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小點	D I M S U M
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中點	L O N G L I V E
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大點	<i>Rents are rising, tastes are changing, and the undisputed capital of dumplings is at an inflection point. Eat up while you still can.</i>
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DIM SUM is a contact sport at Lin Heung Tea House. A new cart rolls onto the dining room floor, and for just a moment, the clatter of a thousand porcelain bowls and spoons quiets as a dozen hungry customers bum-rush the lady with the curried tripe and *siu mai*. If you don't shove your way to the front of the queue,

dodging surly waiters swinging five-gallon kettles of boiling water, you're screwed. The good stuff is all gone, and the best you're gonna get is a sympathy steamer of fish balls and wrinkled tofu skin.

Pro tip: Rather than swarm the cart as soon as it appears, start your own queue where you know the cart will stop in the middle of the room. Keep your ticket ready for stamping and point to the dishes you want in rapid succession. Request them by name, if you know them, and don't be shy. The seasoned regulars you're playing against won't waste time on *please* and *thank you*.

Then take your winnings back to your table and breathe; the key to weekend dim sum is the long game. Pour yourself some tea, unfold your newspaper, and leisurely nibble at your ivory-skinned rice noodle rolls filled with minced beef and sweet, pungent orange peel. You don't need to eat everything at once, and your seat is yours for as many hours as you want it.



THOUGH MY background is very much not Chinese, eating at Lin Heung—a 100-year-old spot which (justly) gets a mention in every guide to Hong Kong dim sum ever written—feels like a kind of homecoming. My childhood best friend was the son of Hong Kong expats, and as early as I can remember, we spent God-knows-how-many Saturdays with our moms in New York's Chinatown, mystified by the frenetic pageantry of palatial dim sum halls and the act of flagging down carts of treats like taxis at rush hour. Even after our weekly trips ceased, we still exchanged matzo ball soup and congee, and after spending months apart at college, we'd always reconvene for dim sum. My nascent fascination with Chinese cooking and culture grew into a field of study; I recently co-authored a dumpling cookbook with a Chinese American chef from the northern city of Tianjin, and I travel to Asia at least once a year to further my education firsthand. Hong Kong, with its neon and crowds and grit, feels remarkably similar to the New York Chinatown its émigrés helped build. But the dim sum is worlds better.

Back when the city of London was still a glorified Roman pit stop, Chinese civilization was already more than 1,500 years old. Traders carrying fine fabrics, jade, and other sophisticated goods to the West traveled along a network of routes called the Silk Road, which meandered along southern China into India and the Middle East. Along the



TYPE ILLUSTRATION BY ZIPENG ZHU

YOUR DIM SUM CHEAT SHEET

It's easy to get overwhelmed with choices at yum cha; here are some of the most common dishes to look for.

Har gow The most iconic dim sum delicacy—shrimp dumplings wrapped in chewy, translucent skins.	Char siu bao Fluffy steamed buns filled with nubs of chopped roast pork in a sticky-sweet glaze.
Lo bak gou Squares of savory steamed rice-flour cakes mixed with shredded daikon radish, then crisped on a flattop.	Mah lai goh Steamed sponge cakes, lightly sweetened with brown sugar.
Siu mai Yellow-skinned dumplings with open tops, usually filled with a finely ground mix of pork, shrimp, and mushroom.	Liu Sha Bao Steamed buns filled with salted duck-egg custard.
Wu gok A fried ball of mashed taro with a delicate, lacy crust enclosing a savory filling, usually chicken and mushroom.	Dan tat Egg-heavy custard tarts baked in flaky crusts traditionally made with lard.
Fu pei guen Steamed tofu skin rolls, usually filled with whole shrimp.	Ngao yuk kau Finely ground, almost bouncy steamed meatballs, made with beef or pork and seasoned with Worcestershire sauce.
	Cheong fun Steamed sheets of rice noodles rolled around minced beef, whole shrimp, or crisp fried savory crullers.

Learning the dim sum trade at Hong Kong's Chinese Culinary Institute with Chef Chan Chun-hung. Previous page: Rush hour at Lin Heung Tea House.

way, they stopped for meals and rest at roadside teahouses, which sold tea and little snacks like dumplings and buns. As international trade grew, so did the need for teahouses to serve food, not just to itinerant traders but to all classes of Cantonese-speaking southeast China. Foreigners may associate dim sum with steamy carts and gilded banquet halls, but at its core, the meal is mercurial. It's called *yum cha*, or literally "drink tea," and it refers less to a type of restaurant or set of dishes than a unique social event: a relaxed morning or afternoon meal with family, friends, and idle conversation. Dim sum, the small bites you eat alongside, is often translated as "touch the heart." The tantalizing concept spread beyond the Silk Road trade routes, and today, with nearly 7.4 million people packed into just over 1,000 square miles, Hong Kong is the undisputed dim sum capital of the world.

Dim sum is Hong Kong soul food. It's daily breakfast, Sunday brunch, midday snack, and power lunch rolled into one. There's back alley dim sum and white linen tablecloth dim sum, and in a status-driven city, it is the great equalizer: Plutocrats rub shoulders with construction workers, often at the same table.

But there are whispers—repeated often enough by industry vets and enthusiasts to make me worried—that Hong Kong's dim sum culture is in danger. No one's saying it out loud, but the signs are there. The core fan base is aging. So is the pool of skilled cooks who can make it. A chronic labor shortage is only getting worse. And in one of the world's most expensive cities, rents are rising so high that some wonder whether any of Hong Kong's classic dim sum restaurants, founded on the premise not only of beautifully crafted bites but leisurely meals, can survive.

Which is why I decide to head to Hong Kong on a week-long dim sum bender, to chat up the experts over plate after plate of dumplings. In a city obsessed with its own reinvention, who will carry on this cornerstone of local heritage? And who are they carrying it for?



SUN HING opens its doors to night owls at 3 a.m. and rumbles through 4 the following afternoon. It's the kind of small, decades-old dim sum joint that caters almost exclusively to people from the sleepy surrounding neighborhood of Kennedy Town. I have several restaurants like it on my to-visit list, but I'd heard good things about its vibe and steamed buns. There are no tourists at the crowded tables, and the space is so small that the waiters, overwhelmingly female, skip the carts for small trays from which they pass out dim sum steamers. The only decorations are news clippings pasted to the walls, and the little space reverberates with chatty customers, waiters shouting orders to the kitchen, and the clink of cups and kettles. The delicious cacophony of old Hong Kong.

“If you look like a foreigner, they usually give you green jasmine tea by default,” my dim sum companion, Hong Kong native Jay Khilnani, tells me as he breaks some leaves off a compressed brick of *bo lei*, an aged, fermented tea. It’s the go-to drink for *yum cha*, revered by locals for its stomach-settling properties. “You have to tell them to bring you this instead.” Like many *yum cha* regulars, he carries his own tea to dim sum, and as he is the proprietor of the online store TeaLife Hong Kong, his stash is a big step up from the restaurant standard.

One of the joys of *yum cha* is seeing your food before you commit to it, and the steamed buns look spot-on. We order two baskets: one full of molten preserved egg yolk, salty and sweet; the other stuffed with sticky-glazed nubs of barbecue pork. The *har gow*, crisp shrimp wrapped in chewy, translucent skins, look a little frumpy but taste just right; the shrimp are fresh and sweet with a delicate snap, thanks to a brief tossing with baking soda, a common Cantonese technique. As this is my fourth *yum cha* outing of the day, fatigue is beginning to set in. The *ma lai goh*, or “Malay cake,” a towering steamed cake tawny with brown sugar, seems like the ideal pillow to rest my head on for a quick mid-meal power nap.

Growing up, Khilnani went out for dim sum with his family all the time. Casual places like Sun Hing—a dim sum-only joint, though many full-service restaurants offer dim sum at certain times of day—are newer in his dining rotation, but he describes *yum cha*, upscale or not, as an essential ingredient to family bonding. “I’d have it with extended family and on school trips, too,” he says. “It’s like Sunday dinner in England, a social activity for the family.” The meal encourages sharing, after all: You pass the steamers around and everyone retrieves a little morsel, rich enough to delight but small enough to keep you wanting more. The ebb and flow of carts sets a natural rhythm to the experience; the meal doesn’t thud in distinct courses so much as it unspools at a pace all its own. *Yum cha* can take 30 minutes or three hours, and with the right company, it’s hard to tell the difference. As you drink and chat and hunt for your favorite buns, the outside world disappears. The meal has a way of easing tensions and spilling secrets.

Khilnani and I ply the staff with cups of his tea and pick their brains. Yes, the customers are mostly older, as are the cooks. And the rent has been rising to a troubling figure: \$140,000 Hong Kong dollars, about \$18,000 US. Our little feast totals \$180 HKD, and I start crunching the numbers in my head, calculating how a restaurant even keeps the lights on at that rate.

The next day, I meet Daniel Calvert for breakfast at Dim Sum Square, another no-frills neighborhood place he’s recommended for the shatter-crisp spring rolls blanketed beneath wisps of rice noodle. Before moving to Hong Kong to become the head chef at French fine-dining destination Belon, Calvert cut his teeth at Per Se in New York and Pied à Terre in London, and his two years in the city have given him a frank opinion of the local restaurant business. When I



A spread at Lin Heung Tea House, with beef steamed meatballs taking center stage.

mention the talk I’ve heard among dim sum chefs about the trouble with finding good cooks, he’s not surprised.

“Young cooks can get better benefits in Western restaurants,” he tells me while inhaling a cloudlike roast pork bun. “More time off, better healthcare, more opportunities.” In addition, Western restaurants in Hong Kong, he argues, encourage more creative freedom—and promote their chefs to the public as a marketing tactic—compared to the world of Chinese fine dining, which rivals the French for its military discipline and adherence to tradition. Even if you reach the top of a classic Cantonese restaurant, you’re still expected to maintain your reserve, not campaign for your own celebrity.

“It’s hard to open a restaurant in any city,” he goes on, “but especially here. Even more so if you’re not part of a restaurant group or in a hotel.” (Indeed, later that week I eat a flaky abalone puff at the phenomenal Lung King Heen in the Four Seasons that could trample any French pastry.)

Back home in New York, the same problem is playing out with its iconic local foods. My favorite pizza joints are losing business to a new wave of dollar-slice shops selling god-awful iterations, but for half the price. And I can count the number of places making legitimately good bagels on two hands.

Calvert joins in on my gummy-bagel griping but agrees that the Hong Kong dim sum world isn’t that dark. For one, despite the aging population, dim sum as a phenomenon has never been more popular. Tourists come to Hong Kong from all over to taste the world’s best dim sum, and even as traditional restaurants struggle, new ones floated by ambitious investors are expanding the very idea of what a dim sum meal can be.



IN THE BLITZ of the city’s financial district, underneath a bank, Mott 32 is a subterranean vault of glass and gold, a testament to Hong Kong’s East-meets-West opulence. Unlike the city’s upscale *yum cha* vanguard—tony restaurants like Fook Lam Moon or Seventh Son, favored by old-money elites—Mott 32 embraces foreign ingredients such as caviar and Iberico pork to reimagine Cantonese recipes. The restaurant, which has a branch in Vancouver and will soon open others in Bangkok, Seoul, and Las Vegas, is the kind of show-off place where bankers take clients to make deals over applewood-roasted Peking duck and a starter of truffle-stuffed dumplings. It’s also where executive chef Lee Man-sing has created an innovative menu featuring *siu mai* stuffed with molten quail eggs, flaky egg tarts baked to order, and hulking lobster *har gow* fortified with Yunnan ham. *Yum cha* doesn’t get more new school than this, which is why I’ve stopped by to get Lee’s perspective on how to run a dim sum operation for the future—assuming you’ve got money to spend.

Like most upscale dim sum joints, Mott 32 has no roving carts. You order off a menu and get food cooked to order. For

Lee, dim sum is a chef's opportunity to showcase all his artistic talents, condensing a lifetime of experience and technique into a single mouthful. "It's almost like handicrafts," he muses. "The details are so important." After all, what is dim sum but a chef's tasting menu doled out in steamer baskets?

He's worked in restaurants for 35 years, and his training shows. The lobster morsels are chopped just so; as my teeth break through the delicate *har gow* wrapper, they tumble across my tongue, sweet and briny and perfect.

Many of Lee's dim sum cooks are 40 to 50 years old, and as the labor pool ages, he says, competition for the good ones gets more fierce every year. I ask if the labor shortage has something to do with an absence of new talent on the market. Surely there must be young cooks out there hungry for work? There are, he admits, but dim sum requires attention to details that most of us would never think to consider, like how to pack those bits of lobster into a precise a 3-D jigsaw puzzle that collapses just so when you take a bite.

At the high end of the market, Mott 32 can afford the cooks it needs. (After all, those lobster *har gow* cost \$115 HKD apiece—about 15 bucks.) But it has unquestionably succeeded in designing a *yum cha* experience calibrated to its target market, decades younger than the retirees and 50-somethings who fill teahouses like Lin Heung every day of the week. Here, and at other nouvelle restaurants like it, you will find a more worldly approach to dim sum that attracts ever younger diners. The food is far-reaching. The experience is streamlined. There are no grandparents gnawing on chicken feet.



IF HONG KONG dim sum has a future, it lies with a new generation of cooks trained to make it right. So, in search of insight, I ride down to Pok Fu Lam, a small, mostly residential neighborhood that's home to the Vocational Training Council of Hong Kong's Chinese Culinary Institute. Established in 2000 as an expansion of the council's other pre-professional technical programs, the school trains about 1,700 combined full- and part-time students in culinary skills across China's regional cuisines, and matriculation numbers are holding steady.

Chan Chun-hung is the 58-year-old chief instructor of the Chinese Culinary Institute, which covers dim sum as an essential pillar of Cantonese cuisine. Students must learn how to make and handle several kinds of dough cooked in a variety of ways, practice knife skills to a level of precision that blows most European cooks out of the water, and maintain exacting consistency as they work. Maybe you can fold a perfect *har gow*, but can you perfectly fold 1,000 in the next hour?

A 40-year veteran of the dim sum business, Chan is used to changes. He recalls a trend of late-night dim sum



At Mott 32, executive chef Lee Man-sing (left) cooks up high-end dim sum, like soft quail egg, Iberico pork and black truffle siu mai (on plate); South Australian lobster har gow; and hot and sour Iberico pork soup dumplings (center).



Barbecue pork steamed rice rolls (center) and golden sponge cake (above) at Dim Sum Square.

restaurants in the '80s that mostly vanished due to changing taste, and over the decades he has watched dim sum's status rise in Hong Kong and across the world. He notes that despite its humble breakfast origins and relatively lower profit margin compared to lavish banquet cooking, dim sum has grown into a marker of prestige for the city's top restaurants and hotels, a way to communicate to guests that they take food and hospitality seriously.

So an increased demand for dim sum cooks was already in motion when Mak Kwai-pui's 20-seat dim sum restaurant, Tim Ho Wan, won a Michelin star in 2010 and became an overnight global phenomenon. Billed now as one of the world's cheapest Michelin-starred restaurants, it has six locations in Hong Kong and 39 more around the world, which command hours-long lines for, frankly, mostly solid—if standard—dim sum fare. The subsequent desire for dim sum-exclusive restaurants fueled a surge in demand for skilled dim sum chefs, straining an already thin labor market to its limits.

One of the VTC's goals, Chan explains, is to supply new young talent to fill this demand in Hong Kong "and to preserve our culture." The city's hospitality industry is booming, but these days a hot new opening is just as likely to be an Italian pasta spot as a Cantonese restaurant. And as the economy soars, young cooks are tempted to find other, more lucrative work, or pursue culinary fame overseas. To sustain this growing restaurant culture, the industry needs to encourage young people to enter the fold. "And they need to have a knowledge of traditional techniques at their base," says Chan.

Could dim sum be a victim of its own success, I wonder, watching a pair of students painstakingly mince vegetables with cleavers? It wouldn't be the only one. You could say New York's pizza culture is more diverse and delicious than ever before, as obsessive young chefs, raised on the same corner slices I was, open ambitious and expensive restaurants devoted to advancing the art of pizza the way Mott 32's Lee is advancing the craft of dim sum. But the corner slice shops are banks now, and it's harder than ever to recruit capable pizzaiolos to run those pricey ovens.

Chan senses my consternation and reminds me, "Yum cha has been around for a very long time." And it's never been just one type of experience. If a new wave of restaurants can attract young people to dim sum in ways the old ones can't, "that is a positive thing. The new can coexist with the old."



BY THE TIME I finish talking with Chan, I'm beginning to vaguely remember what hunger feels like. I've *yum cha*'d over a dozen times in the past week, and I'm desperate for reinforcements. So I invite a couple of friends to meet me for lunch at Yum Cha, another new-school dim sum spot with four locations in Hong Kong. Priced between dives like Sun



At Lung Keen Hing at the Four Seasons, where the baked abalone puffs (center) are not to be missed.



Overlooking King's Road, a major city artery.



A balancing act at Sun Hing, where diners can get their dumpling fix in the wee hours of the morning.

SPOT ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOCELYN TSAI; DIM SUM CARD COURTESY OF JING FONG RESTAURANT

	<p>WHERE TO EAT</p>	orders on the menu. 27 Hillier Street; 852 2851 8088	even tastier dim sum, including some must-try braised meats over rice. 46–50 Des Voeux Road West; 852 2156 9328
小點	<p>Your Big Splurge: Lung King Heen</p> <p>The dim sum ranges from \$66 to \$205 HKD a plate, but if you want to understand what truly high-end Hong Kong <i>yum cha</i> tastes like, book a table at this Michelin three-star restaurant in the Four Seasons. Don't skip the abalone puffs. fourseasons.com/hongkong/dining</p>	<p>Late-Night Dim Sum: Sun Hing</p> <p>A decades-old and delightful Kennedy Town dive with excellent steamed buns. And if you're out late and need a sponge to soak up some booze, note this: The restaurant opens up for service at 3 a.m. 8 Smithfield Road; 852 2816 0616</p>	<p>Your Meat-Free Hideaway: LockCha</p> <p>It's hard to be a vegetarian in Hong Kong, but LockCha, a serene restaurant in Hong Kong Park that's styled like a Japanese tearoom, makes it easy with the best meat-free dim sum in the city. Its tea selection is also the most sophisticated. lockcha.com</p>
中點	<p>Great for Big Groups: Maxim's Palace City Hall</p> <p>One of the last palatial dim sum halls in Hong Kong, and deservedly popular with tourists and locals alike. Despite the enormous dining room, the dim sum is made with enough love to make <i>yum cha</i> pilgrims happy, and the restaurant easily accommodates large parties. Lines begin to form by 10 a.m. maxims.com.hk</p>	<p>The OG: Luk Yu Tea House</p> <p>Some of Hong Kong's wealthiest old folks start their day here, a colonial-style teahouse open since 1933 with wood-paneled walls, cute antique booths lining one side of the first-floor dining room, and traditional dim sum prepared with expert care. 24–26 Stanley Street; 852 2523 5464</p>	<p>Glitzy Modern Dim Sum: Mott 32</p> <p>Chef Lee Man-sing's fine-dining dim sum includes Iberico pork soup dumplings and lobster <i>har gow</i>. They don't come cheap but are an impressive look at what the dim sum of the future tastes like today. mott32.com</p>
大點	<p>Perfect Neighborhood Joint: Dim Sum Square</p> <p>A popular but low-key hang in Central with charmingly brusque old Hong Kong service. There are no carts here; instead, tick your</p>	<p>Budget-Friendly Old-School Classic: Lin Heung Kui</p> <p>No relation to the Lin Heung on Wellington Street referenced in this article, Lin Heung Kui is a similarly competitive morning <i>yum cha</i> arena. While the dining rooms look almost identical, the latter has</p>	<p>Your Most Instagrammable Meal: Yum Cha</p> <p>The steamed buns have cute animal faces and the entire experience seems built for social media success, but the kitchen has serious chops, and those roast pork piggy buns are delicious. yumchahk.com</p>
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Hing and splurges like Mott 32, Yum Cha leverages strong dim sum fundamentals into whimsical, Instagrammable presentations: Taiwanese pineapple cakes pressed into the form of ortolans and enclosed in a birdcage; barbecue pork buns with adorable piggy faces.

The food tastes as good as it looks, and my friends, from mainland Guangzhou, remark how much better the dim sum tastes in Hong Kong than at home, just 70 miles away. “Even at a mediocre restaurant, the average quality is just so much higher,” one of them says as he pops another bite of pan-seared turnip cake. The weekend crowd—millennials aplenty and young families with kids—is eating it up. But I wonder how many of these families return every week, and whether any new traditions have started in this dining room. As we down the dregs of our tea, it occurs to me that, excellent turnip cakes aside, there isn't much about Yum Cha that scratches my childhood itch for, well, *yum cha*. The trappings are there, but the meal is unmistakably transactional. Where's the joy in whiling away the morning hours, the sense of ease that comes with knowing that another bite is just a cart away? The waiters know how to arrange our dishes on the table so we can snap the perfect picture, but they also cagily warn us that we need to leave by a specific time so they can prepare for the next group.

Before I left New York, I hit up a Hong Kong expat pal for restaurant recommendations. She sent a long list but also told me flat out, “The places I used to go to with my parents were nothing special, but the food wasn't the point. We'd go to catch up or read the newspaper and just slow down with each other. That's what was special to me.”

I can't blame the people running Yum Cha for designing a restaurant to survive in a cutthroat industry, nor for charging an order of magnitude more for their food to account for the reality of doing business. And hey, the cooking is really good, what the VTC's Chan Chun-hung would describe as based on a foundation of traditional techniques. But there's an unsettling irony to watching commercial efforts like Yum Cha thrive while the institutions that inspired them struggle to survive.

Cities change. Tastes change. Local traditions keep those changes in check, preserving a common experience that keeps us bound together. I feel pretty confident that as a culinary phenomenon, dim sum will do just fine. It's profitable and easy to package and sell to a crowd driven by novelty in a market ruled by efficiency.

But *yum cha* is another matter. It's more than a meal: It's a little pocket universe, governed by its own laws and sense of time, and it demands a commitment to extra-dimensional social physics that's anything but efficient. We don't consume this type of experience—we participate in it.

And so, when the next steamer of *har gow* gets placed on our table just so, I don't snap a picture immediately. I take a breath. I take a sip of tea. And I slow time down, for just a moment, before picking up my chopsticks again. ●

Max Falkowitz is a James Beard Award-winning writer and the author of *The Dumpling Galaxy Cookbook*.