

Restaurant Review: Hakka Food Makes a Rare Appearance in Chinatown

Hakka Cuisine offers New Yorkers an enticing taste of dishes from a Chinese people who've held close to their culture as they've migrated around the world.

By Pete Wells

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Hakka Cuisine · NYT Critic's Pick · ★★ · Chinese · \$\$\$ · 11 Division Street, Chinatown · 212-941-6888

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I have eaten sweet-and-sour pork out of takeout containers on the floor of apartments while moving boxes towered over my head. I have plucked out its pineapple wedges and bell peppers with plastic chopsticks under strings of puffer-fish lights at long-gone Polynesian restaurants in New Jersey. I have eaten sweet-and-sour pork in which sugar and acid were equally matched antagonists, and I've eaten it when the sauce looked and tasted like melted lollipops.

Until a few months ago, though, I had never tried sweet-and-sour pork served over ice.

That is how the dish is presented at Hakka Cuisine, a Chinese restaurant that opened about a year ago on Division Street just east of Bowery. Hakka Cuisine makes it without pineapples or peppers, but there are some maraschino cherries and melon balls arranged around the rim of the plate like a halo. Chances are that you have seen sweet-and-sour pork the color of those cherries, tinted by ketchup and, in some cases, red dye. The sauce at Hakka Cuisine contains neither. It is closer to the reddish mahogany of expensive bourbon.



You might think that Hakka Cuisine's sweet-and-sour pork on a bed of ice would get soggy, but it becomes more crisp. Lanna Apisukh for The New York Times



Round tables with lazy susans maintain order when Hakka Cuisine's more elaborate platters appear. Lanna Apisukh for The New York Times

The most remarkable thing about the sauce, though, is that it hardens into something like a candy shell as it sits on the ice cubes. This protects the fried batter on the pork while magnifying its crunchiness, which is already pretty intense. When I tasted the pork in its icy glaze, which had a sugar-acid ratio that reminded me of white balsamic vinegar, I had a strong feeling that the chef, Ming Huang, knows a trick or two.

He does. Cantonese banquet dishes are the backbone of his menu at Hakka Cuisine, war horses like prawns in mayonnaise with candied walnuts, lettuce cups filled with minced chicken and pine nuts, and so on. The kitchen cooks some standards that are becoming difficult to find around Chinatown, including fried squab served with a dish of five-spice salt to bring out the ginger and other aromatics in the pink meat.



Crispy squab, a Cantonese classic, has become hard to find in Chinatown. Lanna Apisukh
for The New York Times

There are Hong Kong specialties as well, like the excellent Typhoon Shelter squid that is stuffed with shrimp, fried and scattered with fresh chiles and scallions and a handful of flash-fried garlic.

If this were as far as it went, Hakka Cuisine would still deserve a star on every restaurant fanatic's map of Chinatown. But as the name suggests, the restaurant has another side. Alongside the Cantonese food on the menu are dishes that are traditional to the Hakka people, an ethnic group from northern China who migrated south in waves, particularly to the Cantonese-speaking provinces. (Hakka means "guest families" in Cantonese.) The Hakka never fully assimilated, keeping their dialect, customs and cuisine, a distinct canon marked by preserved meats, greens and eggs.

Large numbers of Hakka people live in Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia and elsewhere in Asia, with smaller communities in Jamaica, Canada and the United States, among other countries. New York City has a significant Hakka presence, but its culture is not always easy to spot. In recent years, one of the few places in town to go for Hakka specialties like stuffed tofu was Hak Box, a three-item takeout shop that appeared to have been burrowed into the side of a building directly under the Manhattan Bridge. It closed over the summer.



New York City has a Hakkā community of fine standing, but its food has been hard to spot. Lanna Apisukh for The New York Times



things.

I always wanted braised pork with preserved greens, for instance. The slabs of pork belly are cooked slowly so they're not tough or flabby. Star anise in the sauce emphasizes the meat's sweetness; dried mustard greens pull in the other direction. Salt-cured egg yolk works a similar trick with chunks of fried kabocha, pulling them across the line from sweet to savory.



Among the menu's Hong Kong-style dishes is Typhoon Shelter squid. Lanna Apisukh for The New York Times



Braised pork belly with preserved vegetables is a mainstay of Hakka cooking. Lanna Apisukh for The New York Times

Hakka stuffed tofu is represented, too: little pork sausage patties resting in thumbprints scooped out of bean-curd cubes in a light, savory sauce.

The restaurant does not serve salt-baked whole chicken, a famous Hakka specialty but a bit of a production. Instead, there is “salt water chicken,” which is rubbed with salt, dipped in salt water with spices and steamed. It is very good.

Mr. Huang’s kitchen has the strength and counter space for Hakka blossom chicken, a lesser-known dish that sounds like an even bigger pain. It starts with removing the skin in one piece using a cleaver, leaving the head and wings attached, then stretching it over a woven bamboo screen to dry. The skin will be stuffed with minced shrimp and soft taro and then cooked until crisp on the outside, springy and creamy on the inside.

In the restaurant’s first months, blossom chicken had to be ordered a day in advance. It turned out to be popular, though, as you’ll understand when it arrives at your table, surrounded by pastel shrimp chips and as flat as a doormat, looking like Wile E. Coyote after he was run over by a steamroller. Now the kitchen sets aside a few hollow chicken skins each day, so there is a chance of getting one if you order on the spur of the moment.

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Hakka Cuisine NYT Critic’s Pick ★★

11 Division Street
(Bowery)
212-941-6888
hakkacuisine.nyc/

Atmosphere The small bar and two large dining rooms suggest an Edwardian tearoom that has just been done over by a contemporary French apartment decorator. Service is very accommodating and patient.

Noise Level Relatively quiet.

Recommended Dishes Pumpkin with salted egg yolk; ying yang mei fun; lobster with sticky rice; Hakka braised duck; stir-fried silver fish, jicama, squid with chives; salted water chicken; Hakka braised pork belly with pickled vegetable; Hakka blossom chicken; sweet-and-sour pork on ice; crispy squab; Hakka stuffed tofu. \$10 to \$36 and up for special dishes.

Drinks and Wine Add the number of beers and wines together and you’re still in the single digits.

Price \$\$\$ (expensive)

Open Daily for lunch and dinner.

Reservations \$10 to \$36 and up for special dishes.

Wheelchair Access The main dining room and an accessible restroom are on the sidewalk level.

What the Stars Mean Ratings range from zero to four stars. Zero is poor, fair or satisfactory. One star, good. Two stars, very good. Three stars, excellent. Four stars, extraordinary.

This information was last updated on Oct. 17, 2023

Pete Wells has served as restaurant critic since 2012. He joined The Times as dining editor in 2006. [More about Pete Wells](#)

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