variety of business models and beer styles to keep beer lovers excited. In the end, though, as Poppelwell observes, it's not really about a label, but about the consumer's own taste. "There are some very good beers out there and they don't all necessarily have to carry the word 'craft,'" he says. "Drink what you like."



EXPLORING TAIPEI'S SPEAKEASIES

The drink of choice is usually Japanese whiskey, sometimes in innovative cocktails.

BY MATTHEW FULCO



WASHU: PHOTO BY MATTHEW FULCO

Nestled deep in the labyrinthine lanes east of AnHe Road, a luminous sign in the shape of a target glows red, white, and blue. Look closer and you'll see that the sign indicates the entrance to a partially hidden bar. Push open the heavy glass door, walk straight in, and the first thing that will strike you is the buzz. The long wooden bar is packed with patrons chatting with the smartly clad bartenders, who effortlessly mix French 75s, Sazaracs, Sidecars, and other classic Prohibition-era cocktails.

The patrons converse with the bartenders as if they're old friends. There are nods of understanding, handshakes, and the occasional high five followed by a shot. A number of the patrons keep whiskey bottles with their names on them on the shelves in the bar – a Japanese custom – from which they pour a drink or two before moving on to something new.

The whiskey selection is encyclopedic, with an emphasis on hard-to-find products from Japan, like Suntory's award-winning Hibiki 21-year or 30-year blended whiskey. If you can find either of those in a store, a bottle is likely to cost more than US\$1,000. There are more modest offerings too, like Nikka Taket-suru 17-year and Hakushu 12-year.

The name of this place is MOD, and it's the oldest whiskey bar in Taipei, long pre-dating the "speakeasy" craze that swept through East Asia over the past five years. Co-founder Hsiao Da-bao and his partner Shao Lin founded MOD in 1995 in a bid to bring Japanese bar culture to Taiwan.

"At the time, Taiwan had karaoke bars, British pubs, and the places in the old Combat Zone [a neighborhood once filled with hostess bars], and that was it," Hsiao says. "We wanted to bring the high quality of the Japanese bar experience to Taiwan, in terms of service, atmosphere, and drinks."

"We were able to do it in part because my partner had spent five years bartending and managing a bar in Yokohama," he says.

The name MOD is derived from the 1960s British subculture focused on

music and fashion and reflects Hsiao's affinity for UK performing artists like The Rolling Stones and David Bowie.

Over the years, MOD has adapted to the local market, he says in response to a query about the wide selection of Taiwanese late-night snacks on the menu. These include thousand-year-old eggs with tofu and an assortment of small dishes stewed in soy sauce: pig's ear, firm bean curd, hard-boiled eggs, and thick-cut seaweed. "It's true, in traditional Japanese bars there is less food and the emphasis is on drinking," he says. "But we want MOD to be a Japanese-style bar for the Taiwan market."

That strategy helped MOD evolve into one of Taipei's first bars that is a destination unto itself, a place locals – and increasingly, savvy tourists – seek out for socializing and enjoying high-quality drinks and food rather than entertaining clients.

The eclectic and well-lubricated crowd may be the most fun of all. On recent visits, I rubbed elbows at the bar with a Chinese dissident residing in Taiwan (who told me I needed to relax

and poured me a drink from his whiskey bottle), a manager at Audi Taiwan unwinding after work, a trio of merry-making Hongkongers, and two Singaporean businesswomen bar-hopping on the final night of their Taipei trip.

Vanishing Japanese whiskey

Thanks to long-established relationships with suppliers in Japan, MOD has been able to maintain a wide selection of rare Japanese whiskeys that have all but disappeared from the retail market and the shelves of many Taiwan bars. MOD's Hsiao notes that prices have surged in the past few years, but says a dedicated market remains for the prestige products from Japanese distilleries.

One of the best of these whiskies is the decorated Yamazaki 18-year, a complex, silky single malt with an aromatic fruit and floral bouquet that continues to unfold on the palate long after the final sip. A glass of it at MOD costs more than a bottle of ordinary whiskey in a retail store, but it's hard to put a price on that taste.



PHOTO: MATTHEW FULCO

A bartender at MOD prepares a cocktail.

Do Not Serve Alcohol to Minors



MOD: PHOTO BY MATTHEW FULCO

“The popularity of Japanese whiskey is a global trend, but it’s especially strong in Taiwan as Taiwanese people have a real fondness for Japanese culture,” says Otto Lai, a local whiskey expert and former deputy managing editor of *Next Magazine*.

Tonic Liu, owner of the Motown bar across the street from Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall in Taipei, notes that Japanese whiskey sales skyrocketed globally after Yamazaki Single Malt Sherry Cask 2013 was named the 2015 World Whiskey of the Year by Jim Murray, one of the world’s top connoisseurs of the spirit. Demand spiked to the point that Japanese distilleries sharply curtailed production of whiskey with age statements, opting instead to offer less labor-intensive products without age statements to the mass market at higher prices than 10- and 12-year-old whiskeys sold for in the past.

“The Japanese distilleries have succeeding in just a few short years in significantly raising sales and making their products household names,” Liu observes. “It’s a remarkable turn of events if you consider that a decade ago, nobody took Japanese whiskey seriously.”

At Motown, Liu says that the best-selling products are non-age-statement Japanese whiskeys. “People ask for Japanese whiskey. Most of them don’t pay attention to whether it has an age state-

ment,” he explains.

The shortage of Japanese whiskey in Taiwan has compelled bar owners to use creative methods to import the products. Tomoaki Inaba, owner of Washu, one of Taipei’s few authentic Japanese bars, says he has been stockpiling Japanese whiskey at his home in Japan for two decades. His mother mails him a few bottles per month as gifts.

The art of the cocktail

While Washu offers an impressive selection of Japanese whiskeys, its innovative cocktails are the real draw. Inaba, who worked as a bartender in London before moving to Taipei in late 2011, originally wanted to open a bar in Tokyo. But in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan in March 2011, “the time wasn’t right,” he says. “My wife is Taiwanese, so I decided to open the bar here.”

Inaba distills his own *shochu* (a Japanese spirit typically made from barley, rice, or sweet potato) and whiskey, and infuses the spirits with a wide range of flavors – everything from cedar to bacon. “My philosophy is if I’m able to eat something, I also should be able to drink it,” he says. “I needed to figure out how to turn a meat into a liquid” in the case of the bacon beverages.

One of Washu’s signature drinks

is the *shiso shochu*, which is infused with *shiso*, an herb of the mint family, along with mint, parsley, and basil for one month. The grassy flavor of the leaf imbues the drink with a rich herba-ceous quality.

Another unusual but delicious drink is the fragrant cedar whiskey, served in a rocks glass and garnished with a real block of cedar. It is the first beverage to ever make me want to drink wood. The key to making that drink work is the use of premium imported Japanese cedar, Inaba notes.

“It’s not like I’m the first person to experiment with these ingredients. I’m not Thomas Edison. I can’t create ideas from zero,” Inaba explains. “But I can do something with Washu that is not easily copied, and that’s very important to survival in this market.”

At Washu, many of the customers are female. In recognition of that clientele, the bar has rolled out a wide variety of fruit-infused *shochus*, making use of both local and Japanese ingredients. The top sellers are passion fruit, *shochu*, and a jasmine-apple blend, Inaba says.

“Taiwanese people are very curious about new things,” he says. “But in the bar business, the curiosity typically only lasts a few months, and then they want to see something different. The customers give me pressure, and that keeps me on my toes.”

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LET CHEF KO MAKE YOUR CHINESE NEW YEAR MEAL THE MOST MEMORABLE EVER

The Sherwood Enables Your Family to Enjoy the Chef's Special Delicacies in Your Own Home

For this coming Chinese New Year welcoming the Year of the Rooster, The Sherwood Taipei's head chef for Chinese cuisine Ko Kang-fei will be cooking up some delectable dishes featuring the year's namesake. And recognizing that Chinese New Year celebrations are about family and home, The Sherwood's Yi Yuan Chinese Restaurant is also offering these dishes for take-away, providing diners with delicious dishes prepared by one of Taipei's top chefs to be enjoyed in the comfort and convenience of home dining.

Chef Ko, originally from Hong Kong, is a student of all Chinese cuisines, and many of his dishes fuse the best of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and other regional cuisines. Moreover, his dishes incorporate ingredients representing the best of the land and the sea. Many feature rich, delicious abalone flown in live directly from South Africa, locally caught prawns, tender U.S. beef, and acclaimed cherry ducks from Yilan.

A proper Chinese New Year's feast starts with a cold platter, and The Sherwood's Roasted and Barbequed Meat Combination platter, including Smoked Duck Breast, U.S. Beef Shank, Shaoxing Drunken Chicken, Sichuan-style Cuttlefish, Braised Abalone, and Caramel Walnuts, is not to be missed.

Each of these dishes is especially prepared by The Sherwood kitchen from the finest of imported and locally sourced ingredients, combined to present a kaleidoscope of flavors. The chicken thigh for the Shaoxing Drunken Chicken are steamed and then soaked in Shaoxing rice wine before being iced overnight and served cold. The beef is tender U.S. beef shanks that is cured in star anise, ginger, tangerine peel, bean paste, and other ingredients for a sublime experience. The tangy black-pepper duck is smoked in longan wood in The Sherwood's own kitchen, while the platter is completed with whole South African abalones, each one tender and soft, alongside Sichuan-style locally caught cuttlefish, and gently sweet Ma Xiangcui walnuts.



fresher. These giant prawns are split and deep fried for some nine minutes before lantern peppers, the chef's special spicy oil, and sautéed green onion, peeled garlic, and purple onion are included. The lantern peppers make the dish look Sichuan-level spicy, but Chef Ko says the peppers provide the dish with

Fresh and clean ingredients are essential to fine dining. Chef Ko's Sichuan-style Fried Tiger King Prawns, made with tiger prawns caught in the pristine waters surrounding Penghu, couldn't be



a pleasing aroma and are hardly spicy at all.

Next on the menu is Chef Ko's celebrated fusion Taiwanese-Cantonese Sticky Rice with Crab, winner of the Apple Daily's award for Best Staple Food in Year 2013 and 2015. For this dish, the rice is soaked for eight hours to wake up the flavor, then steamed for an hour, after which it is combined with oyster sauce, shiitake mushrooms, two kinds of Chinese-style sausages, shrimp, and other ingredients. Finally, the whole dish is covered with the tender meat of a steamed red crab also caught in Taiwan. Joining the best in Taiwanese cuisine with a strong dash of Cantonese taste, this dish certainly deserves agree the Apple Daily's commendation.

Reflecting his heritage in soup-heavy Cantonese cooking, Chef Ko's Chinese New Year take-away menu offers four soups that are so rich with the healthy essence of chicken that each could stand alone as a meal in itself.



One of the four is the Double-boiled Chicken Soup with scallop, pork tripe, and Brazil mushrooms. As the name suggests, the soup is boiled twice – the first time for eight hours, to reduce a whole chicken to a rich broth, along

with Chinese Aged Ham, Jinhua Ham, and rear leg shanks of pork to impart the savory taste to the chicken broth. The salty and savory ham is then extracted – Chef Ko says that unlike ham in Western countries, Jinhua ham is used as a seasoning, rather than consumed directly – and the rest of the ingredients are added, including a boneless chicken stuffed with sticky rice, pork tripe, dried scallops, Brazil mushrooms, and six whole abalones, which are cooked for another three hours. Chef Ko says the broth of this stunning soup is so rich that families can add water and keep eating it for days.

Another dish is the so-called Jumping Buddha, which gets its name from the legend that the first time this soup was cooked, the smell was so enticing that even vegetarian monks jumped over the wall of the monastery to taste it. To a clear broth made from long boiled chicken, Chinese Aged Ham, Jinhua Ham, and rear leg shanks of pork Chef Ko adds fresh chicken, beef tendon, scallops, sea cucumber, shiitake mushrooms, fish maws, and six South African abalones. Boiling for another four hours brings out a flavor that is amazingly rich and savory.

This Chinese New Year, thanks to The Sherwood, we all get to enjoy the fine dining of exquisitely prepared Taiwanese-Cantonese cuisine with family at home.



PHOTO: MARK CARTONHILL

ON THE HUNT FOR CHOU DOUFU IN LONDON

After spending around two decades in Taiwan, three years ago *TOPICS* contributor **Mark Caltonhill** returned to live in the UK. Within weeks, he was missing “three-cups” slow cooking, *kongxin cai* (空心菜), and perhaps most of all, stinky tofu (臭豆腐). Here is his report.

Arriving at Chiang Kai-Shek International Airport in the 1990s after each annual trip home, my bags would be full of cheese, Scottish oatcakes, bags of coffee, and other things I couldn’t live without – and which were either ridiculously expensive or impossible to obtain in Taiwan.

In December 2013 when I flew to Taiwan for the last time, I carried my passport, bank card, toothbrush, and a change of underwear. Following changes in Taiwanese people’s tastes and the spread of international supermarkets and department stores, everything I might need could be bought, and mostly at prices similar to those back home.

In fact, although I certainly haven’t “gone native,” the opposite has been true for quite some time – that flying into the UK my bags are heavy with dried shiitake, Yuchun Sake (玉泉清酒), pineapple cakes, and other Taiwanese goodies I now think of as indispensable to normal life.

Aided by an ever-expanding range of items available at Asian supermarkets in Britain, over the first couple of years since returning home I managed to improvise a few Taiwanese-ish dishes such as “three-cups tofu” made with cooking sherry instead of *mijiu* (米酒, rice wine) – before discovering the Taipei website for specialist import items – and *luobogao* (蘿蔔糕, turnip cake) made with parsnips or Western turnips, before I found a local market that sells the long white *luobo*. I’ve even fried-steamed-fried shop-bought dumplings to satisfy my craving for *guotie* (鍋貼, pot-stickers).

And had I remained in a small beach-and-golf town an hour outside Edinburgh, this might have been my lot. But a year ago I moved to London, and one day I cycled past a restaurant called Hoja. Ironic, I thought, that sounds like “tasty” in Taiwanese – a mean trick to play! Then I looked more closely. It wasn’t ironic or mean; it really was a Taiwanese restaurant.

In fact, since London has the largest Chinatown in Europe, with a plethora of Hong Kong-style barbecued-and-marinated meat, *dim sum*, and rude-service restaurants (not a complaint so much as one of the reasons Londoners go to eat in Chinatown), as well as a Chinese take-



Mark Caltonhill is delighted to find Taiwan's iconic Tatong cutlery at Taiwan Village restaurant

away in every village, town, and city district throughout the country, I thought I knew everything about Chinese cuisine in Britain.

But it turns out Taiwanese food outlets are springing up across London, reflecting its citizens' relatively high disposable income coupled with their voracious appetite for new things. Internet searches didn't provide much guidance on where to go, but social-media discussions among London-based Taiwanese were alive with suggestions.

[Taiwan Village]

Probably the longest established eatery is Taiwan Village in the SW6 district of Fulham, which recently announced it would stop selling crispy duck after 16 years. Some might object that in Taiwan duck is considered "Mainland" food, but in fairness this restaurant does advertise itself as offering Taiwanese and Hunanese cuisine, and anyway it

Opposite page: London's Chinatown now has Taiwanese outlets popular with tourists and local office workers.

Right: Hong Kong meats and dimsum were Chinatown's standard fare until the recent revolution

would take a brave person to claim to define the limits of Taiwanese cooking.

Plenty of classic dishes are available, however, including three-cups chicken (三杯雞), *lurou fan* (滷肉飯, stewed meat with rice), *guabao* (割包, "Taiwanese hamburger;"), General Tso's chicken (左宗棠雞), *yuxiang qiezi* (魚香茄子, eggplant with minced chicken), *mapo* tofu with minced pork (麻婆豆腐), and Taiwan's signature beef noodle soup (牛肉麵). Quite a few dishes are available with vegetarian alternatives, and there are various seasonal vegetables with options of black-bean, oyster, or *gongbao* (宮保) sauces.

One Taiwanese diner, art history professor Tzeng Shai-shu, gave the restaurant a mixed review during a research trip to London. Her steamed sea bass impressed, being "exactly like what we have in Taiwan," and her wonton soup was "not bad," but her tofu, "cooked with a thick and dark soy sauce," was far from acceptable. She lamented that this problem – soy sauce that "dyes all meats and vegetables black so you can't recognize the origin of the foods anymore" – exists at many Chinese restaurants abroad. She then launched into a lecture about how good cuisine should attract

the eyes and nose as well as the taste buds, since "we enjoy a meal even before we eat it."

For her taste of home, long-term London resident Mathilda Lee generally chooses *lurou fan* or beef noodles, especially with *dao-xiao* (刀削, "knife-cut") noodles, which she says are hard to find in Chinatown and almost impossible to make oneself. Or she might get a *guabao* for a snack. And definitely *kongxin cai* (water convolvulus) if it's on the menu.

"Taiwan Village is pretty much the only place I go for Taiwanese food," she says. "Hoja is too snacky, most of the food is fried, and the decoration is poor. Leong's Legend is very poor, in fact I don't believe the owners are Taiwanese. And Bao Bar might be good, but I don't want to queue 40 minutes for a *guabao*. Hopefully Din Tai Fung will open a branch in London next year, but they announce that just about every year."

[Bao Bar]

Presumably Bao Bar is doing something right if other people are willing to queue so long for its food. Moreover, it recently opened its third London outlet in as many years. The original Bao is a small hut offering take-away





Lin Nung serves one of his shop's bubble tea offerings.

guabao in a corner of the Netil Market in East London for three hours on Saturday afternoons. Apparently the owners, whose background is in design, not catering, were looking for an iconic foodstuff to market to London's brand-conscious foodies.

"They don't want people sitting down for a drawn-out meal," says Andy Huang, a Taiwanese resident of London who says he knows Bao's creators. "They want the busy on-the-go young fashionista."

Since perfecting their fusion braised-pork and fermented-greens *guabao* at the market stall, Bao has opened 32- and 47-seat restaurants in Soho and nearby Fitzrovia respectively.

In addition to fairly authentic albeit small *guabao* at £4, other creations include chicken, lamb, and vegetarian *bao*, as well as night-market favorites *yansu ji* (鹽酥雞, deep-fried chicken) and *zhuxie gao* (豬血糕, pigs' blood cake). A small bottle of Taiwan Beer costs £4.50, though more fun might be their original Koxinga cocktail for £8. I wonder how many Soho diners have heard of the Chinese-Japanese pirate turned Ming loyalist who threw the Dutch out of Taiwan in the 1600s.

[Good Friend Chicken]

Most of the other Taiwanese food outlets focus mainly on snacks, and like Bao Bar's first enterprise, they tend to be small in scale or even operate as pop-up events. Roger Ren's Good Friend Taiwan

Chicken Shop on the eastern approach to Chinatown, for example, sells little more than night-market style *zha jipai* (炸雞排, deep-fried chicken filets), *yansu ji* under the name "popcorn chicken," and sweet-potato fries, as well as around two dozen flavors of bubble and regular teas.

[Milktea & Pearl]

Lin Nung's Milktea & Pearl on the first floor (second floor to Americans and Taiwanese) of Boxpark in Shoreditch, East London, has even fewer products. Housed in a complex of reconditioned shipping containers that brands itself "the world's first pop-up mall," the shop sells only one item: Taichung's contribution to world cuisine – *zhenzhu naicha* (珍珠奶茶, bubble tea).

"And even that wasn't easy," says Lin. "When we first opened, we had to educate local people's tastes, and for the first three weeks we simply gave away free drinks. We were also learning from them about what they liked, and we adapted our products accordingly."

Lin is candid about his target market: "Definitely not Taiwanese people, or even Asians. You couldn't make a living from a niche market that represents about 10% of my sales," he says. "None of us could," he adds, referring to his fellow Taiwanese in London, "which is why it's difficult to find any truly authentic Taiwan food in the UK."

His own special innovation to this fusion culture is Milktea & Pearl's range of tea cocktails. Instead of being boiled in

water, the tea is cold-brewed in vodka or gin for 24 hours.

Like most, perhaps all, of London's Taiwan food providers, Lin had no background in the catering industry. Now aged 32, he came to the UK in 2008 to study for an MA at the London School of Economics. When he graduated, the financial crisis had struck, so in 2010 he opened a bubble tea stall in a multi-outlet venue near Oxford Street, followed by the second in Shoreditch a few years later.

[Dumpling Heart]

The area to the north and east of Liverpool Street Station is where to look for Liu Meihui's high-end dumplings. Originally a fashion designer, she has studied and worked in London since the mid-90s when she had a pop-up clothes outlet at the famous Portobello Road market. Her entry into the food business began two years ago when she participated in a 10-day food festival.

Since last year she has focused on pop-up events, renting kitchen spaces at various locations for a couple of days and collaborating with designers, potters and other artists to put on "Dumpling Heart" events. While her set menus might sound like mom-and-pop cuisine, at £30 per person including a glass of wine, her prices are not.

"We use expensive ingredients," she explains, "such as ginger pork from Hill and Szrok, who supply some of London's top restaurants, and organic ingredients wherever possible. And definitely no MSG."

When she decided to buy the best rice imported from Taiwan, she was delighted to find that it came from her grandfather's hometown of Chishang in Taitung County. "It means that some of the rice I sell may have been grown and harvested by my aunt!"

[The Old Tree]

Two restaurants are patronized by significant numbers of Taiwanese and other Asian customers. The first is Lao Shu Daiwan Bee (Old Tree Taiwan

Flavor), which started as a bakery in north London but recently added a restaurant on the western edge of Chinatown. For Taiwanese students and guest workers, it appears to be the place to go for authentic flavors and cheap prices.

Mathilda Lee, who works in Taiwan's de facto London embassy, says there are around 4,000 permanent and long-term Taiwanese residents in London, plus numerous students (many on one-year master's courses) and 1,000 young people on working visas.

Old Tree's many classics include Taiwanese beef noodles, *o-a mi-swa* (蚵仔麵線, oyster thin-noodle soup), *o-a jen* (蚵仔煎, oyster omelets), "three-cups" chicken, salt-and-pepper squid, *liang mian* (涼麵, cold noodles) in summer, and of course *guabao*.

It certainly is a change from the barbequed meat and dimsum dominating Chinatown. Perhaps co-owner Mr. Yip from Malaysia is right when he says his Taiwanese wife has truly "revolutionized the neighbourhood."

[Hoja]

Summer Hsia, co-owner and general manager of Hoja in west London's Shepherd's Bush area, never did much cooking when she lived in Taiwan. "Like most young working Taiwanese I ate out all the time, especially because I lived in a studio apartment in Taipei without a proper kitchen. Also it's really cheaper to eat out than to cook for yourself in Taiwan. But I when I worked for four years in Beijing and Guangdong, I found the food too heavy and too oily, as well as having concerns over food safety, so I started cooking for myself.

"Fortunately I'd watched my mother cooking so much that I could manage well enough. We're from Tainan, home of many of Taiwan's traditional small dishes. So when I started cooking for my husband, and later for Hoja, it was these famous *xiao chi* [literally "little eats"] that I focused on."

These snacks include the so-called "popcorn chicken." Hoja also does a wide range of home-marinated dishes such as pork on rice, pig's ear, Chinese cabbage, and soy eggs, one mouthful of which transported this writer straight


back to Taiwan.

Pride of place, however, is Hoja's beef noodles, served with a choice of *ramen*, *udon*, or knife-cut noodles. Many early local customers weren't used to noodles in soup, so a more Western-style *chowmein* has also made its way onto the menu.

"Similarly," Hsia explains, "many Westerners aren't used to the basic rice-or-noodle choice common to Taiwan cuisine, so we designed some wraps, starting with beef rolls and later prawn and vegetable versions. These aren't the same as the North China wraps typical in Taipei, but reflect my south-Taiwan heritage in that the beef is marinated and slow-cooked." They also show an accommodation to British tastes, in that the usual cucumber has been replaced by lettuce.

"I'd say we're about 90% pure Taiwanese style, about 10% UK fusion," she says. What is 100% Taiwanese are the karaoke rooms in the basement, with perhaps the best collection of Taiwan crooners' songs in London.

Interestingly, Hoja is considering diversifying by opening a pop-up or market stall – that is, going in the opposite direction from Bao Bar, Lin Nung, and others. "Hopefully we'll attract the attention of a wider range of people," says co-owner Chris Wang, a structural engineer by day.

All that provides reason for optimism about the future of Taiwan cuisine in London. Perhaps one day I'll even encounter the sniff of stinky tofu. Until then, the hunt continues. 



A simple but filling, economical lunch at Hoja, including a can of Hey-Song sarsaparilla.



TAIPEI 101: PHOTO BY JULES QUARTLY

FROM NIGHT MARKET TREATS TO FOOD COURT FINE DINING

The evolution of Taiwan's mass market eating establishments has speeded up over the past decade to meet developing tastes and higher expectations.

BY JULES QUARTLY

In recent years the long and colorful tradition of food vendors setting up roadside stalls has become less common, as hygiene requirements and city ordinances tighten up. Taking its place is a multitude of food courts at MRT stops, department stores, shopping malls, airports, hospitals, and universities – even in one of the world's tallest buildings, Taipei 101.

While it would appear that Taiwan's plush new food courts are a world away from their chaotic and stained forebears, it's fairly simple to trace how they developed from the night markets of old, while at the same time incorporating ideas from

the United States and Japan.

A clear example of this transformation is the iconic Shilin Night Market. When a wealthy merchant built Cixian Temple near a wharf on the Keelung River at the tail end of the 18th century, it naturally attracted stallholders jostling for space to do some business. They stayed long after silting put an end to the port. Eventually the area found fame as a night market, a place to browse for clothes and trinkets, but especially to sample the rich array of foods on offer.

Today, vendors need permits and are expected to pay taxes, and they have been corralled into enclosed spaces with

clean running water and public conveniences. Ironically, the more sanitary and “upmarket” surroundings have been a bit of a turnoff for locals, though the market still does a roaring trade, partly due to foreign visitors being encouraged by the Tourism Bureau to seek out an “authentic” experience.

“You’re right, Shilin isn’t such a popular market with locals anymore, but it is with tourists,” says Peter Tou, general manager in Taipei of the communications marketing firm Edelman Public Relations, which works with many of the world’s biggest food and beverage companies. “The place has lost a lot of the mom ‘n’

pop vendors who made it such a draw in the first place. You could say it has been over standardized and codified, almost as if it's lost the original recipe."

"The original experience was spontaneous, exciting, authentic, with artisans or masters cooking while you watched. In the new space it feels more like a food court atmosphere, but smellier and not as pleasant," says Tou, who has handled accounts such as the Mitsui Outlet Park in New Taipei's Linkou and Jamie Oliver's new eatery at Shin Kong Mitsukoshi in the Xinyi district of Taipei.

Essentially, food courts have upgraded the night market food experience for a new generation of office workers and families, those who want convenience, hygiene, and the advantage of choice, but also an atmosphere more suited to contemporary sensibilities. "Night markets have always developed where there's food, near wet markets for instance, whereas these days we are more likely to shop at department stores or malls," Tou observes.

The concept of food courts began in North America. Real estate developer James Rouse – originator of the terms "urban renewal" and "shopping mall" – introduced the idea of restaurants with shared seating in 1962 at Toronto's Sherway Gardens Hall. The objective was to create a kind of "community picnic" area, where diners could choose what they wanted to eat from an assortment of choices and then sit together in democratic harmony.

Food courts became an integral part

of the American lifestyle, while Japan led the way in Asia. According to Tou, the influence of U.S. food courts on Taiwan derives mostly from the emphasis on Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), sanitary conditions, and fast food practices. "The night markets were often family-owned businesses, which provided an authentic communal experience rather than just being about the money."

The Japanese influence

The other significant influence on Taiwan's food court culture has been Japan. One of the legacies of the 50-year Japanese colonial rule of the island beginning in 1895 was a strong food culture, including the adoption of *bento* (lunchboxes) and signature Japanese dishes, and the presence of numerous Japanese restaurants.

Added to which, Taiwan's rather uninspiring retail environment was transformed by Japan's Sogo (partnering with Pacific Construction and later the Far Eastern Group) in the late 1980s, followed by Mitsukoshi (with local operator Shin Kong Group) in the '90s. Naturally, food courts were part of the package. Tou makes the point that Japanese restaurants account for at least a quarter of the total at the huge Mitsui Outlet Park, which opened in mid-2016.

"Taiwanese are naturally receptive to Japanese foods. It's quite usual for restaurants in Japan, which has a saturated market, to look abroad at Taiwan first," Tou notes. "This is why a lot of branded

mid-range eateries open up here, before they set up shop in China and elsewhere."

After online shopping reached a critical mass in 2007 and the financial crisis hit a year later, malls in the United States struggled for business. Consumers were tired of the humble food court, its fast food, and plastic surroundings. High-end food emporiums like Grand Central Market in California supplied the solution. Similarly, in Japan, Tokyo's *depachika* have merged food halls and pop-up restaurants for a fusion of fine dining.

While Taiwan is slightly behind the curve with this trend, there are a couple of honorable exceptions. Addiction Aquatic Development (上引水產), near Songshan Airport, was also developed by Japan's Mitsui Food and Beverage Enterprise Group. It completely upgrades the old fish market experience, adding wine bars and best-in-town sashimi. Meanwhile, the ornate Bellavita in the Xinyi district offers an aristocratic afternoon tea spread, decent Italian food, plus an oysters and champagne bar.

Chen Shih-ming, president of the Taipei Financial Center Corp. (TFCC), which owns and operates Taipei 101, recounts that the original idea behind its food court, which opened in 2004, was to enable shoppers to re-energize when indulging in some retail therapy at the luxury mall. Research from financial information provider MarketWatch indicates that a decent food court can boost spending by up to 20%.

At the same time the food court had to cater to hordes of tourists, families,



ADDICTION AQUATIC DEVELOPMENT: PHOTO BY JULES QUARTIER

footfall from the MRT stop, 101 office workers, and others. “Every day 10,000 to 12,000 people make their way to work here, in what is effectively a vertical city, so we need to support them,” explains Taipei 101 spokesman and TFCC Vice President Michael Liu.

As has been the case elsewhere, however, changing demographics led to the need for the 101 food court to be renovated in 2012 in order to meet higher consumer expectations. Chen describes the new look as “seriously upmarket, a more stylish space for a high-end shopping mall.” He notes that to “complement the luxury retail space, we wanted an excellent quality food space, with LED lighting, TV wall panels, expansive chandeliers, and improved seating to produce a lounge-effect style.”

Eating in the 101 food court has edged closer to becoming a restaurant type of experience, rather than merely a simple cafeteria or canteen. Instead of the food court being just a place for a quick bite to eat, one now finds people reading newspapers and taking their time. The food offerings have changed as well, with fewer night market staples, sandwiches, and other lower priced choices. These have been supplemented or replaced by premium ice creams and coffee and English tea concessions, plus Din Tai Fung – a huge hit, as shown by the snaking queues at all times of the day. There is also a new dining section dedicated to Japanese foods, with branded restaurants.

These changes “made the food court a value-added part of the mall, a place to relax and enjoy the atmosphere,” Chen says. “I think the prices are still moderate, and there is differentiation between the food court and the fine dining options we have elsewhere, such as Shin Yeh Taipei, Diamond Tony’s, and the VIP lounge for prestige customers.”

The importance of a good food court that meets the needs of a mall’s customers is not lost on Michael Liu. “It can help determine the future success of our operation, since there has been a 20% increase in online shopping over the past 10 years. So there’s a need to look at how



to keep our customers. The food court has a very important role in this.”

Chen says that though retail space offers a higher profit margin, improving food and beverage profits is a logical next step. “We’ve noticed a trend toward going upmarket and we’ve responded,” he says. “We see casual dining as a focus in the future. Since we sell high-end products, when there is a financial slowdown there’s usually a corresponding slowing of sales. There is still a predisposition to spend but a natural hesitation. But such economic problems never affect the stomach. People will always eat.”

Back to the future

According to a Taiwan Institute of Economic Research report, double-income families are the norm in Taiwan, and about one-third of household spending goes to dining out. Further, the typical destination for a family outing on the weekend is a mall for shopping, perhaps watching a film, and eating – which is why decent food offerings are crucial to the success of such operations.

Given the challenge posed by e-commerce, food has become an even more important selling point for department stores and malls, since providing a great meal with decent service is obviously an experience that cannot be replicated online. Conceivably, retail sales will continue to migrate online, but food courts

will still make money and also bring in customers to boost bricks-and-mortar retail sales.

For example, TaiMall in Taoyuan’s Nankan district, built in 1997 and resembling a castle, was said to be the first large-scale shopping and leisure center in Taiwan. After turning a profit in 2004, it was snapped up by Government of Singapore Investment Corp. in 2008. It underwent a NT\$1.5 billion, 20-month renovation in 2009 with the aim of meeting higher consumer expectations and beating off increased competition.

The food court was a major element in this revamp, with sectioned seating areas that are more spacious and imaginatively lit, better cleaning and service, and improved food offerings, including some from branded restaurants. TaiMall representatives report that food and beverage sales comprise 28% of the mall’s total profits, and the food court pulls in 3.6%.

As for the humble night market, that too is getting a makeover. Commune A7, situated in the Xinyi district shopping zone, next to Shin Kong Mitsukoshi A9, boldly advertises itself as the “brand new urban community in the heart of Taipei.” It includes well regarded standalone restaurants, such as mini-versions of Selfish Burger, Campus Café, and Alley Cat’s. The units are smartly converted shipping containers or tricked-out trucks.

Clean and stylish, with gentlemen in tuxes marshalling the well-dressed crowds, Commune A7 is only a 10-minute walk from the traditional Tonghua Night Market, but there is a world of difference. In a sense, Commune A7 blends the comfort of food courts and the atmosphere of night markets to create a hybrid, the outdoor food court.

Commune A7 is the new kid on the block, and though it is only scheduled to run for six months – after which the fancy shipping containers will leave and a new building goes up – no doubt the format will be repeated elsewhere. Peter Tou describes the concept as a “Western-food night market, without the friendly price of a night market,” but its customers seem happy to pay the difference. ■



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PHOTO: ANDRE CHIANG

TWO ENDS OF THE CELEBRITY CHEF SPECTRUM

Famous foreign personalities like Jamie Oliver bring business expertise, but in the long run it is local master chefs like André Chiang who will carry the torch.

BY JULES QUARTLY

Celebrity chefs spread stardust over a nation's food scene. They take the spotlight and make the headlines, introduce new ingredients and food preparation styles to give cooking an aura of exceptionality. They are a cut above standard restaurant fare and in a totally different universe from the humble housewife or househusband preparing the family's daily meals.

They become familiar names that can sell anything from condiments and sauces to microwave-oven-ready meals. They appear in advertisements, on reality TV programs, or become a form of "chef-tainment" – witness Gordon Ramsay, once again losing his paper-thin temper and swearing at unfortunate apprentices. Celebrity chefs are minted after winning contests, they become judges on cooking shows, or are asked to pen books and write columns revealing their latest recipe.

In Taiwan they are a relatively new phenomenon. It used to be that chefs were hidden away in the kitchen, toiling away in anonymity, lucky to have a dish named after them or receive any accolades for the work they did. Nowadays, cooking shows are a big deal, and if a celebrity chef gets caught with his trousers down, like Cheng Yen-chi, also known as Ah-Chi-shih (阿基師), then they are lead stories in the gossip pages. Previously he had made headlines for finding creative ways to cook up leftovers.

Taiwanese-American restaurateur Eddie Huang popularized *guabao* (割包)



PHOTO: RAW

– the local equivalent of a hamburger – at his New York eatery, while his biography *Fresh off the Boat* became a best-seller and then a nationally televised sitcom. Meanwhile, Derek Chen (陳德烈) started out in life as an apprentice at a Cantonese restaurant (“catching rats and clearing drains”) but as the host of travel food show *Cooking My Way* (世界我做煮) is known as Taiwan’s “hottest handsome chef.”

Such is the popularity of TV chefs that the Tourism Bureau thought it a good idea to invite Gabe Kennedy to take a look at Taiwan’s Aboriginal cuisine. In November, the winner of the American Broadcasting Company’s reality show, *The Taste*, visited the Atayal tribe to savor the indigenous food culture. He popped up in Yilan at an organic tea farm for refreshment and photo opportunities, and at Wushi Harbor to gawp at local seafood specialties.

But the glitter aside, there’s also gold in the celebrity chef concept. Take the recent opening of Jamie’s Italian, a brand established by Jamie Oliver, in the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Department Store A11 in Taipei’s Xinyi district. Oliver is very much the modern-day celebrity chef, earning his spurs for being bright eyed, bushy tailed, and telegenic, rather than slogging through apprenticeships in demanding French kitchens before making his mark.

He was catapulted into the lime-light with the *The Naked Chef*, earning rave reviews for being youthful, good looking, and irreverent. While he has been quoted in the past as saying, “I’d like to win a Michelin star but it’s unlikely – my cooking just ain’t fiddly enough and that’s fine by me,” his passion for food and acumen for business has served him well.

So well, in fact, that not only was he made a Member of the Order of the British Empire, but he built a business empire, Jamie Oliver Holdings, which made him worth US\$400 million in 2016, according to the *Sunday Times*

Chiang and his creative team, above. Below, the interior of Raw, a 60-seat “lifestyle restaurant.”

Rich List. He is the world’s wealthiest chef and his restaurant chain, Jamie’s Italian, registered sales of £19.4 million (NT\$767 million) in 2015. He also has his altruistic side, having initiated a campaign in the UK, widely imitated in other countries, to reduce obesity among kids and improve school meals.

Jamie’s Italian Taiwan is the brand’s fourth restaurant in Asia, among 40 worldwide. It’s Euro-chic in style, outfitted in shining steel and muted color tiles, with street-art inspired murals. There’s a half-open kitchen, bar with craft beers, and coffee and pizza stations, with plenty of Oliver merchandise on the shelves, such as chopping boards and books. There was a flurry of excite-

ment on launch day in late November and a full house of expectant KOLs (key opinion leaders) wondering what Oliver would bring to the table. We were treated to a video of the celebrity chef, who told us we were “in excellent hands.”

“*Jiababway?*” (Have you eaten?), Oliver began in Taiwanese, from the comfort of his kitchen in Essex. “I can’t believe I’m going to open in Taiwan – and I know you’re going to love it! I know the food culture in Taiwan is incredible: humble, simple, beautiful and great value,” adding this was precisely why customers would like his “rustic” Tuscan offerings.

Jamie’s Head Chef (Hong Kong and China) Steve Ma, who was here on sec-



ondment from the Hong Kong branch to oversee the kitchen, said that Oliver makes every item on the menu himself before approving it. “We want to change the market by providing real food, with all the ingredients being fresh, healthy and sustainable, no-MSG, organic, and affordable,” said Ma.

Business as usual

I was in Hong Kong’s Causeway Bay when Jamie’s opened in 2014 and for months afterwards lines of people would be raring to get in to find out what all the fuss was about. This was the Oliver celebrity effect. After which, it was business as usual. I asked Ma about this and the need to present authentic food, yet cater to local tastes.

The idea is to be both local and global, Ma confirms. “But we want the focus to be on the restaurant rather than celebrity. I want people to come here for great food and sharing rather than Jamie. A lot of people call us a celebrity-chef restaurant but we are more than that. We are about casual and affordable dining.”

“Yes, we do listen to customers and

during the soft opening we learned that people here like their pizza a bit crustier, so we offer a choice of how hard it is. Also, our local head chef, Marco Kao (高楚暘) has developed a pizza that aims to suit the local palate, the Taiwan Hot.” This pizza comprises sweet tomato, Cheddar cheese, spicy meatballs, Taiwan chilies (a pickled chili with the skin off, marinated in soy sauce and vinegar, plus a locally sourced green pepper), and buffalo mozzarella.

Actually, for all the focus on Oliver, this venture is franchise business as usual. It’s not really about the food so much as the concept and positioning. Oliver has no role in the day-to-day running of his restaurants, or of his company, which is managed by his brother-in-law, a banker. Hong Kong’s Big Cat Group has bought the rights to operate Jamie’s restaurants in “greater China,” and a good number of senior executives were on hand to make sure the launch went well.

Big Cat Marketing and Development director Jack Harrison commented that making the move to Taiwan was an easy decision because many of Oliver’s programs have been translated into Chinese

and televised here. “Taiwan has become more international in recent years and more open to different dining experiences,” he notes. “We saw an opportunity in the casual dining space, rather than the fast food and high-end segments that had come before.”

“Shin Kong is one of the biggest malls in Taiwan and provides a great location,” he adds. “When you have a celebrity-chef brand, people typically expect fine dining, so we have managed expectations and I don’t think anybody expects Jamie to be in the kitchen. We are smart, but also casual and friendly.”

And fairly competitively priced. A meal at Jamie’s weighs in at about NT\$1,000 per person.

Food with finesse

At the opposite end of the celebrity-chef spectrum is Taiwan chef André Chiang (江振誠), who is more artist than entrepreneur. The respected French magazine *Le Chef* rates him among the “100 Best Chefs in the World,” at number 37. In 2014, he opened Raw in Taipei’s Neihu district, blending tradition and local ingredients with cutting-edge techniques from around the world. He also incorporates his signature “Octaphilosophy” approach to fine dining, inspired by the fundamental principles of reality represented by the eight symbols or trigrams of *bagua* (八卦) in Taoist cos-

Jamie’s Italian serves up merchandise as well as such meals as burgers and its bespoke Taiwan Hot pizza.

PHOTOS: JULES QUARTLY



mology. The eight elements in Chiang's cosmological cuisine are salt, texture, memory, purity, terroir, "south" (implying lightness, freshness, and plenty of seafood), and unique.

At the table this Octaphilosophy translates into an eight-course tasting menu featuring such gems as in-house baked bread with buckwheat and whipped cream butter; a salad of mint-like *shiso* sorbet, slices of red and yellow tomatoes, with *kanpachi sashimi* nestling under cucumber, topped off by a rosé champagne vinaigrette; and a dessert of sliced strawberries and pink guava sorbet, garnished with cranberry juice and a smidgeon of roasted apple.

While Oliver aims to fill the belly, Chiang's declared intent is "not to feed the stomach but to fill the heart and soul." It's a quote from George Calombaris, Australia's master chef and part of his definition of what the kitchen should be. While Oliver was a sous chef, Chiang was head chef of the Michelin three-star Le Jardin des Sens in France. While Oliver wants world domination, Chiang has no intention of opening another Taiwan restaurant, though there are loud calls for him to do so.

Raised in Taipei's Shilin, he was taught to cook by his mother. He relocated to Japan and then France for 15 years, where he mastered his craft. He speaks Chinese, French, Japanese, and English. In *The World's Top 50 Restaurants*, Raw is described as a place "where food meets art...and has become the hottest reservation on the island." At his eponymous Restaurant André, in Singapore, Chiang is the chef, his wife serves – and if he's not there, it closes.

In a phone call from Singapore, one of the first things Chiang says is: "I'm not a celebrity chef, or a personality. No artist would call themselves an artist. I just feel that I have a responsibility to connect people, and point out the right thing to do, so people can see new possibilities. I can charge NT\$10,000 for a meal with my name on it, but I want to set an example. There's no need for caviar and truffles. I can do something nice with what we have. That's more important to me."

Compared with other fine-dining



PHOTO: RAW

establishments run by big-name chefs, Raw is famously reasonable when it comes to price, about NT\$3,000 per person. While most restaurants have suppliers and the best chefs go to the market for their ingredients, Chiang and his team go one step further. "All the ingredients are 100% from Taiwan. There is a focus on all the beautiful things we have here and I use Raw to showcase this. It makes no sense to have a Japanese pastry chef, French this, Italian that. We have a young team, but everything is Taiwan produced, from the interior, to the metals, the tea and coffee, down to the decorative flower arrangements. We don't import anything; we produce according to the season (four seasons, 24 micro seasons). We could easily go to the market, but we make the extra effort to go to the mountains."

This intense focus on providing the best that Taiwan has to offer goes to the heart of Chiang's philosophy of cuisine, which is to "Carry the knowledge of how people lived in the past and redefine it in the language of this generation." It's a way of passing on of the torch. Many of Chiang's dishes reprise night market favorites, but refined, redefined, and improved. "We update, so the flavor is

not just Taiwanese but international, so it is easy for diners to understand what Taiwan is about."

It's the opposite approach to, say, Jamie's, or Restaurant Atelier de Joël Robuchon in the Bellavita mall in Taipei's Xinyi district, or any number of other celebrity chefs who have come here, setting out to introduce foods from abroad and convert the locals. "We have to dig deeper," says Chiang. "It's not difficult for Taiwan to set an example and deliver a very important message. This is the ambition, and if many people work in the same direction, then we will change the environment and the Taiwan flavor will be known around the world."

As for the trend for branded restaurants to open in Taiwan, Chiang believes it's not sustainable. "It will get less and less. Interest will slowly fade. I say this because looking at Singapore, it went along the same path. Now, the best there are local. There is a learning process, and once you have something that other people have, then you move to the second stage and you want something that others don't have. It will take a few years, but eventually Taiwan will have its own haute cuisine to be proud of." ■



ALEXANDER'S: PHOTO BY MATTHEW FULCO

TAIWAN'S GROWING APPETITE FOR BEEF

The steakhouse market has moved upmarket with the arrival of some new restaurants.

BY MATTHEW FULCO

High-end Western food has long struggled to gain a footing in Taipei. Celebrity chefs known for fusion cuisine, like Singapore's Justin Quek, have come and gone. Yet one type of pricey Western restaurant has been successful here: the American steakhouse and other establishments specializing in beef. Indeed, Taipei has more than 20 such restaurants, some long established. Ruth's Chris Steakhouse opened in 1993, Lawry's The Prime Rib Taipei in 2002, and the Ambassador Hotel's A Cut Steakhouse about a decade ago.

"There's a perception in Taiwan that steak or prime rib is equivalent to fine dining," says Alex Lin, restaurant manager at Lawry's.

With the arrival of California-based Alexander's in 2015 and Chicago-based Morton's in 2016, Taipei's steakhouse scene has now moved further upmarket. A three-course dinner at either (without alcohol) can easily surpass NT\$4,000 if a diner selects one of the more premium cuts of beef. In June, Alexander's invited Michelin chef Claude Le Tohic to co-present an eight-course tasting menu priced at NT\$7,000 per person.

Morton's executive chef, Francis Beauvais, who formerly worked at the Mandarin Oriental and Regent, is optimistic about Morton's prospects. "We have been observing the Taiwan market for many years and have found interest in steak and beef here far exceeds what we had imagined."

Morton's looks to be banking on its strong brand and a stellar location at the apex of the Xinyi Breeze tower to justify the high price of admission. "With the extraordinary view Morton's Taipei offers, there are a lot of people celebrating their special occasions with us," says marketing communication manager Amy Kao.

The restaurant's location in one of Taipei's busiest business districts also ensures that it draws heavily from the corporate market, from client entertainment to employee appreciation lunches and dinners, she adds.

Business looked good on a recent Friday, as a slew of guests poured onto the open-air terrace offering a sweeping 180-degree perspective of the city, from

the misty peaks of the Four Beasts Mountains to the Shin Kong Mitsukoshi Tower near Taipei Main Station. They were there to enjoy Morton's Power Hour, which is actually double that length (5-7 p.m. Monday-Friday) and offers hefty discounts on bar bites and drinks.

To make a meal of it will still cost over NT\$1,000, but it seems like a bargain considering the options: tuna tartare tacos, petite filet mignon sandwiches, mini crabcake BLTs, and parmesan matchstick truffle fries, to name but a few.

No such bargains are available on the dinner menu, but Beauvais says there's a reason for that: Morton's uses only USDA prime beef – the top grade as determined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Marbling – the fat lines found within a cut of meat and between the muscle fibers – largely determines quality grade. The fat melts when beef cooks, infusing the meat with flavor and making it more tender.

Following the slaughter of a cow, an inspector examines the rib area of a carcass to determine its grade based on the amount of marbling present. Roughly 42% of U.S. beef is graded “choice” based on the small amount of marbling. Beef with “slightly abundant” marbling is graded “select,” a category that accounts for about 55% of U.S. beef. Just 3% receives the “prime” categorization as the meat with the most marbling.

Beauvais recommends the 10-ounce American Wagyu Ribeye Steak sourced from Snake River Farms, an Idaho ranch known for its adoption of many aspects of the Japanese feeding method that takes up to four times longer than typical U.S. processes. Cooked to order, that steak “remains juicy and tender because of its Japanese-grade marbling,” Beauvais says. “It's a buttery and superior-textured meat.”

Wagyu beef is also known for its nutritional value. Its high marbling

boosts the ratio of monounsaturated fats to saturated fats, and it contains a higher percentage of omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids than ordinary beef.

For its beef, Morton's mainly utilizes the “wet” or “Cryovac” aging process, favored for the savory taste it produces and the minimal waste. Wet aging entails sealing beef cuts in largely airtight polyethylene bags and storing the meat at temperatures just above freezing for up to 30 days. During the aging process, an enzyme created as the meat decomposes breaks down muscle, enhancing the flavor and tenderness of the meat.

Living in the dry age

Morton's is one of the few Taipei steakhouses that focuses on the wet aging technique. Other steakhouses *Taiwan Business TOPICS* visited were adamant in their support of “dry aging,” a process in which beef is hung in coolers to age anywhere from three weeks to several months. High-powered fans in the coolers help to remove moisture from the meat. As evaporation shrinks the meat, it softens, concentrating the flavor.

“In the dry-aging process, you're extending the cellular breakdown of the



PHOTO: MATTHEW FULCO

Beef for Toscana undergoing dry aging at The Sherwod.



PHOTO: MATTHEW FULCO

The dry-aged U.S. beef served at The Sherwood's Toscana restaurant has won a wide following.

meat,” says James Brownsmith, executive chef of Alexander’s Steakhouse. “Once the collagen [which holds the muscle fibers together] is broken down, the steak becomes more tender. You can see that the muscle fibers are packed closer, tighter, and as you chew, they feel a little lusher, though there is no visible juice on the plate.”

As the surface of the meat dries, spores grow on it that impart their own flavor, he notes. “You’re almost treating it like a wine. Since the steak is dry-aged here, you’re getting the terroir of Taiwan in the taste in the meat.” After 30 days, that flavor will be fairly subtle. Extend the dry-aging process to 100 days and “your steak will taste like you already put blue cheese on it,” Brownsmith says.

While acclaimed for its taste, dry-aged beef is costly to produce. To begin with, the beef loses up to 15% of its volume during drying. Further, during the aging process a crusty exterior forms on the meat that cannot be consumed. Once it is trimmed, the meat has lost anywhere from 35% to 50% of its original weight. Finally, there are increased costs associated with a dedicated dry-aging facility, which requires precise air circulation, temperature, and humidity.

“Our chef must go to the dry-aging

room three times a day to make sure the temperature is 1 to 2 degrees Celsius and that humidity does not exceed 60%,” says Achim van Hake, general manager of The Sherwood Taipei, a five-star hotel that played a pioneering role in introducing dry-aged beef to Taiwan in 2006.

A decade ago, Sherwood executives traveling in the United States observed the then-nascent dry-aging trend, von Hake notes. “They were amazed with the taste of the dry-aged beef, with the intensity of its flavor. When they returned to Taiwan, they said, ‘The Sherwood needs to bring dry-aged beef here.’” The hotel then sent its chefs to the United States to learn the dry-aging technique, and it invited master steak chef Hans Aeschbacher to appear at its Toscana restaurant and provide training to the local cooking team. Aeschbacher has been the head chef at renowned steakhouses including Chicago Cut Steakhouse and Smith & Wollensky.

“The influence of the dry-aging trend in the U.S. on Taiwan has been very strong,” says Chef Philip Wu of Gustoso, the Madison Taipei’s Italian restaurant. “Many Taiwanese have studied in America; they’ve worked there too. They were exposed to the dry-aging trend as it began, and developed a taste for beef pre-

pared in that manner.”

Gustoso has made some small adjustments to the presentation of its dry-aged steaks to ensure guest satisfaction, Wu notes. “We serve center-cut ribeye, which has had much of the fat trimmed from it. A steak with a high amount of fat in it tastes too greasy to many Taiwanese.”

No beef allowed

Because of periodic bans on U.S. beef imports to Taiwan, it has been challenging at times for The Sherwood to source its steak, von Hake observes. Following the discovery in 2003 of a case of Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, commonly known as mad cow disease) in Washington State, 65 countries – including Taiwan – banned the import of U.S. beef either partially or completely. Even as Taiwan kept certain restrictions in place on U.S. beef, by 2007 the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) said U.S. beef was safe to consume. The OIE currently lists U.S. beef as having negligible BSE risk.

In late 2009, the Ma Ying-jeou administration lifted most of the remaining restrictions on U.S. beef imports, only to have the Legislative Yuan – controlled by Ma’s own political party, the Kuomintang – re-impose a ban on certain products from the United States, including ground beef and internal organs, in January 2010. The move was prompted by the desire of many lawmakers in both major political parties to dispel any criticism that they were insufficiently attentive to the public well-being.

The ban was bad for business, says Lawry’s Lin. “It was very hard at that time to get any U.S. beef at all, and what we could get would typically be held up in customs. Sales were hurt.”

During that tense period, The Sherwood was one of the few restaurants that continued to promote its steaks sourced from America. Indeed, it was during 2010 that The Sherwood introduced its dry-aging room. Davis Wu, then

director of the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF)-Taiwan, hailed the move in a statement published on the USMEF's website. "The willingness of the management of the Sherwood Hotel to aggressively support U.S. beef and expand into dry-aging is a testimony to their loyalty to U.S. beef," he said.

The presence of the muscle-enhancing feed additive ractopamine in American beef exports has been another point of contention. In 2011, Taiwan began rejecting U.S. beef shipments that tested positive for even trace elements of ractopamine, which is banned in Taiwan although the United States insists that there is no scientific evidence of its harmfulness to humans.

The U.S. and Taiwan resolved the ractopamine issue in September 2012. Taiwan agreed to accept a standard adopted by Codex Alimentarius Commission, the United Nations-affiliated organization that sets food safety standards, implementing a maximum residue level (MRL) of 10 parts per billion for the additive. Since then, the United States has once again surpassed Australia to become the top beef supplier to Taiwan. In 2015, the value of U.S. beef exports to Taiwan reached a record US\$329 million.

Despite the periodic bans on its importation to Taiwan, U.S. beef remains popular with Taiwanese consumers, observes Lawry's Lin. "U.S. beef is slightly sweeter and richer than Australian beef. Taiwanese prefer U.S. beef."

Greener pastures ahead

With competition intensifying in Taiwan's steakhouse market, restaurants are working hard to differentiate themselves. Lawry's focus on prime rib gives it a distinct niche, Lin explains. Prime rib is made by roasting meat from the center cuts of the primal rib for hours, giving rise to the name "roast beef." Nick Solares, a New York City-based food critic, writes on the New York Eater website: "At its best, prime rib embodies all the finest aspects of meat cooking – the heartiness of a stew, the tenderness of a long braise, the bodacious, up-front flavors of steak, and the salty and peppery punch of barbecue."

The use of hand-made "silver carts" (actually hammered out of stainless steel) is another special feature of Lawry's, Lin says. Designed according to the law of thermodynamics, the cart allows uniform, well-proportioned heat distribution. "The silver cart is like a moving kitchen," Lin says. With it, "the chef is able to showcase the standing rib roasts and carve the beef tableside, right before the eyes of guests."

Despite the arrival of some high-profile newcomers since 2015, business remains brisk at The Sherwood's Toscana restaurant, says von Hake. "Toscana has developed an excellent reputation among Taiwanese beef lovers and patrons of steakhouses," he says. "The brand stands for quality."

Of course, it is not beef alone that attracts local gourmets (and gourmands) to Toscana, he adds. "One of our most popular dishes is surf and turf, which is perfect for sharing. The combination of a half a Boston lobster with a juicy dry-aged steak is very popular with Taiwanese patrons."

Lobster also has a notable presence on the Morton's menu. In addition to surf and turf, the Chicago-based steakhouse offers lobster bisque, a hearty cream-based soup served with lobster medal-

ions made from fresh Boston lobster, and garnished with fresh chopped parsley. It takes three days to boil and prepare the lobster shells to create the soup, chef Beauvais notes.

Meanwhile, Alexander's expects corporate banquets and holiday celebrations to give a boost to business in the fourth quarter. Annual revenue is expected to reach US\$3 million this year and increase by 5% in 2017. "We are improving our knowledge of Taiwanese consumer tastes," says Brownsmith. When expanding internationally, "it's important to be flexible and relate to the local palate," he says. "Compared to Americans, Taiwanese are more sensitive to spiciness, fat, and salt."

Brownsmith notes that since April, Alexander's has offered prestigious American Imperial Wagyu Beef. The majority of the cattle used for this type of beef are raised on "lush green vistas" before entering a fully vegetarian feeding phase that lasts 400 days. That production method results in delicate steaks with tiny flakes of marbling and velvety texture, he says.

"Since Taiwanese really enjoy eating steak and understand how to taste it," says Beauvais, "we think there is room for everyone in this market." ❧



ALEXANDER'S: PHOTO BY MATTHEW FULCO



PHOTO: MATTHEW FULCO

DESPITE CONTROLLED HEAT, SICHUAN CUISINE BURNS BRIGHT IN TAIPEI

Chefs have toned down the spiciness to accommodate local taste.

BY MATTHEW FULCO

Cuisine from China's southwestern Sichuan province has a well-deserved reputation for intense flavors given its frequent use of chili peppers, numbing Sichuan peppercorns, bean paste, and garlic. Many aficionados of the cuisine insist that the spicier, the better. Anything less than fiery is considered pedestrian.

My brother was close friends in college with a Chengdu native who insisted heat was paramount to the Sichuan dining experience. At the then only authentic Sichuan restaurant in Connecticut's Hartford County, he always ordered the dishes on the menu identified with three chili peppers (zero was the mildest,

three the hottest). While the rest of us were sweating or choking, he would note casually that the food "still lacked some flavor." Once, cooking up a Sichuan feast in our home, he used so much chili oil that it set off the smoke detector.

In Taiwan, where milder flavors are preferred, one is hard pressed to find Sichuan food with much kick. The Taiwanese palate tends to recoil instinctively from overly liberal doses of the chili oil, hot peppers, and salt that are essential ingredients in classic Sichuan dishes like *mapo tofu* (麻婆豆腐, "pockmarked old woman beancurd"), double-cooked pork (回鍋肉), or spicy eggplant with minced pork (魚香茄子). Indeed, when

Taiwanese chefs are indulgent with any single ingredient, it tends to be sugar – not oil, chili, or salt.

That tendency has led some purists to lament the lack of authenticity in Taipei's Sichuan restaurants. On the Facebook page of the Chili House, one of Taiwan's longest-running Sichuan restaurants, some recent comments lambast the restaurant for toning down the spiciness. Commentator Kli Tei laments that the Chili House takes the edge off of its food to suit foreign tastebuds (an interesting comment, as I have seen few foreign customers there on multiple visits). He says he had to ask the restaurant manager to add extra chili peppers to the food

to make it sufficiently pungent.

Commentator Sam Yang goes further, blaming the restaurant's second-generation management for failing to maintain its erstwhile high standard. Yang says the food is insufficiently numbing and aromatic, tasting nothing like what he remembers from his childhood. "Don't take your Chinese clients or friends here; they won't be happy," he writes.

It didn't look that way on a recent Thursday evening, with the restaurant at full capacity and several boisterous dinner banquets in full swing. The guests were nearly all Taiwanese. People First Party chairman James Soong even showed up to have dinner with one of the restaurant owners, who glowed with pride as he introduced us.

Soong has long been a regular, according to co-owner Wan Min-chi. "He loves the food," she says. The veteran Taiwanese politician is one of a number of luminaries who frequent the Chili House, which has a reputation for dis-

cretion. "The windows here do not face the street, so dining here is a very private experience," Wan notes. Although the Chili House's address is listed as 250-3 ZhongXiao East Road, Section 4 – a very central location – the entrance is actually in a narrow lane that is easy to miss.

Of course, the setting is unimportant if the food is outstanding, and the Chili House has plenty of it: savory *dan dan* noodles (擔擔麵), delicate Chengdu-style pork dumplings (紅油餃子), pan-fried string beans with minced pork (乾扁四季豆) served in a thin pancake, and a fluffy Sichuan omelette bathed in chili sauce (魚香烘蛋), to name a few.

Wan concedes that in its 65-year history the Chili House has adjusted some of its recipes (it was founded in 1951 by a group of recent migrants from Sichuan together with several local Taiwanese). That's a response to market demand, she explains. "In recent years, Taiwanese have become more health conscious. People want to eat food that's not overly

oily, that's not too salty."

The difference between the Chili House's food and Sichuan food served in China is palpable, says Wan, who makes regular trips to China for culinary inspiration. "The Sichuan food you'll have in Chengdu or even Shanghai is heavier than what's served in Taiwan," she says. "It's more of everything: chili peppers, oil, salt, sauces."

Sichuan cuisine 101

Research by China's state-run China Publishing Group has found that the intense flavors that characterize Sichuan cuisine today only became common about a hundred years ago, and that in the beginning only the lower classes ate food prepared in this style. While Portuguese traders introduced hot pepper to China in the late 17th century, it took several centuries before it became a staple of Sichuan cooking.

Interestingly, during the Three King-



PHOTO: MATTHEW FULCO

Boiled pork with mashed garlic (蒜泥白肉) is one of the standard dishes on Sichuan menus.



PHOTO: MATTHEW FULCO



PHOTO: MATTHEW FULCO

The Szechuan Court's Chef Fong and the restaurant's sliced fish, top. Xiao Wei's mapo tofu, below.

doms period in China (the 3rd century AD), Sichuan was the location of the Shu kingdom, whose inhabitants were known for preferring sweet food. Their tastes changed in the Jin Dynasty era (AD 265-420) when they developed a taste for pungent food flavored with ginger, mustard, chives, and onions.

The mild flavorings that characterized Sichuan cuisine in ancient times can still be tasted in dishes today like camphor tea roast duck (樟茶鴨), boiled pork with mashed garlic (蒜泥白肉), and dry-fried carp (豆瓣鯉魚).

Chef Fong Chin Hsu of the Ambassador Hotel's Szechuan Court – considered the top of the line among Sichuan restaurants in Taipei – notes that due to the numerous cooking tech-

niques involved, Sichuan cuisine is far more complex than most people realize. Among these techniques are dry-frying, dry-braising, water poaching, and the smoking of meats.

In an interview with the website Serious Eats, Chinese food expert Fuchsia Dunlop said Sichuan cuisine is best characterized by its “stunning variety of flavors.” She referred to a Chinese idiomatic expression that translates as “each dish has its own style, a hundred dishes have a hundred different flavors.”

The Chili House's version of the classic Sichuan dish *dan dan* noodles is a good example of that. Most Taiwanese versions of the dish are anodyne, its subtle blend of numbness and fire overwhelmed by gobs of peanut or sesame sauce. The Chili House's take on the dish is a symphony of flavors by comparison, the sauce a savory mix of preserved vegetables, chili oil, Sichuan pepper, minced pork, and scallions. It's just hot enough to excite your palate, but the spiciness doesn't overpower the many other rich flavors in the dish.

I found the same is true of the *mapo tofu* at the Ambassador Hotel's Szechuan Court. Typically, *mapo tofu* in mainland China is blazing hot. It tastes of chili oil and Sichuan peppercorns. In Taiwan, the dish is more likely to be devoid of spice and a little sweet. But the Ambassador has found a perfect balance. Chef Fong says the use of minced beef – required by the traditional recipe – instead of pork makes the dish more savory. The key,



PHOTO: MATTHEW FULCO


he says, is to first dry-fry the beef, and then set it aside, adding it to the tofu at the end as a garnish rather than stir-fried with the rest of the ingredients.

Another recommended Taipei Sichuan restaurant is Xiao Wei, which opened as a 10-seat eatery in 1971 near Nanmen Market and moved to its current location near Taipei Main Station about 20 years ago. Chen Ching-bin, the restaurant manager, says Xiao Wei focuses on serving top-quality but simple Sichuan-style dishes at a reasonable price. "We want this restaurant to be accessible to all types of guests, so we keep prices affordable," he says. An average meal at Xiao Wei runs NT\$300-\$400 per person, which is not high by Taipei standards.

The cooking is more home-style than at the Chili House, but equally enjoyable. Chen recommends the *gong bao* chicken (宮保雞丁), *mapo tofu*, and the classic Sichuan hotpot of pig intestine and duck's blood (五更腸旺). The latter is a favorite of Taiwanese, though Westerners may be squeamish approaching it. At Chen's prodding, I tucked into a piece of intestine, which had the consistency of firm bean curd and had absorbed the intense heat of the broth.

Chen says Xiao Wei is able to keep prices low but quality high because its head chef, Chiang Chin-chen, formerly worked as a purchaser of ingredients for hotel restaurants, waking up as early as 2 a.m., combing the city's markets for his clients, and delivering their orders before 8 a.m. "He spent years sourcing ingredients for some of the best restaurants in town," Chen says. "He became very good at finding the best and freshest ingredients."

While Sichuan food is arguably more of an acquired taste than other milder Chinese cuisines like Cantonese or Taiwanese, enthusiasts are fiercely devoted, the Ambassador Hotel's Fong says. Some may even wish to try their hand at cooking Sichuan food at home. Chef Fong does not recommend that. "It's very difficult to make authentic Sichuan food at home," he says. "There are too many ingredients required, most homes lack a stove with a hot enough flame for the various cooking techniques, and then there's the problem of ventilation."

Recalling how my brother's Chengdu friend set off our smoke detector, I would say Chef Fong's advice is astute: "Leave the Sichuan cooking to us." 

Some recommended restaurants:

Chili House (四川吳抄手)
250-3 ZhongXiao E. Rd., Sec. 4, Taipei
Tel: 2721-6088
<http://www.chilihouse.htm.tw>

Emei Restaurant (峨嵋餐廳)
No. 10, Alley 8, Lane 316, Roosevelt Rd.,
Sec. 3, Taipei
Tel: 2365-5157

Huangcheng Laoma Sichuan Restaurant
(皇城老媽四川家庭料理)
No. 5, Lane 97, YanJi St., Taipei
Tel: 2773-6936

Kiki Yanji Dian (KIKI筵吉店)
No. 47, Lane 280, GuangFu S. Rd., Taipei
Tel: 27814250
(see the website www.kiki1991.com for the location of other branches)

Szechuan Court (川菜廳)
12F, Ambassador Hotel
63 ZhongShan N. Rd., Sec. 2, Taipei
Tel: 2551-1111 x2384

Xiao Wei Sichuan (小魏川菜餐廳)
3F, 13 GongYuan Rd., Taipei
Tel: 2371-8427

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ISLAMIC FLAVORS BLENDING WELL IN TAIPEI

More Muslim tourists means more demand for
halal-certified restaurants.

BY SCOTT WEAVER



PHOTO: KUMING ISLAMIC/CHRIS STOWERS



PHOTO: CHRIS STOWERS

Applications are surging in Taiwan for *halal* (清真) certification – assurance that a restaurant’s food preparation strictly follows Muslim law. This growth likely helped Taiwan achieve its ranking as the world’s seventh-most Muslim-friendly travel destination among non-Muslim countries, according to the “Global Muslim Travel Index 2016” survey published by Mastercard-CrescentRating. Taiwan’s rating was up from 10th place in the 2015 survey.

Given the continuing efforts of the Taiwan government to promote tourism from countries with large Muslim populations, this ranking may well move even higher. The number of restaurants, hotels, and other venues in Taiwan certified either as *halal* or the equivalent “Muslim-friendly” designation increased to 92 at the end of October 2016, according to Jeff Tsai, *Halal* Specialist for the Chinese Muslim Association (CMA), which is responsible for the certification process. The figure was up 21% from the 76 at the end of 2015, and a steep increase from the mere 11 at the end of 2011. Tsai expressed hope that the number of certified establishments will soon reach 100.

This program has transformed Taiwan from a place with very limited *halal* food availability to a locale offering many choices from among many different types

of cuisine. The CMA office, located within the Taipei Grand Mosque at 62 XinSheng S. Rd., Sec. 2, can provide visitors with a list of Taiwan’s *halal*-certified restaurants.

Among the provisions of Islamic law are a prohibition on pork products and a requirement that other meat come from animals slaughtered in accordance with Islamic ritual practice.

A key factor behind the surge in *halal* certification requests are shifts taking place in the composition of Taiwan’s tourism. For both political and economic reasons, the number of tourists coming from China, especially in group tours, has been declining, while arrivals from areas with large Muslim populations are growing. Taiwan’s extension of its e-visa and visa-waiver programs to more countries with large Muslim populations has helped spur the trend.

Taiwan Tourism Bureau data for the first 10 months of 2016 show that tourism arrivals from China were down by 44% to 220,000, while arrivals from Southeast Asia rose by 25% to 150,000. Among the Southeast Asian countries, arrivals from Malaysia rose by 11%, Singapore by 8%, and Indonesia by 5%.

In response to that shift, the Tourism Bureau has engaged in active outreach to encourage restaurants to gain *halal* certi-

fication. It has conducted forums to educate restaurant owners about the potential benefits of *halal* certification and the procedures for obtaining it. The Bureau offers subsidies of up to NT\$200,000 to help offset direct costs incurred in connection with the *halal* certification.

Besides making Taiwan more attractive to Muslim visitors, the government views the encouragement of *halal* certification as a worthy activity in its own right. “Taiwan is a Gourmet Kingdom, right?” says Eric Lin, director of the Tourism Bureau’s International Affairs Division. “*Halal* is a healthy standard. Everyone can eat and enjoy foods that meet this standard, whether they are locals or visitors.”

“When we first started encouraging restaurants to obtain *halal* certification, many owners dismissed the idea, saying ‘Oh, that’s very difficult,’” Lin recalls. “But we’ve worked to show them that it’s really not that difficult or expensive.” Over time, as restaurant owners have looked more closely at the program, more and more of them have decided that in the current environment it may make sense for them to obtain either *halal* certification (accorded only to those of Muslim faith) or the “Muslim-Friendly” designation in cases where the owner is not Muslim.

According to the CMA’s Tsai, changes are also occurring in the demographics of Taiwan’s resident Muslim population. Although he estimates that the total number of Muslims has remained rather stable at about 223,000 believers, the composition has been evolving. Many of the older Muslims who came over from China in the wake of the Chinese Civil War in the 1940s have passed away, but taking their place have been younger people from countries such as Indonesia, who are either working or studying in Taiwan. These more recent arrivals have also increased the demand for *halal* eateries.

The diverse demographics of Taiwan’s Muslim population can be observed at the Taipei Grand Mosque during Friday prayers. The Mosque is open to guests, although non-Muslims should avoid entering the prayer hall. Visitors are also asked to dress appropriately (no short

pants, please).

Below is a selection of *halal*-certified restaurants representing a range of cuisines, atmospheres, and price levels.

Chungkuo Beef (Noodles) Restaurant (清真中國牛肉麵餐館); No. 1, Alley 7, Lane 137, YanJi St. Located near the intersection of YanJi St. and ZhongXiao E. Rd., Chungkuo Beef Noodles tends to be crowded, a testament to its popularity. It is one of the old-style Chinese Muslim restaurants founded more than half a century ago by natives of northeastern Chinese provinces, especially Shandong, and now often run by their descendants. Others of this type are Zhang Jia Beef Noodles (21 YanPing S. Rd.) and right next door to it the Muslim Beef Noodles Restaurant (23 YanPing S. Rd.).

Of these, Chungkuo is the largest and most modern. For NT\$155, you can enjoy a flavorful bowl of traditional Taiwanese beef noodle soup. Also recommended is the beef with pancakes, which resembles Peking duck in style and flavor (you can request a less sweet style if you prefer). Also be sure to also try some of the side dishes, such as the sliced cucumbers and Chinese eggplant.

Tajin Moroccan Cuisine (塔吉摩洛哥料理); No. 3, Lane 144, Keelung Rd., Sec. 2. If you're looking for a delicious meal that's a bit different from what you're used to, Tajin Moroccan may be



PHOTO: CHRIS STOWERS

the answer to your search. The owner, Hicham Samh, is from Morocco and seeks to provide an authentic Moroccan experience, starting with the interior design and decoration, as well as the traditional music playing in the background.

Among the signature dishes are Ourzazata Traditional Lamb (摩洛哥羊肉) and an excellent Marrakech Cheese Kofta (番茄起士牛肉丸). The set meals include saffron rice and pita bread. For

an extra charge, very good couscous and humus are available.

Also recommended is the Meknes Beef with Plums (番紅花牛肉蜜棗). The spiciness of the beef together with the slight sweet-and-sour flavor of the plums makes for a very tasty combination. Finish the meal with the excellent coffee or mint tea, and the desserts include dates (try these!), marshmallow treats, and yogurt.

Saffronbolu Turkish Restaurant (番紅花城土耳其餐廳); 60 NanJing E. Rd., Sec. 2. The elegant interior and cushioned seats create a very comfortable and welcoming atmosphere. The menu options include eggplant with yogurt, lamb kebab, lentil soup, and a good beef pida, which is something like Turkish pizza. The Turkish salad with its bursts of Mediterranean flavors is a good choice to begin the meal.

The cold, sour flavor of the traditional yogurt drink adds a nice refreshing note during the meal, and afterward a cup of Turkish tea and the very sweet but good



PHOTO: CHRIS STOWERS

Turkish food at the Saffronbolu, above, and a Thai shrimp dish at Yunus Halal, left.

cookies are a nice way to top it off.

Kunming Islamic (昆明園); No. 26, Lane 81, FuXing North Rd. Proprietor Yacoob Mah has operated the current Kunming Islamic Restaurant for more than 20 years, earning a reputation for very tasty dishes and building a loyal clientele. The restaurant offers what Mah describes as “international” dishes, primarily based on the cuisines of India, Thailand, Burma, and the Middle East.

Frequent customer Jason Sliman regards the Kunming as his favorite restaurant, and his favorite dish is the Chili Prawn (辣醬蝦). “The sauce is out of this world,” he raves.

The menu offers quite a bit of variety. Start with the moist and well-flavored vegetable samosas – the best we’ve had in Taiwan. Another good early selection is the Burmese Cold Tea Salad. The Indian chapati bread and humus make good pairings with other dishes, such as the coconut chicken and spicy lamb.

Taj Indian Restaurant (泰姬印度餐廳); No. 1, Lane 48, Civic Blvd., Sec. 4). Taipei has several *halal*-certified Indian/Pakistani restaurants. One we especially enjoyed was the Taj Indian, whose pleasant interior design is highlighted by beautiful tapestries on the walls. The Taj offers a comprehensive menu, such as chicken palaak (curry chicken with spinach) and dahl macani (lentils with kidney beans). Try the potato parata as a change from the more common naan bread.

Yunus Halal Restaurant (Thai) (清真泰富豪); 36 BeiNing Rd. Yunus offers a very friendly atmosphere and a menu containing a mix of Thai and Chinese dishes, with an emphasis on the former. The dishes are tasty – imaginatively prepared and attractively presented. An English menu with photos is available (although the photos don’t really do justice to the food).

Royal Café and Restaurant (Indonesian); 72 XinSheng S. Rd., Sec. 2. This simple shop, offering tasty Indonesian flavors at very reasonable prices, is situated just a few doors south of the Taipei Grand Mosque. The food, while not exotic, is very enjoyable. We had the *mie goreng* (Indonesian fried noodles) and two glasses of iced tea for only NT\$180. ☞

Kunming’s Yakoob Mah: Long Journey to a Good Place

Yakoob Mah was born in what was then called Burma to Muslim parents from China’s Yunnan Province. Mah’s father was a member of the Kuomintang army during the Chinese Civil War, and was among many soldiers who withdrew to Burma after China

fell to the Communists. As hopes of retaking the mainland faded, young Mah was sent to Taiwan to study, and eventually the rest of the family followed.

Years later, after taking his father back to visit Yunnan, he realized that “In Burma we were refugees, when we arrived in Taiwan we were ‘mainlanders,’ and when we went back to Yunnan for a visit, we were ‘Taiwan compatriots (台胞)’! It was as if we didn’t really belong anywhere.”

In the early 1980s, Mah established the first Kunming restaurant – named in honor of his grandmother, a native of Kunming – across from the Taipei World Trade Center on Keelung Road. Serving halal food, the restaurant did very well, and attracted many customers from among wealthy Muslim businessmen from Saudi Arabia and other locations. They encouraged him to shift from the Chinese cuisine he originally offered to fare from India, Thailand, and other areas that might suit the tastes of more Muslims. He thus gradually moved his menu in that direction.

Taiwan’s economy was booming, and so was Mah’s restaurant. Seeing the potential for further growth, he moved the restaurant to a location behind the Sogo Department Store. But this move coincided with a downturn in Taiwan’s economy as China’s rise began to attract business people away from Taiwan. In those circumstances, this second restaurant failed.

Mah says this was a very difficult time in his life, and his spirits were low. Perhaps he had been too greedy, he thought. Eventually, he was able to put together enough funds to open the third Kunming, which is the current restaurant.

With a slight choke in his voice, he says: “This place has been lucky for me.” He believes God (Allah) gave this opportunity to him, and he is very thankful for it. In the same year that he opened his current restaurant, he experienced another life-changing event with the birth of his daughter. He happily notes that this year she has begun attending university in Tainan.

Mah says one lesson he learned from his earlier difficulties was the importance of having a diversified customer base. If the winds of change blow and one type of customer declines, there will be others to enable the business to continue. Currently Mah says that about half of his customers are local Taiwanese and half are expatriates and overseas tourists.



PHOTO: CHRIS STOWERS

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GETTING A HANDLE ON THE TAIWANESE HAMBURGER

The humble *guabao* is now gaining popularity among food lovers on other continents.

BY STEVEN CROOK AND KATY HUI-WEN HUNG



PHOTO: RICH MAETHESON



Compared to the cult-like veneration of beef noodles, hot pot, and stinky tofu in Taiwan, the *guabao* (割包 or 刈包) is an underappreciated snack. What English-speakers often call “the Taiwanese hamburger” is available in every town and city, but certainly not on every street, nor even in many night markets.

Because of their shape, these hearty delights often appear in *weiya* (尾牙) banquets, traditional end-of-the-year feasts at which Taiwanese bosses treat their employees. According to some, a generously proportioned *guabao* bears an auspicious resemblance to a purse overflowing with money. The way in which the bun envelops the pork has also inspired a nickname which some vendors have embraced: *hu yao zhu* (虎咬豬, pronounced *ho ka ti* in Holo, “tiger bites pig”).

Some foodies steer clear of *guabao* because they think neither of the main ingredients – pork belly and steamed bread – is especially healthful. The meat, while exceptionally tender and juicy, is heavily marbled with fat. To people who believe whole-wheat bread is better for you than loaves made of bleached flour, the shiny whiteness of the wrap suggests it offers nothing but carbohydrates. Those who abstain may be right, yet over the past six or seven years the popularity of *guabao* in the Western world has leapfrogged that of other Taiwanese dishes.

And truly Taiwanese it seems to be, too. There is a theory, though not a widely held one, that a meat-filled,

steamed cut bun called *roujia mo* (肉夾饅, literally “meat pressed into a small loaf”) popular in the mainland Chinese province of Shaanxi made its way to Fujian and eventually to Taiwan. Fujianese cuisine does have something called *khong bah pau* (the Holo pronunciation of 焗肉包; *kong rou bao* in Mandarin), but nothing is added to the meat and bun but celtuce (also known as Chinese lettuce).

Taiwanese *guabao*, by contrast, almost always incorporate fresh cilantro, pickled mustard greens, and a dusting of crushed peanut. “These three components extend the dimensions and depth of the dish tremendously, making it so much more interesting,” gush Singaporean bloggers TravellingFoodies (<https://travelling-foodies.com>). “The regular [*khong bah pau*] taste rather plain and run-of-the-mill in comparison.”

Just as it is hard to image an American-style hamburger without lettuce, tomato, onion, and perhaps a pickle, many Taiwanese assert that if a *guabao* is to be considered authentic, peanut powder is an essential element.

Guabao is similar to the Mexican dish *carnitas soft taco* in that the protein in both is slow-cooked pork. However, whereas *carnitas* is pulled apart by hand or shredded, most *guabao* feature a single slab of deliciously soft meat about the size of a deck of playing cards.

Taiwanese usually call this *kong rou* (焗肉, *khong bah* in Holo). Beyond Taiwan and Fujian, common names for pork cooked this way include *hongshao rou* (紅燒肉, “braised pork”) or *dongpo*

rou (東坡肉, featured in many cookery books as “Dongpo pork”). A few vendors advertise their *guabao* with the Holo term for uncooked pork belly (三層肉, *sa chan bab*; in Mandarin this cut is known as *wuhua rou*, 五花肉).

Not just any chunk of pork belly will do. The meat should not be too lean, to ensure it does not become dry and fibrous after braising. The meat is cooked in a thick gravy that typically includes soy sauce, rice wine, and often sugar (see the recipe at the end of this article). Some chefs cook the pork this way for several hours; others not nearly so long. The goal is “melt-in-the-mouth textures,” according to TravellingFoodies. “The fatty layers and pork rind are still intact but [have] developed an almost gelatin-like consistency. Wobbly collagen-packed meat with a plenitude of flavors in savory, sweetness and spice.”

Going international

New Yorkers have embraced the *guabao* iterations brought to them by restaurateurs such as David Chang and Eddie Huang. Best known these days for writing the memoir on which the ABC comedy *Fresh off the Boat* is based, Huang founded Baohaus with his brother Evan in 2009.

Stanford Chiou, an American foodie of Taiwanese descent who has sampled *guabao* throughout the United States and Taiwan, rates the pork-belly buns at Baohaus quite highly. At the same time, Chiou says he understands why some Tai-

wanese people are unhappy that Huang chose to call the pork-belly version he sells the Chairman Bao, in apparent homage to the late Communist dictator. Baohaus also sells buns filled with fried chicken, fried fish, or fried tofu.

“In New York City, Taipei Hong (in Flushing, Queens) is as close as you’re going to get to Lan Jia in Taipei,” says Chiou. “The *khong bah* could be better prepared, but you can specify how fatty or lean you prefer the meat, just like at Lan Jia.”

Chiou is referring to Lan Jia Guabao (藍家割包; No. 3, Alley 8, Lane 316, Roosevelt Road, Section 3; open 11 a.m. to 12 midnight, Tuesday to Sunday). It is perhaps Taiwan’s best-known seller of *guabao*, so expect a queue. The chefs here break with tradition by shredding the pork after it has been braised.

The pork buns popularized by David Chang at Momofuku in New York differ substantially from traditional *guabao*, says Chiou. “Tiger-bites-pig is filled with braised pork belly, pickled mustard greens, peanut powder, and cilantro, whereas a Momofuku bun is filled with roast pork belly, quick-cured cucumber, scallion, and hoisin sauce,” he notes.

Chiou notes that when a dish is introduced into the American diet from elsewhere, and especially if it becomes popular, “it often ends up being served in portions much larger than the original. Bagels are a good example of this.” Curiously, “the opposite seems to have happened with *guabao* in the U.S.,” observes



PHOTO: RICH MAETHESON

Chiou. “I would surmise that this is because the *guabao* was introduced to American cuisine as a starter in a fine-dining context, where diners are willing to pay higher prices for a relatively small amount of food, as opposed to a context of ‘cheap ethnic eats,’ where there’s an expectation of value for money.”

Across the Atlantic, *guabao* are not much bigger than scones, and also served in circumstances quite at odds with their humble origins. “We started as a small stall in Netil Market in East London selling just the *bao* buns and received an amazing response,” says Wai Ting Chung, one of the founders of Bao, which in May 2015 was described by *The Daily Telegraph* as a “buzzy Taiwanese restaurant” where diners have to queue for a table.

“We never thought that we would have the chance to open up a restaurant, but one thing led to another,” she says. “A year later we opened up in Soho and just a few months ago we opened our newest site in Fitzrovia. The three of us – me, my brother Shing, and his partner Erchen, who was born in Taipei – spent quite a bit of time traveling around Taiwan and eating everything we could along the way. We loved the *guabao*, and at that time it was quite rare to see a homemade *bao* in London. We thought it’d be a good opportunity for us to cook something we loved in a city that’s very open to trying new things.”

Chung says that getting the buns just right took a lot of time: “In the UK, the ingredients, temperature, and humidity are so different from Taiwan, so it was important to just keep tweaking the recipe and technique until it was right. In Taiwan, a lot of *guabao* vendors don’t actually make the *bao* themselves. They buy them in, whereas *baozi* (包子) are commonly made fresh, and you can see a big difference. It was important to recreate the softest and fluffiest texture we could.”

Chen Hsin-hung, who sells *guabao* for NT\$40 each in Tainan’s East Dis-



PHOTO: STEVEN CROOK

Stone Master's version of a *guabao* filled with crab meat.

trict, says profit margins are low, but unlike the other items he sells for breakfast, much of the preparation can be done the night before, and the leftovers have a long shelf-life.

Inevitably, prices are higher in Taipei. Ah-Wan's (阿萬油飯刈包; opposite the Wanhua Railway Station on Bangka Boulevard; open 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Monday to Saturday) charges NT\$50 per bun. This eatery has no pretensions – customers sit on stools placed around folding tables – but the *guabao* are excellent, although the crushed peanut sprinkled over the pork may be too sugary for some people.

Stone Master (石家刈包; flagship outlet at 21-2 Tonghua Street; open 10 a.m. to 12 midnight daily) offers a dozen different fillings, as well as the choice of “original” or whole-wheat bun (NT\$55 to \$65). However, some of the more exotic options, such as crab meat with salad, are a little bland.

The flagship store of the Olympia bakery/grocery chain (世運食品; 101 BoAi Road, Taipei; open 8:30 a.m. to 10 p.m. daily) sells a top-notch *guabao* for NT\$80. The bun is not overloaded with peanut powder, and the meat is not overly fatty. What makes it truly special is the addition of a slice of braised egg and a sliver of taro tucked under the pork.

Given the growing popularity of *guabao* in the West, it is not surprising to hear Ivy Chen (<http://kitchenivy.com>), who teaches Taiwanese and Chinese cooking to foreigners in Taipei, say that it tends to be her Western students, not those from Japan or other parts of Asia, who ask her to teach them how to make *guabao*.

“The most difficult part of making *guabao* is the bun, and my Western students tend to do this better than my Asian students, because they’ve experience making pies or bread. Their kneading and rolling techniques are better,” she says. “I never suggest to my students they buy the buns from a shop instead of making their own, as *guabao* buns are actually easier to prepare than *baozi*. Also, not everyone lives near an Asian supermarket, and if they learn this skill, they can apply it to other recipes.”

Recipe for Guabao

(courtesy of Ivy Chen)

Ingredients for 8 steamed buns

300g plain sifted flour
 ½ tablespoon active dry yeast
 1 tablespoon sugar
 Pinch of salt
 150ml water
 1 tablespoon vegetable oil (more oil is need for brushing the cut buns)

Ingredients for pickled mustard greens

1 stalk of pickled mustard green, finely chopped
 1 garlic, chopped
 2 tablespoons soy sauce
 1 tablespoon sugar

Ingredients for braised pork slices

600g pork belly, sliced 1.5cm thick and 8cm wide
 ⅓ cup soy sauce
 2 tablespoons rice wine
 1 ½ tablespoons sugar
 3 cups water
 2 pieces of star anise or dried mandarin skin
 1 stick of cinnamon (optional)

Garnish

½ cup sugared ground peanut (some people may prefer sugar-free ground peanut, but sugared ground peanut is more authentic)
 2 stalks cilantro (coriander), chopped

How to make the buns

- 1 Dissolve dry yeast in tepid water for 3-4 minutes. Mix flour with sugar, salt and oil in a large bowl. Leave a hole in the middle, then pour in the yeast water. Bring together the flour and knead the mixture into a dough. Cover with wet cloth, and allow to rest until it has doubled in size (takes roughly 40-60 minutes, depending on room temperature). Divide the dough equally into 8 portions. Roll into balls, then flatten into neat ovals at 7-8mm thick. Lightly grease half of one side of each oval with oil. Fold each over itself with the greased side inside. Line the base of steam baskets with wax paper or lightly greased baking paper, then position the buns in the baskets. Let the buns rest in a warm place for no more than 30 minutes until the buns rise another 50%.
- 2 Add 8-10cm water inside a pot or pan and set the steam baskets over it. Turn up the heat and bring water to a boil so you can see steam emerge from the baskets. Steam the buns for another 12-13 minutes. Then keep the baskets over the pan for another 2-3 minutes before removing.

How to braise the pork

- 1 Simmer the pork in water for 5 minutes, then remove and rinse. Mix in all the spices and ingredients, simmer for 40 minutes until the meat is tender.
- 2 Separately, sauté the garlic in 2 tablespoons of hot oil, then add the mustard greens for 1 minute over low heat. Add soy sauce and sugar, and water if necessary. Stir fry at low to medium heat for 8-10 minutes.
- 3 Assemble the buns by topping the pork belly with pickled mustard greens, peanut powder, and cilantro.



FUNGUS AMONG US

Taiwan has a long history of growing a wide variety of mushrooms, and was once a major exporter.

BY STEVEN CROOK AND KATY HUI-WEN HUNG



PHOTO: STEVEN CROOK

We eat too much of what is bad for us, experts say, and not nearly enough fruits and vegetables. But one positive trend is visible in some parts of the world: People are eating more mushrooms than they did a generation or two ago.

That is good news from a nutrition perspective because many types of mushroom contain vitamins (especially B1, B2, B3, and B6) as well as iron, selenium, and other minerals. They are rich in antioxidants that can survive cooking, and there is some evidence mushrooms have cancer-fighting properties.

Global mushroom cultivation grew tenfold between 1981 and 2002. Since the mid-1960s, annual per capita mushroom consumption in the United States has risen from 0.7 lbs to 3.7 lbs. In recent years, fresh mushrooms account for three quarters of this total.

Precise data on mushroom consumption in Taiwan is hard to find, but anecdotal evidence points to a steady increase. Edible fungi find their way into hot pots, stir fries, and soups, as well as the “mock meats” eaten in vegetarian restaurants.

In Taiwan, the systematic cultivation of fungi dates back over a hundred years, with many of the original techniques introduced by the Japanese during the 1895-1945 colonial period. However, the industry did not properly take off until the late 1950s, after domestic shortages prompted the U.S.-ROC Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction (JCRR) to expand local mushroom production.

Early trials were conducted in mountainous areas such as Xibao (915 meters above sea level, and now within Taroko National Park), but very soon farmers in the west-central region came to dominate production.

According to a report prepared for the Federal Reserve’s Division of International Finance, the American economic aid program (USAID) provided US\$82,574 to help develop sanitary harvesting and canning practices, as well as for the construction of processing facilities. The return on this investment was fantastic. “Taiwan first began to export canned and bottled mushrooms on a regular commercial basis in 1960,” states the report. “By 1963, Taiwan had become the

world’s foremost exporter of mushrooms ...supplying one-third of the total amount of mushrooms imported by all countries.”

About 80% of the canned mushrooms sold in the United States in 1963-64 were from Taiwan. Annual exports of canned mushrooms peaked in 1978 at US\$120 million, before Chinese and South Korean growers ate into Taiwan’s share of the global market.

In 2013, the Council of Agriculture’s Taiwan Agricultural Research Institute (TARI) estimated that the industry’s annual sales had reached US\$295 million. In recent years, fungus farmers have been shipping around 140,000 metric tons of produce annually to domestic and overseas buyers. Relatively few farms now concentrate on the species that kick-started the boom – the humble *Agaricus bisporus*, also known variously as the common white mushroom, button mushroom, or champignon mushroom.

Frank Tai and his cousin Chu Rui-Jong are second-generation mushroom farmers in Taichung City’s Wufeng District. Both men grew up helping their parents cultivate button mushrooms, which Taiwanese often call “Western mushrooms” (*yang gu*, 洋菇).

“Wufeng has the right conditions for successful mushroom farming,” says Chu. “Northern Taiwan is too humid and the south is too warm, but the Taichung area

is ideal.” Local weather patterns no longer matter much, however, as both men’s operations are now more like food factories than traditional farms. Growing the mushrooms indoors enables them to fully control temperature and other factors.

Their families, and hundreds of others, have benefited from the presence in Wufeng of TARI’s Edible and Medicinal Mushroom Laboratory. Among the laboratory’s many contributions are introducing the king oyster mushroom (*xing bao gu*, 杏鮑菇) – currently one of Chu’s principal crops – to Taiwan from France and devising ways in which this unusually sensitive fungus can be protected from micro-organisms.

Tai, who was born in 1970, graduated from Soochow University’s Department of Microbiology, choosing this major knowing he would eventually manage the Tai Mushroom Farm, currently Taiwan’s number-one producer of enoki mushrooms (*jin zhen gu*, 金針菇). He also grows shiitake (*xiang gu*, 香菇) and shimeji (*liu song gu*, 柳松菇) mushrooms. Until it was overtaken by growers in China, the Tai Mushroom Farm was regarded as Asia’s largest in terms of output.

Apart from regular albeit small shipments to Singapore, almost all of Tai’s output goes to domestic customers. Most is sold fresh but some is dried, including



PHOTO: STEVEN CROOK

Fresh Taiwan-grown mushrooms make a delicious and nutritious addition to soups and other dishes.

his entire *Agaricus blazei* crop. This brown mushroom is eaten for its taste as well as its supposed anti-cancer properties. “Dried mushrooms offer quite different flavors and textures compared to fresh ones,” he says.

Tai employs 150 workers, a third of whom are devoted to harvesting around 25 metric tons of mushrooms each day during the summer and up to 35 tons daily in the winter. Because so many enoki mushrooms get eaten in hot pots, winter prices are typically double those in summer, he says.

Tai is constantly experimenting with different species in the hope of finding new ones he can grow and sell. Potential certainly exists, as of the 2,000-odd fungus species around the world that are regarded as truly edible, a mere 30 or so have been commercially cultivated, and just 10 are exploited on a major scale.

The growing process

Large-scale fungus cultivation is as capital-intensive as it is labor-intensive. Like many in the industry, Chu grows mushrooms in plastic bags known locally as *taikong bao* (太空包, “space bags”). Five of his 13 employees are assigned to preparing the company’s 8,000 bags. Two other workers concentrate on inoculation, which means adding spawn of the species to be grown, while the remaining six nurture and harvest the mushrooms.

On Tai’s farm, enoki production is a six-stage process. The first step, filling

1-liter polypropylene (PP) bottles with substrate, is mechanized. He has more than six million bottles, each costing NT\$10, but because the bottles are never exposed to sunlight, he expects them to last for over 20 years. Tai keeps his growing sheds at 5 degrees Celsius, so he is especially sensitive to increases in the price of electricity.

For conventional crops, the substrate is common soil. While some fungi thrive in ordinary dirt, Tai’s enoki mushrooms do best in a 3:1 mix of sawdust and rice bran. The sawdust is from broadleaf-tree timber, as this replicates the rotting stumps on which the mushrooms grow in the wild, and is obtained from lumber washed out of Taiwan’s mountains by typhoons. According to Tai, many Chinese enoki farmers use substrate derived from corn cobs, which he avoids because they could be genetically modified.

To avoid contamination, the bottles are then sterilized by heating to 121 degrees Celsius. Other items of equipment are sanitized with UV light, and Tai’s workers always wear gloves. “Mold or bacteria will grow” if sterilization is incomplete, Tai says. “Mold grows faster than mycelium [the vegetative part of a fungus], absorbs nutrients, and thereby inhibits mushroom growth.”

Following inoculation, a month is spent nurturing mycelium, which can be likened to the roots of a plant. For another month, the mushrooms (which are actually the visible fruiting bodies of the mycelium in the substrate) are care-

fully monitored. Humidity and temperature are adjusted when necessary.

Finally, just before they reach peak maturity, they are harvested. According to Chu, a good fungus farmer must be acutely observant. “Over-mature mushrooms don’t taste or look as good. Also, each part of a mushroom has different requirements,” he says, explaining that the caps are influenced by lighting, whereas the stems require the correct level of carbon dioxide.

The growing process for wood-ear (*mu er*, 木耳), formerly one of his family’s major crops, is considerably shorter, Tai explains, while that for shiitake mushrooms is usually three months.

After a spell in Taipei working as a car mechanic in Taipei, Chu returned to the family farm a quarter of a century ago. There, besides button mushrooms, his father cultivated straw mushrooms (*caogu*, 草菇), shiitake and wood-ear.

“I use less land to grow mushrooms than my father did, but produce 10 times what he did,” says Chu, who now focuses on abalone mushrooms (*baoyu gu*, 鮑魚菇) and king oyster mushrooms – both belonging to the widely eaten *Pleurotus* genus – as well as wood-ear. He also grows rice and muskmelons.

Both Tai and Chu are optimistic about the future of mushroom farming in Taiwan. “The focus now is investing in high-tech equipment to take us through the next 10 to 20 years, and researching how to make the growing environment more productive,” says Chu.



Western mushrooms growing in substrate, left, and *mu er* make it evident why they are called “tree ears,” right.

PHOTOS: WIKIPEDIA

He explains that staff training is also important. “The average age of mushroom workers in this area is 50, but many young mothers cherish the flexible working hours. For certain tasks, youth is a distinct advantage in terms of good eyesight, quick learning, and sharper execution.”

Tai says labor issues are his biggest challenge. “Twenty- and thirty-somethings don’t like this kind of work,” he says. Like some other employers in the agricultural sector, he laments that he is not allowed to hire foreign laborers.

Tai and Chu’s indoor operations protect against unfavorable weather. Nantou County’s shiitake farmers, few of whom have temperature-controlled growing sheds, have reported falling crop yields, apparently because of climate change. However, science may yet make air-conditioning unnecessary. On its website, New Taipei City-based MycoMagic Biotechnology Co., Ltd. touts a patented enoki variant that thrives at temperatures of 16 to 25 degrees Celsius. They also claim it grows 30% faster, “increasing warehouse turnover rates and total production rates.”

Energy consumption aside, commercial fungus cultivation does little harm to the environment. Being a closed system, not much water is required, even though relative humidity is maintained at 90%. The only chemical Tai uses is slaked lime – calcium hydroxide, $\text{Ca}(\text{OH})_2$ – to adjust the natural pH value of sawdust from 5.5 to between 9 and 9.5.

Each year in Taiwan, an estimated 29.6 million bags and 7.5 million bottles are emptied of substrate. The spent substrate from Tai’s enoki production line is composted, mixed with animal manure, and then used for growing other types of mushrooms.

Among Taiwan’s mushroom growers are hobbyists like You Jin-zhi, a 75-year-old Atayal resident of Zhongzhi Village in New Taipei City’s Wulai District. You, a retired government worker, started growing shiitake mushrooms on log sections around 20 years ago. He harvests them in November, and what he and his relatives do not consume he gives away to friends and neighbors.

You says people have been cultivating



The Other Wufeng

Wufeng (霧峰區) in Taichung means “misty mountain peak.” Taoshan Village (桃山村) of Wufeng Township (五峰鄉, “five peaks”) in Hsinchu County also has a mushroom-growing tradition, although many of those who visit the area’s most famous sight – the house where the “Young Marshal” Zhang Xue-liang spent several years under house arrest – know nothing about it.

Like Wulai, Taoshan is a predominantly Atayal community. Several families here cultivate shiitake mushrooms outdoors, on hardwood logs and sell them fresh, dried, or grilled.

At least one Taoshan farmer believes his family has been growing mushrooms this way for around a century. When asked why, despite this long history, the village’s mushrooms are so little known outside the area, he offers a remarkable explanation. Fearing the authorities would nationalize the trade, Taoshan’s shiitake farms went underground soon after Chiang Kai-shek’s retreat to Taiwan. Only after the lifting of martial law did local fungus growers dare place growing logs in public view and offer their produce to strangers.

mushrooms this way in Wulai for at least 30 years, but the number of growers is declining. Obtaining suitable logs has become more difficult because of forestry-conservation laws. Also, packaged mushrooms are affordable and available year-round. Proving his point, most of the dried mushrooms sold along Wulai Old Street are actually from Puli in Nantou County.

At least 32 poisonous mushroom species grow in Taiwan’s forests and bamboo groves, but that does not stop enthusiasts from gathering wild fungi. One wild species often eaten is *Macrolepiota albuminosa*. In rural parts of Tainan where it grows especially well, it

is better known by its Holo name, *ke-bah si ko* (雞肉絲菇, “shredded chicken-meat mushroom,” on account of its color and texture. So far, no one has successfully farmed *Macrolepiota albuminosa* because it grows only in obligate symbiosis with a particular termite species.

Between June and August, if there is a succession of rainy days with temperatures above 26 degrees Celsius, those who know where to look are able to gather several kilograms of *ke-bah si ko* each day. One Chinese-language blogger says the mushrooms taste best when boiled with a little salt, gushing: “No artificially cultivated mushroom can match the flavor, which is refreshingly crisp.”

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