

GLOBE



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Dim Sum
Decoded
The Fiery
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Rum
& Sunshine
A spirited Caribbean cuisine.

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Nibble your way to culinary satisfaction.

By Antony Bolante



delights of
dim sum

Har Gow



DIM SUM ISN'T JUST A DISTINCTIVE CUISINE; it's a singular dining experience. For the uninitiated, both can be a bit intimidating. But armed with a few pointers, you don't have to let this delicious opportunity pass you by.

And I mean that literally.

In a dim sum restaurant, numerous servers roll carts from table to table, each cart covered with small plates and steam baskets made of bamboo or metal. When a cart arrives at your table, you're on: Indicate the items you want, and then send the cart on its way and await the next one. It requires a bit more, shall we say, assertiveness than usual. Sure, you can get dim sum a la carte or for take out, but what's the fun in that? Once you're familiar with the basic dim sum offerings and dining etiquette, you'll be ordering your meal with confidence — and eating it with gusto.

The Cantonese term dim sum is translated as "point of the heart", or sometimes, "a little bit of heart". Fittingly, dim sum refers to any of a number of small dishes that includes filled dumplings, buns, rolls, meat or vegetable plates, and dessert items. The meal itself is called *yum cha*, which literally means "drink tea". Originally, dim sum were offered as an accompaniment to tea, and particularly well suited for travellers. These days, yum cha is usually served from early morning to mid-afternoon, but has become especially popular as a kind of brunch.

When sitting down to yum cha, it's only natural to start with a pot for the table. Proper tea etiquette requires that you always serve your

companions first. When the pot is empty, leaving the lid ajar is a tacit signal to your server that you're ready for it to be replenished.

Meals are always better shared, and this is especially true for dim sum. Each plate usually contains three or four morsels — so the more people at your table, the more opportunities there will be to sample different dishes. If you accept a dish consisting of a single item — say, a pile of greens — don't hesitate to transfer a bit to your plate.

The main thing to remember is to relax and enjoy the ride. Your server will usually identify your choices (albeit briskly) and unveil the contents of a steam basket for your assessment. If they don't, point and ask. There's no reason to feel stressed; and there's no need to hem and haw, either. Don't feel obligated to take something that doesn't appeal to you. And if you're unsure of a dish, why not give it a try? After all, most items are inexpensive, and your small risk could pay off.

That said, here's a field guide to a few representative dim sum delicacies.

Har Gow — Crystal-Skin Shrimp Dumplings

If har gow are the most recognisable dim sum, it's because they're classic. To make har gow, wheat starch is transfigured into a smooth, translucent wrapper that encloses a shrimp filling. Finely chopped bamboo shoots, water chestnuts or onion can also add texture and flavour. Because the pink shrimp should shine faintly through the wrapper, har gow are also known as 'crystal skin'

shrimp dumplings. Traditionally, the wrapper should resemble a bonnet, carefully pleated before sealing in the filling. In fact, the number of pleats made into the delicate dough — seven or more tiny folds — showcase a dim sum chef's abilities.

Siu Mai — Pork Dumplings

Siu mai aren't the only pork dumplings available, but they are the quintessential pork dumplings. Your dim sum cart will likely feature the Cantonese variation: a meatball made of ground pork and chopped shrimp mixed with Chinese mushrooms and scallions, seasoned with a bit of ginger, rice wine, soy sauce and sesame oil. This savoury morsel is cupped in a yellowish wheat-flour wrapper. The top is usually garnished with a dot made from roe, carrot or a pea, giving the dumpling a flower-like appearance.

Char Siu Bao — BBQ Pork Buns

Char siu bao is one of the most popular buns, or *baozi*. *Cha siu* is sliced or diced pork loin marinated and slow-roasted in a Cantonese-style BBQ sauce. Recipes vary, but most include soy sauce, oyster sauce, hoisin sauce, sesame seed oil and a thickener like flour or cornstarch. Sugar or honey provides sweetness. This savoury-sweet pork is ensconced in a *bao*, or bun, which is either

Feng zhua



steamed or baked. In the steamed variety, the bao is a fluffy, white, soft bread. In the baked version, the char siu is completely hidden within a spherical bao, which has a glossy egg-wash finish sprinkled with sesame seeds.

Cheong Fun — Rice Wraps

Cheong fun is the name for pig intestines, but *fun* denotes a noodle. Thus, *cheong fun* is simply a noodle — in this case a very wide, flat and shiny rice noodle — that, when rolled, is said to resemble a pig intestine. But if that's too vivid, you can just think of it as a dim sum-style savoury crepe. Cheong fun is often wrapped around a filling, such as marinated shrimp, beef, char siu or chicken. Generally, a plate holds three rolls, which will be doused in a light, sweet soy sauce just before serving.

Feng Zhua — Phoenix Claws

Despite their grandiose appellation, you'll immediately recognise phoenix claws for what they are: chicken feet. In Cantonese cooking, they are deep fried, braised and steamed before being simmered in a sauce of fermented beans, bean paste and sugar. The lengthy preparation makes the feet tender and remarkably flavourful. Once you overcome any mental barriers you may have, feng zhua may even become one of your favourites. And yes, the 'claws' themselves — that is, the toenails — have been removed.

Dan Tat — Egg Custard

Chinese cuisine isn't particularly known for desserts, but rest assured, your dim sum server will come along with a confection that will satisfy your sweet tooth. One favourite is dan tat, a bright yellow custard made from whipped eggs, sugar and evaporated milk, baked into a crisp and flaky pastry crust. It's sure to catch your eye and delight your palate. And remember, you don't have to wait until the end of the meal for dessert. Feel free to get one whenever the cart comes your way, and to eat it whenever you please.



Cheong fun