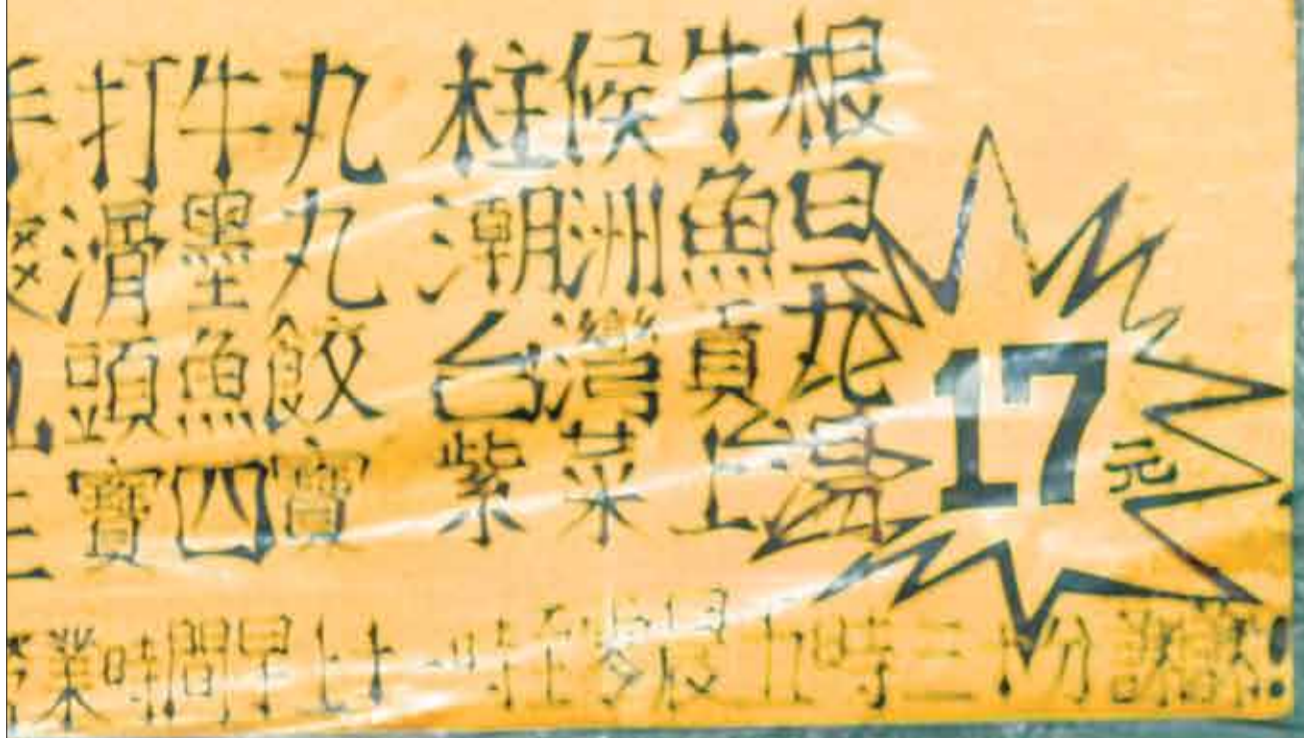


The Definitive Dai Pai Dong

HK's special issue dedicated to our favorite culinary tradition.

By Dorothy So. Photos by Keith Chan.



The dai pai dong is the one icon of Hong Kong that we all took for granted. The city was full of these unique outdoor restaurants 25 years ago, but is now fast losing them. As of today, only 28 licensed dai pai dongs remain. But while the golden era for these outdoor eateries may be long gone, the remaining vendors continue to be devoted to their humble restaurants, determined to preserve this unique side of Hong Kong's dining scene. That is why we decided to devote this issue of HK Magazine to dai pai dongs, to thank them for their years of serving us awesome food at dirt-cheap prices. We embark on an eating tour around some of the city's best dai pai dongs (p.8-10) and provide you with a comprehensive guide (p.12-13). In celebration of outdoor dining, we also look into the alternative to street-side dai pai dongs (p.13), and finally, we ask why allfresco dining is, for some reason, hated in certain neighborhoods (p.14). Tuck in.



Shui Kee

Located in a small, sloped alley just off Graham Street Market, this tiny street-side stall has been serving its signature cow offal noodles to the neighborhood clientele for over 50 years. The stall is now managed by Lam, who took over the business from his father and grandfather. And just like the generations before him, Lam prides himself on Shui Kee's dedication to its food, including everything from a bowl of \$16 noodles to the dai pai dong's vinegar daikon and chili sauce, which he makes himself.

Shui Kee offers the whole set of cow offal, including more obscure parts such as "sha gua" (cow's fourth stomach)—a fairly uncommon cut of offal which Lam usually reserves for his regulars since there are only two small pieces to every cow. "Cow offal takes a lot of time and care to clean. These days, who wants to spend that kind of effort?" says Lam as he shows us a basket of snowy white tripe he hand-cleaned himself that morning. And unlike most other street stalls and cha chaan tengs that often use already-cooked and refrozen meats and offal to save time and money, Shui Kee insists on serving only fresh ingredients to its customers. This unchanging commitment to quality, despite being just a small alley-side stall, is the main reason Shui Kee has remained popular since Lam's grandfather's time.

Must-try dishes: beef offal noodles, deep-fried wontons, deep-fried eel skin.

2 Gutzlaff St., Central, 2541-9769.



Sing Heung Yuen

This perpetually-packed dai pai dong received its first government license in 1957 and was originally located on Elgin Street before moving to its current Mei Lun Street spot 30 years ago. "I started helping out at Sing Heung Yuen 33 years ago," says Irene, who inherited the dai pai dong from her mother. "I've watched this whole neighborhood change—the shops, the people—but our dai pai dong has remained the same." And it's this nostalgic charm that has kept Sing Heung Yuen so popular. "We get a lot of young, hip customers nowadays who want to experience that part of local culture they see fast fading," says Irene, as she swings back and forth between the kitchen and the dai pai dong front to chat with some of her regulars.

By 5:30pm, when Sing Heung Yuen is just closing for business, a steady stream of customers still drop in, requesting Irene make them just one more hot milk tea or one more crispy sweet bun for takeaway. "Traditional dai pai dongs used to be taken for granted," she says as she finally manages to close for the day. "But now I can see that Hong Kong people are finally beginning to treasure the last remaining few."

Must-try dishes: tomato broth noodles with beef, toast with condensed milk.

Corner of Gough and Mei Lun Streets, Central, 2544-8368.



So Kee

One of the few remaining old-school outdoor street stalls on Sham Shui Po's once dai-pai-dong-laden Yiu Tung Street, So Kee is an easy neighborhood favorite with its dirt-cheap but satisfying food, all day opening hours and warm, friendly staff. Having been in the same spot for 30 years, So Kee has a steady base of loyal regulars. Owner Ms. Chan gestures at a young couple sitting at the back table, "they come by every week for my husband's signature fluffy pork chops." She then goes on about a customer she's known for over 20 years, "His family used to bring him here all the time when he was just a little school kid," adding that, although he's grown up, become a successful businessman and moved away from the neighborhood, "he still makes a special drive down here every now and then to visit us."

Chan started off by helping her dad out at the dai pai dong when she was still in school and eventually took over the stall with her husband and family after her father retired. "I grew up in Sham Shui Po. My whole life is here and all the staff. The chefs, the waiters, they're all family," she says with a smile. And when asked to sum up her relationship with So Kee, she doesn't even need to think before answering in five simple words. "So Kee is my home."

Must-try dishes: pork chop noodles, beef noodles.

5-16 dai pai dong, Yiu Tung St., Sham Shui Po, 2779-1182.



Hung Fook Seafood Restaurant

Despite its obscure, grotty side-alley location, Hung Fook is one of those places that is packed to the brim from opening until closing, getting busier and busier as it gets later into the night. In fact, Hung Fook is so popular, even the much-lauded film "Infernal Affairs II" chose it as a backdrop in their movie.

A glance around the restaurant alley shows big groups of friends huddling around the large tables set with either a charcoal-heated hotpot stove or barbecue grill in the center. Hung Fook does over 30 items for the DIY charcoal grill, with most items coming in at the very affordable \$20-\$45 range. And even though the semi-outdoor alley location may seem a little disconcerting at first, the food at the restaurant is all of top-notch quality. The signature seafood items in particular are all freshly sourced, from the fist-sized oysters on the half shell to the jumbo shrimp and abalone. And another reason for its popularity? Hung Fook is open until 4am, making it the perfect spot for a giant food fest with plenty of beers and friends.

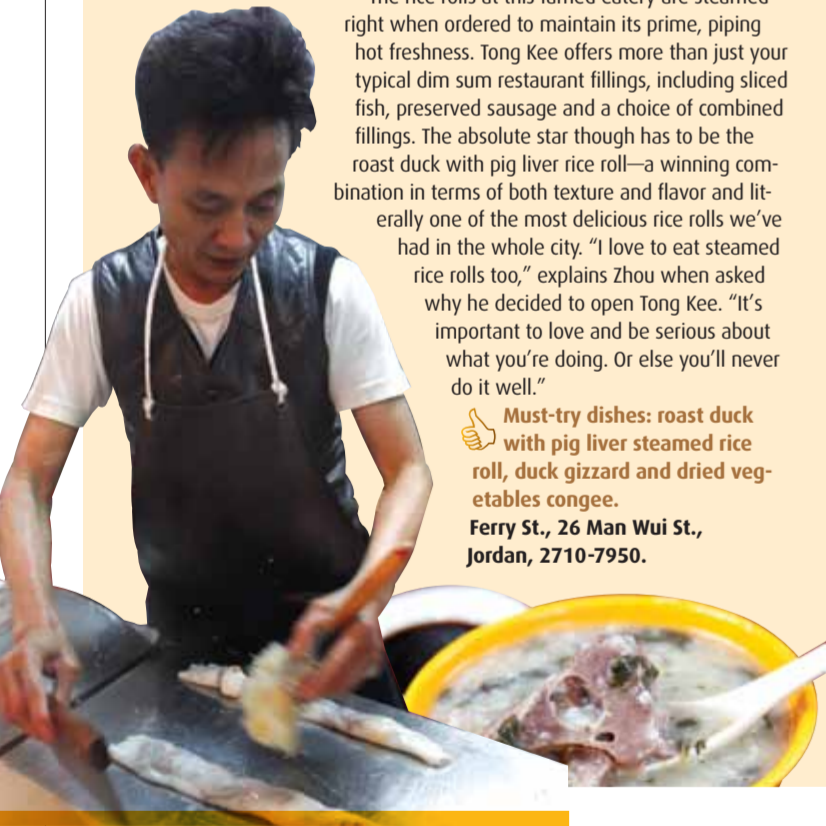
Must-try dishes: grilled seafood items, stingray hotpot soup base.
86D, Lok Shan Rd., To Kwa Wan, 2365-0112.

Tong Kee Cheung Fun Specialist

According to Tong Kee owner, chef Zhou, the two things you need in order to become successful in any industry are experience and a whole lot of heart. So it's no wonder that chef Zhou's tiny cheung fun (steamed rice noodle) shop has become so popular, drawing in massive queues more than half an hour before its 7pm opening time each evening. The veteran chef has over 20 years of experience in the kitchen and his dedication to his craft is evident as he pours ladle after ladle of flour batter into the hot steam racks and spreads the batter out into a uniform, thin layer with his bare hands. "It's a very realistic world. If your food quality slips, customers have no reason to come back. I have a duty to keep my customers happy," he says, as he busies himself with making the endless cheung fun orders, with hardly any time to even catch his breath.

The rice rolls at this famed eatery are steamed right when ordered to maintain its prime, piping hot freshness. Tong Kee offers more than just your typical dim sum restaurant fillings, including sliced fish, preserved sausage and a choice of combined fillings. The absolute star though has to be the roast duck with pig liver rice roll—a winning combination in terms of both texture and flavor and literally one of the most delicious rice rolls we've had in the whole city. "I love to eat steamed rice rolls too," explains Zhou when asked why he decided to open Tong Kee. "It's important to love and be serious about what you're doing. Or else you'll never do it well."

Must-try dishes: roast duck with pig liver steamed rice roll, duck gizzard and dried vegetables congee.
Ferry St., 26 Man Wui St., Jordan, 2710-7950.



Hon Fat Noodle Specialist

Stroll by Sham Shui Po's fabric district and you'll see a small metal stall surrounded by a scattered crowd of fold-up tables and stacking chairs. Inside the stall, Hon Fat's owner, Kwok, mans three boiling pots, throwing a cake of noodles into one, just as he scoops up a mass of cooked noodles and a ladle of soup into a plastic bowl before passing it to his staff to bring to his waiting customers.

At the side of the dai pai dong, Kwok's son manages his own assembly line of pots and pans. Having inherited his father's multitasking skills, he cracks an egg into one pan and picks up a few more customer orders from the surrounding tables, all the while keeping an eye on the two slices of spam sizzling over yet another stove. "A lot has changed in this area," Kwok's son says of the neighborhood they've been operating in for over 30 years. He recalls the days when Ki Lung Street was bustling with similar street-side stalls, adding that today, there are only 14 dai pai dong style eateries left in the Sham Shui Po district. But while the times may have changed, the Kwoks have remained, believing that the dai pai dong is something truly special to Hong Kong and that, by cooking up even just a simple bowl of soup noodles, they are doing their bit to preserve this unique local culture.

Must-try dishes: pig's trotter noodles, wonton noodles.
166 Ki Lung St., Sham Shui Po, 2380-6772.



Chun Chun Restaurant

Every establishment has its story and Chun Chun Restaurant's goes back 30 years when Shirley Chan and her husband took over the restaurant from one of their relatives. The Chans made a big name for themselves in the local dining scene and their signature dishes drew in droves of customers during their restaurant's heyday in the 1980s. "I remember a time when we had to bring out our customers' orders by the cartload because there was just so much business," says Chan's daughter, who helps out at Chun Chun every chance she gets. "But times have changed. The dai pai dong is not in its glory years anymore, competition in the restaurant industry has gotten more fierce and customers' tastes have changed as well. We have to adapt with the times. If not, how can we keep our business alive?"

But despite all the changes through the years, Chan's dedication to her dai pai dong has not wavered. If anything, she's become even more involved in the restaurant's operations, not only manning the restaurant front, but also becoming more hands-on in the kitchen, adding and perfecting dishes along with her team of experienced and equally dedicated chefs. "Give this a try. I made it myself," she says, pointing to a plate of perfectly deep-fried, golden crispy, but still-fluffy-on-the-inside whitebait fish. Although business at Chun Chun, especially on a weeknight, is nowhere near as busy as it used to be, the food standard is definitely on par with its glory days. The signature pigeon is crispy-skinned and is bite after bite of meaty goodness; the chicken congee is stomach-warmingly satisfying; and the stir-fried clams in black bean sauce are flavorful with a nice spicy edge.

At the end of the day, it's about bringing back the standard of food that Hong Kong diners first fell in love with at Chun Chun. "A customer once said to me, 'your pigeon is delicious. Just like it was when I first had it 20 years ago,'" Chan says before adding, "that's what makes me happy. And that's why we are still in business."

Must-try dishes: roast pigeon, chicken congee, clams in black bean sauce, oyster pancake, mantis shrimp in spicy salt.

Outdoor Food Market, Shan Mei St., Fo Tan, 2691-2660.



The Road Ahead

Rumors of dai pai dong death may have been exaggerated. A little.

For years, Hong Kongers have been worried that dai pai dongs, a much-loved part of the Hong Kong vernacular, will one day vanish without a trace. The government, however, was unmoved by these feelings, and in the 1970s the colonial government decided to stop issuing new licenses to dai pai dongs. Therefore, when the licensee died, the dai pai dong would have to shut down. Currently, only 28 licensed dai pai dongs are left in the city.

But after much persuasion and discussion in society, especially with the idea of preserving "intangible heritage" floating around these days, the government has decided to reopen that door—a dai pai dong license can now be inherited by the original licensee's children. The Food and Environmental Hygiene Department (FEHD) is also considering reopening the application for new dai pai dong licenses.

And as a first step for the conservation plan, the FEHD has decided to revamp the 10 dai pai dongs in Central (check out where they are on p.12), improving their sewage systems and installing Towngas pipes in order to improve the overall environment and safety of those stalls. The plan, now being drafted, will be presented to the district council and require around six months to finish all the improvement work.

This is wonderful news for Central, but not for Sham Shui Po—although this old district has the most number of dai pai dongs in Hong Kong (14!—check them out also on p.12), the FEHD will not conduct a similar scheme. The FEHD expects that most licenses in the Sham Shui Po District will not be successfully renewed because of the lack of support.

Winnie Yeung





NEW AND NOTED with Dorothy So

Chef Ehrgott does shrimps with white tomato mousse for his guest appearance at the Lobster Bar



Island Shangri-La invites chef de cuisine Alexander Ehrgott, of Germany's famed Schloss Vollrads restaurant, to guest chef at the Lobster Bar and Grill from January 25-31. Chef Ehrgott will be jetting into town from the Schloss Vollrads castle (yes, the restaurant is actually in a real castle), bringing in his brand of modern yet comfortably classic German cooking. Menu highlights include red barbell with mussels on saffron fennel, and an absolutely stunning shrimps with white tomato mousse and marinated pepper. Lunch-goers can opt for the two or three-course lunches (\$320 and \$350, respectively)—both of which include a glass of Schloss Vollrads Reisling. But for the full Alexander Ehrgott experience, go for the four-course dinner, which is priced at \$788 per person and includes five glasses of Schloss Vollrads wine. 6/F, Island Shangri-La, Pacific Place, 88 Queensway, Admiralty, 2820-8560.

798 unit and co. have just launched a menu of hearty Western-style hot pot dishes to warm the stomach this winter. Using the magic of Le Creuset cookware, the seasonal dishes are all slow-cooked to tender, flavor-soaked deliciousness. The menu's set up to be an absolute comfort-food fest, with osso bucco veal shank (braised to pure succulence with garlic and Italian herbs), stewed beef short ribs in Amarone red wine with veggies, lamb shank simmered for hours in a delectably sweet broth and—last but not least—squid-ink paella speckled with fresh seafood and Spanish chorizo. These four chill quelling dishes are available at the 798 restaurants from now until February 28 so make like a bunny and hop on over. 1/F, 9 Hau Fook St., Tsim Sha Tsui, 2366-0234; 1203, 12/F Food Forum, Times Square, 1 Matheson St., Causeway Bay, 2506-0611.

Must love the Spanish for two things—food and football. And we're definitely in luck this month with the food side of things. Veteran Spanish chef Quim Hernández, of Comiols restaurant in Barcelona, will be visiting the H one kitchen from January 18-28 to offer Hong

Kong diners a taste of Catalan cuisine. Dishes to look out for include the region's famed black sausages, which chef Hernández pairs with scallops carpaccio and sea salt, as well as crispy Iberico pork with apples and honey and mustard sauce. Order à la carte or go for the \$320 set lunch options. H one will also be offering a selection of handpicked boutique Spanish wines to go along with this promotional Catalan menu so be prepared for a Spanish gastronomic fiesta. Shop 4008, 4/F, IFC Mall, 8 Finance St., Central, 2805-0638.



Café Gray Tea

Chef Gray Kunz stole my heart when he led his team out of the Café Gray Deluxe kitchen during the New Year's countdown, banging on pots and pans. Super cute. And now he's made me fall in love with him even more by introducing a classic afternoon tea menu to his restaurant at The Upper House. The "Café Gray Tea" menu (\$185 for one, \$345 per couple) is served daily from 3:30pm-5pm and includes a selection of finger sandwiches, dainty pastries, scones with preserves and clotted cream, along with a nice range of coffees or teas. This afternoon tea is also being offered in conjunction with a new à la carte selection of bakery and pastry items, including apple crostada, zesty lemon tartlettes, beautifully flakey

mille-feuilles and more. 49/F, The Upper House, Pacific Place, 88 Queensway, Admiralty, 3968-1106.

Vietnamese food and I get along like two peas in a happy food pod so I'm usually all-alert when I hear about Vietnamese food related restaurant promotions. Enter Murray House's Saigon on Stanley with its creative new "Ca-ri" Dac San menu. The promo menu looks very promising, with dishes such as fresh, crunchy cucumber cups filled with lemongrass and curry flavored crabmeat and char-grilled short ribs with curry fresh herbs and rice vermicelli taking the spotlight. But that's not all—the restaurant's also lined up a new series of "North and South" Vietnamese herb teas to wash down all their delicious dishes. 1/F, Murray House, Stanley, 2899-0999.

Grand Hyatt's Grissini Italian restaurant goes seasonal this January with Umbria's prized black truffles. These delicately earthy truffles are put to fantastic use by chef Marco Torre, who's designed a special four-course dinner menu for the occasion. Expect authentic Italian flavors in dishes such as mascarpone and Parmigiano risotto with Norcia black truffle stewed artichoke. For \$850, you get the special black truffle menu and an additional \$450 will get you Grissini's sommelier wine pairing with each course. 2/F, Grand Hyatt, 1 Harbour Rd., Wan Chai, 2584-7722.

It's the best of the best at the InterCon Grand Stanford's celebrated Hoi King Heen restaurant. To usher in the new year, the restaurant is pairing chef Leung Fai-hung's award-winning Chinese dishes with a selection of fine Italian wines in a special Wine and Dine Degustation dinner menu. Marinated egg with barbecued honey sauce beef short ribs and smoked scallops are paired with a citrus-y Prosecco, followed by a number of other tantalizing dishes, including the oh-so-tender braised pork belly with port, paired with a Cabernet Sauvignon from Veneto. The menu also features chef Leung's famous steamed garoupa rolls with Yunnan ham (top right) and fried prawns with wasabi and black sesame sauce. Grab a fellow foodie and have a very good time with this seven-courser with wine pairings, which is priced at \$1,988 for two. B2, InterContinental Grand Stanford, 70 Mody Rd., Tsim Sha Tsui, 2731-2883.

Email me at dso@asia-city.com.hk.



Hoi King Heen's steamed garoupa rolls with Yunnan ham