



This page CHAI WU stir-fried lobster noodles £64; VILLEROY & BOCH Manufacture Rook plate £21.90.
Opposite page CHAI WU grilled lamb outlet with Szechuan sauce £29; VILLEROY & BOCH Manufacture Glow plate £34.90



Bold FUSION

Chinese food is having a moment in London, adding a contemporary twist to traditional dishes worthy of the cuisine's rich heritage. Amy Broomfield tucks in

Photographer NATASHA ALIPOUR-FARIDANI

Two of the greatest gifts bestowed upon me by my formidable Chinese grandmother were an unfiltered Cantonese language lesson, swearwords included, and a thorough understanding of what makes really good homemade Chinese food. As a London-born Chinese girl growing up in Holland Park, I never really appreciated how good that grounding was until I was much older. My grandmother moved to London before I was born and I'd come home from school to wholesome bowls of egg noodles, sweet bread buns filled with barbecued meats, wok-fried egg with Chinese chives, or mushroom and marrow soup. My grandmother and mother's version of a Chinese Sunday roast was often a feast of eight different traditional dishes (the number eight being a symbol of good fortune in China) that they cooked up on our very English Aga. Among my favourites were steamed whole sea bass with ginger and spring onions; honey-glazed char siu pork shoulder; braised mustard greens; and steamed chicken with shiitake mushrooms.

Save for a few sporadic celebratory meals in institutions like New Loon Fung or Royal China, there was seldom any occasion to eat Chinese food outside the home. And, when I did, I found it to be completely alien to what I knew: sweet-and-sour chicken luminous in colour and over-saturated with sweetness; roast pork containing so much food dye it turned the rice red; and roast duck riddled with MSG (monosodium glutamate). It saddened me that this was the common perception of my cultural cuisine.

"Chinese food is, without a doubt, one of the most over-commercialised foods in the world," says Andrew Wong, the luminary chef of Michelin-starred restaurant A Wong. "With over-commercialisation, corners are bound to be cut and all those delicious specialist ingredients get swapped out."

Wong is part of the tide of change that is reasserting Chinese food as one of the world's top cuisines – and nowhere is that happening more rapidly than in London right now. While Chinatown may be losing a battle against sky-high rents and bubble-tea cafés, well-known chains like Din Tai Fung and Maxim's opening in London have been steadily raising the bar. Then there's the growing interest in lesser-known regional foods championed by journalists like Fuchsia Dunlop – who gave up her career as a BBC correspondent to live in China and write about Szechuan food – and food critics Fay Maschler and Jay Rayner, who have sought out smaller independent restaurants to show there is more to Chinese food than stir-fries and soy sauce.

Wong's restaurant in Victoria has become known for combining ancient cooking traditions with elevated techniques to bring in new dimensions of flavour and texture. "People assume Chinese food is all quick and rough-and-ready," says Wong, "but if you look at the skills of a patisserie chef and a dim-sum chef, you'll find a lot of them are the same. If anything, dim-sum chefs have to be more versatile, as they need dexterity and speed to produce the volume they do." >



Wong's dim-sum menu includes plump prawn hau gau (dumplings) topped with citrus foam; lobster cheung fun (rice-noodle rolls); and, the crowning glory, its Shanghaiese soup dumpling, xiao long bao. The creation of this dumpling is a scientific feat; its filling is made of soup in gelatinous form that melts when steamed. Wong's version has an ultra-fine pastry and is injected with ginger-infused vinegar to omit the need for dipping.

Like me, London-born Wong grew up around good Chinese food, so his knowledge was inherent. When his father died, Wong took over his parents' restaurant, Kym's (while studying for a degree in cultural anthropology), which he later reopened as A Wong in 2013 – with a brand-new Kym's opening in honour of the original in central London last year. "Did I know how to cook back then? No. Did I know how to taste food? Absolutely," he says. "My grandmother was an amazing cook, as was my father – I grew up in the restaurant's kitchen during the 1980s and 90s when the chefs we had were flown in from Hong Kong."

The success of Wong's restaurant is partly down to his ethos; he and his team work with historians, anthropologists and food culturalists to reconnect with China's food history. "Our restaurant is a celebration of Chinese food and we're looking at giving old ingredients a new lease of life. There are 14 countries on China's borders and the dishes eaten on those borders are steeped in history," he says. "We need to broaden our perspective of what we perceive to be Chinese. It saddens me when people jump on the bandwagon and say something isn't authentic; if they did their research, they would find that it is."

When I tell Eddie Lim, owner of the Mango Tree group, which includes 70 global pan-Asian restaurants, that I have recently interviewed Wong, he smiles and says: "He calls me 'uncle'". Using a familial term for a non-relative is a huge mark of respect in Chinese culture. Lim once had a restaurant next to Kym's and the Wongs regularly dined there. "I am so proud of what Andrew is doing," he enthuses. "He is giving Chinese food a fresh

perspective." Malaysian-born Lim has long been championing authentic Asian food in his restaurants, including Chai Wu in Harrods, and the popular chain of restaurants Bao – one of which is also in Harrods. "A great deal of Asian food begins as street food," he says. "To me, it's about making that food suitable for a restaurant without losing the essence or flavour."

Chai Wu's menu features food from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Japan, and Lim has a dedicated chef for each region, as well as four dim-sum chefs. Like Wong, he has made contemporary adaptations to traditional dishes. Dim sum comes topped with white truffle, caviar or gold leaf, while roast duck is served with a delicious garlic and white truffle sauce and served in the fluffy buns popularised by Bao. There is panache in the presentation, too: a whole lobster shell on a bed of noodles, half a pink crust of a dragon fruit, a pak choi 'flower' and half a lime skin filled with chilli sauce. "I've seen a lot of European chefs experiment with Chinese food and do amazing things," Lim says. "They are beginning to explore a similarity between French and Chinese techniques, and are adopting Chinese cooking methods in their own dishes."

So, does Lim think Chinese food is on its way to being the Next Big Thing? "To me, it has never gone away – it has always been about feasting, family and sharing. We don't do fads, and that is what gives it longevity," he says. Wong concurs: "Chinese food in London is the best it can be right now – it's even better than in Hong Kong." Something my grandmother would have been very happy to hear. □

From left CHAI WU steamed dim-sum platter £38 and Beijing duck with mantou bun from £56; VILLEROY & BOCH Manufacture Glow plate £24.90 and Rock plate £13.90

Entertaining at Home, Second Floor; Bao Kitchen, Fourth Floor; Chai Wu, Fifth Floor; and harrods.com

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