



Xiao long bao.

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## Vancouver's stunning Asian banquet

A Chinese culinary adventure awaits, no passport required

by CINDA CHAVICH · April 2017

The fat dumpling sags seductively at the end of my outstretched chopsticks, proof of its delicate wrapper and perfectly soupy interior. As instructed, I've lifted it carefully by the nub that sits at the apex of its 18 perfect folds, sliding the base through a saucer of inky black vinegar sauce. When the soup dumpling bursts in my mouth, revealing all of the hot, porky perfection within, I mumble my best multilingual culinary compliment: "Mmmmmmm."

Though it's a simple food, the skillful execution of this Chinese specialty, xiao long bao, is what makes it so special. The fact that I'm eating it half a planet away from its origins in Shanghai, makes it even more remarkable. But this is just one of the many remarkable – and authentic – Chinese food experiences you can have in Metro Vancouver, now considered "the most Asian" city outside of Asia, with 45 percent of its residents of Asian descent.

Whether it's the great ramen shops along Robson Street, the elegant Chinese dining rooms for dim sum, or hip new Asian concepts serving up small plates and sake cocktails, it's easy to eat something exotic at every meal. It's like a trip to Hong Kong – via Tokyo and Seoul – without the jet lag.

### CHINESE MASTER CHEFS

The first wave of Chinese immigrants arrived in Vancouver in the late 1800s, but it wasn't until the 1980s and '90s that Vancouver saw a large influx of immigrants and capital from Hong Kong and Mainland China, including some of the country's top master chefs.

Alex Chen, one of the young Asian-Canadian chefs making their mark in Vancouver restaurants today, takes his inspiration from those pioneers. A child of Chinese immigrants, Chen built his impressive culinary career in top kitchens across North America, competed for Canada at the prestigious Bocuse d'Or, and now runs Boulevard Kitchen & Oyster Bar at the Sutton Place Hotel. His upscale menu, like many in Vancouver, represents that confluence of cultures – fresh, seasonal and overlaid with influences of the Orient.

Chen has watched Vancouver's Asian food scene blossom like a pot of flowering tea especially "after we started to see the Michelin star chefs arriving from Hong Kong."

"I go to New York, I go to San Francisco, I hit all the Chinatowns," he says, "but it's here I find that perfect har gow, the skin strong enough to encase the sweet prawns, but so thin and delicate it almost melts in your mouth."

It's access to fresh ingredients, from local ling cod and Dungeness crab, to big geoduck clams and pristine greens, that makes Vancouver's Chinese food unique, he says. But traditional technique is key, too, and Chen points me to his favourite haunts for Chinese baking and barbecue meats. In search of the latter, we head to an unassuming shop, behind a supermarket parking garage in suburban Richmond.

### AUTHENTIC ASIAN

There's a row of mahogany glazed ducks hanging in the window next to the busy take-out counter at Hong Kong B.B.Q. Master. Anson Leung, barbecue master Eric Leung's son, brings us plates piled with duck and soy chicken but it's the roasted pork, with its crisp layer of golden crackling, that brings me back.

"It's a traditional way of cooking food, all done by hand and by eye," explains this second-generation, chef-in-training. "It's pure fire, and how you move the meat around, a lost art."

Almost lost, but thankfully not quite. In this sprawling city of new immigrants, with its traditional tea shops, ginseng merchants and designer knock-offs, it's easy to imagine you've fallen through a rabbit hole and arrived in the Middle Kingdom. But it's only a 20-minute ride on The Canada Line from downtown Vancouver, and just 10 from the airport.

Richmond has a colourful history as a fishing village and boats still unload their catch of fresh salmon and prawns at the dock in Steveston. But food has become a big draw for visitors, says Colin Wong, guiding me through the city's 400-plus Asian eateries.

"We can eat all regions of China in Richmond, Hunan, Szechuan, even authentic Muslim Chinese cuisine," says Wong as we sample the Shanghaiese specialties at Su Hang Restaurant.

"It's gotta be authentic, because there are a lot of new immigrants, and they demand it."

In fact, there's so much that's authentic here, it's hard to know where to start. Whether you're snacking on the ethereal "shaved ice" at Frappé Bliss in the uber-Asian Aberdeen mall or a crispy bubble waffle doled out by the elderly Cantonese couple at the Rainbow Café, eating your way through Richmond is a culinary adventure. Where else will you find authentic "dragon beard candy" pulled by hand on the street, flaky wife cakes (laopo bing) filled with winter melon and sesame paste, or snowy balls of coconut-crusting mochi?

The array of sweets and savouries at the lovely Kam Do Bakery is stunning. We select buttery egg tarts, golden "pineapple" buns with crackled sugar tops, and coconut-filled buns for nosing while we continue to explore.

### RESTAURANT ROW

Alexandra Road (a.k.a. "Food Street") with its clusters of strip malls and signage bristling with Chinese and Korean characters, can be a navigational nightmare, even for a savvy explorer with a Google map. Thankfully, the clever tourism types at Visit Richmond understand this cultural conundrum. So they've created a Dumpling Trail pamphlet and smartphone app, to lead diners to a dozen local restaurants, all carefully curated for cleanliness, English-speaking staff and, of course, delicious dumplings.

It's a great place to start, as many of the stops on their trail are known for other specialties, too, from hand-pulled noodles to hot pots and, that popular daily ritual, dim sum.

We dig into the latter at Chef Tony Seafood Restaurant, a bright space swathed in glossy white enamel, with the double bling of neon and crystal chandeliers. Tony He opened his first Sea Harbour restaurant in China, expanded to Richmond and Los Angeles, then created the eponymous Chef Tony here in 2014.

The big dim sum menu is illustrated and easy to navigate. The fluffy, fried taro dumplings (wu gok) arrive with a sliver of abalone perched on top, the translucent har gow has matsumae in the sweet shrimp filling, and steamy egg buns ooze golden custard. Like the pork and shrimp sui mai topped with black truffles, it's all about elevating the traditional, in both quality and price.

As much as Chef Tony is about dazzle, Hoi Tong Seafood Restaurant celebrates subtlety. Tucked into one of the ubiquitous strip malls along Westminster Highway, Hoi Tong is small and unassuming, but Chef Leung Yiu Tong is known for his precision with delicate Cantonese dishes. We start with fish maw soup, then sample his crisp, salt-baked chicken, an ethereal cloud of dai lang fried milk with quenelles of tofu, slippery bean curd rolls filled with mushrooms, and taro-crusting layers of tender pressed duck. It's clear why this friendly septuagenarian is a local legend, a master chef true to classical Chinese cooking.

### INNOVATIVE ASIAN

Office workers line up at the counter at Heritage Asian Eatery in the downtown financial district for morning Peking Duck Benny Bowls, congee, and fluffy bao with pork belly, daikon kimchi and shiitake mushrooms.

Chinese-born Chef Felix Zhou and his partners (with Chinese and Japanese/Spanish roots) designed the menu to reflect their shared heritage. They're on a trajectory that mirrors the evolution of Asian immigration and food trends in Vancouver, mashing up old and new ideas, family comfort foods and fresh ingredients, with classical chef training.

"This is the Chinese food we know," says Zhou. "When we go to Asia, we don't think the food is as good as Vancouver."

The rice bowl is simple, but the confit duck, like the pork char siu, is all made in house, and the udon is topped with a perfect sous vide egg. Zhou's Lunar New Year dinner – "the most traditional menu you will ever see me cook" – is a feast of updated flavours, from the pork consommé with a brunoise of vegetables and Chinese ham, to steamed oysters with puffed vermicelli, and eggplant dumplings, another of this young star chef's popular creations.

Old Chinatown is no longer the city's Chinese food hub. It's crumbling around the edges and seems an aberration among the luxury brand boutiques and posh hotels of downtown Vancouver. But we wander through the peaceful Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Chinese Garden and stop at trendy Bao Bei for a rum cocktail flavoured with plum juice and Sichuan peppercorns, and bar "schnacks" of house-made Taiwanese sausage and Chinese pickles.

Dinner is at another modern Asian eatery, Chef Clement Chan and partner Steve Kuan's award-winning Torafuku. Chan is at the pass in the busy open kitchen, and we sit at the polished concrete bar and watch our artfully-plated orders emerge: Dy-No-Mite prawn tempura roll, Humboldt squid in flour batter with crispy Brussels sprouts and compressed apples, seafood laksa in a miso and red curry sauce, creamy Panna Cotta with yuzu gelée and a sliver of black sesame shortbread for dessert.

The room is sleek and minimalist, a buzz of hip diners enjoying cocktails, the soft grey and blue upholstery along the walls dampening the clatter and chatter in this narrow space. Chan was born in Vancouver, his grandmother owned a popular Shanghaiese restaurant, and went from culinary school to cooking alongside top city chefs. With his Le Tigre food truck, pop-up dinners, and Food Network appearances, this celebrity chef is a poster child for the evolution of modern Asian food in Vancouver, where cultures fuse, even as traditions endure.

"In Vancouver, it's all about diversity, especially in Asian places," says Chan. "But better Asian or Chinese cooking here is mainly about better ingredients. We can have anything you can think of."

There's a creative hot pot of far eastern flavours to explore on Canada's west coast, no passport required.

*This article was accurate when it was published. Please confirm rates and details directly with the companies in question.*

### IF YOU GO

There are 20 restaurants listed on **Visit Richmond's Dumpling Trail** ([visitrichmondbc.com/365-days-of-dining/dumpling-trail](http://visitrichmondbc.com/365-days-of-dining/dumpling-trail)) map. Visit the website to download a copy and learn more.

Explore **Tourism Vancouver's website** ([tourismvancouver.com](http://tourismvancouver.com)) for dining guides including their Dim Sum Tasting Tour.

### WHERE TO DINE



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#### Hong Kong B.B.Q. Master

4651 No 3 Rd,  
Richmond, BC  
(604) 272-6568  
BBQ duck, BBQ pork, roast pork with crackling – take-out or eat in

#### Su Hang Restaurant

100-8291 Ackroyd Road,  
Richmond, BC  
(604) 278-7787  
[suhang.ca](http://suhang.ca)  
Shanghaiese menu including soup dumplings (xia long bao), steamed or pan fried, hand-pulled noodles and Ma Lan, a cold dish of bean curd and sautéed greens

#### Aberdeen Centre Food Court

4151 Hazelbridge Way,  
Richmond, BC  
(604) 270-1234  
[aberdeencentre.com/en/home.php](http://aberdeencentre.com/en/home.php)  
Mall food court with 20 stalls featuring fast food, from shaved ice and hot pots to bubble waffles, sushi and Taiwanese fried chicken

#### Kam Do Bakery

6211 No 3 Rd #135,  
Richmond, BC  
(604) 284-5611  
Flakey egg tarts, pineapple buns, coconut buns, wife cakes in Chinese bakery next to Richmond Centre

#### Chef Tony Seafood Restaurant

Empire Centre Mall  
600 No 3 Rd #101  
Richmond, BC  
(604) 279-0083  
[cheftonycanada.com/en/](http://cheftonycanada.com/en/)  
Busy, modern dining room for dim sum or dinner, with specialties like siu mai with black truffles

#### Hoi Tong Chinese Seafood Restaurant

8191 Westminster Hwy.  
Richmond, BC  
(604) 276-9229  
Traditional, high-end, Cantonese cuisine from Hong Kong master chef in small, private setting; reservations required

#### Heritage Asian Eatery

108 W Pender St  
Vancouver, BC V6E 4J6  
(778) 737-1108  
[eatheritage.ca](http://eatheritage.ca)  
Counter service for creative bao, congee, breakfast bowls in downtown Financial District

#### Bao Bei Chinese Brasserie

163 Keefer St  
Vancouver, BC  
(604) 688-0876  
[bao-bei.ca](http://bao-bei.ca)  
Compact, stylish Chinatown space for Asian-inspired cocktails and shared plates

#### Torafuku

958 Main St  
Vancouver, BC  
(778) 903-2006  
[torafuku.ca](http://torafuku.ca)  
Playful Asian fusion menu, bold flavours and cocktail scene, on edge of Chinatown

### WHERE TO STAY

#### Four Points by Sheraton

Vancouver Airport  
8368 Alexandra Rd,  
Richmond, BC  
(604) 214-0888  
Located in the heart of Richmond's restaurant row, right along Alexandra Road (a.k.a. Food Street), with 200-plus restaurants in a three-block stretch, and free shuttle service to the airport. From \$124.

#### The Listel Hotel

1300 Robson St.,  
Vancouver, BC  
(604) 684-8461  
[thelistelhotel.com](http://thelistelhotel.com)  
A downtown boutique hotel with two notable local restaurants, Forge and Timber. Centrally located. From \$145.

#### Opus Hotel

322 Davie St,  
Vancouver, BC  
(604) 642-6787  
[vancouver.opushotel.com](http://vancouver.opushotel.com)  
Stylishly boutique hotel in trendy Yaletown, conveniently located next to the Canada Line station for travels to Richmond and airport. From \$249.

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