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HuTong Dumpling Bar

—·08年12月23日·—

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timeout

Eating out is kids' stuff

Dumplings are a winner for the whole family, writes Michael Harden

The holy grail for parents who want to dine out with their kids is the culinary win-win scenario when neither parent nor child has to compromise their dietary desires. Chinese restaurants are a good place to start, because the Chinese (alongside the Italians) are world-renowned child-friendly restaurateurs. But even in the most kid-pleasing joint, if the food is average parents will feel they are, once again, paying the price for being parents.

This is where Hu Tong Dumpling Bar comes to the rescue. Across the lane from the Flower Drum in the city, Hu Tong is a three-storey temple of family harmony, particularly if you remember to book ahead so you don't have to wait in the cramped holding bay at the front.

Hu Tong Dumpling Bar does, of course, do dumplings, and it is a worrisome child that doesn't like those steamed and fried little gems. Hu Tong also does an extensive range of lovely, spicy Sichuan dishes and well-

executed Cantonese favourites that will keep parents as satisfied as offspring.

Each level of Hu Tong is slightly different, starting with the café-style space on the ground level with a large window into the kitchen where the dumpling makers are in full display. The second level has a clean-lined, canteen-style vibe while, one flight up, things take on a more refined feel with comfortable wooden chairs, ornate wooden screens and rows of designer lanterns. Service seems to follow suit with the greatest level of care and attention on the top floor.

It is a crime to eat here and not try the shao long bao (\$10.80 for eight). These steamed ginger and pork dumplings contain an excellent broth and so eating them requires a little practice. The best way is to lift the dumplings onto a ceramic spoon, chew a hole in the bottom and then suck the broth out. Then dip the dumpling in some Chinese black vinegar. The gorgeous textures and sparkling flavours are a treat for young and old.



Pan-fried pork dumplings (\$10.80 for eight) are also excellent. The slightly charred bottoms give a nice chewiness that works with the edible fried "basket" (made from water and starch) in which the dumplings sit.

Among the non-dumpling dishes, the powerful fish in hot chilli oil (\$25.80) is a hot and peppery delight as is the bean curd mixed with chilli and pork mince (\$13.80). Some may find the torn cabbage served with preserved pork and chilli sauce (\$15.80) too intense but chilli lovers will find it toe-curlingly good.

Hu Tong is a family restaurant in the best sense of the term. All food-loving parents should add it to their list.

Hu Tong Dumpling Bar

14-16 Market Lane, City. Call 9650 8128

OWNER Jeff Hu

CHEF Juafu Cao

OPEN Daily, 11.30am to 3pm; 5.50pm to 11pm

Licensed and BYO (\$3 per person) AE DC MC V EFT

COST About \$70 for two, plus drinks

COMPLEMENTED BY

The mostly Australian wine list is passable and well priced but wine drinkers might like to consider the BYO option. For those travelling the chilli road, the cleansing, refreshing lightness of a Tsing Tao beer (\$7) is a great companion. **mwm**



THE SERVE

THIS WEEK: SUMMER STUNNERS

Restaurant reviews by Dani Valent

★★★★★ excellent
★★★★ very good
★★★ good
★★ average
★ poor
☹️ abysmal



Chilli wontons: sublime.

PICTURES: GARY MEDLICOTT

★★★☆☆ **Hutong Dumpling Bar**
162 Commercial Road, Prahran, 9098 1188
Licensed MC V Eftpos
Daily, 11.30am-3pm, 5.30pm-late
Entrees \$5-\$10, mains \$25-\$30, desserts \$10

Summer means swimming and swimming means hungry. Sometimes that's roast chicken by the 50-metre pool. Other times it's fish and chips on a pier. Sometimes it's as low-key as a cold shower while the barbecue warms up. This summer it also means dumplings at Hutong — a quick stroll from Prahran Pool and an easy spin from St Kilda Beach.

There's already a Hutong in Market Lane in the city, known for delicious dumplings but also for mad service ("They slammed the door in my face!" marvelled one friend, who snuck in eventually then couldn't wait to return). The new outpost is aiming for

a smoother experience but it's sure to become just as crazy-busy. Part of the glam Cullen Hotel, Hutong is a curious but clever choice for an in-house dining room (the Eurocentric Terrace bistro is also part of the hotel's eats package). Hutong's appealing private chambers, bar and courtyard sweeten the deal.

I'm not sure if it's a Prahran thing or whether the staff came straight from bonhomie boot camp, but the service was all smiles. In fact, my preschool luncheon companions were treated with such warmth that they're still talking about it ("He gave us lemonade!" "And a straw!"). That's not to say it was a seamless experience. We received some dishes twice, some after much waiting, others not at all. Food needs to be very good to overcome such glitches — luckily, that's no problem here.

The key morsels are the xiao long bao, called XLB by their many obsessive fans. These translucent dough packages are stuffed with pork and prawn mince

and a mouthful of delicious pork stock that's jellied when it's assembled and liquefies as the dumpling is steamed. There are how-to-eat leaflets available; suffice to say, any soupy splashes on your summer threads are worth it. The view is first class: a window reveals Hutong's nimble-fingered dumpling makers pinch-pinch-pinch their way to RSI. Also on display is a \$300,000 oven that can cook a duck in 15 minutes. I'm not sure if the warp-speed roast is the problem but the Peking duck wasn't the luscious mouth-melt I was hoping for. I preferred mashed turnip in puffed pastry, sublime chilli wontons and winsomely fluffy pork buns. But the XLB are XLNT: if I was the mince within, I'd enjoy swimming in that soupy pool as much as I love dunking in the chlorinated 50-metre heaven up the road.

Tips and pans to theserve@theage.com.au

ALSO TRY

Red Mullet Fishcaf, 210 Glenferrie Road, Malvern, 9500 9338. Tues-Sun, noon-9.30pm. New owners are freshening up this popular seafood diner and take-away. Fry-o-phobes go for grilled skewers; regulars look to the specials board for dishes such as clam chowder, fish curry, baked barramundi and prawn caesar salad.

West Beach Bathers Pavilion, 330 Beaconsfield Parade, St Kilda, 9593 8833. Daily, dawn to dusk. Kiteboarders and the family behind



Fairfield Boathouse have turned a long-empty deco building on the foreshore into a surfer store and beachy cafe. The food is simple: think bacon and eggs for brekkie and fish'n'chips and burgers for later.

Red Till, 143a Great Ocean Road, Anglesea, 5263 2900. Daily, breakfast and lunch; dinner, Thurs-Sat.

A serious approach to coffee keeps this cafe buzzing all day. At night, try housemade gnocchi, filo-wrapped prawns and chicken with Asian salad. There's live music on Friday evenings.

INDULGE

Snacks at Trunk
Coda owner/chef Adam D'Sylva often drops into Trunk before the dinner rush to chew the fat with old pal and Trunk owner Nick Kutcher. "It's a great space in the concrete jungle, with trees and an open courtyard," says D'Sylva. "It's relaxing and fun and people always drop past." Fave eats include the gnocco fritto and the pizzas. "They do a great prosciutto pizza," he says. "It's where I go for pizza in the city."
Trunk, 275 Exhibition Street, Melbourne, 9663 7994
Coda, Basement, 141 Flinders Lane, Melbourne, 9650 3155



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IN EPICURE ON TUESDAY

Flower shower

Cooking with spring blooms

NO RESERVATION

Much ado about dumplings



A storied
dimmie
has been
humbled

by a hot dumpling,
writes **Matt Preston.**

RIGHT, let's call to order this quarter's meeting of the Melbourne Association of Dumpling-lovers – MAD for short. Those of you who are regulars here will know that this is a haven for lovers of dumplings, be they steamed and sweet, or fried and savoury.

We've played here with fluffy beauties poached in golden syrup and sung hymns of praise to a special dumpling shop in Hong Kong. In this supportive environment can I share the rather exciting news that dumplings may well be this year's zeitgeist item in Melbourne's restaurants.

Gyoza, pierogi and har gow have been perennial restaurant favourites when dining at places with names written in Japanese, Russian or Chinese characters. As have funkier modern versions which are their own hagiographies, such as those at Ichi Ni or Verge.

Forget the previous trend for hot pots, the Chinese way with pastry and fillings is where the smart money is going these days. We've always had a bit of a thing about them whether served from a yum cha trolley or sold by the plate from such sticky-tabled delights as Camy Shanghai Dumpling House, where the low prices have you overlooking a number of sins.

New dumpling restaurants are popping up all over Melbourne seemingly faster than our highly trained team of reviewers can keep pace. We've seen Auntie's Dumplings in Carnegie and are now on the trail of a new place in Glenferrie Road. I have also been hearing delicious dumpling tales from the flash Red Pocket in Victoria Street in Abbotsford, which opened with an original reaction from this paper that was more of a whimper than a bang.

It is, however, about HuTong in the city that I would like to talk today. If HuTong was in Sydney it would have a *Good*

Food Guide hat, for it is more than a match for that city's much lauded branch of the Taiwanese dumpling phenomenon, Din Tai Fung, which was recently toque-d by our friends in the north.

I've eaten at, and enjoyed, both. But I think HuTong is superior in a number of ways. First, its smaller two-tier design makes it feel intimate. Secondly, the option of following dumplings with Sichuan or Shanghainese dishes such as plates of soft gelatinous Dong Po pork belly (OK, I have to admit I really just like the bell-like rhythm of the name), Shanghai-style pork ribs in a sweet vinegar sauce, or juicy fried chicken wings tossed with loads of dried chilli, is a big plus. Even the dumpling-obsessed need a little variety occasionally.

Outweighing both of these reasons, however, is the chance to eat their shao-long bao, the famous soup-filled dumplings that should be the city emblem of Shanghai. I have eaten these miracles of culinary engineering from Shanghai to Springvale and I'm jiggered if I can think of a better example than the ones at HuTong. The juicy kernel of meat inside the dumpling floats in a broth loaded with flavour, and leaves you wondering how you fill a dumpling with soup. (The

secret isn't the nifty use of a syringe but what happens to great stock when it goes cold). But here the real wonder is how they make the dumpling wrapper so thin and silky, yet strong enough to hold a tablespoon of hot soup and the meat filling without it splitting and letting that rich stock ebb away.

I have found after some disastrous and shirt-wrecking experiences that the best way to eat shao-long bao is to pick them up carefully with your chopsticks and rest their base on your spoon, close to your mouth. You then nip the skin near the neck of the dumpling and suck out some of the soup, leaving a little in there to lubricate the meatball filling and pasta sheath when you pop the partially drained dumpling in your mouth. If you don't do this, you don't know how hot the soup inside is. As a shao-long bao novice, many was the time I'd greedily ram a dumpling into my gob only to find the soup inside scaldingly hot. Painful, for when the dumpling burst it would turn the skin on the roof of my mouth into bubble-wrap.

So go, try and enjoy and question whether these could become the dumpling emblem of Melbourne to replace the South Melbourne Market dimmie, a dimmie that has long been as uniquely

Melbourne as trams, good coffee and a universal dislike of the Hawthorn colours.

I only ask this because disturbing reports have reached me from the taxi and limousine drivers' arm of MAD that the dimmies at South Melbourne Market have lost their shine. It's a serious accusation but delivered with the sort of gravitas that normally greets the news that a much-loved, gin-soaked member of the royal family is dead.

While the sincerity of the source leaves me no room to disbelieve, we still pointed the meter south and discovered that he speaks the truth. While it's too early to declare that the mighty have fallen, they are looking distinctly wobbly. The South Melbourne dimmie is not the crunchy, meaty brute it was even a couple of years ago.

It's a sour moment alleviated only by the hope that, like a dough-covered phoenix the size of a fat toddler's fist, these iconic dimmies can rise again from the ashes in my mouth. Regular updates from MAD members would be much appreciated. In fact do your fellow man, or dumpling-loving woman, a favour and file your favourite place for a dimmie to me.

mpreston@bigpond.net.au





Hu's the daddy

Restaurant **HU TONG** / Where **Melbourne** / Review **John Lethlean**

DRINKS? IT HAD BECOME AN AMUSING question. By the time a fourth waiter had asked if we were right for beverages, a little gentle eye-rolling had started. But then, it was just the second week of trading for Hu Tong at Prahran's smart new Cullen Hotel, and it had opened with a precious, red silk-lined box full of brownie points.

I was prepared for a little madness. A lot of Melbourne foodies were.

The first Hu Tong, a self-proclaimed "dumping bar", opened in Chinatown in early 2009, a curious mix of the city's bowerbird school of cool cafe design, classic Chinese elements (including appallingly uncomfortable furniture), slightly shambolic service and a pan-Chinese menu focusing on dumplings from many regions and plenty of Szechuan-inflected food. Black vinegar and Szechuan pepper as opposed to soy and roasted chilli oil.

It was fun and great value, and the food, while inconsistent (it became standard practice for waiters to open by announcing what was *not* available), was more often than not wonderful. Pure. Uncompromised. Well-cooked.

Tapping into Melbourne's enduring love of yum cha, it sold hand-made, steamed and pan-fried dumplings by the kilo. How many shao-long bao – brilliant Shanghai dumplings filled

with pork and hot "soup", served with black vinegar and ginger – did they sell in 2009? Impossible to eat there without a basket of the volcano-shaped gems.

Hu Tong Market Lane was my most-patronised restaurant of 2009; this year may see its glamorous inner-suburban sibling grab the baton. Yes, it was disorganised for the first few weeks, but then few restaurants open to such a surge of demand.

The place has relaxed, even glamorous style, a clever mix of the modern massaged with Old China and a proper wine effort, with Riedel glassware and a smart list constructed by consultant Jane Thornton. It's Chambolle-

Musigny alongside classic China porcelain. Hu Tong 2 has honed the City joint's rough edges.

Fundamentally, however, the food is still excellent – although ironically, Peking duck (a point of difference over its progenitor) is dull. Forget it. If you want Cantonese, the cooks behind the fishtank kitchen window are making dumplings by hand, which should give you a clue: amazing ha gao, a springy prawn dumpling filled with fragrant meat all wrapped in a sensuous, pliable steamed skin. Equally, fried pork dumplings served with a gossamer web of batter joining all eight, and chilli won tons with a pork filling that come in a crunchy/piquant and slightly tongue-numbing Szechuan oil with sesame and spring onion, are just ridiculously delicious. The freshness of the house-made dumpling skins makes such a difference.

Spicy sesame chicken – a cold dish – gets a similar, but sweeter treatment; as a rule, the oil/chilli/Szechuan pepper excesses of some northern Chinese places are avoided at Hu Tong. And if you want something light and clean, "crystal tofu" – rectangles of cold, silken curd dressed with sweet soy, fresh coriander and preserved egg – is the biz, although modern preserved egg is a bland substitute for what used to do the rounds of Chinatown illicitly 25 years ago.

That other international bean curd standard – ma po tofu – with minced pork is done sensibly, too. By which I mean the combination of chilli and pepper is not going to upset your diary. Which just about sums the place up: the flavours are there and in balance – the cooking is really good – but the gentle pitch to adventurous occidentals suggests that, behind the occasionally chaotic service, there's been serious thought about how to deliver an accessible experience without overly compromising the whole thing.

The new Hu Tong may just be the best Australian Chinese restaurant to open in a decade. I'll drink to that.

restaurants@theaustralian.com.au
For the latest Food+Wine news, see First Bite every Tuesday in *The Australian*.



HU TONG

Address: Shop 1, 162 Commercial Road, Prahran

Phone: (03) 9098 1188

Web: n/a

Hours: lunch, dinner daily

Typical prices: appetiser/dumplings \$12; main courses \$20; desserts \$8

Summary: The kind of restaurant you miss after a week's absence.

Like this, try ... Din Tai Fung, Sydney; T-Chow, Adelaide



RESTAURANT

It's true love, at first bite



Larissa Dubecki

I AM in love. Deeply. Devotedly. The object of my affection has a droopy bottom, a puckered face and — I must face facts — a bit of an incontinence problem. But love, as they say, is blind. The shao long bao at HuTong Dumpling Bar remain a thing of beauty.

The soup-filled pork dumplings are the headline act at a very welcome CBD newcomer that won't win many accolades for its decor and even fewer for its service, but is nonetheless well worth seeking out for its addictive specialty, and plenty of other dishes besides. Its BYO status doesn't hurt, either.

You can see the Shanghai specialty being made by frenetic white-hatted chefs — three of whom are imports from Taiwan's famous Din Tai Fung chain of dumpling restaurants (now global, there's also one in Sydney) — on the ground floor of this three-level restaurant opposite the venerable Flower Drum.

The two establishments might breathe the same Market Lane air but that's about the extent of the similarity. HuTong is noisy. It's cheap and cheerful. The service is, to put it politely, appalling, and the wine list is just OK.

But you certainly don't go to HuTong for the wine, the service, or the decor, which features a utilitarian second floor and a more attractive upper floor decorated with wooden lattice screens that evoke visions of old Beijing.

You go there for the first-rate dumplings, for a start, and after many repeat visits it seems it's the rare diner who doesn't begin with a serve of the shao long bao (\$8.50 for eight pieces).

Pedants will argue they're not actually dumplings. They're buns; little basket buns, as the name translates. Exactly how they get the soup inside sounds like a mystery with shades of the model-sailboats-in-bottles debate, but it turns out it's a firm, gelatin-like piece of meat stock that melts in the heat of the bamboo



steamer. It's cunningly, almost disappointingly, simple.

It can be tricky figuring out how best to tackle them, so there's a pamphlet explaining the process. Take the dumpling around the middle with your chopsticks; dip it in some black vinegar and shredded ginger; put it in a ceramic spoon, leaving a bit of the droopy bottom hanging over the edge; take a small bite and slurp out the golden, lightly seasoned liquid; dunk in more ginger and vinegar, eat the rest.

HuTong isn't the first place to offer Melburnians shao long bao (more commonly spelled xiao long bao) but they've certainly set the bar high.

The skin is thin yet firm and elastic; the minced pork filling is a gristle-free product of a quality not often encountered.

They're just one of seven types of dumpling on offer. Most are pork — the default meat of Chinese cuisine — but there are also whole-shrimp shao mai (\$5.50 for four), which are shaped like little nuclear power plants, and minced prawn steamed dumplings (\$5.50 for four). Slippery yellow wontons (pork-filled, \$8 for

eight) live up to their name (it literally translates as "swallowing a cloud"), and the pan-fried dumplings (or "pot-stickers", \$4.50 for six) intriguingly come embedded in a tissue-paper-thin sheet of slightly sweet pastry.

But HuTong is not only a dumpling bar. Like all self-respecting Chinese restaurants, it has a menu that would take a month's worth of dinners to wade through.

It's Sichuan rather than bog-standard Cantonese. Plainly translated, it means the food on the whole is spicy, and occasionally incendiary.

You won't have to spend too long among the main courses to come face-to-face with the Sichuan culinary

trademark known as ma la. Basically, it means spicy and numbing, the latter the peculiar quality of Sichuan peppercorns that begin by imparting a herbal, almost minty, flavour, before numbing the mouth and sending the salivatory glands into overdrive. An acquired taste, yes. You can pick your way through the little Novocain bombs in a terrific dish of deep-fried prawns alongside a thicket of large dried chilli (\$22.80).

It's food that doesn't hide its light under a bushel, and that occasionally banishes conventional notions of taste to a realm somewhere beyond pain. If you like your beef noodles as an extreme sport this is the place for you, but it's not all such dangerous terrain.

Squares of bean curd with minced pork — the region's famous "ma po tofu" (\$13.80) — arrive in a tasty chilli-dotted oil-slick of a sauce with a kick that's more like a handshake in comparison with some of its stablemates.

Other stand-outs include deep-fried salt and pepper whitebait (\$18.80); super-crunchy and super-sized, it's damned good fried fish. Eggplant in a "claypot" made of



Shao long bao.

PICTURES: EDDIE JIM

HuTong Dumpling Bar city

Dumpling heaven, and more besides. **14/20**

Where 16 Market Lane, city
Phone 9650 8128
Food Chinese
Cost Dumplings and appetisers \$4.20-\$11.80; mains \$11.80-\$28.80; desserts \$6-\$9.80
Wine list Unexciting all-Oz and New Zealand list from big-name producers
Corkage \$2 a person
We drank Tsingtao beer (China) \$7
Service Occasional
Value Excellent
Owner Jia Fu Cao
Chef Jia Fu Cao
Vegetarian Yes
Outdoors No
Wheelchairs No
Parking Street or paid
Cards Amex, Visa, MC, Eftpos
Hours Daily 11.30am-3pm; Fri-Sat 5.30pm-11pm; Sun-Thurs 5.30pm-10.30pm

Score: 1-9: Unacceptable. 10-11: Just OK, some shortcomings. 12: Fair. 13: Getting there. 14: Recommended. 15: Good. 16: Really good. 17: Truly excellent. 18: Outstanding. 19-20: Approaching perfection, Victoria's best.

metal, with more of that Sichuan chilli sauce (\$13.80) performs a velvety dance around a numbed mouth.

More mainstream dishes might disappoint. The lobster san choi bao (\$8.50) sounds luxurious, and it does contain a not-microscopic amount of crustacean, but it's an under-seasoned, under-sauced bit of lettuce-cupped stodge.

Others are simply careless, such as Chinese broccoli with oyster sauce (\$13.80) that has been waved somewhere in the vicinity of a steamer.

Be prepared to book ahead or wait for a table at HuTong — it only opened in December but there are already queues out the door on weekends.

Try to ignore the bass reverb thumping through the walls when there's a band playing at the next-door Ding Dong Lounge.

Patchy service is the luck of the draw, but occasionally you might want to consider setting your hair on fire to attract a waiter's attention. Take good notice of the pointers on the menu and proceed with extreme caution on any dish that has three little red chillis printed next to it.

And take care slurping the soup from the shao long bao — it can be scaldingly hot. Love sometimes hurts, but it shouldn't scar.

THE AGE GOOD FOOD GUIDE

2012

edited by Janne Apelgren



Hutong

14-16 Market Lane, City 9650 8128

CHINESE

13/20

In 2010, 'Hutong' became part of the lexicon for Melbourne restaurant goers and many couldn't rest till they'd sampled Hutong's famed xiao-long bao: hand-made steamed pork dumplings filled with soupy stock. Yes they're good, but Hutong's wontons swimming in a fragrant, hot chili oil will knock your socks off and make you breathe easier than a dose of flu medication. Chili, Sichuan and Shanghaiese dishes get a serious look-in at this shambling three-storey dumpling house, decked out in dark timber, lanterns, red lampshades and lattice sliding doors. Soft rocking pieces bob in an ornate bowl filled with a garlic-heavy sauce swimming with dried chillies and peppercorns, while silken tofu with minced pork also gives a real kick, Chinese broccoli in oyster sauce is suitably tender with bite, the perfect foil to all that heat (and all those dumplings). Though service can be brisk, and desserts hit and miss, Hutong is a destination dumpling house and its range will have you coming back for more. Also in Prahran.

Open Daily 11.30am-3pm; Sun-Thurs 5.30-10.30pm; Fri-Sat 5.30-11pm

Typical prices £ \$12.80 M \$28.80 D \$10

Cards AE, MC, V, Epos

Wine Plenty of good food and wine matches, and a handful of dessert wines; BYO (corkage \$4 a head)

Owner Jeff Xu

Chef Jian Qing Chen

Seats 160; private room

Map page 276 **Melway** 2F HQ

And ... Take advantage of the wine notes, which complement the fiery menu.

In search of the perfect dumpling

Matthew Burgess

March 20, 2012 - 12:48PM

ETHEREAL is a word not commonly associated with food, unless you're discussing dumplings with chef Tony Tan.

Advertisement

Tan, the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival's cultural consultant, offers that exact description when asked about the key to a top dumpling.

"A really great dumpling should be really very small and it should be no more than a mere mouthful. So, in other words, you eat the dumpling in two mouthfuls and it's gone," he says.

"It's very effervescent or it's very ethereal from that perspective.

"The word itself in Chinese or in Mandarin ... it's the same character, it's dim sum. Dim means to touch ... sum means the heart, so that means it just hits your heart very lightly, you eat it and it's gone."

As part of the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival, Tan is hosting visits to some of Chinatown's most notable dumpling houses. The three Dumpling Crawl sessions (March 19 to 21) sold out well in advance.

He said the idea was to explain the various types of dumpling, according to certain traditions.

Australians, he said, were familiar with Cantonese yum cha.

"The two words just mean to drink tea and as part of the tea-drinking tradition, they offer dumplings to sort of help wash the tea down," Tan said.

"The Chinese dumpling chef is forever thinking about ways to entice people to drink more tea or to eat more dumplings, so therefore it creates that creativity. So they come up with more and more dumplings."

Others included the Shanghainese dim sum and the lesser-known Chiu Chow dumplings, Tan said.

"Chiu Chow dumplings come from a different tradition - it's a similar tradition, but ... they have come up with some really very interesting and innovative dim sum items," he said.

That includes the 'pomegranate' dumpling, which Tan says can be filled with chicken or pork and shaped to resemble a pouch. That dumpling earns its name due to its appearance.

Tan said he wanted people to appreciate that dumplings were not only a "palatable pleasure", and praised Neil Perry for his understanding of Chinese cuisine.

"He has adopted the whole tradition of offering dumplings in different forms at his restaurant, Spice Temple," Tan said.

This is a subject Tan is passionate about - "I think I have got dumplings in my bloodstream - that is the problem". Melburnians, it seems, based on the demand for Tan's Dumpling Crawl sessions, are too.

Tony Tan's selection

Xiao long bao or Shanghai steamed pork dumplings, Hutong Dumpling Bar (Melbourne CBD)

These dumplings encased in broth demonstrate the mastery of the dumpling master as these little critters are so difficult to make and so delicious to eat. Their Sichuan-style pork dumplings with chilli oil are ace too.

Pomegranate dumplings, Mask of China (Melbourne CBD)

A Chiu Chow restaurant, their dumplings are somewhat different to those from Cantonese and Shanghainese traditions. Perhaps the best examples are the pomegranate dumplings filled with diced pork or prawns, bamboo and mushrooms and the garlic chive dumplings called Chiu Chow fun gor.

Cantonese hand-chopped siu mai and har gao, Yum Cha Cafe (Melbourne CBD)

These two classics are standard-bearers of Cantonese dumplings. The former is made with minced pork and sometimes water chestnuts encased in a wonton wrapper and the latter consists of prawns wrapped in wheat starch pastry.

Char siu bao, Red Emperor (Southbank)

Another Cantonese classic, the roast pork (char siu) dumpling here is moist and the soft bun is one of the best in Melbourne.

Beijing dumpling with pork, Dumpling King (Box Hill)

A local institution, their rustic pan-fried Beijing dumpling with filled pork can sometimes be one of the best in town. Also known as pot stickers, these dumplings with the crispy base are the fore-runners of the Japanese gyoza.

melbournefoodandwine.com.au

The Melbourne Food and Wine Festival runs until March 21. For full coverage of the festival, click [here](#).

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/restaurants-and-bars/in-search-of-the-perfect-dumpling-20120320-1vh06.html>

cover story

larissa dubecki

20 iconic melbourne dishes

THE 20 MOST ICONIC DISHES OF Melbourne? It's asking for trouble, we quite agree. Our tribal fealty to various restaurants and their signature dishes rivals AFL supporters in the passion stakes. It's pistols at dawn over whether the ma po tofu is better at Dainty Sichuan or Lau's Family Kitchen.

It follows that this is a mission not to be undertaken lightly. Raising as many questions as they resolve, the criteria for icon status are not exactly clear-cut. It does not mean traditional or touristy. It does, hopefully, mean timeless, whether the dish was invented last century or last year.

What has emerged from the pursuit is the breadth of good eating in Melbourne. Some dishes are expensive (Ezard's pork hock tops out at \$46), some are cheap (fill up at I Love Pho for the bargain price of \$9). Some are new, some long in the tooth. Some are spoken of in quasi-religious overtones, some are the simple stuff of a hearty lunch.

For every choice there are five more waiting in the wings. Things as simple as Jock's ice-cream or a burger from Andrews. The Reuben at the Carre Street Deli. Congee at Supper Inn. Geoff Lindsay's red duck curry, which migrated (in modified form) from Pearl to Dandelion but didn't fit the criteria of being available here and now. And there were many, many more we could have mentioned.

Apologies all.

As contentious as the desal plant, as controversial as myki, as oppositional as Collingwood versus Essendon, here are (in our opinion, anyway) the dishes that make Melbourne tick, in no particular order.

Eaten alone, one will give a small bite of Melbourne terroir. Taken as a whole, they might just reveal who we are.

1. Anchovy with smoked tomato sorbet at MoVida, \$4.50

The anchovy is "a hand-filletted Cantabrian artisan anchovy"; the smoky/smooth sorbet was something of a mistake when chef Frank Camorra first made it. Their marriage atop a crouton is something else entirely — a modern

tapas dish that is ballsy and elegant and utterly unique.

MoVida, 1 Hosier Lane, city, 9663 3038.

2. Philippa Sibley's Snickers, \$20

The Snickers has travelled some of the better kitchens of Melbourne with its maker; now it resides at Brunswick's Albert St Food & Wine, where it pops up from time to time on the specials list. Well and truly ahead of its time, that killer combination of salted peanuts, caramel and chocolate has gone viral but this is the baby that started it all.

Albert St Food & Wine, 382 Sydney Road, Brunswick, 8354 6600.

3. Xiao long bao at HuTong, \$10.80

Xiao long bao? Shao long bao? Whatever. What matters is these little soggy-bottomed Shanghaiese soup dumplings have the right amount of seasoned pork and tasty, lip-burning broth inside. At HuTong their expert construction is a piece of performance art in itself.

HuTong Dumpling Bar, 14-16 Market Lane, city, 9650 8128.

4. Ma po tofu at Lau's Family Kitchen, \$26

It's Chinese penicillin; the Sichuan answer to chicken soup. Lau's rendition of the classic "pock-marked grandmother's beancurd", with minced pork, silken tofu, black beans and its special house-made sauce packing a heat factor on the far side of challenging, is as restoratively delicious as it gets.

Lau's Family Kitchen, 4 Acland Street, St Kilda, 8598 9880.

5. Pho at I Love Pho, \$9

Pho is a deeply personal, potentially divisive subject thanks to the subtle differences

evidenced by our de facto national dish. I Love Pho is all about Vietnam's soulful rice-noodle soup, with pink slices of beef brisket softly cooking in the elegantly complex broth. And it was name-checked by

David Chang, for extra rock-star cachet. *I Love Pho, 264 Victoria Street, Richmond, 9427 7749.*

6. Lamb shoulder at Cumulus Inc, \$69

The paradox of the whole slow-roasted joint of meat: an age-old treatment, yet ridiculously on-trend. "Eating house and bar" Cumulus Inc gets its sharing credentials in order with this complex, gnarly slow-cooked shoulder boasting the kind of deeply tanned crust that's worth the price of admission alone.

Cumulus Inc, 45 Flinders Lane, city, 9650 1445.

7. Souffle at Vue de Monde, part of \$150 four-course menu

Vue has travelled many a winding path from its Frenchified days in Carlton but they converge,

come dessert time, at the souffle. No bells, no whistles, just a perfect expression of the art. Whether it's the classic chocolate, or the arriviste made with tonka beans (the effect is nutty, with warm notes of vanilla and cinnamon) paired with bitter dark-chocolate ice-cream, we don't mind a bit. *Vue de Monde, level 55, Rialto, 525 Collins Street, city, 9691 3888.*

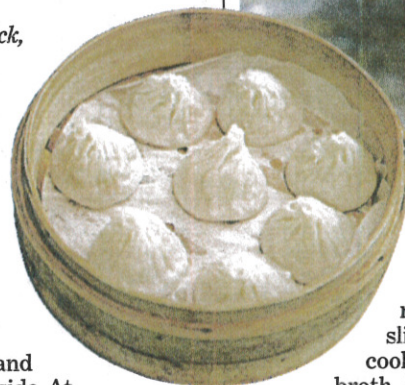
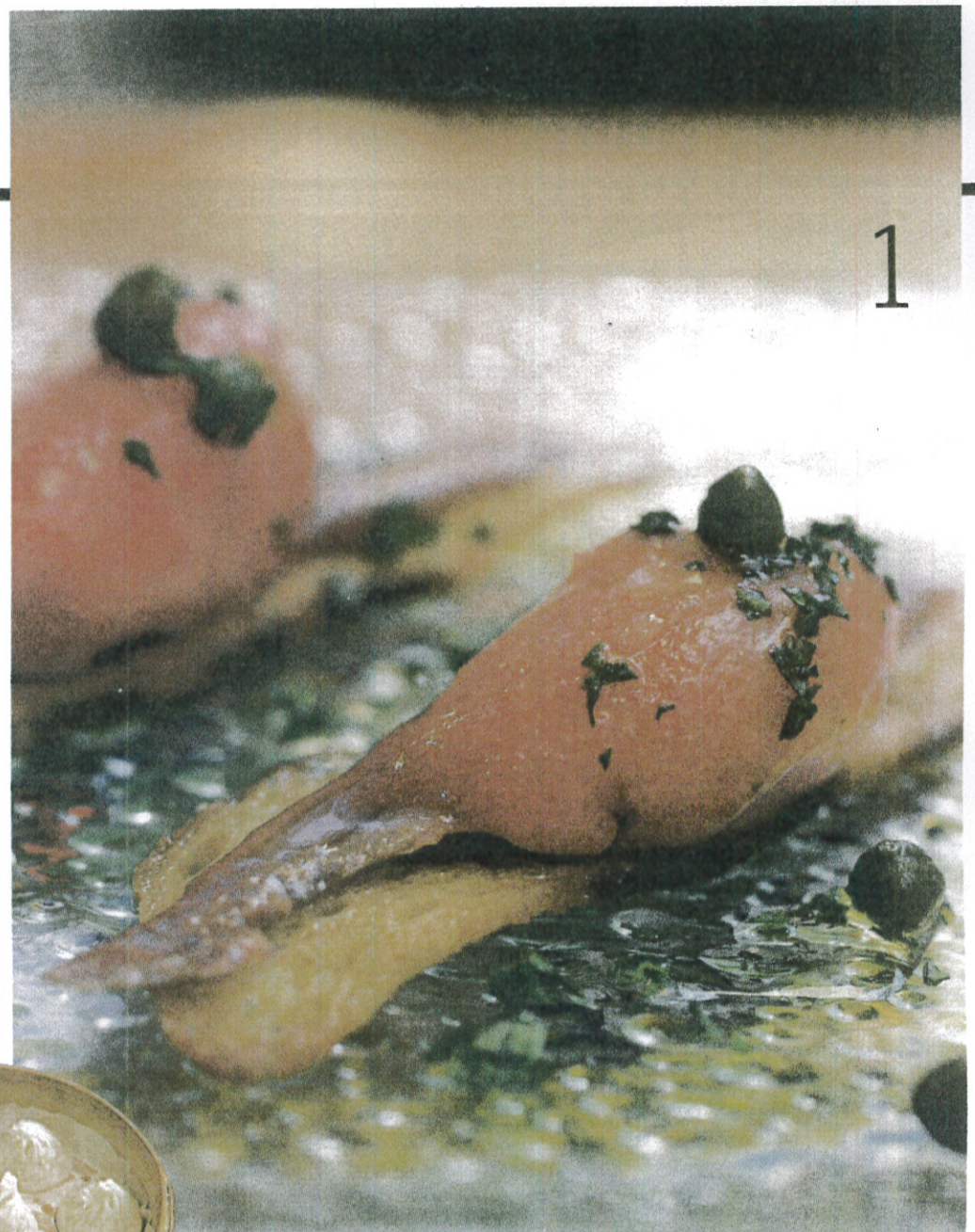
8. Steak frites at France-Soir, starts at \$35

This is experiential dining, a faithful simulation of the Parisian bistro where the surprise-free menu is anchored in the manifold joys of the French table. You may start with onion soup, or steak tartare, or oysters, but you will end with steak and irresistible thin, salty fries and a glass of anything so long as it's red.

France-Soir, 11 Toorak Road, South Yarra, 9866 8569.

9. Corn at Mamasita, \$4.90

Elotes callejeros is better known to its friends as chargrilled corn on the cob, slathered in queso fresco with chipotle mayo, paprika and



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Principal Partner

Secrets of a dumpling master

From the perfect pleat to the juicy broth – each step is rich in history.

HERE I AM, DUSTY WITH FLOUR, awkwardly holding the dumpling wrapper I've just rolled flat with a mini wooden rolling pin. I'm ensconced in a tiny kitchen with Sammy Shi, a dumpling master of 15 years, who learnt his craft in Shanghai.

Thumb here, and here – Shi wordlessly shows me how the crimped frill of the pot-sticker needs to cup neatly into my palm.

I've mucked it up – not enough pork mince filling in the centre, too much at the side, bits of meat poking out the edges. As for “making it beautiful”, my dumpling is lumpy and small, with the pleat all wonky.

It helps to explain why becoming a dumpling master takes a minimum of 15 years and is considered a great honour. Shi says it's much more than a process. “It's like kung fu – there are no short cuts. The steps are just as important, and it's about your soul.”

Jian Qin Chen, head chef at Melbourne's HuTong, which serves an average of 800 dumplings a day, is a dumpling master of 30 years' experience. He comes from Wuxi, a city renowned for its xiao long bao and dumplings, and estimates that among its 6 million-odd residents there are only about five true dumpling masters.

“It's easy to tell everyone the measurements or to learn it from a book, but the taste and skill

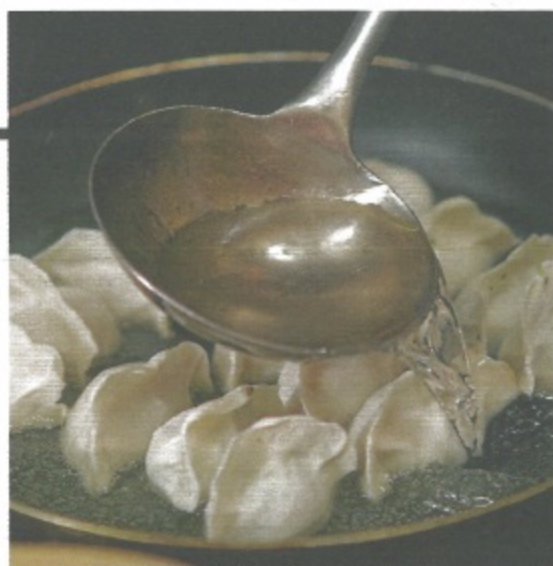


come from experience,” Chen says. “It's a balance of everything.”

Back at Shanghai Street, I watch Shi pour a slosh of oil into a frying pan, enough to liberally cover its base. In go the mini pork buns until the bottoms start to brown and colour, then a scoop of boiling water is added and the lid plonked on top, so the dumplings are fried and steamed all at once.

Over at the giant wok, filled with bubbling hot water, I'm boiling up some more pork dumplings, gently pushing them around with an upturned ladle so they don't stick on the bottom. When they're ready, they float.

But the pouchy, pleated xiao long bao are the



(From left) Head chef Jian Qin Chen and manager Patrick Liu at HuTong restaurant; water is added to the frying oil at Shanghai Street; xiao long bao ready to steam. Photos: Simon Schluter

real heroes of the dumpling world, and the biggest sellers. They are the hardest and most technically difficult to make, and the signature dish at many dumpling restaurants. Traditionally, the filling is pork mince, laced with sesame oil and hot, soupy juice that squirts out when you bite.

Hands up who thinks this liquid is a stock. It isn't. Boiling pig skin until it turns into a clear jelly is the key to making the signature broth of the xiao long bao – it's not a soup that's sealed in the dumpling before cooking.

At HuTong, they take the whole pig skin, scrape off the fat and hair, then simmer it in a big stockpot for six to eight hours until the gelatin dissolves and turns sticky – that's when you know it's ready. The gelatin is then frozen solid, cut into cubes and mixed with the minced pork to make the filling. Gelatin melts to a liquid when heated, and it's this that squirts from a dumpling when you bite into it. Note that there is no fat in this juice – any

oiliness comes from the meat or the sesame oil. David Loh, from Food Republik in Box Hill, Victoria, says their xiao long bao are Taiwanese-style, which means an ultra-thin, almost translucent skin with “a minimum of 18 folds” and a smaller size than the typical Chinese dumplings.

“We weigh every five or six dumplings,” Loh says, and mostly they are “plus or minus one gram” of the desired 26-gram weight. Loh is looking to source Kurobuta pigs (black Berkshire ones raised using Japanese nutrition and practice) for the pork xiao long bao, as he prefers the more refined flavour.

A final tip: to eat xiao long bao, hold the dumpling on your spoon, nibble off the pleated top and slurp the juicy broth. Only then may you want to add some black vinegar with sliced ginger, but many eat xiao long bao unadorned to savour the true flavour.

What did I learn? That making dumplings is much harder than it looks.

▶ Dumpling recipe and video at goodfood.com.au