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An Oriental melting pot

Hong Kong's restaurant scene is enjoying a new lease of life. From street food to fine dining, Nicki Symington picks the highlights

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Raising the bar ... The Felix bar on top of the Peninsula Hotel is a favourite with plutocrats. Photograph: Corbis

Maybe it's because there's a lot of money sloshing around, but Hong Kong has always been known as the restaurant capital of the Far East, and a playground for international chefs. A stint in the Special Administrative Region has become a requisite for any decent chef on the move, and recently it has seen an influx of talent from Australia and Italy. Weathering Communism, SARS and avian flu has done nothing to dampen the exuberant and fickle restaurant scene where restaurant listings change almost weekly as new culinary trends from every region of the world are quickly adopted. Perhaps surprisingly given the ongoing bad feeling between Japan and China, Japanese food is becoming popular, with hip new restaurants and bars, such as Wasabisabi and Mizu, exploring every avenue of its culinary canon. Bizarrely, given the heat, HK is fast becoming a land of lasagne lovers and more Italian restaurants are opening than any other variety. Inevitably, the likes of Starbucks, Pret A Manger and Pizza Express have arrived too. Yet despite the plethora of styles, and a greater choice than possibly anywhere else in the world, you still have to do your homework to find a good meal. When you do though, it's likely to be magnificent.

Lunch Stops

Shah Loon Tse Kee (80 Old Man Street, Aberdeen, no telephone) is an unassuming backstreet cafe with scrubbed Formica tables and steamed-up windows where two red-faced women cook vats of stock and noodles behind a thick pane of glass. This becomes heavenly rice noodle soup, to accompany delicious fish cakes. You'll have to share a table, but don't worry about uncomfortable eye contact, as everyone is too busy slurping their delicious lunch. Noodle soup costs about £1, the fish cake about £1.50.

Despite being a bit of a model hang out and about as trendy as it gets, the usually pricey **Wasabisabi** (Times Square, Causeway Bay; 00 852 2506 0009) does a very reasonable sushi lunch for £10 a head.

Excellent dim sum (abalone, lobster) are served all day at **Dim Sum** (Ground floor, 63 Sing Woo Road, Happy Valley; 2834 8893), a very classy joint where the usual noisy trolleys and abrupt service give way to a more stylish offering. About £5.30 with tea.

Y's (10-12 Pennington Street, Causeway Bay; 00 852 3196 9200) is the newest kid on the already crowded Causeway Bay restaurant block. This 'Asian-Mediterranean' eatery opened at the end of March offering street food in the achingly hip, Philippe Starck-designed JIA boutique hotel and has Melbourne wonderchef Teage Ezard at the helm. The food's a big hit but Y's is proving equally popular with locals for tea - the house blend of lemongrass black tea is a favourite with shopped-out fashionistas. Mains cost about £4.60 and tea from £2.10.

Markets

Central Graham Street Market. Wet fish, fresh produce, 1,000-year-old eggs, dried everything - very fragrant but not always in a good way. Be careful not to skid down the perilous gradient slick with water from overflowing fish tanks and rotting vegetable off-cuts.

Wan Chai Spring Garden Lane is where the old Wan Chai area rubs up with new Hong Kong, as the age-old market stands alongside the factory outlets so popular with tourists and locals in search of a bargain. Between the knock-off Gucci and the jade charms, expect to see live chickens that are soon to be dead, and fresh fish in tanks.

Yau Ma Tei North of Kowloon Park and a couple of blocks west of Nathan Road, Reclamation Street is crammed at all times of the day with stalls heaving with fresh flowers, fruit and veg, pickles and dried fish, squid and scallops. At its end where it meets Kansu Street is the Yau Ma Tei fish market, brimming with stalls flogging the biggest crayfish you've ever seen, prawns the size of lobsters and lobsters the size of an It girl's lap dog.

Dining in style

Start with cocktails at **Felix** (Peninsula Hotel, Salisbury Road, Tsim Sha Tsui; 00 852 2366 6251), the Philippe Starck-designed cherry on top of the Peninsula Hotel, which recently garnered Hong Kong's only entry in Restaurant magazine's 50 Best Restaurants list. This groovy joint is a favourite with local plutocrats and swingers, yet for my money, and a considerable amount is required to dine here, the best things about it are the bar, the disco (with its heat-sensitive floor), and the men's loos (with an unbeatable view of Kowloon).

Spoon (InterContinental Hotel, 18 Salisbury Road, Tsim Sha Tsui; 00 852 2721 1211) is the easternmost outpost of multi-Michelin-starred Alain Ducasse's fine-dining chain. Make sure you get a window table and drink in the view over the harbour to Hong Kong island. Look up as you eat your farfalle with roast turbot and marvel at the 550 hand-blown Venetian glass spoons hanging from the ceiling.

If you need to ask the price, you can't afford to eat at **Pétrus** (Island Shangri-La, Pacific Place, Admiralty; 00 852 2877 3838), the very swanky French restaurant at the top of the Island Shangri-La Hotel. Think foie gras and truffles and special occasions. From HK\$1,000 (£70) a head before wine.

Drinks

Follow the irrigation channels of trickling water up a sepulchral dark stairway into **Aqua Spirit** (29-30th floors, 1 Peking Road, Tsim Sha Tsui; 00 852 3427 2288) and suddenly all of Hong Kong is at your Jimmy Choo'd feet - through a wall of glass. An Aquatini (Ketel One vodka, lychee liqueur, Chambord and gold leaf) for £10.60 makes a good start for any evening.

Hong Kong is in love with all things Japanese. **Mizu**, (49 Hollywood Road, Central; 00 852 2545 9889) an izakaya-style bar (a Japanese version of a pub, selling beer, sake and snacks) is the latest offering to hit the shores and has proved an instant hit with Central locals not only for its robotayaki grill (serving skewers of grilled meat, seafood and vegetables) but also its sake, straight and in cocktail form: sake sceptics should try the subtle Oba Leaf Caipirinha for an instant conversion.

Dragon-I (Upper Ground, The Centrium, 60 Wyndham Street, Central; 00 852 3110 1222) has androgynous waiters wearing T-shirts that read 'chic by accident' and the menu has Bruce Lee figures to denote which items kick ass (note: wasabi peanuts go down surprisingly well with strawberry Bellinis). After 10pm the restaurant, with its red-leather half-moon booths, turns into a VIP lounge, popular with the city's wealthiest hipsters and the odd footballer or pop star passing through town.

For something a little less exclusive but still swish and funky, seek out the hard-to-find **Drop** (39-43 Hollywood Road, Central; 00 852 2543 8856), but get

there before 11pm or it's members only.

Out of town

Walk off some of the indulgence in **Sai Kung Country Park** in the New Territories. Finish the hike at Sha Kiu Tau village on High Island (Leung Shuen Wan Chau), where a little terrace of very basic but wonderful waterside cafes serve up fabulous spanking fresh seafood (such as steamed grouper and Japanese scallops) on outside tables.

Yau Ley and **Loi Lams** (Sha Kiu Tau waterfront; no telephone numbers) are the best, and popular with locals in the know. Portions are generous and you will eat your fill (for less than £10 a head). Then simply hop on a sampan (£1.40 per person) and head back to Sai Kung pier.

Where to stay

JIAboutique Hotel Apartments, 1-5 Irving Street, Causeway Bay (00 852 3196 9000; www.jiahongkong.com). Lay your head in the hip new Philippe Starck-designed 57-room hotel where studios start at a very reasonable £113 per night (suites from £170).

If you are planning a long stay, a special rate is negotiable. All rooms have a little kitchen, but the price includes breakfast, free local calls, broadband access in all rooms, complimentary cocktails and access to the exclusive members-only Kee Club and the VIP lounge of Dragon-I. Guests also get discounts at selected shops. There's even a soundtrack CD.

Alternatively, the **InterContinental**, 18 Salisbury Road, Tsim Sha Tsui (www.hongkong-ic.intercontinental.com) has harbour view rooms from £226 a night.

Getting there

British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) flies daily from Heathrow to Hong Kong from £509.

Cathay Pacific (020 8834 8888; www.cathay-pacific.com) flies three times daily from Heathrow to Hong Kong from £488 return.

Find out more

Time Out's Hong Kong, Macau and Guangzhou (£12.99) is the best all-round guidebook. Luxe Hong Kong and Macau (HK\$60, Luxe City Guides) is the best guide to restaurants, bars, clubs, shops and services. It is pocket sized and written with attitude by locals who tell it like it is. It's available from various Hong Kong bookshops.

The South China Morning Post has restaurant reviews and foodie news every Friday and Sunday.

The Hong Kong Tourism Board is based at 6 Grafton Street in London (020 7533 7130).

In the footsteps of Fatty Pang

When Chris Patten was governor of Hong Kong, he was such an enthusiastic restaurant goer that he could have written his own guide. Hong Kong is littered with eateries proudly displaying photographs of an expanding Fatty Pang (the unflattering nickname given to him by the Chinese) glad-handing the owner. And we're not talking just the ritzy and the glitzy, but little out-of-the way noodle shops and lowly hole-in-the-wall bakeries favoured by locals. One such place is the Tai Cheong Cake Shop (Lyndhurst Terrace, Central; 00 852 2544 3475), a tiny bakery which does a roaring trade in sublime egg tarts that draw queues up the road from dawn to dusk.

Five foodie things you must do

1 Dim sum is the favourite food ritual of Hong Kong, primarily eaten for breakfast or lunch. Choose from an array of savoury and sweet titbits, ranging from deep-fried chicken feet to steamed prawn dumplings. For an authentic dim sum experience, complete with ageing waitresses pushing steaming trolleys around a noisy barn of a place, try **Maxim's** Palace City Hall (Low block, City Hall, 7 Edinburgh Place, Central; 00 852 2521 1303) for around £3.50 with tea. At the other end of the spectrum is **Yan Toh Heen** (InterContinental Hotel, 18 Salisbury Road, Tsim Sha Tsui; 0800 0289 387). House specials such as deep-fried scallops with pear, or turnip cake in flaky pastry are feather light and divine. From £21.20 with tea.

2 Eat at a speakeasy. These small, private dining rooms are effectively unlicensed restaurants, often in unlikely buildings. One such is **Xi Yan Culinary Art** (3rd floor, 231-233 Queen's Road East, Wanchai; 00 852 9020 9196). The menus change according to what's available in the market but the standard of cooking is usually high and you'll be guaranteed personal service.

3 Try spicy Szechuan dan dan mian noodles (£1.20) at **Wing Lai Yeun** (102-103 Whampoa Gourmet Plaza, Hung Hom; 00 852 23 20 64 30). For years the chef cooked at a street stall, until moving to the Gourmet Plaza, which has brought together some of the finest street vendors into a foodie's paradise. The peanut-flavoured noodles are so popular that, despite cooking 1,800 portions a day, there's a strict limit of one serving per person.

4 Get a flavour of Imperial China at **Hutong** (28th floor, 1 Peking Road, Tsim Sha Tsui; 00 852 3428 8342). On the 28th floor of a Kowloon tower block, it resembles a 17th-century Beijing courtyard house with Ming-era antiques, birdcages and fluttering fabrics. Northern ('modern Beijing') and regional Chinese cuisine.

5 The **Tasty Congee and Noodle Wantun** shop (21 King Kwong Street,

Happy Valley; 2838 3922) does what it says on the tin - tasty noodles in pungent broth with pork and prawn dumplings for £1.30.

Now you do it

Learn to make Cantonese classics at the Chinese Cuisine Training Institute in Pokfulam (00 852 2538 2373; www.vtc.edu.hk). Enthusiasts can learn about the eight regional cuisines of China on courses lasting up to three years, or simply master a couple of classics in a four-hourly session that costs £44. A training restaurant serves up the students' best efforts.

Pampered guests at the Peninsula Hotel (00 852 2920 2888; www.hongkong.peninsula.com) can sign up for the Academy programme (£70), which includes a 90-minute dim sum-making lesson under the tutelage of dumpling master Yip Wing Wah.

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