

## Chinese Cuisine Goes Upscale

New wave of Chinese restaurants offers an alternative to greasy takeout

By Sophia Hollander  
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On-tap offerings at the bar at Williamsburg's Kings County Imperial include beer, cocktails—and soy sauce.

It's one of a new wave of Chinese restaurants trying to dispel the cuisine's reputation in New York City as greasy takeout by relying on fresh ingredients, an ambitious drink selection and upscale ambience—with prices to match.

Proponents say it is the natural evolution of a complex cuisine that they say has been dumbed down for decades in the U.S. They point to other ethnic foods that have undergone a similar journey in New York, yielding some of the city's most celebrated restaurants.



The double garlic Chinese eggplant at Kings County Imperial. PHOTO: LEVI MILLER



Kings County Imperial's Copper Well Street noodles PHOTO: LEVI MILLER

“You think about Italian food 20 years ago in New York. It was pasta and red-sauce places, and now you get places like Babbo,” said David Garcelon, culinary director at the Waldorf Astoria New York, which in the fall opened La Chine, a luxury Chinese restaurant.

At La Chine, a special menu for the Lunar New Year to be offered later this month includes Lo Hei Yusheng raw fish salad (\$68) served tableside.

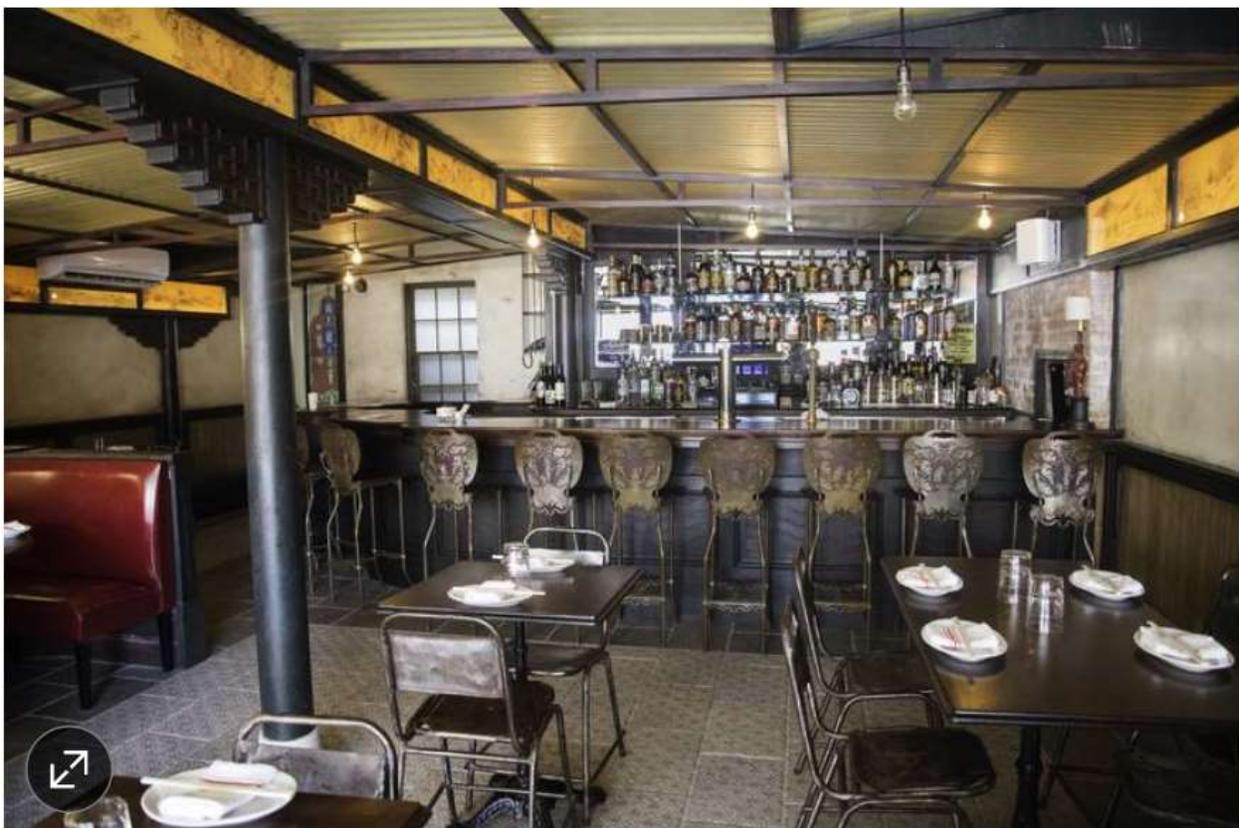
But in New York City, entrenched habits can die hard, especially when it comes to price.

“People have this idea that Chinese food has to be \$5.99 and come with free rice and a side of wonton soup,” said Danielle Chang, who founded the annual Asian food festival LuckyRice in 2010. “That’s really backwards thinking.”

Some question whether efforts to bring higher-quality dishes can be successful without changing the cuisine beyond recognition.

“The stigma is still that Chinese food cannot be, at this point, at this time, perceived as a very fine type of cuisine,” said Jason Wang, president of Xi’an Famous Foods, which operates 12 restaurants in the city based on the cuisine from Xi’an, his hometown in northwestern China.

“The only way to charge things up is to try things that are not traditional,” he said. “But when you do that, does that still fall under Chinese food?”



The interior of Kings County Imperial in Williamsburg. PHOTO: KATIE BURTON

In January, the team behind X'ian Famous Foods relocated its sit-down restaurant Biang! from Flushing to the East Village, with plans for a new cocktail program and dishes featuring fiddlehead ferns and quail eggs.

“We do want to move along the path of becoming fancier, becoming a higher price point,” Mr. Wang said. “But at the same time for our business, at least, we’re unable to step away too far from where we started off as a hole in the wall.”

The opportunity is there, restaurateurs say. China’s relaxed travel policies and growing wealth has created a new class of Chinese tourists willing to pay more for quality Chinese food, some say.

With looser borders, Chinese chefs are also discovering a range of world cuisines, reinvigorating traditional cooking, said Eddie Schoenfeld, a Chinese food expert who opened RedFarm in 2011, a restaurant that helped usher in New York’s farm-to-table Chinese movement.

But that cuts both ways, he said. Chinese chefs “can make more money in China now than they can here,” Mr. Schoenfeld said. And “they’re appreciated more” in Hong Kong or Taiwan.

When La Chine was searching for chefs, management interviewed about 100 candidates for 14 chef jobs.

“That skill is just not here,” Mr. Garcelon said.

Upscale Chinese food is hardly new in the city. A crop of elite Chinese restaurants opened in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including Shun Lee Palace. But takeout places quickly proliferated, becoming most Americans’ connection to the cuisine.

When it opened in the West Village, RedFarm positioned itself within a broader food movement that “starts off with the premise that really good ingredients make for really good food,” Mr. Schoenfeld said.

An instant smash, the restaurant has since expanded to the Upper West Side, added a separate restaurant dedicated to Peking duck and is planning a London expansion.

“There’s kind of this little revolution in higher-end Chinese food that’s slowly starting to take place,” Mr. Schoenfeld said.

In 2013, Jonathan Wu, a former line cook at Per Se, and his partners opened Fung Tu with a menu inspired by Mr. Wu’s mother’s Chinese-American cooking during his childhood in Connecticut, family stories and old Chinese cookbooks.

A relative’s memory about eating smoked black dates on the streets of China evolved into Fung Tu’s smoked-and-fried date, stuffed with duck confit.

Efforts to adopt a more upscale approach can lead to sticker shock. Vegetable fried rice: \$16.95 at RedFarm. An egg roll: \$13 at Fung Tu. Garlic Chicken: \$24 at Kings County Imperial. Whole barbecue duck: \$70 at La Chine.

But the dishes barely resemble their takeout counterparts. At Kings County Imperial, the soy sauce comes from a third-generation family brewery in China that sun-ferments the product; tapping the soy sauce prevents oxidation, they said. They harvest Chinese herbs and vegetables in their backyard garden.

For years, Chinese food was a guilty pleasure for New Yorkers. “It’s greasy, it’s starch-laden, it’s gloppy,” said Joshua Grinker, Kings County Imperial’s chef and co-owner. “You’d be like, ‘OK, now I don’t need to do that for another month because that was disgusting.’ That’s the renaissance—it’s not disgusting. It’s amazing.”