

# crave

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## STEAMED AND FOLDED

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# BUNDLES OF JOY

Dumplings are integral to Hong Kong cuisine. Pork and shrimp wontons, sui gao water dumplings, shrimp har gao, siu mai, and soupy Shanghainese xiaolongbao are part of the city's culinary DNA. Three dumpling masters reveal the secrets behind our favourite bite-sized morsels.

Words Michele Koh Morollo Photos Samantha Sin

## CHEF CHAU SAI-TO

*Executive chef of Dim Sum Library*

Chau Sai-to's love for Chinese cuisine started at home. Growing up in Hong Kong, he was enthralled by his mother whipping up a storm in the kitchen, deftly chopping meat and vegetables for dinner. His childhood interest grew into a passion for cooking that led him to culinary school in England.

After graduating, he worked as a chef at well-known London dim sum restaurant Shanghai Moon before returning to Hong Kong. Under the mentorship of celebrity chef Jacky Yu, he became executive chef of modern Chinese restaurant Xi Yan Private Dining.

In England, Chau observed that although British palates differed from those of Hong Kong diners, they all loved dim sum – the traditional small snacks once served at teahouses on the ancient Silk Road. In both places, classics such as siu mai and har gao never failed to satisfy.

Today, Chau is executive chef at Dim Sum Library, the Aqua Restaurant Group's innovative, contemporary dim sum venue. Unlike some of the more humble mum-and-dad stalls, where the dumplings can be a little clunky or stodgy, those at Dim Sum Library are finely crafted with unique fillings enveloped in delicate skins and unusual garnishes such as leopard coral grouper and truffle.

For Chau, presentation is as important as flavour. "I like to think of my dishes as works of art and strive to create colourful, aromatic and palatable dishes that can meet the ever-evolving tastes of discerning guests," he says.

At Dim Sum Library, Chau puts his own spin on Chinese dumplings with items such as black truffle har gao, dan dan xiaolongbao, leopard coral grouper fillet dumplings and black truffle Iberico pork dumplings. Though we all have our favourite dim sum dishes, Chau says siu mai is the yardstick for measuring standards at traditional dim sum teahouses, so it is important to get it right.

Unlike most dumplings, where the filling is completely enclosed by dough, siu mai – believed to have originated in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia – are shaped more like a tiny cup with the meat filling exposed. The skin is made from a yellowish dough of flour, egg yolk and lye water. The top of the steamed mince is usually garnished with an orange dot of either crab roe or diced carrot. Chau's signature dish is black garlic siu mai pork dumplings made with caramelised garlic that gives the meat and mushroom filling a distinct and slightly sweet flavour.

"Many Hongkongers judge the quality of a dim sum restaurant based on how good their siu mai is," he says.





## CHAN YAN-TAK

*Executive Chinese chef of Lung King Heen at The Four Seasons*

**O**n the fourth floor of the Four Seasons Hotel Hong Kong, chef Chan Yan-tak stands in the main dining room of upscale Cantonese restaurant Lung King Heen and looks out at the harbour, contemplating the bounty of the South China Sea.

“Cantonese cuisine is famous for its seafood,” he says. “Traditionally, the fillings in wontons are pork and shrimp, but in our kitchen, we only use shrimp. Because you can find such fresh and juicy shrimp in Hong Kong, we want it to be the star ingredient. We make the skin of our wontons very thin, so the sweetness of the shrimp can shine through.”

Born in Kowloon, the acclaimed chef worked at The Regent Hotel (part of the Four Seasons Group) and Fook Lam Moon before hanging up his apron in 2001, after his wife passed away, to raise his youngest child. In 2005, at the behest of Alain Tsui, former manager at the Four Seasons, Chan came out of retirement to become executive sous chef at Lung King Heen, which has since become one of Hong Kong’s top fine-dining Cantonese restaurants. In 2006, Chan was promoted to executive Chinese chef and became the first Chinese chef to be awarded three Michelin stars.

Lung King Heen is famous for its seafood dishes and dim sum, including wonton and sui gao. Chan, who never compromises on quality ingredients, offers diners eight rotating dim sum menus, varying the dumpling fillings every day of the month. This might include a vegetarian har gao filled with mushrooms, bamboo shoots and bean curd and wrapped in crystalline skin tinted ruby red with beetroot juice.

“For our sui gao, we have different fillings in the summer and winter. During the hot months, we add black fungus for a more

refreshing taste and in winter we add century egg for a creamier texture,” Chan says.

One of his signature dishes is shrimp-only har gao, which he elevates with a daub of gold leaf. “The shrimp used for har gao needs to have a crisp, bouncy texture. The dough for the wrapping is made from white starch, so when the dumpling is steamed, the skin takes on a shiny, translucent quality. Har gao can break apart easily, so you have to be careful that the consistency of the dough is right, to ensure the skin stays intact after steaming,” Chan says.

Another classic at Lung King Heen is xiaolongbao – the pouch-like, soupy, Shanghaiese meat dumpling. Though the dish’s origin is disputed, most agree a man called Huang Mingxian created it in about 1875, in the Shanghai suburb of Nanxiang. The dough wrapper is pleated 14 times at the top before the dumplings are placed in a bamboo steaming basket. The enterprising Huang added aspic to his minced pork filling, which would melt during cooking into a savoury, pork-juice-infused broth within the tender dumpling skin. Huang named his invention Nanxiang da rou mantou, or Nanxiang large meat bun, but legend has it that he soon made the dumplings smaller and renamed them xiaolongbao.

“A good xiaolongbao has to be really juicy inside. We add agar jelly inside the pork mixture, so when the dumpling is steamed, the jelly melts with the pork juices to make it extra moist,” Chan says. His xiaolongbao are served in a bamboo cradle he designed himself “to avoid accidentally piercing through the skin and losing the juicy liquid while transferring the dumpling onto your individual plate”, he explains. “It is more elegant to move the dumpling using the dumpling cradle, to ensure it is intact when you pop it into your mouth.”



## STEVEN HO KOON-MING

*Second-generation owner and director of Tasty Congee & Noodle Wonton Shop*

If one dish best represents Hong Kong, it's wonton noodles. They're said to have originated in Guangzhou, during the Qing dynasty, as a winter solstice offering to departed ancestors. Originally filled with meat, the dumplings soon became a popular suppertime street snack in the city. They didn't catch on in Hong Kong until after the Second World War, when a large number of cooks fled to the territory from the mainland and set up mobile carts selling wonton noodles. Adapting to their harbour location and easy access to fresh seafood, the cooks added shrimp to their dumplings.

Though the dish continues to thrive in Hong Kong, Steven Ho Koon-ming, owner of Tasty Congee & Noodle Wonton Shop, was surprised at how difficult it was to find a decent wonton noodle shop in Guangzhou, where the dish was born.

"Now, in Guangzhou, you can't find wonton noodles easily. The recipe was not preserved and shared because in China, it is considered a cheap street food, and therefore nothing special," he says. "But in Hong Kong, where people move fast and are always busy, wonton noodles became very popular because it can be cooked and eaten quickly. In the 1940s, there were street vendors selling wonton noodles everywhere, the dish was the fast food of the time."

One of those early vendors was Ho's father, Ho Wing-fong, a Guangzhou immigrant who started operating a pushcart noodle stall in 1946, in Wan Chai. By 1957, with business booming, he opened a brick-and-mortar shop in Wan Chai, which he named Ho Hung Kee.

Watching his parents making the dumplings almost every day, Steven Ho jokes that he "lived with wontons". In 1984, he took over the business and expanded into a new shop in Causeway Bay and, two years later, he incorporated the business to become Tasty Congee. Today, there are five Tasty Congee restaurants in Hong Kong, including branches in ifc mall and Elements, as well as seven outlets in the mainland.

Ho makes his wonton skins with rice flour and lye water, or gan sui. "You must use gan sui because this is what gives the dough its elasticity. When we mix gan sui into the flour, the mixture changes to a yellow colour, as a chemical reaction takes place to make the dough stronger and more elastic," he explains. Once the dough is made, Ho flattens it out with a traditional bamboo press, called a chuk sing, for the dumpling wrappers and noodles.

Shrimp, minced pork and minced flounder are used for the filling, while the broth is made from pork bone, flounder and shrimp roe stock and simmered for six hours. The noodles are cooked up to 20 seconds, the wontons for three minutes, and – voila – a delicious, piping-hot bowl of wonton noodles is ready for the table.

Like most wonton noodle shops in Hong Kong, Tasty Congee also serves sui gao, or water dumplings, which have the same basic filling as wontons but with added vegetables – bamboo shoots and black fungus at Tasty Congee. "Sui gao, which are bigger than wontons, are a variation of the northern Chinese crescent-shaped jiaozi dumplings. In northern China, people eat dumplings as a staple but they aren't as popular in southern China, and are usually served as a side dish," Ho says.

