

Food & Drink

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THE LAST SIZZLE

Are Hong Kong-style
steakhouses a
disappearing act?

Dorothy So gets into
the meat of the matter.

Photography by
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STEAKS

Rich, soy sauce-based marinades (usually involving Worcestershire sauce) are used to flavour and tenderise the meat. It's also not uncommon for lower-end restaurants to use baking powder on cheaper, tougher cuts. Steaks are seared to medium doneness before they're thrown on to heated iron plates for further cooking and served to customers with gravy or black pepper sauce. Sirloin, T-bone and filet mignon are the most popular cuts but non-beef options are also available.





SOUPS

The standard practice is to offer a 'red' and 'white' soup on the menu. The former denotes the iconic borscht while the latter is usually a variation of Campbell's-like cream soup.



BREAD

Not at all like the bread you'd get at a proper French restaurant, these baked dinner rolls are soft, fluffy and served with prepackaged butter.



STARTERS

Most set meals don't include starters but add-ons are always welcome. Escargots in garlic butter is one of the more popular options.



DRINKS

Coffee or tea are included in set meals but fancier steakhouses also offer fruit punches, milkshakes and classic cocktails.

STORY OF THE STEAK



Imagine a huge slab of suspiciously tender beef sizzling away on a hot iron plate. It's slopped in thick gravy and plated with flash-reheated fries, mushy peas and a single broccoli floret. It's hardly haute cuisine by today's food snob standards – but, for most of those who grew up in Hong Kong in the 70s and 80s, this sort of menu represented high-brow Western dining at its finest.

Borne out of the city's more prosperous era in the latter half of the 20th century, the number of 'soy sauce Western' steakhouses grew in response to the population's interest in (and access to) foreign culture. People were listening to The Beatles, Bruce Lee was making it big in Hollywood and the younger, more affluent generation started looking for places to dine out beyond their usual family favourite Cantonese restaurant.

A typical set meal at these steakhouses is simple, consisting of soup (served with fluffy dinner rolls), meat or fish, dessert (usually jelly or ice cream) and coffee or tea. While the menus are a mishmash of various cultural influences (for example, Russian borscht soup and French escargots are two of the most iconic offerings), all dishes are heavily modified to suit local palates. Steamed rice is almost always available as an additional side and the common marinade for meats is a combination of sugar, Maggi and soy sauce.

That's not to say there weren't authentic European restaurants in the city at the time. For instance, Jimmy's Kitchen has been around for more than 80 years and Gaddi's at The Peninsula has been in operation since 1953. But these eateries were mostly frequented by expatriates, officials and the uber-rich. Local-style steakhouses, on the other hand, created a form of fine-dining that was accessible to the masses.

In recent years, increased restaurant choices and the heightened knowledge (and demands) of the city's diners have steadily pushed these steakhouses out of the spotlight. Fortunately, there are still a handful of old-school venues in town that plate up a well-done steak with a side of nostalgia. Read on for more... ►





END OF AN ERA

After 49 years, we say goodbye to one of the city's most iconic steakhouses

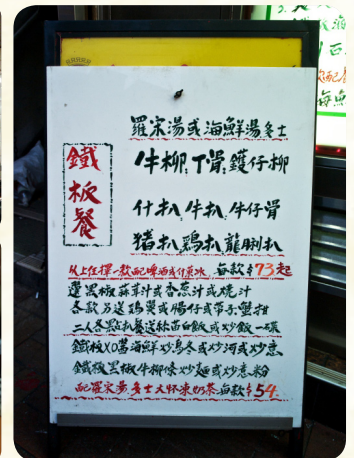
Rose Marie, 1963

Those who lived in Hong Kong during the steakhouse era should be no stranger to this restaurant. Rose Marie, better known to locals as Mei Yi Lim (meaning 'beautiful and affordable' in Chinese), was one of the most successful chains in the 70s and 80s and owned multiple branches throughout the city. Its main selling point was cheap steaks and, even today, just a mere \$76 will get you a full filet mignon or T-bone set meal. And, for \$73, you can have the mixed grill with beef, pork chop, sausage, chicken wing and a slice of bacon. It's not exactly quality dining but Mei Yi Lim has fed a whole lot of people nonetheless and grown up with an entire generation.

Although there is only one Mei Yi Lim left in the city, the restaurant has cemented its status in the dining

scene and continues to draw in crowds of dedicated carnivores. A lot of it has to do with the people. The waiters – most who have been with the restaurant for decades – are blunt but charming and know almost all their customers by name. And if you're a first-timer, the lady at the cashier will tell you that she loves seeing new faces and will remind you to visit again soon. It's personality that drives this place.

Sadly, it won't be long before this last remaining branch closes as well; unable to keep up with the continually soaring rent, Mei Yi Lim has announced that its last business day will be April 10. The owners are looking for a new location but, for die-hard regulars, this tiny, 49-year-old restaurant on Sai Yee Street will be sorely missed. 86 Sai Yee St, Mong Kok, 2396 0730.



STILL STANDING

Three restaurants continue Hong Kong's sizzling steak tradition



Goldfinch Restaurant, 1962

Causeway Bay's Goldfinch Restaurant, which has been open for half a century, is perhaps as famous for its sizzling steaks as it is for being a filming site in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*. According to the staff, the restaurant's second dining room (which opened in 1974) was decorated according to the film crew's specifications and has remained the same ever since.

The restaurant is expensive compared to its peers with set menus clocking in at upwards of \$100. At this price though, Goldfinch also offers better quality food for local steakhouse standards. The black pepper steak (\$130) is a house favourite but customers also order the grilled sliced ostrich (\$135) for novelty's sake. The menu also covers an ample selection of Chinese dishes, ranging from Yangzhou fried rice (\$75) to stewed e-fu noodles (\$48). But, for the best deal in the house, go for the two-person 2046 set meal, which includes bread, soup, prawn salad, baked escargots, roasted lamb rib or sirloin, ice cream and drinks for \$320. 13-15 Lan Fong Rd, Causeway Bay, 2577 7981.



Golden Phoenix Restaurant, 1969

Golden Phoenix's founder Lam Chi-keung (known affectionately as 'uncle' to regulars) worked at numerous five-star restaurants and hotels prior to opening his own place. His aim was to serve up a high-end dining experience that would be accessible for everyone. The restaurant was a smash success and in the mid-1990s, Lam opened a second branch in Tsim Sha Tsui before expanding into the Mainland. The original location on Lai Chi Kok Road, however, remains the most iconic and is packed by 6pm almost every evening.

"My father is a sociable, humorous person who always does his best to take care of his customers," says Lam's daughter Noble, who works alongside her father as the restaurant's managing director. "When people line up outside the restaurant, he'd bring a stool out for the elderly to rest on." While she admits that the \$90 T-bone steaks and \$68 sirloins (all including bread, soup and coffee or tea) they sell aren't prime-grade, she also recounts stories of regulars who've asked to have their wedding photos taken at Golden Phoenix – or of tourists who've returned after stumbling into the restaurant for the first time. "People don't necessarily come here for the food," she says. "They come here for the friendliness and the personal touch." 102 Lai Chi Kok Rd, Prince Edward, 2393 6054.



Flying Eagle, 1977

Originally from Macau, the owners of Flying Eagle moved their restaurant to Hong Kong in the latter part of the 1970s. The space is still family-run and most of the furnishings – including the brown leather chairs and the metal beer plaques – have stayed with the restaurant since day one. The typo-laden menu is an amalgamation of random Western dishes, from onion soup au gratin (\$34) to German pig's trotters (\$73) and even so-called Greek-style grilled steaks (\$73). Nostalgic, soda shop desserts such as ice cream sundaes and banana splits are also available. The food quality isn't bad for the prices, which is why the restaurant has remained popular over the years. 258 Lai Chi Kok Rd, Sham Shui Po, 2395 2576.