

Pun Choi Is Purely Hong Kong

A Basin Chock Full of 14 Ingredients

By

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It's considered a Hong Kong culinary relic, said to capture the distilled soul of the land. These days, though most lifelong Hong Kongers have heard about *pun choi*, many have never tasted it.

THE DISH



Asia is rich in iconic foods – explore some favorite local dishes.

Dismissed as low-brow grub, it never won a regular spot on the menus of fancy Chinese restaurants here, which tend to favor items with a more sophisticated reputation. As such, the dish itself has remained confined largely to the home kitchens of its birthplace in Hong Kong's New Territories area.

Pun choi, whose name translates to "basin food," is literally just that -- a large basin, traditionally made of wood, filled with up to 14 types of ingredients, assembled into a casserole. Each item is individually prepared in advance and then carefully layered in the basin, similar to the way a terrine is made with the ingredients arranged in tiers. Then, just before serving, the contents are reheated until warm for no more than 30 minutes over an open fire.

"You start off with a layer of braised turnips on the bottom," explains Ping-kwan Leung, a dedicated foodie who is also a comparative literature professor at Lingnan University in Hong Kong. "Then there are the usual suspects: mushrooms, bamboo shoots, bean curd, fish balls, fried pork skins, squid, pan-seared prawns, five-spice chicken, dried eel, braised pork in soy-sauce

paste, and roasted duck -- the more expensive the ingredient, the higher up they're placed" in the cooking basin.

The amassed creation has a stew-like quality, with the juices from the meats binding together the other ingredients. Yet each individual element, slightly softened from the quick baking, retains the integrity of its distinct texture, ranging from the al dente fish balls, the chewy pork skin, to the crispy skin and tender meat of the roasted chicken.

"Nothing fancy," adds Prof. Leung. "Just cheap, locally grown produce found in the countryside."

The History

Legend has it that the dish was thrown together by mainland village peasants in the Song Dynasty (960-1279), when one of the emperor's generals arrived with his army in retreat from the Mongols. Lacking enough bowls for all the soldiers, the villagers piled what food they had into a washing basin and created the first pun choi.

Officially, pun choi is indigenous to Hong Kong's walled-village, or *wai tsuen*, cuisine. According to Prof. Leung, these folk dishes were invented by the earliest settlers in Hong Kong -- in the area now called the New Territories -- who had been driven south of the mainland by a series of barbarian invasions in China between the 13th to 17th centuries. Continual threat from enemies and nearby pirates during these turbulent times called for building entirely enclosed fortress-like villages surrounded by thick defensive walls, the remnants of which can still be seen today along the coastal areas of the New Territories.

With pun choi's signature large portion sizes and communal eating style, its consumption naturally led to congregations of large parties, including entire villages. Over time, it grew to be a mainstay dish during Chinese festivals, especially those relating to ancestor worship where it was essential for families to assemble en masse. Though the tradition continued to be carried out within older families of the territory, the dish never caught on with newer immigrants to Hong Kong, mostly because it was rarely served in a restaurant.

Then came the handover of Hong Kong to China from Britain in 1997.

Spurred by a desire for remembrance and nostalgia at the time, locals made pun choi a nationalistic metaphor for Hong Kong's identity. Citizens, pulled between their Chinese and British legacies, wanted to reassert their "Hongkongness," says **Sidney Cheung**, a Chinese University of Hong Kong professor and food historian.

Because it predated the colonial era, and thus was unaffected by Western influences, pun choi was revered as a dish that was "born and raised" in Hong Kong, and found nowhere else. Made from locally grown ingredients and cooked by villagers with local family lineages, it was a precious bit of something "purely Hong Kong," says Prof. Cheung.

Consequently, the late '90s welcomed a slew of "discovery tours" for locals that included heritage-site visits and pun choi-tasting trips. "The journey into the inner parts of the New Territories is for urban Hong Kong residents, a journey into their inner selves," says Prof. Cheung. A big basin of pun choi, like a time capsule, captures Hong Kong's pastoral pedigree and flavors of the past. It also reveals a facet of the territory's old-school, village-dining culture that has gotten lost in the hustle and bustle of modern, urban life, he says.

The Setting

A native of Ping Shan village in the New Territories near Yuen Long, fashion designer William Tang can trace his ancestry over a thousand years. He enjoys pun choi the way it was meant to be eaten: Prepared and served in his family's 600-year-old ancestral hall in Ping Shan and shared by the entire village with a guest count of up to 500 people during Chinese New Year, weddings, birthdays and banquets.

THE SOURCES

Tai Wing Wah

Owner Hugo Leung Man-to (a.k.a. Toto) is famous around these parts as the "God of Cookery" for his walled-village cuisine and regular appearances on local TV. His restaurant, one of the largest and most-established in the region, opened in 1975. It was the first to serve pun choi as a signature item, and this helped introduce the dish to mainstream Hong Kong audiences. The restaurant has two branches: one in the New Territories and one in Kowloon.

Koon Wong Mansion, 2-6 Yuen Long On Ning Rd., Yuen Long (852-2476-9888); a 10-to-12- person serving costs HK\$900 or HK\$1,380 (depending on the types of ingredients included).

1/F Chevalier Commercial Centre, 8 Wang Hoi Rd., Kowloon Bay (852-2148-7773); HK\$900 or HK\$1,380 for a 10-to-12-person serving.

Tai Foon Hei Restaurant

The 33-year-old eatery is a magnet for lovers of authentic pun choi. Orders must be placed a few hours ahead: The restaurateurs believe pun choi should sit after cooking for a minimum of one hour before it is reheated a second time, so the flavors are enriched and absorbed evenly.

G/F, 76 Kau Yuk Rd., Yuen Long (852-2478-9395); HK\$888 for large size (a 10-to-12- person serving); HK\$600 for medium size (a four-to-six-person serving); deliveries available to nearby areas.

Ping Shan Pun Choi

Using a secret family recipe passed down from father to son, the pun choi here is declared by many locals to be among the tastiest. It is still prepared using firewood, which is said to impart a unique flavor and allow better control over the cooking temperature.

G/F, 36 Tong Fong Village, Ping Shan, Yuen Long (852-617-8000); HK\$850 for large size (a 12-person serving), HK\$750 for medium size (a 10-person serving), HK\$450 for small size (a six-person serving).

Calling it "the most important place for a family," Mr. Tang describes his ancestral hall as a free-standing "house" -- though it is not a residence -- with five different sections, two large patios and an inner court where the ancestral tablets are housed. "It's not seen as a somber or morbid site," he says. "Rather, it is a place to pay (your) respects and congregate as a community." Many families, usually the older, wealthier clans of Hong Kong, still have ancestral halls in the New Territories.

During holidays centered on ancestor worship, such as the grave-sweeping festivals of Ching Ming in the spring (April 4 this year) and Chung Yeung in the autumn (Oct. 26 this year), it once was customary to bring pun choi to the actual

gravesite or family tombs to share the meal with the ancestors. The large basins made for a fitting way to transport the meal across long distances, and a fire was built on the premises. These days, this custom is seldom practiced because fewer families have private burial grounds, and most settle for an ancestral hall, home or restaurant.

A sizeable pun choy can feed 10 to 12 people with hefty appetites and is often the only dish on the table. While it can be accompanied by side servings of rice or soup, Prof. Leung calls pun choy the undoubted "main event" of the feast.

These days, a few restaurants serve eat-in or take-away pun choy. The added convenience has made it a welcomed catering solution for large house parties, student gatherings and group events.

And as at most communal meals, there aren't a lot of rules: "It is more than acceptable and polite to dig deep into the bottom of the basin to pick out your favorite items, especially now that we offer *guen fai*," says the fashion designer Mr. Tang. (Those are clean chopsticks used not for eating, but just for moving food from basin to personal bowl.) "The layers inevitably collapse, and it all becomes a mix in the end."

The Judgement

"When pun choy is bad, it is very bad," warns Mr. Tang.

The scattershot of items, when clustered together carelessly, can be likened to a disagreeable pile of leftovers -- in other words, slop.

Conversely, when carefully orchestrated, the final composition can create a magical equilibrium of tastes: savory, earthy and robust. "The key is harmony. Everything must taste good when eaten together and that means each item must be well-prepared on its own," he adds.

The time-consuming process of cooking each item separately before it is layered in the basin makes preparing pun choy a rather laborious project, not to be undertaken by a kitchen lightweight and often requiring a day or two of cooking in advance with multiple hands on deck.

The key to an appetizing pun choy is the meat. "The sauce from the braised pork is the backbone of the flavor," Prof. Cheung says. "It is layered on top so that

the juices trickle down and season every component in between." The freshness from the seafood and the charcoal accents of roasted poultry add more complex dimensions while the vegetables mellow out the flavors.

And here's a secret among pun-choi connoisseurs: "The best item is the turnip on the bottom-most layer," says the foodie Prof. Leung. "It has sopped up all the lingering sauces from the rest of the ingredients on top."

Finally, every cook touts his or her own set of trusty cooking techniques. Some believe using firewood rather than a gas stove imparts a smoky aroma. Others insist that the secret to a well-developed flavor is to cover the bowl with a lid immediately after taking the bowl off the flame, which allows the ingredients to steep.

—Amy Ma is a writer based in Hong Kong.