

Farm-to-'Burbs:

A Canadian food destination, shaped by immigrants

By Ari Burack
Special to S.F. Examiner

If you're in the Vancouver area, you might wonder at a detour to the suburbs to explore the culinary splendors of China and greater Asia.

But here in Richmond, British Columbia, among rows of neatly groomed and gated family homes and countless strip malls, lies an evolving history spanning generations of Asian immigrants to North America's West Coast that has quickly transformed this once-pastoral island network wedged to the underside of Canada's hip, pricey, multicultural metropolis.

Comprising primarily Lulu Island (reportedly named for a young dancer and actress from San Francisco who visited the area in the 1860s) and the smaller Sea Island which is now home to Vancouver International Airport, Richmond still bears the remnants of its agricultural and seafaring roots. The waterfront, with its system of parks and trails and modern Olympic venues, maintains a working commercial fishing harbor at the mouth of the Fraser River. Cranberry and blueberry farms, and other crops, keep apace in outlying areas of the city. Lulu Island Winery, opened in 2009 by Taiwanese immigrants, has even established a tiny grape-growing operation, though most of its grapes — including those used for its popular ice wine — come from the Okanagan Valley in the interior of the province.

In late winter under a mottled and weepy gray sky, the city is abuzz over its Chinese New Year celebrations, which seem to grow bigger every year. Brightly garbed children dance, ceremonial drums thump, and multicolored dragons bob and weave on makeshift shopping-mall stages flanked by bank sponsorship signs. Packets of candy are handed out, and cultural activities and musical performances attract throngs.

"This was all farmland before," says Linda Reid, a longtime Richmond representative to British Columbia's legislative assembly, during a visit to the Dharma Drum Buddhist center as part of the two-week-long celebrations. "It's changed

Richmond, British Columbia, has transformed into the underside of Canada's hip, multicultural metropolis.



Yougo Popcorn Chicken



Xiao Long Bao



dramatically."

Evolving from a homogeneous community of single-family acreages, farms and cows decades ago, Richmond is now much more of a palette of faiths and nationalities. Immigrants, mainly from Asia, make

up more than 60 percent of its population of 214,000. The newcomers arrived in waves, many from Hong Kong in the 1980s, Taiwan in the 1990s, and more recently from all regions of mainland China. Currently, about 65 percent of the total popula-

tion are Asian, and half are Chinese.

Along No. 5 Road — dubbed the "Highway to Heaven" — the Dharma Drum center is flanked by a spectacular, gold-interior Tibetan monastery, a Vedic cultural center, and several other schools and houses

of worship and representing Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs — all within about a mile of one another.

"You can get a global view from your backyard in Richmond," Reid says, noting that the city has also

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IF YOU GO

Here are some must-visit places in Richmond, British Columbia:

Alexandra Road: Definitely worth a visit or two (or more) for the foodies, "Food Street" has about 200 restaurants jammed into three blocks of strip malls, including Cantonese, Szechuan, Shanghainese and northern Chinese, as well as Japanese, Vietnamese, Thai, Korean and Malaysian eateries. www.tourismrichmond.com/restaurants/food-street/ and www.followmefoodie.com/2010/07/5384/

Aberdeen Centre: Wade through the teens for a mall food-court experience on another level, with tastes imported from the Asian night markets. 4151 Hazelbridge Way, Richmond. www.aberdeencentre.com

Lulu Island Wineries: This small winery set amidst farmland on the outskirts of Richmond offers tours and tastings, and maintains a craft feel. Tastes may range toward the sweet, particularly its popular ice wine. 16880 Westminster Highway,

Richmond. www.luluslandwinery.com

Deer Garden Signatures: This Chinese noodle joint popular with locals may not be the easiest to find, or find an open seat in, but it's worth it for a steaming hot bowl of something great and, possibly, altogether new. Venezia Place, 2015-8580 Alexandra Road, Richmond. www.deergarden.ca

Shiang Garden Seafood Restaurant: This Cantonese seafood and dim sum restaurant has a tremendous variety of dishes, served with flair, including some tidbits you may have never seen on a plate. 2200-4540 No. 3 Road, Richmond.

Pacific Gateway Hotel: Situated on the waterfront and very close to Vancouver International Airport, the hotel is an ideal jumping off point to discover Richmond. 3500 Cessna Drive, Richmond. www.pacificgatewayhotel.com

recently begun taking in Syrian refugees.

It is that global view that has helped make Richmond's food scene so eclectic, albeit dominated by Chinese flavors. The culinary epicenter, Alexandra Road, is home to some 200 restaurants and tea shops. It's known as "Food Street," though the Chinese "Wai Sek Kai" actually translates more closely to "Hungry Street."

Some of the best spots are hidden from street view, accessed by unmarked elevators or doorways, and popularized by word of mouth from the many — mostly families with children — who fill them. Some signs are only in Chinese, which has at times become a contentious issue among English speakers in Richmond. Others have names quirkily translated into such tasty linguistic morsels as "Old Buddies Seafood," "Vivacity" and "Chubby Lamb Hot Pot."

At Deer Garden Signatures, one of those semi-hidden local favorites, a heaping bowl of the "original fish soup" comes in a rich, milky, fragrant broth laden with spheres of ground fish, herbs, rice noodles and enoki mushrooms — if that's what you ticked off on the multiple-choice menu. The xiao long bao at R&H Chinese Food (a not-at-all-hidden shop in the nearby Lansdowne Mall food court) are handmade before your eyes, steamed and served in bamboo baskets. A Shanghai specialty, these soup dumplings — enveloping both ground pork and a hot pork broth, and seasoned with rice wine, soy and ginger — are to be delicately opened and sipped before devouring.

At the famed Aberdeen Centre, the largest mall in British Columbia, hordes of teens and adults alike descend on its food court for Taiwanese bubble waffles, Hainanese chicken rice, Yougo popcorn chicken dusted in Chinese five-spice, boiled or pan-fried pork and chive dumplings with red vinegar and soy dipping sauce, deep-



Original Fish Soup

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fried chicken wings, curried fish balls and sweet iced tea with lemon. Surely more interesting, and satisfying, than the typical American mall fare.

The ornately decorated Shiang Garden Seafood Restaurant feels like a step back in time, but it manages to bridge conventional and modern. Guests are seated at large banquet tables for dim sum lunches and (mostly) traditional, multi-course Cantonese dinners. Some of the more exotic dishes — textures ranging from the crunchy to the gelatinous — are (of course) said to impart luck and prosperity. A formal Chinese New Year meal here may include jellyfish, duck and goose feet, lobster, beef shank, surf clam, dried oyster, varieties of mushrooms, pork tongue and steamed whole rock cod. Desserts include mango pudding and chrysanthemum tea jelly.

If, amid the staid architecture, grid-pattern streets and ubiquitous shopping centers, the vibe of Richmond tends toward the blandness of suburbia, the food does not. The Chinese restaurant scene here is highly competitive, catering to the tastes of both new immigrants and a modern generation of youth, and the locals dine out often and bring high standards.

As Richmond continues to evolve in its uniquely Asian-Canadian fusion, bringing with it booming development, rising home prices and other new challenges, perhaps it will also find ways to stay in touch with its origins in the immigrant experience, the land and the sea — the catalysts of its success.

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