

## AT THE RESTAURANT

### **Cleaning cutlery**

The first task Cantonese turn to in a Chinese restaurant is sterilising chopsticks, serving spoons, and any other cutlery, in a glass of hot tea. The restaurant provides the tea for drinking, not washing; but it is seldom drunk. Waiters and restaurant proprietors are in no way offended by this obvious distrust of their washing up skills – they would do the same themselves even if they had personally washed the chopsticks earlier in the day. It is simply social custom. Extra tea is ordered for drinking.

In Western restaurants, cutlery is cleaned by wiping it down with a tissue, or the table napkins provided. Locals do not trust the cleanliness of napkins in Chinese restaurants and would not dream of using them to clean either their mouths or their eating tools.

## Using the menu

It is not the restaurant which is chosen, it is the type of food. When entering a dining room, Cantonese generally have a good idea of what to order.

Negotiations with the waiter are begun immediately upon being seated. The menu is not relied on, except to see what is discounted, what new ideas the chef has come up with, and whether the signature dish is a good deal.

Restaurants which advertise themselves as *dim sum*, for instance, are expected to offer the standard dishes in the category. Response is likely to be vocal if they cannot be supplied. *Dim sum* menus seldom list price, which is usually on a card on the table and changes depending on the time of day. At non-peak hours, the food is significantly cheaper. The prices are often standardised into three categories: large, *dye*, 大, medium, *juung*, 中, and small, *seen*, 小.

More expensive dim sum categories are: *chew*, 廚, *duk*, 特, and *ding*, 頂. As a rule of thumb, the more strokes in the character, the more money changes hands!

If you try to order seven dishes, the waiter will try to sell you one more so as not to tempt fate. Seven is the number of dishes served at funeral banquets. Once you have chosen six dishes, Cantonese waiters are reluctant to take an order for one more dish. They will, however, happily take an order for eight or more dishes.

The most important word in the description of each dish is put at the end. A list of common food names follows.

*Farn*, 飯, rice.

*Meen*, 麵, noodles. All types of noodle apart from rice noodles, often egg and/or wheat noodles.

*Fun*, 粉, rice noodles. Most commonly *mye fun*, 米粉, fine noodles or *bor fun*, 河粉, thick flat noodles.

*Tong*, 湯, soup.

*Gow*, 餃, dumpling.

*Bow*, 包, filled bun.

*Yook*, 肉, meat, usually pork. Sometimes the full term *jew yook*, 豬肉, pig meat, is used.

*Ngow yook*, 牛肉, beef.

*Yerng yook*, 羊肉, lamb or mutton.

*Gye*, 雞, chicken. To aggrandise an everyday item, chicken might be described as *fuung*, 鳳, phoenix. *Fuung jow*, 鳳爪, phoenix claw, is actually chicken feet.

*Ngarp*, 鴨, duck.

*Ngor*, 鵝, goose.

*Yew*, 魚, fish.

*Ha*, 蝦, prawn, shrimp.

*Hye*, 蟹, crab.

*Darn*, 蛋, egg.

*Choy*, 菜, vegetable.

*Gwa*, 瓜, melon.

*Dow foo*, 豆腐, tofu or bean curd.

*Kair jee*, 茄子, eggplant or aubergine.

*Farn kair*, 番茄, tomato (means foreign eggplant).

*Chuung*, 葱, spring onion.

*Yerng chuung*, 洋葱, onion (foreign spring onion).

*Sewn*, 蒜, garlic.

*Lart jeen*, 辣椒, chilli, hot peppers.

The word/s preceding the main ingredient might be purely decorative, might refer to the location from which the dish supposedly hails or might be a description of the cooking process. For example, *yerng jow chow farn*, 揚州炒飯, Yangzhou fried rice – the first two characters denote a city in China, the third character is a method of cooking and the final word is rice.

Some locations are now taken as a method of preparation. It can also indicate to those in the know that there has been a price hike.

## Food choices

Chinese prefer their fish, fowl, or meat with bones. Removal of chicken or fish skin is not practised as the fat is seen as the most important and flavour-enhancing part of the dish.

The fish fins and head are delicacies, as are chicken feet and the tip of the wing. The chicken breast, on the other hand, is not a favoured part of the bird and is often left on the plate. The thigh of the chicken is the “best” part of the bird and will be offered to the honoured guest, similarly the tail of a fish. Soup is a nourishing food suitable to honour your guest.

Pork knuckle and spare ribs are delicacies, while boneless meat such as rump and fillet steak are chopped up and stewed, or sliced and fried.

Offal: whether flesh, fish, or fowl, is enjoyed. The local perception is that Westerners do not like to eat offal and it will be offered with a big smile and the phrase, “this won’t kill you” as an incentive. It usually backfires. Most Westerners are loath to try dishes offered in this way because the smile and the phrase together is generally taken as some sort of trick.

Garnish: the rice paper, fine slice of carrot, or cabbage leaf placed between dim sum and steamer baskets is not eaten – ever. Nor is the leaf which wraps rice dumplings. They are there to stop the food from sticking to the basket and are left on the side of the plate.

By contrast, garnish such as cherries and tinned pineapple are generally eaten.

Cantonese seldom drink the soup served with noodles. The stock is expected to be full of MSG. A separate bowl of soup is ordered if required.

**Q:** How come soup is sometimes served at the beginning of the meal, and sometimes at the end?

**A:** Sometimes it’s served in the middle, too. It depends on the soup and the banquet. Casual meals start with soup, formal banquets serve it in the middle, and soup at the end is sweet, served as a dessert.

## **Drinking with meals**

This is considered bad for one's health. It is said to interfere with the digestive process, much as in some schools of Western thought on diet. Instead of drinking water or tea, Chinese take soup as a substitute.

It is considered bad form to mix rice in your soup and this is also thought to be bad for you. One of the reasons behind this superstition is that you might take the easy way out and just swallow the softened rice without chewing it properly, leading to digestive problems.

Restaurants serve drinks throughout the meal but it is not unusual for Chinese to wait until the meal is almost over before taking liquid, such as dessert soups or tea.

## **Jew choy, 主菜, the important dish**

At Chinese meals, particularly banquets, some dishes are described as *jew choy*, 主菜, often mistranslated as main dish, when what is really meant is that it is expected that the dish will be served. If the dish is omitted, questions are asked. A feeling of discomfort prevails and the omission becomes the subject of gossip for years to come.

Whole chicken and prawns are expected at any banquet. In a Chiu Chow restaurant, goose and sharks' fin are expected among the banquet courses. Peking duck is expected in a Beijing restaurant, etc.

### **Hong Kong food specialities**

Over the years, Hong Kong chefs have delighted in taking ideas from other cuisines and incorporating them into the local diet. This is not so much fusion food as a re-working of classic dishes from other parts of the world, adding, mixing, and substituting ingredients until the original is not recognisable. Often the name is retained unchanged and this presents difficulties if you order Tiramisu, for instance, and are served a pudding where mascarpone has been replaced with custard, amaretto with brandy, sponge finger biscuits with chocolate cake, etc.

Some classic examples of this localising follow.

*Sing jow chow mye*, 星州炒米, Singapore fried noodles. A very popular dish in Hong Kong but you will not find it in a restaurant in Singapore. You will, however, find Hong Kong fried noodles which is the same dish. This is a bit of tit-for-tat as neither city wishes to lay claim to this rather colonial dish.

The “noodles” part of the description is actually vermicelli rice noodles. Chinese place great importance on the distinction between rice flour noodles, egg noodles, wheat flour noodles, and whether the noodles are flat, round, thin, thick, etc., etc., etc. It is a matter of surprise when Westerners are unconcerned about the type of noodles – they are just noodles.

Pasta oddities. The Cantonese consider pasta part of the noodle family, favouring spaghetti and macaroni. It is believed that Marco Polo introduced noodles and pancakes to the West after his adventures in China. Fast food restaurants, *cha chan teng*,

茶餐廳, have devised many dishes based on pasta made the modern Western way. Some are:

*Gon chow bark jeeu ngow yook yee fun*, 乾炒黑椒牛肉意粉, fried spaghetti with beef and onions in soy sauce and black pepper. *Gon chow* means that the dish is fried until the sauce blends into the noodles, *bark jeeu*, black pepper, *ngow yook*, beef, *yee fun*, spaghetti.

*Herng senn yook see chow yee*, 香蒜肉絲炒意, fried spaghetti with shredded pork and garlic in soy sauce.

*Sarm see chow yee*, 三絲炒意, fried spaghetti with ham, sausage, BBQ pork and vegetables in soy sauce.

At breakfast, Cantonese like to eat something soupy. Spaghetti in broth with sliced BBQ pork, *cha seen tong yee*, 叉燒湯意, and macaroni in broth with shredded ham, *for toy tuung fun*, 火腿通粉, are favourites.

French toast: the Hong Kong version is a peanut butter sandwich, soaked in beaten egg, fried in oil, and served with heavy syrup and butter!

Toast topped with peanut butter and condensed milk is a particular favourite.

*See mut nye cha*, 絲襪奶茶, pantyhose milk tea. So-called because the tea is made using a long white cloth bag as a teabag, which looks a bit like a leg of pantyhose. Milk tea is a favourite of Hong Kong Cantonese. This one is a mix of black teas placed in the bag and boiled in a kettle for a minimum of eight minutes. The bag of tea leaves is pulled up and down several times to enhance flavour. The milk must be evaporated milk, not fresh



milk or cream. Some people prefer condensed milk, and that style is called *cha jow*, 茶走, tea with something left out. The thing that is left out is the evaporated milk, which is replaced with condensed milk although this is not mentioned in the description of the drink. You just have to know the local custom.

Some restaurants are famous for their cold milk tea. This is a concoction of blocks of frozen milk tea and freshly made milk tea. The idea is to preserve the strength and thickness of the drink by using the milk tea ice blocks and not to dilute it with ordinary water ice.

*Yewn yerng*, 鴛鴦, literally Mandarin duck, is a mix of milk tea and coffee, served in the same cup. Mandarin ducks are renowned for their monogamous relationships and the drink is an auspicious symbol of togetherness. The term is also used to describe two kinds of similar ingredients served in a dish, in this case, the tea and coffee. For example, *yewn yerng fan*, 鴛鴦飯, is fried rice topped with both shredded chicken in tomato sauce, and with prawns in a cream sauce.

Many Cantonese believe that hot Coca-Cola cures the common cold. An infusion of fresh ginger boiled in Coke is a remedy for colds and a delicious drink.

Egg tart topped with bird's nest, *yewn wor darn tart*, 燕窩蛋撻.

*Bor lor bon*, 菠蘿包, a sweet bun with flaky topping. The uneven surface looks like pineapple, *bor lor*.

*Gye may bow*, 雞尾包, a sweet bun with coconut and custard butter cream. *Gye may* is a translation of cocktail, indicating the stuffing is a mixture.

Although these last three are very sweet pastries, Cantonese like to comment “it’s nice, not very sweet,” almost as an excuse for ordering the sugary excess.

Cantonese are also particularly fond of a pastry which is not sweet: *jew jye bow*, 豬仔包, literally piggy bun. It boasts a puffed-up crisp crust, and is based on the plain yeast bun, brioche, found in Portugal, Spain, and France. It is often stuffed with a piece of pork chop, *jew pa bow*, 豬扒包, and is an invention of the Macau Chinese.

### **Table manners**

Chinese think nothing of spitting out food they do not want to swallow. There is usually a plate to hold the leftovers in more proper Chinese restaurants. Otherwise the food is spat directly onto the tablecloth. Waiters circulate to change plates, bowls, and spoons from time to time, especially after soupy or heavily sauced dishes and dishes with bones or shells.

Eating with your mouth open or talking with your mouth full is considered rude in traditional Chinese culture.

Few Chinese are taught how to use a knife and fork with the result that either one is used to convey food to the mouth. They tend to be held like chopsticks, which looks decidedly odd, and are often waved about like pointers through the meal. It is considered very rude to use chopsticks this way, but the

prohibition does not seem to extend to knives, forks and spoons. Again, it is a matter of lack of education.

Western approaches to table manners vary from continent to continent. What might be accepted practice in America is viewed with horror in Australia and taken as offensive in Europe. By the same token, some of the strictures of fine European dining are unknown in other parts of the world. Who takes the first mouthful? Should I cut bread on my side plate? Should I move my plate away when I've finished eating? From which side should I expect my meal to be served? It is a minefield for the unwary.

The next time you are offended by the behaviour of diners at the next table it might help to remember that the problem is one of education and tradition. Then again, you might find that you want to get up and leave the restaurant, or change your seat, rather than look at a superbly turned out young woman eating off her knife.

### **Left handedness**

Left handedness is seen as being contrary to the general line, creating difficulties in future life. All Chinese tools are designed to be used right-handedly. Even chopsticks are believed to be designed for right-handed use.

As a result, children who use their left hands have traditionally been nagged until they stop. Young parents are becoming increasingly tolerant of left-handedness.

## **Sharing dishes**

Chinese food is designed to be shared. In Western restaurants, dishes may be put in the middle of the table, with diners helping themselves, or shovelling parts of meals onto others' plates. The fact that the chef has carefully planned each meal with a view to nutritional balance and pleasing presentation for one diner is not taken into account. This is an example of cross-culturalism which does not seem to work.

## **Service levels**

In local Chinese restaurants, the major expectations are speed and accuracy. Sadly, they are seldom found.

Speed will generally be provided by the waiter being direct to the point of rudeness. "You sit here," with a finger pointing at a particular chair, is a common ploy. The waiter will then stand beside the table waiting for your order. If you ask to, *shock, horror!*, look at the menu, do not be surprised if staff just walk away, giving every evidence of annoyance.

Once you have decided and signal the waiter for attention, he or she may be reluctant to return, and may make you wait while ostentatiously looking for the order book.

Food, once ordered, is expected to arrive at the table, piping hot, within five minutes. Diners check the time and expect their order to be the next one dealt with by the kitchen. Being kept waiting is very annoying and, if a later arriving table seems to be getting preferential service, the reaction is likely to be both vocal and angry.

The moment one's eating tools are put down, the waiter collects your dishes without asking. If one practises standard European manners, where it is considered rude either to hold your eating tools all the time, or to clear one person's place while the others are still eating, then one is going to be offended.

This habit frequently annoys Cantonese diners as well, who may be saving the best mouthful for last. It is a sad fact that the high standard of table service which used to be typical in Hong Kong is now rare. Like so many other things in today's society, it is a matter of lack of training. Hong Kong lost many of its good waiters to Mainland China where their skills as staff trainers are in great demand. They are paid more than they can earn in Hong Kong where the profession does not command much respect.

Regular customers can expect better service and preferential treatment, even larger servings and better food.

### **Useful gestures**

**Tapping the table** with the first two fingers of the right hand, bent, so that the action imitates kneeling and bowing to the Emperor. This indicates thanks for serving tea (only) and is a proper gesture of thanks for this service from a fellow diner, not a waiter.

The story behind the gesture is that the Emperor Qian Long, of the Qing dynasty, wanted to go out among the people *incognito*. The courtiers accompanying him were forbidden to kowtow or in any way mark him out as leader. They invented this way of showing their appreciation when their high and mighty Lord so

abased himself as to serve them, who should properly have been serving him.

**Circling your index finger** downwards towards the table while holding your hand in the air means please bring my bill.

In the old days, bills *per se* were not presented but the empty dishes were left on the table. Each different dish, whether of size or decoration, was in a single price category. The total owing was then shouted across the room to the cashier and the diner would walk over to pay his bill before leaving the restaurant.

### **Charged extras**

Wet towels, peanuts or pickles, chilli sauce or mustard, and tea, are all extras which you should expect to have added to your bill. Tea is charged by the number of people at the table, not by the amount consumed. The only exception is in cheap restaurants where all of these frills either are offered *gratis* to the customer or are not available.

### **Tipping**

A 10% service charge is the rule, rather than the exception, on restaurant bills. On top of that, Cantonese generally tip the service staff a small amount up to the closest round number, generally between HK\$20 and HK\$30.

If the bill is quite large, say for a banquet or a group of ten or fifteen, the tip will be proportionally larger, reflecting the extra level of service received. On a bill of HK\$4,000, for instance, the tip might be HK\$200.

Regular customers show their thanks at Chinese New Year by taking red packets to their favourite waiters or waitresses.

If paying by credit card it is normal to give the tip in cash. This is to ensure that the staff receive it, and that it does not go into the restaurant's general revenue.

### **Paying the bill**

Cantonese think nothing of making a scene as they fight over who is going to pay for the meal. People sneak over to the reception or cash desk on a pretext in order to get in first. When later it is suggested that the bill be called for, the "winner" can smirk and say, no, I've paid it!

When the waiter brings the folder to the table with the bill, it is customary for the male diners to all try to put down a credit card or to fling cash at the waiter.

Women dining amongst themselves are most likely to split the bill. In mixed-sex dinners, a woman might take charge and say, "let's split the bill," and immediately collect a proportionate amount from each diner or couple. This is considered quite acceptable, whereas if a man made the same suggestion, he would lose face and be seen as a cheapskate.

# Hand gestures at Chinese restaurant

Add water!



Clean the table.



My food not yet come.



Check the bill.



Let me pay!

No, I'll pay!

