

Lifestyle/ Food &amp; Drink

## Authentic Chinese food is the thing to eat in London – think roast meat, Shanghai dumplings, hand-pulled noodles and plant-based menus – as diners move beyond takeaway fare


A growing crop of London restaurants have pivoted from serving takeaway sweet and sour pork, chop suey and shrimp toast to offering authentic Chinese fare

A Cantonese chain serves 'the best roast duck in the world', a stall sells soup dumplings as good as those in Shanghai, and there are plant-based menus too

**Delle Chan**

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Shengjian bao, prawn wontons and sesame noodles at Dumpling Shack. Photo: Delle Chan

In the UK, Chinese cuisine has had something of a bad reputation until recently, thanks to the ubiquity of dishes such as fluorescent sweet and sour pork, gloopy chop suey and oily shrimp toast.

“In general, Westerners have had a tendency to think of Chinese food as either cheap and unhealthy, or terrifyingly weird,” says [Fuchsia Dunlop, a Chinese food expert based in the UK](#). “But of course, this stereotype is derived from the kind of takeaway food that they love to eat – and that most Chinese don’t.

“This is changing with the rise of China on the international stage, and a new generation of Chinese immigrants in the West who are helping to reshape public opinion through their restaurants and other food ventures.”

This is especially the case in London, which is home to 32 per cent of the UK’s Chinese population and a growing crop of restaurants dishing up authentic Chinese fare. These venues don’t just cater to a few immigrants craving a taste of home, though – some of them rank among the hottest tables in town.



The exterior of Four Seasons in Chinatown, London. Photo: Delle Chan

Cantonese chain Four Seasons – which recently opened two outposts in Hong Kong, one in Tai Po and [another in Central](#) – serves what the *Financial Times* proclaimed is “the best roast duck in the world”, and it seems that many Londoners agree.

Walk into one of its restaurants on any given evening, and you’ll find the space packed with diners tucking into smoky char siu, crisp pork belly and, of course, a platter of succulent roast duck.



Roast duck at Four Seasons. Photo: Delle Chan

True to the spirit of traditional *siu mei* (roast meat) shops, Four Seasons proudly displays its glistening barbecued meats in its shop window for all to see.

“There is a misconception about the authenticity of ingredients used in Chinese cooking in the UK, especially when it comes to meats,” says 26-year-old Elema Rockson, a psychometrician (someone who administers and interprets psychometric tests) who posts on Instagram as [@omgthatfood](#).

“But Four Seasons has all of its roast meats on show, and you can see that the cuts of pork used are clearly of really good quality.



Four Seasons displays its barbecued meats in its shop window for all to see. Photo: Delle Chan

“This is what makes its roast meat platter so delicious – in fact, its crispy pork belly is the best I’ve had in London.”

Au Po-hing, the manager of Four Seasons’ branch on Gerrard Street in Chinatown, attributes the high quality of his restaurant’s dishes to the competitive nature of the industry.

The 57-year-old says that the local Chinese food scene has developed over “years and years”, citing Chinatown, Kensington and Mayfair as prominent culinary hotspots.



Au Po-hing, the manager of Four Seasons’ branch on Gerrard Street in Chinatown. Photo: Delle Chan

Yet more top-notch Chinese food can be found at Spitalfields Market in East London, where Dumpling Shack has built a cult following for its Shanghai-style *shengjian bao* – [plump soup dumplings](#) packed with pork and a piping hot broth, and pan-fried until golden brown.

“I love how flavourful and unique the dumplings are,” says customer Olivia Burn, a 24-year-old monitoring administrator. Her views are echoed by 32-year-old lawyer Gerald Leong.

“The dumplings here are as good as those I had for breakfast every day on my last trip to Shanghai,” he notes.



Dumpling Shack owner John Li began selling dumplings as a weekend hobby in 2014 before opening his Spitalfields stall in 2016. Photo: Delle Chan

According to owner John Li, his team makes 1,000 to 1,500 dumplings on site daily, and they start as early as 6am.

“We’re actually busier than we were pre-pandemic,” says the 37-year-old, who began selling dumplings as a weekend hobby in 2014 before opening his market stall in 2016. He has since gone on to open a second grab-and-go site in Canary Wharf and he plans to open a third outpost in Broadway Market next year.

“Traditionally, Chinese food in the UK was all about takeaways, and I’m super supportive of that – after all, that’s how my family [who moved to the UK from Hong Kong] made a living. There’s still a place for these takeaways in Britain,” says Li. “But compared with when I entered the industry six years ago, the quality of Chinese food offerings in London is now completely different, and I can only see it improving.”



Shengjian bao, prawn wontons and sesame noodles at Dumpling Shack. Photo: Delle Chan

Besides more mainstream Cantonese and Shanghaiese fare, lesser-known regional Chinese cuisines are growing in popularity in London, with food from Xian – the capital city of Shaanxi province – having a moment in the spotlight.

Some of the best renditions in the city can be found at Master Wei, an unassuming restaurant that opened in the Bloomsbury neighbourhood in early 2019.



The outside of Master Wei. Photo: Delle Chan

It is headed by 40-year-old Xian native Wei Guirong, who whips up chewy *biang biang* (hand-pulled wheat flour noodles), refreshing *liang pi* (cold wheat starch noodles) and spicy *rou jia mo* (cumin-scented beef burger) using her grandmother's recipes.

These dishes have proven to be a hit with Chinese and Western customers alike, with the latter making up 80 per cent of the restaurant's clientele.

"Our *biang biang* noodles are more popular among Western people, whereas Asian people tend to order the burgers and *liang pi* noodles," says Wei. However, she admits that as Xian cuisine is "more hot and sour, and features a lot of garlic", she has to temper some of her flavours for her London audience.



Master Wei is headed by 40-year-old Xian native Wei Guirong.  
Photo: Delle Chan



Boneless chicken in ginger sauce at Master Wei. Photo: Delle Chan

Other Chinese restaurants are catering to local palates in different ways. For instance, Tofu Vegan in Islington offers an entirely plant-based menu – think *xiao long bao* stuffed with tofu and mushrooms, stir-fried *gong bao* tofu with peanuts, and twice-cooked “fish” made using bean curd and strips of seaweed for a hint of brininess.

These dishes have clearly tempted the taste buds of London’s growing vegan population – queues are a common sight come dinnertime and reservations are essential.

Tofu Vegan is the brainchild of 46-year-old restaurateur Zhang Chao, who was born in Xinjiang in western China and moved to London in 2003 to study. “I really got so homesick for Chinese food,” he says. “At that time, Cantonese food dominated everything – so things like sweet and sour – and I couldn’t find authentic Sichuan, Shanghainese or Xian cuisine.”



The outside of Tofu Vegan. Photo: Delle Chan

This prompted him to open his first restaurant, Sichuan Folk, in 2009, followed by Xi’an Impression in 2015, Xi’an Biang Biang Noodles in 2018, and then Tofu Vegan in 2021.

The flexitarian says he was inspired to open his latest venture chiefly because of his wife, who follows a vegetarian diet. “At Tofu Vegan, we want to change customers’ minds about vegan food. Every little bit helps,” he says. “But if we can also change their minds about Chinese food, then why not?”

From roast duck to *biang biang* noodles to New-Age vegan dumplings, the food dished up at London's Chinese restaurants today is wonderfully varied – a glowing testament to the sheer multifariousness of Chinese cuisine.



Gong bao king oyster mushrooms at Tofu Vegan. Photo: Delle Chan



Vegan wontons at Tofu Vegan. Photo: Delle Chan

“I think most people can now see that Chinese cuisine is not one single style of cookery,” Dunlop says, “but something amazingly diverse and exciting.”

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*Dumpling Shack*, Old Spitalfields Market, Brushfield Street, London, E1 6BG, [dumplingshack.co.uk](http://dumplingshack.co.uk)

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